A Mystical Concubine: Giunta Bevegnati’s Portrayal of Margaret of Cortona as a Spiritual Mother

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Abstract:

Margaret of Cortona, (1247-1297), led an intriguing life and one that would inspire others. As a single woman and an unwed mother turned mystic and saint, Margaret spanned the spectrum of womanhood. Earlier in her life, she was a concubine, a woman living with a man outside the bounds of acceptable marriage. More importantly she had an illegitimate son, which compounded the usual pollution of childbirth. She thus carried not only a social stigma, but was considered impure in the eyes of the Church and God. Fra Giunta Bevegnati, Margaret’s Franciscan confessor and author of *The Life and Miracles of Saint Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297)*, constructs his narrative of her life to demonstrate her transition from impurity to purity by showing her development from physical mother to spiritual mother. By embracing spirituality and a more ascetic way of life, Margaret is able to gain a more intimate relationship with Christ.

Giunta traces this process of how Margaret became a holy, spiritual mother who cared for the people of Cortona and how she emerged through her spiritual motherhood as a new kind of saint and champion for the Franciscan Third Order. When Giunta portrays Margaret’s spiritual motherhood as a living embodiment of Holy Mother Church, he also presents a new hierarchy of spiritual to physical motherhood that spoke to the lay people of Cortona. As an ascetic, female, mystic, Margaret was considered suspicious by the Church and was even dangerous to the Church and to society as a whole.¹ Since he was aware of this, Giunta constructed his biography to portray her in a fashion that is acceptable to society and orthodox to the Church. In order for Margaret’s

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spiritual gifts to benefit the Franciscan Order, she must be presented as a woman who was gifted with visions but who also conformed to religious orthodoxy.

Margaret’s living embodiment of Holy Mother Church presents a new hierarchy of spiritual to physical motherhood. Giunta weaves this theme of the two motherhoods throughout the *Vita*. This is an important aspect in the construction of Margaret’s identity because it posits her as a safe and obedient member of the Church. As a widowed-concubine with an illegitimate son experiencing personal interactions with Christ, Margaret was suspicious and a potential threat to the authority of the Church. By stressing Margaret’s obedience to him and the other Franciscans, as a spiritual mother figure, Giunta ensures Margaret’s reception as a positive role model for the Italian laity.

Furthermore, Giunta includes a ledger of the multitude of miracles attributed to Margaret, many of which involve stories of mothers praying to Margaret for the health and safety of their sons. This further cements her role as a spiritual mother figure for the people of Cortona and demonstrates the hierarchy that occurs in spiritual and secular motherhood.

I will conclude by the end of this thesis that Margaret changed the concept of motherhood, enriching it with the addition of spirituality. She is a new transformative figure for the Italian laity to model themselves after, in particular the mothers. Margaret’s example by spiritual motherhood gives even more strength and power to mothers while remaining harmoniously within the realm of acceptable social roles for women. Her story serves to highlight the power of medieval Italian motherhood beyond the parameters of physicality, enhancing it with a spiritual power that was previously absent.
Introduction:
Margaret of Cortona, (1247-1297), led an intriguing life and one that would inspire others. As a single woman and an unwed mother turned mystic and saint, Margaret spanned the spectrum of womanhood. Earlier in her life, she was a concubine, a woman living with a man outside the bounds of acceptable marriage. More importantly she had an illegitimate son, which compounded the usual pollution of childbirth. She thus carried not only a social stigma, but was considered impure in the eyes of the Church and God. Fra Giunta Bevegnati, Margaret’s Franciscan confessor and author of *The Life and Miracles of Saint Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297)*, constructs his narrative of her life to demonstrate her transition from impurity to purity by showing her development from physical mother to spiritual mother. By embracing spirituality and a more ascetic way of life, Margaret is able to gain a more intimate relationship with Christ.

Giunta traces this process of how Margaret became a holy, spiritual mother who cared for the people of Cortona and how she emerged through her spiritual motherhood as a new kind of saint and champion for the Franciscan Third Order. When Giunta portrays Margaret’s spiritual motherhood as a living embodiment of Holy Mother Church, he also presents a new hierarchy of spiritual to physical motherhood that spoke to the lay people of Cortona. As an ascetic, female, mystic, Margaret was considered suspicious by the Church and was even dangerous to the Church and to society as a whole.² Since he was aware of this, Giunta constructed his biography to portray her in a fashion that is acceptable to society and is orthodox to the Church. In order for

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Margaret’s spiritual gifts to benefit the Franciscan Order, she must be presented as a woman who was gifted with visions but who also conformed to religious orthodoxy.

Studying Margaret’s *Vita* to understand how Giunta accomplished this is difficult because the *Vita* is the only primary source for Margaret’s life. She herself did not write any part of her biography; there is nothing to balance Giunta’s view that is biased towards the Franciscans, shaped completely by the image Giunta was trying to create out of her. Secondary sources help to explain aspects of her behavior and the relationship she had with both Giunta and Christ, however it is difficult to ascertain which events actually occurred from those which might have been fabricated to prove a point.

Some secondary sources have helped to give a context for Giunta’s ideas about spiritual motherhood, by examining typical motherhood practices by medieval women both secular and religious. Motherhood is a powerful force, particularly in medieval Italian society, whether it is exemplified by the laity or the saints. Further, the idea of spiritual motherhood has existed since the creation of Christianity, through the exultation of the Virgin Mary and, in later scholarship, through Christ as Mother.

I will begin my analysis of the *Vita* with Giunta’s short description of Margaret’s secular life to give her story some historical background. It is important to begin with Margaret’s personal relationship with her son before her conversion to demonstrate that she was a very capable single mother. It is only after her conversion to her ascetic, penitent lifestyle that her power as a visionary and mystic grows. Margaret’s acts of penance through fasting figure prominently in Giunta’s depiction of her sanctity and he makes extensive notes of her acts of charity for the poor and sick. Giunta explains how her devotion to Christ purifies her and how this single-minded behavior makes her a holy
woman, regardless of her past. Giunta makes use of many interactions between Christ and Margaret to prove their intimacy and to demonstrate that Margaret’s reliance on the Eucharist for nurturance causes Margaret to treat Christ as a Mother. The bond Margaret shares with Christ is highly complex, in that not only does she feed from him, but she assimilates to him as well, through the suffering on the cross. In order to fully assimilate with Christ, Margaret must experience the physical suffering that occurs on the cross and share in such pain with Christ. In Christ’s suffering, he symbolically gives birth to the Church and becomes a mother to it. Likewise, Margaret takes on these characteristics, which are imagined and reproduced as both the Virgin Mary and as the nurturing aspects of the institutional church. In her assimilation to Christ, Margaret represents Christ on earth by caring for the spiritual and religious welfare of the people of Cortona. She intercedes with Christ on the people’s behalf and acts as a mediator between them and the divine. Giunta uses this theme of motherhood to portray Margaret as the nurturing face of Mother Church, guiding, advising, and comforting the people in her community.

Margaret’s living embodiment of Holy Mother Church presents a new hierarchy of spiritual to physical motherhood. Giunta weaves this theme of the two motherhoods throughout the *Vita*. This is an important aspect in the construction of Margaret’s identity because it posits her as a safe and obedient member of the Church. As a widowed-concubine with an illegitimate son experiencing personal interactions with Christ, Margaret was a suspicious and potential threat to the authority of the Church. By stressing Margaret’s obedience to him and the other Franciscans, as a spiritual mother figure, Giunta ensures Margaret’s reception as a positive role model for the Italian laity. Furthermore, Giunta includes a ledger of the multitude of miracles attributed to Margaret,
many of which involve stories of mothers praying to Margaret for the health and safety of their sons. This further cements her role as a spiritual mother figure for the people of Cortona and demonstrates the hierarchy that occurs in spiritual and secular motherhood. I will conclude by the end of this thesis that Margaret changed the concept of motherhood, enriching it with the addition of spirituality. She is a new transformative figure for the Italian laity to model themselves after, in particular the mothers.

