

Conversion, *Conversi*, and the Christian Life in Late Medieval Tuscany

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“There are two kinds of Christians,” according to Gratian — the clergy, occupied with the divine office, prayer, and contemplation, and the laity, involved in this world. For Gratian, living at the end of a period of intense religious reform, the issue was still one of protecting the liberty of the church and insuring the correct ordering of society. If the church was to maintain its vitality and meet the challenges of a sinful world, it needed an unambiguous structure and inflexible discipline. He described the clergy, how they should live, and in what ways they could participate in the secular world. And, he argued, these distinctions between the lay and ecclesiastical estates were ancient — he traced them back to St. Jerome. The reformer had little to say about the laity. Those in holy orders were to devote themselves to salvation through an imitation of Christ. Although laymen certainly were capable of finding salvation, their duties were to command women, plow fields, and pay tithes.¹

Gratian’s description of the laity is but one of several possible outlines of medieval Christian society. While it is primarily a constitutional description, it has the merit of highlighting a problem that Christians faced during and after the Gregorian reforms: What are the avenues to Christian perfection most appropriate to the laity? In the early Middle Ages it had been possible for the laity, even married couples, to convert, give themselves to God, and

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¹ *Corpus iuris canonici*, ed. Emil Friedberg, 1 (Leipzig, 1879), C.12 q.1 c.7; Stanley Chodorow, *Christian Political Theory and Church Politics in the Mid-Twelfth Century* (Berkeley, 1972), passim, especially pp. 201–4; Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (Westminster, Md., 1967), pp. 11 ff.; Ronald J. Cox, *A Study in the Juridic Status of Laymen in the Writing of the Medieval Canonists*, Catholic University of America Canon Law Studies 395 (Washington, D.C., 1959), pp. 19–30; and Luigi Prosdocimi, “Chierici e laici nella società occidentale del secolo XI: A proposito di Decr. Grat. C. 12, q. 1, c. 7: ‘Duo sunt genera Christianorum,’” *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Medieval Canon Law, Boston College, 1963*, ed. Stephan Kuttner and J. J. Ryan, *Monumenta iuris canonici* 1, ser. C (Vatican City, 1965), pp. 105–22; and *I laici nella “Societas Christiana” dei secoli XI e XII*, Atti della terza settimana internazionale di studio, Mendola, 21–27 agosto 1965 (Milan, 1968).

follow a monastic profession either at home or in a community. Some laymen voluntarily chose to adopt the penitential life required of public sinners, including a penitential habit and retreat from public life, festivals, and secular trades. It is doubtless significant that in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries conversion (to cenobitic monasticism or simply *in vita et habitu sanctae conversationis*) was not clearly defined, and the terms *poenitentes*, *conversi*, and *religiosi viri* were inextricably confused. While councils and synods questioned the status of these penitents and worried about the obvious opportunities for abuse, laymen continued to convert. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries this special status continued to attract the pious laity. Criticism also continued, but now because the isolated penitents living at home or laymen meeting without clerical supervision violated the reformed ideals of order.²

But as assiduously as Gratian and the reformers tried to distinguish between clerical and lay status and to define the role of the laity, their formulae remained, in part, hopeful theorizing. Distinctions were constantly blurred, and monastic and clerical prerogatives were quickly imitated by the laity. Confraternities elected laymen to serve as "abbots" who would lead and correct individual members. The use of the phrase *recipere in ordine fraternitatis* in the eleventh-century statutes of a Tuscan confraternity suggests to Gilles Gérard Meersseman an attempt to create a lay *ordo* by emulating the monks.³ And a series of religious movements critical of the local clergy arose that redefined the *vita apostolica* to emphasize popular preaching, voluntary poverty, and a return to the simplicity of the early church. A feature common to many of these movements was the role they offered to the laity. Among the rural penitentials near Vicenza and the Humiliati of northern Italy, married couples who made no vow of continence were given a place alongside the single men and women who were celibate. These religious movements were found throughout Europe, but they were especially popular in northern and central Italy. The most successful of these groups was the Order of Friars Minor.⁴

² Gilles Gérard Meersseman, *Ordo fraternitatis: Confraternite e piet  dei laici nel medioevo*, with Gian Piero Pacini, *Italia Sacra, studi e documenti di storia ecclesiastica* 24–26 (Rome, 1977), 1:265–304, especially 268–69 and 273–76.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 242, and the statutes on p. 60, cap. 1.3.