Margaret’s example by spiritual motherhood gives even more strength and power to mothers while remaining harmoniously within the realm of acceptable social roles for women. Her story serves to highlight the power of medieval Italian motherhood beyond the parameters of physicality, enhancing it with a spiritual power that was previously absent.

Margaret’s Confessor and Interpreter – Giunta Bevegnati

Margaret’s *Vita* sheds some light on her life and the spiritual benefits she offered to the people of Cortona, but it is also the only primary source information available about Margaret and it comes from Giunta. This makes exploring Giunta’s agenda even more important, and it is necessary to place it into the historical climate and traditions at the time of its construction. This demands a close reading of his writing and a more in depth view of how Giunta’s personal perspective shaped his picture of Margaret’s holiness.

An additional problem is that, in essence, we know Giunta only because of his singular association with Margaret of Cortona. Giunta was a friar in the Franciscan Order, intimately involved with the Franciscan missions to women and the purpose of the
Third Order. He was stationed at Cortona for most of Margaret’s career as an ascetic and mystic but was briefly moved to Siena towards the end of her life. The text implies, somewhat covertly, that his close relationship with Margaret raised concerns as she was “a potential source of corruption, both supernatural and sexual,” therefore he was relocated to avoid any possible inappropriate behavior. As her confessor and main confidant, Giunta was privy to many of Margaret’s visions and therefore it is unknown how many of these visions are altered to better suit Giunta’s portrayal of Margaret as a holy woman. Hence, Giunta wielded an ample amount of power and authority, not only by portraying Margaret as a religious figure who was dependent on her advisors, but also how his construction of her life could better serve the Franciscans and strengthen the Orders.

The Vitae indicates the extent of Giunta’s authority over Margaret and her actions. As Margaret’s confessor, it was Giunta’s responsibility to properly guide Margaret and ensure that she did not deviate from religious orthodoxy. She could have visions and demonstrate extreme asceticism but only as long as she continued to obey her confessor in all matters regarding religious practice. For example, when Margaret threatens to cut her face to diminish her physical beauty and become closer to Christ, Giunta does not allow her to and says he will deny her confession if she acts otherwise. Giunta notes, “Being very beautiful, [Margaret] wanted to disfigure her face, but, as an obedient daughter, she would not dare to do such a thing without the permission of her

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3 Caciola, 107.
confessor.” By refusing to hear her confession, Giunta would be refusing to give her absolution, something she greatly desired daily.

While both Margaret and Giunta wield an aspect of religious authority, their own power is limited due to their expected roles within the Church. For example, Giunta’s role as a mediator and priest allows him to guide Margaret and to preach sermons based on God’s word. Coakley clearly distinguishes the differences between the two as, “the cleric who directs souls and dispenses the sacraments on the basis of his office, the woman who conveys to others her unique and useful knowledge of divine things on the basis of her unmediated contact with the divine, and Christ who commands and transcends them both.” While both are endowed with religious powers, the all-powerful Christ sets their powers within the realm subordinate to absolute divine authority.

Margaret and Giunta are both important figures, but due to the hierarchical nature of the Church, Giunta as a male member of an orthodox religious order wields more power and authority than does Margaret. He is religiously ordained to perform the Eucharist and to instruct sinners on how they can repent. She is however an important figure, as an obedient servant, for the Franciscan movement and for the prosperity of the Church as a whole. In order to present Margaret as an orthodox member of the Church, “Giunta…rationalizes [Margaret’s] independence in such a way as to respect the legitimacy and discreteness of her powers but nonetheless bring them into coordination with the powers of the priest.” Margaret’s gifts are useful to the Franciscans, and her devotion to Christ and the citizens of Cortona is to be admired. However, her gifts

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5 Coakley, 147.  
6 Coakley, 147.
become suspect if she is not functioning properly within the restrictions of the Church’s authority, by being obedient to a properly ordained male figure with a clear place in the hierarchy.

A troubling aspect of Margaret’s religiosity that seems to compromise her orthodoxy is clear when she receives the Eucharist. For a devout ascetic, such as Margaret, receiving the Eucharist gives her life an aspect of spiritual fulfillment that cannot be filled with priestly sermons or prayers. However, if the Eucharist is not properly consecrated, then it is not truly the body of Christ and therefore provides no spiritual gratification. When it comes to issues of distributing the Eucharist, the proper consecration reflects the purity and authority of the priest performing it. On a particular occasion, Giunta reveals that a priest, giving communion to Margaret, made a mistake and brought unconsecrated wafers from his home instead of the consecrated ones. This curious instance becomes more interesting in that when Margaret receives the Eucharist, she immediately acknowledges that it is not truly the body of Christ: “Margaret of Cortona, for example, saw the hands of an unchaste priest turn black when he held the host. When the priest brought an unconsecrated wafer by mistake, Margaret vomited it out.”

Margaret is able to perceive this difference because she is denied any feeling of presence or vision of Christ.

Here Margaret is like other medieval female mystics, “Whether a pious woman swallowed or vomited thus became a test of the priest who provided the wafer…Women’s Eucharistic visions, like their sense of taste, were a kind of litmus test

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for clerical immorality or negligence.”\(^8\) This extra sense endows Margaret with a type of power that was most definitely considered dangerous to established religious authority because the power to channel God’s grace is put into doubt.

The Eucharist visions of Margaret and these other women granted them a provocative power because it seemed to supersede the function of the priest and put the women directly in contact with the divine, even though they were laywomen. In essence, “in their Eucharistic visions, women not only received God as holy food, they also sometimes claimed for themselves, at least metaphorically, both the priest’s proximity to God and the sacerdotal role of mediator between human and divine.”\(^9\) Giunta’s record of Margaret’s life effectively demonstrates this tension between mediated contact with the divine, such as through the priests and sacraments of the church, and direct contact with the divine, such as Margaret experienced in her visions. By identifying with Christ as a man who suffered rather than as a man of divine merit and power, these women and Margaret were introducing a new type of relationship to Christ, through their own personal interactions with him. Their type of relationship appealed to the laity in a way that the priests could not and of which they lacked within their hierarchical view of the Church. As befitting their profession, the priests separated themselves from the laity and all things material, in order to find a closer relationship to God. Their lives centered on worship of God and therefore they believed themselves to be in the position to speak on the behalf of the laity, and only them. Margaret’s type of spirituality challenged those preconceived notions about who could communicate with God. As a member of the laity

\(^8\) Bynum, 228.  
\(^9\) Bynum, 233.
herself, she and the women who shared in her talents became much more accessible outlets to Christ and Christian worship.

In order for Margaret not to be seen as a threat to the priests, it was necessary for Giunta to guide and shape the relationship Margaret had with Christ. Giunta would regulate her behavior so that she did not appear to be a renegade agent of God, working independently of the Church. In fact, among the multitude of purposes in Giunta’s composition and distribution of Margaret’s *Vita*, a major one was to give credit to and strengthen the Franciscan Movement rather than undermine it. Scholar Bernard Schlager argues,

> It was in the obvious self-interest of the Franciscan friars that a lay woman of such high profile whom they wished to claim as their own be seen as operating within the bounds of acceptable religious behavior, and Giunta consistently claims that Margaret responded to the voice of the Lord and also heeded the advice of her Franciscan spiritual directors.¹⁰

Having Margaret as an icon for their lay movement was a definite advantage for the Franciscans, but only if she was constructed as a woman who could be controlled and who could function within the proper hierarchy of religious authority. Giunta is very careful to portray Margaret not only as a powerful mediator between the divine and the laity, but also as one who can obey the proper spiritual advisors on Earth: those who hold the true authority in religious matters. In addition to the emphasis that Giunta puts on Margaret’s orthodoxy, “Giunta highlights the unmistakably Franciscan features of her life…Margaret’s piety and ministry were genuinely, and even predominantly, Franciscan

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Not only does Margaret obey her Franciscan advisors, she perfectly epitomizes the Franciscan way.

On other occasions, Giunta uses the voice of Christ to authorize his own decisions and actions and highlight his own religiosity. At multiple points throughout the text, Christ praises Giunta and instructs Margaret to obey him. It is necessary for Giunta to include passages such as these in order to emphasize that Margaret fit within the Church rather than being a totally free agent communicating with God alone. Christ commands Margaret, “Nevertheless, my daughter, I order you to obey your confessor in all things, because for all aspects of your life I will lavish his mind with the light of a special grace.”

She is blessed to have a special relationship with Christ but that divine relationship must be monitored by others, such as Giunta, in order to maintain the orthodoxy of her visions and actions.

Through his association with Margaret and his careful guidance of her devotions, Giunta is assured that he too is destined for greatness. In one instance, Giunta records how Christ tells Margaret to specifically pray for her confessor and Christ himself confirms that he spoke through Giunta earlier in the day: “Then Christ returned to her and said: ‘My daughter, you should pray for your confessor and give him advice, since you are after all indebted to him…The Lord: ‘He talked about me so perfectly because it was actually me who spoke to you through him.’” This exchange confirms the power implicit in the priestly office and in the church hierarchy as a whole. Christ uses Giunta as a mouthpiece without even Margaret’s knowledge, emphasizing the power of those in

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11 Schlager, 161.
12 Giunta, 98.
13 Giunta, 191.
religious office and how even Margaret is humbled in relation to that power. This type of proclamation, or rather conversation, designates Giunta’s power as a priest within the hierarchy of the church and endows him with a certain amount of divine authority, giving him the capabilities to properly advise someone so controversial as Margaret.

While Giunta weaves aspects of his own strong religiosity through his *Vita* of Margaret, the purpose to the text is to demonstrate Margaret’s divine intimacy with Christ while affirming her orthodoxy as a penitent model for others. During the thirteenth century, the Franciscans were striving to connect more to the people and began to formulate a more meaningful spiritual program for the urban laity. In order to make this connection work, they needed models or figures of whom the people could relate to and would find approachable. Margaret is one such example, due to her sullied past as a widowed concubine with an illegitimate son, using her past as something that was necessary to overcome in order to achieve saintly virtues. At a time in which there was a lot of general unease and hostility towards urban women engaged in active ministries, Giunta seeks to assure his readers (members of the Franciscan Order as well), that Margaret was an orthodox Catholic woman who had proven with her life that “the lay Franciscan life offered a path of holiness for all women and men.” Her holiness and Giunta’s emphasis on her motherly care shape her image into that of a penitent that is widely appealing to the laity. By choosing the theme of motherhood to mold Margaret into an icon of maternal care, Giunta is giving a clear context for her devotion and power and locating her within the more traditional gender role of mother, thereby ensuring her

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15 Caciola, 16.
16 Schlager, 143.
orthodoxy while still highlighting her sanctity. By constructing her in this manner, Giunta hopes to motivate lay people to participate in the Franciscan Order of the Penitents.17 The Order of the Penitents, which was later called the Third Order, was established by St. Francis to create a fraternity in which the laity could participate in religious life, while maintaining their jobs and roles in society.18

While Margaret can be viewed as a role model for lay women who want to follow the Franciscan way of life, “it is important to note here that Margaret appears throughout the [Vita] as a figure of imperfection rather than perfection.”19 Giunta gives glowing praise to her desire to be closer to Christ and her selfless acts of charity for others “but her surpassing virtue is humility, and he does not mind pointing out that she has due cause for it: she is above all a penitent sinner.”20 Being humble and being aware of that humility is an important aspect in Giunta’s construction of Margaret’s Vita. The entire work highlights Margaret’s chosenness and intimate relationship with Christ, however, “the chosenness is almost always linked directly to humility, in such a way as to make a point of [Christ’s] grace and by implication her shortcomings… on the whole it is not miracle, but rather penitence, that demonstrates her chosenness.”21 Margaret is aware of her own sins and Christ does not dissuade Margaret from forgetting her past. Her son is a constant reminder of such sin and as a result she must cope with his physical existence to

20 Coakley, 136.
21 Coakley, 136.
create a religious identity for herself. It is because of her past imperfections and struggle with pride that she is chosen and purified by Christ and subsequently exulted by Giunta.

Giunta’s depiction of Margaret as a mother, transitioning from a secular one to a spiritual, is exceptionally important for his purposes of arguing for her orthodoxy. The suspicions regarding her visions are made worse by the fact that she was a former concubine with no male guardian and an illegitimate son. By portraying her through the softer lens of motherhood, Giunta makes this isolated individual into an embracing spiritual mother; into someone who fits in with the social norm and is in line with what was expected of Italian women at the time. Through her charity works and devoted prayer, Margaret transcends secular ideas of motherhood to give it new power and meaning and endows it with religious fortitude. Margaret becomes a living, visceral icon of motherhood for the laypeople. Giunta’s portrait of Margaret’s increasingly spiritual motherhood makes her into an outlet that the laity can use to reach Christ and salvation. According to Catholic theology, “It is through the saints…that we can hope to reach Christ and ultimately reach the Father of our salvation…[because] God works through finite agents to achieve infinite ends.”

Giunta’s construction of this ideal of Margaret’s holiness participates in a broader movement of writing such accounts of sanctity and further demonstrates the role of holy figures in mediation for the Church.

**Margaret’s Motherhood – Transition from Secular to Spiritual**

Before her conversion, Giunta was careful to show that, as any secular mother who fed and educated their children, Margaret’s primary concern was to care and provide

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for her son: “And since she had decided to support herself and her son by the work of her hands, Margaret humbly and lovingly began to care for the noble ladies of Cortona as a midwife.” Margaret understands that she needs to find work to provide for her son and herself. The appropriate work for a woman of her reduced social statues was as a midwife. Giunta describes this turn of events in her new employment in all its irony. When her lover was alive, she was living in wealth with nobility and although her son was illegitimate, all of his needs were provided for. However, with the change in her lifestyle, she is no longer able to rely on the services of others and must take on physical labor. After her lover’s death, she serves others to provide for her son. As a concubine and unwed mother, Margaret was already a soiled figure in the eyes of God. She could not be re-purified by the Church: “women who conceived and gave birth outside of marriage were identified as sinners and marginal members of the community by being denied a proper churching… [and] without the purification [of churching], a woman was prohibited from entering a church for fear she would desecrate sacred space with blood pollution.” Because Margaret had her son out of wedlock, she carried with her the blood pollution of her childbirth and could not be purified to re-enter the community of the Church.

It is therefore interesting that in choosing work as a midwife, Margaret is further dirtying herself spiritually by becoming physically involved with the blood and mess of physical childbirth. This form of pollution only further reduced Margaret’s status in society and separated her from God even more. Margaret is reduced from being

23 Giunta, 52.
pampered as a wealthy mother to enduring the struggles of real life by toiling as a midwife and delivering noblewomen’s children, so that her own child can survive. As a midwife, she is wholly mired in physical motherhood.

The growing Franciscan movement was appealing to the laity, especially the wealthy laywomen of the Italian cities.\textsuperscript{25} As their midwife, Margaret came into close contact with the Franciscans and found great solace in their encouragement for laypeople to take responsibility for their own souls. As Margaret became more involved in the Franciscan movement, the pollution of both her social position and her work as a midwife moved her to pursue a more pure life. This led her to stop practicing midwifery completely in order to devote all her time to prayer. When she stepped away from gainful employment, Margaret took the first step in her transition from being a typical secular mother to her son into becoming a spiritual mother to the whole city of Cortona.