⁴ Herbert Grundmann, *Religi se Bewegungen im Mittelalter: Untersuchungen  ber die geschichtlichen Zusammenh nge zwischen der Ketzerei, den Bettelorden und der religi sen Frauenbewegung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert und  ber die geschichtlichen Grundlagen der deutschen Mystik*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt, 1961); Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1954); Luigi Zanoni, *Gli Umiliati nei loro rapporti con l'eresia, l'industria della lana ed i comuni nei secoli XII e XIII* (Milan, 1912; repr. Rome, 1970); Brenda M. Bolton, "Paupertas Christi: Old Wealth and New Poverty in the Twelfth Century," *Renaissance and Renewal in Church History*, ed. Derek Baker, *Studies in Church History* 14 (New York, 1977), pp. 95–103; idem, "Sources for the Early History of the Humiliati," *The Materials and Sources and Methods of Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Derek Baker, *Studies*

As first envisioned by St. Francis, the Friars Minor were to make little use of Gratian's dichotomy. The saint's own views were ambiguous enough that one tradition could maintain that he had no interest in founding a new order. Francis himself made no distinction between cleric and layman except that one was empowered to say the divine office and the other was not. He also did not initially prohibit his brothers from practicing secular trades so long as they caused no scandal.⁵

But almost from its origin this ideal came under sustained attack. The desire for advancement and prestige, the evangelical needs of the church, and the prejudices of the order's leaders reduced the role played by the "simple." It was "absurd," Salimbene averred, that laymen should hold positions of power, "since there is such an abundance of good clerics in the order."⁶ It bothered him that laymen were allowed in the chapter. He criticized Elias for having received "multos inutiles" into the order.

Some lived in towns, completely secluded in the hermitage beside the church of the friars, and they had a window through which they conversed with women; and laymen and *inutiles* were hearing confessions and giving advice. This I saw at Pistoia and elsewhere. And some lived alone in hospitals, that is, without another brother in residence. This I saw at Siena where Friar Martino Spagnolo, that wretched old layman of short stature, served the infirm in hospitals; and daily, when he wished, he went about town alone. . . .⁷

Salimbene's preference for limited participation by the laity seems to have characterized the English and German Franciscans. By 1260 restrictions had spread to Italy.⁸ Henceforth laymen were most often found as patrons or members of the increasingly popular Third Order.

The clericalization and bureaucratization of the Franciscans are often recited as a kind of tragedy that ends with an alienated and dying Francis being transformed into a carefully groomed relic to be housed in Assisi's magnificent new Franciscan convent. But too often the irony of Francis's hopes and Salimbene's recriminations has obscured the extent to which the laity in Italy attempted to blur the canonical definitions of the "two kinds of

in Church History 11 (New York, 1975), pp. 125-33; idem, "Innocent III's Treatment of the Humiliati," *Popular Beliefs and Practice*, ed. Derek Baker, Studies in Church History 8 (New York, 1972), pp. 73-82; Barbara H. Rosenwein and Lester K. Little, "Social Meaning in the Monastic and Mendicant Spiritualities," *Past & Present* 63 (1974), 4-32; John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order to the Year 1517* (Oxford, 1968).

⁵ Laurentio Landini, *The Causes of the Clericalization of the Order of Friars Minor, 1209-1260, in the Light of Early Franciscan Sources* (Chicago, 1968), p. 43.

⁶ Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, ed. Giuseppe Scalia, 2 vols. (Bari, 1966), 1:141.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:144, quotation on 145.

⁸ Landini, *Causes of the Clericalization*, pp. 87-88, citing Thomas of Eccleston, notes that English friars tended from the beginning to be clerics. John B. Freed, *The Friars and German Society in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), p. 126, notes that in the 1220s and 1230s Franciscans were often lay, but that the situation changed in the 1240s.

Christians" and to use already well-established structures and institutions to fulfill their own religious needs. The concomitant clericalization of the First Order and the expansion of the Third Order suggest that authorities could control the expression of lay religiosity only with great difficulty. The tension between legal-institutional structure and individual aspirations can be seen clearly if we look at the continued use of the term *conversus* to describe the humble and ambiguous status of lay brothers found in and around Tuscan religious corporations in the thirteenth century.

Before the mid-eleventh century a monastic *conversus* was one who had entered the community as an adult, often lacking the education necessary for participation in the monastery's liturgical life. The choicest positions in the monastery often were reserved for the *oblato*, monks who had been given to the monastery as children and educated in monastic traditions. *Conversi* served as they could, by singing Psalms or carrying lanterns for the abbot as he went to night offices. A mid-twelfth-century canon of Liège obviously was thinking of this group when he described men "less suitable for these tasks [those of priests, deacons, doorkeepers, acolytes], who are taken into the church simply as clerics, whence they are called among themselves *conversi*."⁹

But at the very time that the canon of Liège was writing, the term *conversus* was increasingly being reserved to describe laymen who were associated in some way with a religious house. At Cluny in 1100, *conversi* of ambiguous status freed the monks from dependence on servants who lived outside the monastery, entered daily, and disturbed the tranquillity of the house. We often imagine these lay brothers to be day laborers who handled only the most menial tasks. Even among the Cistercians such a portrait is overdrawn. Cistercian *conversi* usually managed granges and hired laborers. *Conversi* were far from being excluded from decision-making; they handled daily affairs without referring them to the monks. And finally, by the end of the twelfth century, the terms *conversus* and *frater* could be used in various parts of Europe to denominate lay members of prayer societies related to monasteries, widows who wore a religious habit, donors of properties who reserved the use and the fruits and promised to live with the religious, and even those who converted *ad succurrendum* — on the point of death.¹⁰

In northern Italy and especially in Tuscany there were significant material and spiritual advantages to be gained from conversion. At a time when communal governments increasingly claimed the right to regulate and tax their citizens and subjects, *conversus* status as an exempt cleric brought

⁹ *Libellus de diversis ordinibus et professionibus qui sunt in ecclesia*, ed. and trans. Giles Constable and B. Smith (Oxford, 1972), p. 61.

¹⁰ *I laici* (above, n. 1), especially Jacques Dubois, "L'institution des convers au XIIe siècle: Form de vie monastique propre aux laïcs," pp. 183–261, and Cosimo Damiano Fonseca, "I conversi nelle comunità canonicali," pp. 262–305. Jacques Hourlier, *L'âge classique (1140–1378): Les religieux* (Paris, 1974), pp. 256–70. On twelfth-century Benedictine *conversi*, see Giles Constable, "'Famuli' and 'Conversi' at Cluny: A Note on Statute 24 of Peter the Venerable," *Revue bénédictine* 83 (1973), 326–50, who argues that they were religious.

obvious benefits. In Piedmont and in the Bolognese countryside, *conversi* were viewed as little more than tax evaders. Tuscan chroniclers regularly complained about false clerics, the noble *frati gaudenti*, and Third Order Mendicants who used claims of clerical immunities to shield themselves from communal courts, financial exactions, and military service. They often lived with their families, practiced trades, and disposed of their material possessions, the only obvious evidence of their conversion being a distinctive habit. The material gains were neatly balanced by a series of spiritual benefits. *Conversi* had earned a religious habit and the right, the important right, of burial in that habit. They were sometimes included in the necrologies and prayers of the monks. Like monks, they could claim to have embarked on a road that would lead to a special *imitatio Christi*. And finally they were members of a religious community, but freed from the rigors of the demanding system of monastic worship.¹¹