After her conversion, Margaret moves into a cave with her young son to lead the life of a religious ascetic and begins to shirk her duties as a secular mother. Typically, medieval Italian mothers were responsible not only for the physical care of their children but for their education as well.\textsuperscript{26} However, Giunta recalls an instance after her conversion, where Margaret is confronted by her son’s teacher, a fellow Franciscan, about where the son is and the payment due for his education and Margaret seems to not care at all. She refuses to even respond to the friar, as she “was detached from any worldly concerns which could hinder her progress; she lacked maternal affection, as if


she were not of this world, a world of which she had only horror; it was as if she had never given birth to her son.” Margaret has so dissociated herself from society and proper social roles that she clearly no longer feels tied to the physical world and is only preoccupied with the spiritual.

Later, when justifying her actions to her confessor, Margaret states that Christ was testing her and that by remaining silent and keeping her attention on him alone, she passed the test and was rewarded by her Master. Caring for her son’s academic education clearly made it hard to stay on track to spiritual martyrdom and salvation. Giunta takes care to point out this behavior did not reflect badly on her motherly skills, but testified to her steadfast devotion and her qualification to become a spiritual mother. This single-minded attitude sets her apart from other women and reveals her as a holy and virtuous woman.

While Margaret seems to lack typical motherly concern for the physical welfare of her son, she overcomes that shortcoming to exhibit care for the spiritual welfare and religious development of her son. She demonstrates this concern in a fashion that is congruent with her values after conversion while simultaneously carrying with it a redefinition of the old values. Margaret still cares for her son, the only thing that has changed is the type of care, and she views her spiritual care as superior. According to the Church, “it was a mother’s duty to inculcate within her children proper morals and values to educate them in the Christian faith...[and] this important function appears to have been reserved for the mother of the family, rather than for the father.”

27 Giunta, 61.
teach her son in the ways of morals and Christian faith after her conversion and thereby begins to truly fill her role as a proper mother, albeit with spirituality as the focus.

While Margaret and her son were living in the secular world, she believed that they were causing great spiritual injury and harm to Christ. The mere presence of her son born out of wedlock would have been seen as an affront to God. This speaks to the pollution she incurred as a concubine, which distanced herself from any personal relationship with God. Further, as the concubine of a nobleman, Margaret was privy to excessive wealth and luxury. She led a life of ease and material comfort with no concern for her own spiritual welfare, let alone that of other people. However, through their religious practices and ascetic devotion, Margaret believed she and her son could repair their connection to Christ and lead holier lives. Christ tells Margaret, “When [your son] was in the world, he strove most thoroughly to injure me. Now I wish he would be thorough in his thoughts and affections for acquiring grace.”

At this point in Margaret’s conversion, she has reached a level of purity and holiness that marks her out as someone with an intimate relationship with Christ. This has separated her from her son in another way, since her physical son still struggles in his spiritual life. He needs to reclaim a higher and purer relationship with Christ and by consequence, his own mother. Christ’s directions to Margaret regarding her son lead her to act the way she does, with physical distance but spiritual proximity to her offspring, so that he can also achieve a sort of religious awakening and close connection to God.

One way of pleasing Christ is by committing her son to his care and service, and she instructs her son how to do this in a letter. In her instructions to her son on how to be

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29 Giunta, 146.
a true follower of Christ and a noble member of the Franciscan Order, Margaret writes, “If you fight valiantly in his army, I will always be affectionate to you. I will be your mother if you do what I say.” Margaret is willing to recognize a familial relationship between herself and her son but only in the sense that they are religiously bound. As long as he follows her in devotion and is spiritual as she is, she can care for him. At a later point, he makes a mistake as a friar when he forgets to wake up in time for a religious service. He beats himself as punishment for his laziness. In a divine revelation, Margaret learns of this event, calls her son to her cell and chastises him for his indiscretion. Even though he had already enacted an extreme act of penance, the physicality of it was not enough for Margaret who wanted her son to feel remorse in his heart. She cares more about the spirituality and emotions of her son rather than his physical actions or bodily health because his body is transitory and true devotion comes from inside. Furthermore, as someone seeking to live a holy life, she cares deeply for his success and uses her authority as physical mother to scold him for his mistake. In this sense, her roles as spiritual and physical mother are bound into one at this point and her secular motherhood is endowed with spiritual authority.

While Margaret’s attitude towards academic education was perhaps the most public rejection of her role as a secular mother, the more crucial rejection of motherhood was that of the food provider. Even more than education, a fundamental duty of a mother is to provide food for her family and yet Margaret rejects this duty early on in her conversion, at Christ’s bidding and encouragement. In her extreme devotion to Christ, Margaret fills her days with prayer and silence, refusing to stop her prayer to feed or

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30 Giunta, 219.
clothe her son. Through her strict food practices of neglect and fasting, Margaret was in a sense rejecting her family, “to refuse commensality is both to refuse the meal as symbol of familial bond and to refuse the most basic support...food.” In refusing to feed her son, Margaret is simultaneously rejecting his very presence and familial tie to her. Her son is a constant reminder of her physical ties to the earth and quite possibly is for her a physical manifestation of her previous sins. At some point before this confession, Christ even tells Margaret “If you observe my gospel and renounce everything on earth – including your own son – I will never abandon you and I will call you my ‘sister.’”

Margaret is encouraged to reject her physical ties of family and material objects in order to reach a purer state of spirituality.

Any physical tie to her son and food only serves to remind Margaret of her past gluttony and avarice, thereby halting her spiritual development as a follower of Christ. For Margaret and similar female penitents, “in controlling eating and hunger, medieval women were sometimes explicitly controlling sexuality...women fasted in order to quell sexual desire...there were some women (for example, Margaret of Cortona, Catherine of Sweden) who associated food abstinence with chastity and greed with sexual desire.”

Margaret has had a history with sexual avarice and luxurious greed, thereby in denying herself most food and the physical closeness to her son that most mothers enjoyed, Margaret is pushing away the symbol of her sexual greed and the needs of her physical body.

Such a rejection of the social role of mother and this seeming neglect is shocking and upsetting to the modern reader. Giunta’s elaborate justification indicates that

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31 Giunta, 150.
32 Bynum, 214.
medieval people did not readily accept such behavior either. Her confessor praises this aspect of her religious devotion emphatically and continually. Giunta portrays this blatant disregard for her maternal responsibility as evidence of Margaret’s dedication: “Margaret gave whatever she could but concerning her own son, she acted as if she had forgotten maternal concern…she preferred the eternal Love to the son of her womb – to such a degree that she did not want to cook anything for him lest it interrupt her time for prayer.” In this “preference for eternal Love,” Margaret transcends her usual social role and pushes the parameters of motherhood to a new level. Up until this point, Margaret has traversed the spectrum of motherhood, slowly substituting her role as a secular mother to a spiritual one. She has cared for her son physically but found her life lacking, and her employment as a midwife did not help with her spiritual development. It is only through complete rejection of the physical world that Margaret can embrace the spiritual one and in that world, she can continue to fulfill her role as mother but in the more superior sense of spiritual care. Giunta demonstrates that Margaret seems to contradict secular viewpoints of motherhood, however her choice to embrace Christ and remain devoted to him, elevates her to new level of motherhood in which she is still filled with motherly responsibility but for far more precious things: the souls of others.