During the early thirteenth century churchmen successfully defended the judicial immunities of the *conversi*. But they always did so with the understanding that the status of a *conversus* was limited. That "*conversi* are not monks" was a key precept. *Conversi* had no voice in the chapter; they were to have their own cloister; and, among the Cistercians, they even had their own entrance into the church, where they sat, like the rest of the laity, separated from the altar and the choir by a rood screen. By the thirteenth century even the Benedictines had introduced separate cloisters for the *conversi*. Innocent III ordered, and Boniface VIII reiterated, that *conversi* should have no voice in chapter meetings or elections. In the 1250s Bishop Guercio of Lucca included in his diocesan synodal statutes the provision that religious corporations had to provide a special dormitory for *conversi* and, of course, separate quarters for *conversae*.¹²

There were a number of terms that could be used to describe this special lay status and the various laymen who converted. But by the mid-thirteenth

¹¹ Robert Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, 8 vols. (Florence, 1972-73), 2:177-80, 817-18; 3:382, 598-99; 5:272; 7:106-7. Isidoro del Lungo, *Dino Compagni e la sua cronica*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1889), 1:46-59. Francesco Gosso, *Vita economica delle abbazie piemontesi (sec. X-XIV)* (Rome, 1940), pp. 161-63.

¹² Examples of litigation are found in Gosso, *Abbazie piemontesi*, p. 164. Wolfgang Braunfels, *Monasteries of Western Europe: The Architecture of the Orders* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 74-75. On the probable design of one house, Anthony Luttrell, et al., "An Umbrian Abbey: San Paolo di Val diponte," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 40 (1972), 185. But Marcia B. Hall, in a series of studies, has suggested that in fact *conversi* and other males were allowed within the rood screen and that it was most effective in segregating females: "The Italian Rood Screen: Some Implications for Liturgy and Function," *Essays Presented to Myron P. Gilmore*, ed. Sergio Bertelli and Gloria Ramakus, 2 vols. (Florence, 1977), 2:213-18; "The Ponte in S. Maria Novella: The Problem of the Rood Screen in Italy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974), 157-73; and "The Tramezzo in Santa Croce, Florence, Reconsidered," *Art Bulletin* 56 (1974), 325-41. Guercio's statutes are included in Paolino Dinelli, *Dei sinodi della diocesi di Lucca*, *Memorie e documenti per la storia di Lucca* 7 (Lucca, 1834), p. 57.

century the terms were hopelessly confused. *Conversi* regularly would refer to themselves as *conversi*, *commissi*, *oblato*, *Deo devoti*, *servitialis fratres*, or *sorores*, most often using a combination of these terms — each of which could carry a different meaning.¹³ Even a careful reading of the early-fourteenth-century statutes of the Sienese hospital of Santa Maria della Scala fails to yield a clear distinction between the *fratres*, *conversi*, and *oblato*. *Conversi* dressed differently from lettered *fratres*, but they wore the same habit as the unlettered *fratres*. The statutes also included provisions for priests who were *conversi*. Similarly at Lucca one group of women was cloistered at San Cerbone. They were not nuns, yet they were never described with terms for *conversae*.¹⁴

To be a *conversus* and to be eligible for the accompanying advantages one had to promise to give one's self and all one's possessions to an ecclesiastical institution. One was further expected, at some time, to adopt a habit and to follow the rule of a religious superior. By the late twelfth century, however, canonists came to distinguish between the true, or professed, *conversi*, who had actually put on the habit and moved into a religious house, and the nonprofessed, who had not. While both professed and nonprofessed could claim to be *conversi*, only "true *conversi*" possessed ecclesiastical status and the concomitant immunities. This practical distinction was ultimately adopted by both secular and religious governments.¹⁵

In 1251, the commune of Lucca faced the problem of defining the status of *conversi* when it amended its statutes in order to make it more difficult to evade communal responsibilities through conversion. In that year the commune needed money to raise an army and send it against the Pisans at Serraglio in Versilia. A special commission of ten men selected to review the communal statutes ordered that whoever was a *conversus* of a church or any other ecclesiastical corporation excepting monasteries should be liable for military service and for payment of communal imposts. They clearly had in mind conversions by working farmers and not wealthy widows and merchants since in speaking of tax liabilities they mentioned "such a *conversus* and his farm." A more general phrase and one more usual in a general statute would have been "all goods and possessions, movable and immovable."¹⁶ The commune may have thought *conversi* were most properly found

¹³ On the various terms for *conversi* see J. Bonduelle, "Convers," *Dictionnaire de droit canonique*, ed. R. Naz, 7 vols. (Paris, 1935–65) 4:562–88, especially 575–79.