**Margaret’s Union with Christ the Mother**

Throughout Giunta’s account of Margaret’s life, Margaret strove to become a devout follower of Christ; she desired to become a more perfect being and therefore be more worthy of his intimacy and attention. One way of which truly bonding with Christ

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33 Giunta, 56.
involved extreme asceticism and penance in the form of fasting. To harm her body through excessive fasting allowed Margaret to suffer with Christ and seek her only form of nurturance from him and the Eucharist. Margaret’s union with Christ in suffering lead to a full assimilation with Christ as “Mother.” There has been excellent scholarly work that helps decode some aspects of Giunta’s account, which also helps to draw out further elements of Margaret’s spiritual motherhood and bond with Christ who is himself conceived of as a spiritual mother. Caroline Walker Bynum, in particular, discusses the depth and commonality of such “suffering” practices through fasting as penance and rejection of the physical body. Seeing Margaret in this larger tradition makes clear the extent that her control of food and food practices was an important form of her penance that was intended to make her worthy of intimacy with Christ and that prepares her to receive her nourishment from the body of Christ alone.

Margaret gives herself enough food to survive and just barely, as Giunta reports that her body is continually weakened. However, as Bynum points out, if food (even minimal amounts) can be equated to flesh, which is suffering in the view of common penitent thought during the twelfth century, then this “delicious suffering” means redemption and salvation. One is saved by fasting and harming the body; fellow female penitents “frequently called this journey ‘eating’ or ‘hungering,’ because to eat is to join with food – and God is food, which is flesh, which is suffering, which is salvation.”34 The Eucharist is the actual body and blood of Christ and by eating it, one is joining with God in his suffering and to suffer is to be saved. In the minds of women like Margaret, to fast is to unite with God and Christ.

34 Bynum, 250.
By engaging in fasting and by relying solely on Christ’s body for nutrients, Margaret was imitating Christ and his suffering on the cross. She suffers as he does by starving herself and putting her body through physical pain. As a reward for her replication of Christ’s pain, she is allowed to nurse from his side, such as a newborn from her mother’s breast. Christ would frequently invite Margaret to partake of his body, “saying: “My daughter, receive me.””\textsuperscript{35} Giunta records an instance where Christ tells Margaret, “Do you remember what I said to you in that year when you were enclosed in your cell, that you would drink from the wound in my side? That time has arrived.”\textsuperscript{36} Because Margaret has demonstrated her purity through sacrifice and penance, Christ allows her to feed from his side and he fully adopts her as his spiritual child. She is now worthy enough to receive his nurturance and be united with Christ. As a child resembles their mother, so too will Margaret take on Christ’s characteristics and become a mother who spiritually nurtures.

Male religious figures, including Giunta, cite the motherly qualities of Christ: his ability to protect his followers, to nurse them from his wounds, and to give them shelter in his side, which is often equated with a womb.\textsuperscript{37} After studying these motifs, Bynum concludes, “The blood that flows from the wound in Christ’s side becomes wine, the water becomes milk; and the soul not only draws nurture from Christ but also flees for refuge into the wound in the wall of his body.”\textsuperscript{38} Christ becomes a source of nourishment for his followers, in way that is remarkably similar to motherhood, the way Christ’s

\textsuperscript{35} Giunta, 69.
\textsuperscript{36} Giunta, 117.
\textsuperscript{38} Bynum, 123.
“naked breasts will feed you with the milk of sweetness to console you.”\(^{39}\) This was an idea established by the late twelfth century that would have been known to Giunta through the writings of Aelred of Rievalux, (1110-1167)\(^{40}\) a Cistercian monk. Followers of Christ can be fed from his “breasts” and seek refuge in the wound of his side, much like a mother nurses her child after birth and holds them in the womb during pregnancy. Bynum further explains, “In medieval legends…and in medieval devotions…milk and blood are often interchangeable, as are Christ’s breasts and the wound in his side.”\(^{41}\) Christ is associated not only with motherly attributes, but with the actual bodily functions of mothers themselves, such as nursing his followers using the blood from his wounds as a mother would nurse a child with milk.

Christ’s suffering on the cross makes him a mother in another way, through the symbolic pain of childbirth which Margaret has physically experienced and spiritually re-enacts with Christ’s dying on the cross. In a series of visions that Giunta records, Margaret seems to relive the Passion of the Christ when receiving the Eucharist. Here, Margaret takes the role of the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross, and she unites with both the Virgin and Christ in his pain. Like the Virgin Mary, Margaret is wracked with pain and as Amy Neff explains, “In identifying with Mary’s anguish, which was not only an emotional or spiritual sorrow but also physical pain, medieval beholders might have gained a reassuring sense that their own suffering was shared.”\(^{42}\) In a spectacular scene of devotion, Giunta comments that on how violently her body contorted and how she

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\(^{39}\) Bynum, 123.

\(^{40}\) Bynum, 123.

\(^{41}\) Bynum, 133.

seemed to be experiencing not only the anguish of the Virgin Mary but also the pain of Christ. Giunta and other witnesses were convinced that she too had died along with Christ. Neff makes an interesting observation by pointing out,

An ideology that defined the ‘good mother’ as a mother who experiences grief and loss could sometimes have had harsh consequences for the mundane daily lives of men, women, and children in the Middle Ages. But for the life of the spirit, the model is eloquent: the viewer is invited to imitate Mary’s piety, her sorrow, her compassion, and her willingness to give birth.

While Margaret clearly fulfills this ideology of the good mother because of her ability to experience sorrow and pain and share in Christ’s suffering, the Virgin Mary is still viewed as the ultimate good mother. Mary is depicted as a grieving mother at the cross, but this depiction of physical pain grows and intensifies throughout the development of Christian theology and artwork in the thirteenth century: “Mary came to encompass all the pain associated with the Crucifixion as a drama of loss and bereavement.” While the “chief mediator of Christ’s pain was Mary…her co-suffering was offered for the imitation of the audiences,” which is exactly what Margaret does. Margaret imitates the pain of the Virgin Mary by bonding with Christ in his pain, just as the original mother once did.

As Christ suffers on the cross, he symbolically gives birth to the Church, and through the wounds of his body, he feeds his spiritual followers as a mother himself. Margaret is linked to Christ in that she feeds from him but she also experiences the “birth pangs” of the Passion along with him. Martha Easton has studied images of the wound in

43 Giunta, 108.
44 Neff, 270.
46 Rubin, 246.
Christ’s side and concludes, “The wound of Christ was the birthplace of Christianity, from which the Church was born and through which true Christians were nursed with the blood of salvation.”\textsuperscript{47} Christ therefore becomes not only the “Son” but the “Mother” as well because he births and nourishes his “children,” such as Margaret specifically, but the Church as a whole as well. While Christ can be seen as the mother of the Church through his death and sacrifice, his own mother also functions as a symbol for the Church and guides it with her maternal care. She is the first to assimilate with Christ in grieving for her son as he dies on the cross and therefore it is fitting that she be known as “Mother Church.” However, while she is the first, she is certainly not the last as Christ tells Margaret, “Just as I made the blessed Virgin Mary, my mother, responsible for the salvation of humankind, I chose you to be the mirror as well as the mother of sinners.”\textsuperscript{48} Christ gives Margaret the authority to be a mother figure for people on Earth, especially the citizens of Cortona. She, like the ultimate mother, the Virgin Mary, is authorized to look over and pray for the souls of sinners and others who are misled.

While Margaret’s assimilation with Christ and the feeding of Christ is a complicated relationship, the two ideas serve to reinforce the central idea of motherhood. Christ is the ultimate mother of the Christian Church because his sacrifice and suffering gave birth to Christianity.\textsuperscript{49} Hence Christ can feed his children through his blood in the Eucharist, which he uses to sustain spirituality and assimilate others to him. As Margaret eats the Eucharist and suckles from Christ’s wound, she becomes a part of him – she in

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[48]{Giunta, 190.}
\footnotetext[49]{Gerard Mannion and Lewis Seymour Mudge, \textit{The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church}, London: Routledge, 2008.}
\end{footnotes}
effect becomes him. Therefore she too takes on characteristics of the mother by using spiritual means to heal Christ’s followers and by caring for them in the role of Mother Church. Through ingesting Christ’s Body (the Eucharist), Margaret becomes intimately tied to Christ in a number of ways, all which serve to emphasize the importance of motherhood.

Highlighting the feminine side of Christ gives him authoritative, yet also tender and protective, characteristics. Bynum gives a nice summary of this: “Descriptions of God as a woman nursing the soul at her breasts, drying its tears…giving birth to it in agony and travail, are part of a growing tendency to speak of the divine in homey images and to emphasize its approachability.”

Employing imagery and metaphors associated with a mother’s unconditional love suggest a strong personal connection between God and the individual. These images of Christ and God as mothers would allow women to further relate to the divine, because of the implied suffering and joy shared in childbirth and raising children.

The idea of the “mother” Christ, which developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, brought a new respect for physical motherhood by coupling it with spiritual meaning. Bynum points out the importance of the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages, particularly as a grieving mother at the suffering of Christ on the cross. This same mother served as a model for mothers in the laity and as a protector of their motherly roles. Linking the spiritual and physical motherhood together and protecting it with a divine figure elevated both the secular and spiritual power of mothers as a whole. But while the Virgin Mary was depicted as the ultimate mother, displaying the perfect

50 Bynum, 129.
affective piety for the suffering of her son, she is also seen as a “majestic queen of heaven.” Moreover, despite the fact that Mary was viewed as a model for other women and that there was a “recognized similarity between Mary and other women, her singularity is more commonly emphasized.” Mary’s singularity is centered on the fact that although she shares many of the virtues that are applicable and encouraged for women, she has them to such a degree that she far surpasses other women, making it impossible for them to attain her level of motherly sanctity.

In order to bridge the gap between divine motherhood and more secular motherhood, the saints serve to function as intercessors and guides on the behalf of the people. Bynum points out “Saint’s lives begin to emphasize the influence of mothers on children at the moment when motherhood becomes an important image of God’s activity,” in essence, an enhanced role of physical motherhood. Mothers were always highly influential members of the family when it came to raising children. Therefore, it is only fitting that they in some way would influence the spirituality of their children. Margaret is a prime model for Italian mothers to follow in her acts of selfless devotion to others and the caring aspects she developed as a mother to all. As mediators between people and the more remote divinity, saints were ideal and somewhat more practical figures for the laity to model themselves after, rather than the figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

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51 Bynum, 137.
53 Gold, 70-71.
54 Bynum, 142.
Margaret is the perfect role model for the people of Cortona, by exemplifying and embodying the characteristics of Christ as Mother; she transcends the typical idea of motherhood to reach a level of spiritual care previously associated with the Virgin Mary. In her assimilation to Christ, Margaret uses that intimacy to seek the salvation of her people, those living on earth and who have already died.

As a mother figure, such as the Virgin Mary, Margaret is concerned with the spiritual fate of her people and therefore she uses her role as a direct mediator between the divine and the humans to intercede on the behalf of the latter. The interesting part is that Margaret was able to do this as a layperson. Bynum illustrates the power of the mediating role by demonstrating how Margaret and other women subverted established hierarchical modes of worship to divert attention to Christ in a more personal way: “Rather, women forged, through charity, miracle, and fasting, an alternative role – an essentially lay and charismatic role – authorized not by ordination but by inspiration, not by identification with Christ the high priest but by imitation of Christ the suffering man.”\(^{55}\) All of these practices reflected the credo of the Franciscan movement, through works of charity and personal penance. Through imitation and action, even the laity could participate religiously which was a goal the Franciscans encouraged.

Margaret spearheaded this goal of the Franciscans through her own actions and works as a spiritual mother for the Cortonese. More than caring for their physical needs by feeding and clothing them, Margaret prays for her “children” which moves her one step further: past charity and physical actions to address the spiritual fate of her “children.” As Giunta comments, “Like an affectionate mother, Margaret was full of

\(^{55}\) Bynum (Holy Feast), 233.
piety and zeal for the well-being and salvation of everyone…[she] said: ‘Lord, if it were possible, I would give even my own heart to the poor.’” Margaret becomes a mother to the weak and the poor; she demonstrates this by her selfless acts of generosity and spiritual piety to the seemingly less fortunate. Whenever Margaret would receive food, she would attempt to give it away to the poor. Any clothes she owned, even the cloak on her own back, she would push onto the nearest poor soul. In addition to giving away to others all she had, she would in addition pray for their well-being and salvation, as a caring mother who is devoted to the health of her children. In this sense, Margaret was a self-sacrificing mother, giving both bodily and spiritual support to the people of Cortona.

Interestingly enough, while the Franciscan Order adopted Margaret in a sense, she cares for them as well and uses her motherly skills to spiritually guide the friars. Giunta comments on his own struggle with the devil and how it is only with Margaret’s help and prayer that he is able to overcome it. Christ tells Margaret to instruct Giunta to pursue peace for the citizens of Cortona, first in their hearts and then physical peace will follow. As an extension of her spiritual motherhood, Margaret uses her motherly concern to advise Giunta on how to save the people of Cortona. However, in this pursuit of peace, Giunta is supposedly struck with a “spiritual blow” that was so numbing it “tempted me to turn against the daughter of God.” Giunta goes on to explain how Margaret’s prayer and concern for his well-being cures him of his doubt and gives him strength to seek peace for the citizens of Cortona. This is a powerful assertion of Margaret’s orthodoxy and conformity to the Church. Just as a spiritual mother would heal her children through

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56 Giunta, 205.
57 Giunta, 215.
prayer and devotion, Margaret performs this service for her confessor, another spiritual child of Christ.

While Giunta highlights Margaret’s motherly care and spiritual fortitude in regard to his own faith, he continually emphasizes how her holy gift is controlled by her advisors and serves the higher purposes of the Franciscan Order. In her intimate interactions with Christ, Giunta deliberately notes Christ’s wish for Margaret to confide in the friars and demonstrate her personal suffering to the people. This is in order to maintain Margaret as a public figure and not a secluded mystic who hoards her religious ecstasies against the wishes of the Church. Coakley points out, “for all the intimacy and implied privacy of his encounters with her, Christ uses those encounters to articulate a vocation for Margaret that is not contemplative but active; he pictures her even as a kind of public figure. Like her suffering itself, her public role is framed as an imitation of Christ.”

But, Coakley continues, “when she is on immediate display, it is the friars who are to be the mediators between her and the world at large.” Margaret does not want to be around other people and would prefer to experience her religious visions in private. However, Giunta explains that Christ uses these episodes to further demonstrate Margaret’s mystical link to Christ as a model for the laity, but also as a laywoman who is mediated by the Franciscan friars. The friars are the ones who can properly channel Margaret’s religiosity so that the laity has a figure of whom they too can follow, under the guidelines of the Franciscan lifestyle.

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58 Coakley, 138.
59 Coakley, 140.
The Franciscan Friars are intimately tied to Margaret’s life and holiness, because they are the ones who preach about her and “convey her example to sinners” in a way that is proper and does not threaten the authority of the Church. Often, Margaret’s religious visions and piety endorse certain actions by the friars, for example, “Giunta shows [Margaret] often exercising her charismatic powers or influence specifically in coordination with his own ministry, either to supplement or inform it in particular cases, especially those involving the hearing of confessions and the mending of quarrels.” Margaret’s wise advice, due to her intimacy with Christ, serve the Franciscans and aid them in becoming better servants of Christ themselves. Giunta utilizes Margaret’s services and her visions by inspiring and directing the laity and other friars. Furthermore, Giunta often relates instances where Christ berates Margaret for not thinking of the friars or Giunta enough “for which fault she then repented…such passages also nicely crystallize a view of what the holy woman should render the priest, namely, a thorough obedience and a devoted intercession.” Margaret is thereby capable of great holiness, which can be controlled by her Franciscan advisors and furthermore she serves the purpose and credo of the Franciscan Order by following the penitent way.

Through her active involvement in the community of Cortona in both charity and prayer, she becomes a figure for the people of Cortona to model themselves after, in particular mothers. While Margaret seems to deviate from typical motherhood when she cries, “I cannot tolerate the presence of anyone, my son included,” she then extends her prayers to include the people of Cortona and asks Christ to pray for his “children” on her

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60 Coakley, 140.
61 Coakley, 143.
62 Coakley, 146.
63 Giunta, 160.
behalf. Margaret prays, “I ask with confidence God our King to care for these children, and mercifully accept the prayers I offer for them with tears.” Margaret cares deeply for the spiritual welfare of the people she prays for, her “children” in a sense, but cannot bear to be around her own son. In Giunta’s construction of powerful but orthodox motherhood, physical proximity and touch are not indicators of motherly care, but rather it is through devoted religious supplication for the sake of others that Margaret demonstrates true maternal care.

Even in her semi-constant state of weakened health, Margaret continues to think about and care for others, rather than her own physical body. For example, she uses personal fasting as a form of penance and yet exhibits excessive generosity in feeding other people. This seeming paradox serves to highlight Margaret’s religiosity and role as a spiritual mother because she puts the needs of others before her own and has no personal attachment to physical, material objects, such as food. As part of her devotional discipline, Margaret did not eat in a fashion that could be considered healthy by any sense, medieval or modern: “Margaret, the servant of the Lord, most eager out of her love for Christ for every discipline of her body, spurned all kinds of tasty food…throughout the course of many years she maintained her frail body just on bread, raw greens, a few hazelnuts, or perhaps some almonds.” Margaret rejected the things she once found luxurious and comfortable, such as figs that she enjoyed in her previous, secular life. She rejects her past physical desires in order to purify herself but also so that she could give all she had to others. Instead of sustaining her physical health, she is more concerned with the health of the poor and consequently their path to spiritual salvation. By denying

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64 Giunta, 160.
65 Giunta, 78.
her physical body to save others, both physically and spiritually, she is performing the duties of a good mother.

This type of behavior, of sacrificing food and material objects in lieu of spiritual salvation, was seen as holy and was even rewarded with miracles. Catherine of Siena, (1347-approx. 1380) Margaret’s close contemporary in a neighboring town, for example, rewarded a follower for her substitution of Church for food preparation:

“Catherine of Siena, after her death, miraculously cooked for a woman devotee who had gone to church instead of preparing dinner for her sons. Catherine thus, from beyond the grave, blessed and approved by miracle a woman’s escape from the ordinary maternal duty of food preparation.”67 This story is strikingly similar to the miracles that occurred after Margaret’s death. In a series of miracles that are attributed to Margaret, which will be discussed in the next section, mothers who pray for the health and recovery of their sons are rewarded for their devotion to Margaret and spiritual motherhood. Because the women have faith and pray to Margaret rather than relying on physical or secular means, their sons are saved. Like Catherine, miracles that are attributed to Margaret represent her approval of these mothers’ spirituality. Because these mothers rely on divine intervention and appeal to a holy mother figure, Margaret, these women also become more than just physical mothers. They embrace a spiritual motherhood by using devotion rather than physical practices to care for their sons. Through God’s approval of them, Margaret and Catherine are endorsing and encouraging this behavior beyond the grave.

With this transition from a physical, secular mother to a spiritual mother of others, Margaret achieves her transformation into spiritual perfection. Margaret is no longer

66 Bynum, 221.
67 Bynum, 221-222.
known for being a sullied concubine; she has transformed into a spiritual being, one who is rewarded with the role of mediator or intercessor between humans and the divine. Additionally, as a significant motherly image for the people of Cortona, Margaret is a key player in shaping the purpose and parameters of motherhood, imbuing physical motherhood with more spirituality and power than was previously attributed to the role of mother. Margaret has become a role model and supplicant for the people of Cortona to pray to and her position as mediator continues after her death.

**Margaret in Memory and Miracles**

During her life, Margaret was an active participant in the welfare and spiritual care of others but her position as a symbolic ideal of motherhood continues after her death. Giunta records Margaret’s miracles in a separate chapter of the *Vita*, entitled the *Legenda*, and it is perhaps not surprising that the theme of motherhood has an important role here too. There are approximately twenty-five miracles that involve a mother praying on behalf of her son for a cure from some malady or disease. More than any other type of miracle attributed to Margaret, this emphasizes and reinforces Margaret’s role as a mother, and one that shows a hierarchy, yet an interrelationship between spiritual and physical motherhood. Margaret is identified with motherhood and therefore mothers appeal to her based on motherly concern for their own offspring. In changing to a life of penitence and exhibiting maternal concern for the people of Cortona, Margaret’s conversion has come full-circle and the people honor her in memory as a saintly mother.

Three miracles, in particular, are interesting in that they explicitly involve something the women all possess: sons and profound faith. In one instance, a boy is
assumed dead due to some mishap. However, according to Giunta’s account, “But the mother, who had a deep faith, returned home and invoked the blessed Margaret…the good and charitable Saint, who comes to help those who are weeping, immediately met the faith of the pious mother.” The woman saved the life of her son through faith in Margaret and her holiness. In the hierarchy of spiritual and physical motherhood, the spiritual triumphed, because faith is more healing than any physical action. This mother rose above the typical expectations of motherhood to care for her son religiously, thereby this miracle demonstrates the power of motherhood in spirituality.

In a similar story of faith and motherhood, a son falls ill and passes away “But the love of his mother, who believed her son could be restored to her, led her to make a vow to Saint Margaret, promising to visit her tomb.” Her love for her son motivated her to believe in Margaret’s intercessory and healing powers, for while she was alive, Margaret could often be appealed to for help for the sick and dying. Because of Margaret’s special link to Christ, she was able to save many through various miracles while she was still alive. This faith the mother had in Margaret and her divine powers translated into spiritual power, a power of which could heal her son while her physical body could do nothing to help. In this case, physical mothering was not enough to save the life of her son therefore she employs spiritual measures and uses belief to care for her child.

In a third miracle that involves motherly concern for a son and resulting pleas to Margaret’s sanctity, a woman’s son has fallen ill and the doctors have left him for dead. Giunta continues, “Since there was no human remedy, the pious mother turned to divine

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68 Giunta, 314.
69 Giunta, 320.
help. Full of faith, she recommended her son to blessed Margaret…Today he is a member of the Order of the preaching friars dedicated to the service of the king of the world.” This mother displays sincere piety herself and in her devotion, creates another spiritual offspring for the followers of Christ and Margaret. This creates an interesting parallel between the mother and Margaret, as both of their sons became friars due to the religiosity of their mothers. In a way, this woman has assumed Margaret’s image as a holy mother, who because of her faith gives up her son to the holy order of the Franciscans and consequently to Christ. Both this mother and Margaret mold their bodily sons into spiritual sons of Christ.

Piety, and the living out of that piety, is a particularly important criterion for eliciting miracles from Margaret. The three women mentioned above are rewarded for their faith in Margaret’s sanctity. Their motherly concern for their sons drive them to prayer but as Margaret is their intended audience, they pray to Margaret, not Christ, because they believe her to be endowed with the power to perform miracles. Margaret is both a mother and a religious icon. She has an intimate relationship with Christ and as a Mother of the Church she is endowed with the power to mediate between these mothers and God. Additionally, these women can relate more readily to Margaret because she was also once a secular mother. But she was able to do more than just provide for her bodily son, she provided for all the people of Cortona through her care and devotion. In a way, these secular mothers could be seen as becoming more like Margaret in that they care for their sons but their care for their sons’ souls supersedes their concern about their

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70 Giunta, 322.
bodies. These women are rewarded for their faith and devotion as mothers because they value the spiritual, just as Margaret did in her lifetime.

Yet another story of a mother praying for the health of her son indicates this clearly, and reaffirms the hierarchy of spirit and body. A certain woman’s son had some incurable disease, which human skills could not remedy. This mother prays to Margaret and promises her that if she heals her son, she would visit Margaret’s tomb. The boy is immediately healed, “But since [the mother] neglected to fulfill her vow, the same disease returned. She renewed her vow and again the boy was cured, but the woman still neglected to fulfill her vow. Every year that she put off her promise the boy had the malady.”\(^{71}\) The woman had faith but because she neglected to match faith to action, her son became ill again and again. According to Margaret’s standards, she was not being a good mother. She cared enough for his physical health to pray for him to be healed but did not go the spiritual step further, to cement and strengthen those vows of devotion and as a result, neglected to be a spiritual mother.

This miracle serves to highlight the difference between Margaret and this mother and to emphasize the importance of spiritual motherhood. Once again, physical maternal acts are not enough to save or heal. Spiritual acts become the saving force in the son’s life. By demonstrating the lack of spirituality in motherhood, this miracle demonstrates the hierarchy of spiritual and physical motherhood and how faithful spirituality is an important aspect of motherhood.

After her own conversion, Margaret seemed to neglect her son in that she refused to care for him physically. However, through her extreme penance, she was able to care

\(^{71}\) Giunta, 324.
for even more people, ensuring their salvation and thereby cementing her role as spiritual mother. As a spiritual mother, she can care for more than just her bodily son and he is not neglected in the process. The woman who did not remain devoted, by contrast, caused her own son to become ill again and again. Margaret’s son excels spiritually after his mother’s conversion. What he loses in physical touch and care, he gains in spirituality. By being Margaret’s only bodily son, he is doubly blessed to have Margaret as a spiritual mother. In a sense, Margaret’s son is healed of the secular ills of the world that he would experience as an illegitimate son. Instead, he becomes a member of the Franciscan Order with a highly exalted, pious mother.

The miracles Margaret granted to these ordinary mothers highlight an interesting aspect of motherhood as a source of piety and power. It is through these women’s devotion and faith in Margaret that they are able to serve their sons as good mothers. In a sense, Margaret is helping these women realize an even more fulfilling motherhood, by caring for their sons physically and through their own spirituality. In essence, these women are becoming spiritual mothers, like Margaret. Their assimilation with Margaret’s form of motherhood is a reflection of Margaret’s own tie to the motherly aspects of Christ. Margaret truly has become an intermediary for the people and particularly the women of Cortona by changing model motherhood to include spirituality as a key component.
Conclusion:

Speaking of Margaret and other female penitents like her, a modern scholar stated that it is not surprising that “the fame which surrounded these women during their lifetimes and the success of their post-mortem cults brought increased spiritual authority and power to the Franciscan friars.” Margaret is constructed as a role model for fellow penitents of the Franciscan’s Third Order and she is the light for them all to follow. Her popularity among the people of Cortona only served to further strengthen the power of the Franciscans and to bring about a new hierarchy of motherhood in which secular motherhood is fused with the spiritual, imbuing it with more power than before. Rather than being a threat to the Church, Margaret becomes a beacon for the laity to follow and it is through her cult that an intensified devotion to Christian practice thrives.

Giunta portrays Margaret’s life in a way that highlights her orthodox religiosity through the lens of motherhood. In Giunta’s account of “this sinner-turned-saint,” he seeks to “prove that the penitential way of life offered a legitimate path to sanctity and that an officially-sponsored Franciscan ‘third order’ of lay penitents living under the official supervision and direction of the Friars Minor could be both an orthodox movement within the church and a genuine expression of the Franciscan life.”

Church politics and forms of worship were gradually changing during this period and therefore there was the constant danger of worshiping in a fashion that could be considered heretical by the Church. An important aspect of this change was a development in the language associated with authority, as the perception that religious authority, coupled with maternal instincts was becoming a more beneficial way to instruct the laity in

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72 Schlager, 165.
73 Schlager, 164.
religious matters. The Christian hierarchy, as an all-male institution, had long utilized the language of fatherhood as God was often cast as the stern father. However, as Christ and God were associated with motherly qualities in addition to their fatherly qualities, motherhood was seen as a source of power, rather than weakness or mere femininity. The power of mothers, as of all women, was primarily exercised privately and within the realm of the family. Motherly power was viewed more as a one-to-one relationship while fatherly power was more a public institution, as was so clearly demonstrated in the authority of the Church. In medieval society, physical motherhood was venerated already, being an essential aspect to producing life and raising moral beings. Therefore, with the inclusion of motherhood language in the teachings of the Church, authority figures were re-appropriating that inherent power for the Church and Christianity.

Margaret’s miracles for the people of Cortona after her death continued the spiritual comfort and the security she provided to her community when she was alive. After her conversion and throughout the rest of her life, she continued to care for the citizens of Cortona with a motherly touch. Margaret’s unique assimilation to Christ endowed her with the power to adequately intercede on the behalf of and for her people. Her role as an intercessor between the human and the divine provided the people with a figure to whom they could appeal and whom they could model themselves after. This role as mediator is clearly defined in the miracles section of her Legenda, highlighting the various acts she was able to perform through the power of Christ, for her people. Moreover, her penitent behavior and devotion to charity while she was alive proves her to be a model figure for followers of the Third Order and for lay-Christians everywhere.
With his emphasis on the theme of motherhood in her life, Giunta constructs Margaret to be a non-threatening influence to the Church: by positing her visions and devotional practices within the safe and acceptable realm of motherly care. Giunta’s aim in portraying Margaret’s life was to provide an example of a religiously devout woman, from the laity, who could repent and dedicate herself completely to Christ and the Franciscan mission. While she was endowed with special visionary powers, she was not heretical because of her obedience to the Franciscans and her charitable desires to serve as a spiritual mother for the people of Cortona. More importantly, Giunta’s creation of Margaret’s *Vita* embraced the popularity her local cult created while simultaneously imbuing it with orthodoxy, such that the Christian Church would not be suspicious. By re-appropriating her popularity into the Franciscan Movement, Giunta portrayed her as a light for the Third Order, thereby helping to ensure the validity and orthodoxy of the Third Order itself, in the eyes of the Church.

Giunta’s representation of Margaret as a spiritual mother had at its center the inherent hierarchy of spiritual and physical motherhood. But rather than simply dismissing the physical, Giunta’s portrait of a spiritual mother enriches it with spirituality. Margaret’s form of motherhood encompasses the duties of typical, medieval Italian mothers but also adds to it the value of spirituality.

Margaret demonstrates her love and care for her son in a way that is superior to secular motherhood, which can be seen most concisely in her evolving relationship with him. She distances herself from the role as a physical mother but is greatly invested in his spiritual development. Giunta reports how Margaret rejected her role as physical mother to her son, an act that – then and now – might seem, at best, selfish and
neglectful. But because her physical son found a place among the Franciscans and the state of his soul is cared for, he earns a higher distinction, as one of Margaret’s spiritual children.

Margaret’s sullied past is no longer remembered. Instead, she is remembered for her extreme devotion to Christ and spiritual prowess as a mother of Cortona. In Margaret’s case and for the people in her society, social circumstances are not as important as the devotion of the soul, which accurately reflects the mission statement of the Franciscans towards the laity. In their rapport attention to and inclusion of the laity, the Franciscans continually stressed the importance of faith and good works. By living a simple, devout life, one’s past had no lasting negative effect on one’s spiritual development, which is so clearly exemplified through Giunta’s depiction of Margaret’s life.
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**Primary Sources:**


**Secondary Sources:**


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