¹⁴ Dinelli, *Dei sinodi*, p. 169; *Statuti senesi scritti in volgare ne' secoli xiii e xiv*, ed. Luciano Banchi, vol. 3: *Statuto dello spedale di Siena* (Bologna, 1887), p. 53, cap. 42; p. 77, cap. 58; p. 94, cap. 101.

¹⁵ See the discussion in Cox, *Juridic Status of Laymen* (above, n. 1), pp. 19–83, and Bonduelle, "Convers" (above, n. 13), 575–79.

¹⁶ On Lucca's war in Versilia, *Le croniche di Giovanni Sercambi, Lucchese*, ed. Salvatore Bongi, *Fonti per la storia d'Italia* 19–21, 3 vols. (Rome, 1892), 1:34. The constitutional amendment is found in Archivio Arcivescovile di Lucca (hereafter AAL), Fondo Diplomatico (hereafter Dip.), AI 36 (25 July 1251): "Omnibus hanc paginam inspecturis pateat manifeste quod inter constitutiones factas per decem viros duos de Burgo et duos de qualibet porta electos . . . talis

in monasteries, or, more likely, it did not wish to litigate with corporations directly under papal protection and thus exempt from local ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Within four years, however, the communal attack on *conversi* had expanded to include monastic *conversi* as well as *conversi* of other groups. In 1254 the commune tried to collect a *dazio* or some other form of direct tax on the possessions of Jacopo Cardinale, a *conversus* of the monastery of San Michele di Guamo. Both Jacopo and his wife Berta are recorded in San Michele's necrology as being *conversi*, but we have no other information about the nature of their conversion. A consilium of 1255 written for the court of the podesta (and torn in half vertically in the only known version) is our only record of the litigation. From the tenor of the extant portion of the document, and because San Michele attempted to preserve a copy, it seems likely that the communal claim to tax revenues was not sustained.¹⁷ At Bologna, too, civil authorities declared that lands initially subject to taxes would remain taxable even if those who hold the lands convert, "since many who fraudulently and maliciously wish to evade *collectas* and *factiones* of the commune of Bologna make themselves *conversi*."¹⁸ It is probably significant of the confusion about *conversi* in the mid-thirteenth century that the commune did not try to define the formal requirements that had to be met in order for an individual to claim immunities. The commune knew that something had to be done, but its first reaction was simply to attempt to reduce the number of ecclesiastical corporations that could offer immunities, or to restrict the advantages offered.

These statutes attacked the problem of a peasant whose property was real and immovable without solving the large problem of who could or could not be accounted a *conversus*. Since the purpose was to end fraud and not to destroy religious liberties, the simplest definition was a functional one. At Bologna immunities were to be granted to those "who live in the *familia* of a church, wearing the attire and following the customs of *conversi* working for the good of the church and sustained in the vestments and by the bread of the church."¹⁹ No one who lived outside a church or monastery was eligible

constituto (*sic*) continetur, videlicet, quicumque effectus est conversus ab exercitu de sertalio citra vel in antea efficietur quocumque tempore, alicuius loci vel ecclesie que non sit monasterium, cogatur ille talis conversus et locus et ecclesia in qua se conversavit servire comuni lucana et ville de qua fuit dictus conversus, si fuit de aliqua villa vel terra lucani districtus, in andatis et cavalcatis, et datia et impositiones tali converso vel suo poderi contingentes solvere tamquam si conversus non esset."

¹⁷ AAL, Dip., AG 45 (31 December 1254). The necrology is in Archivio di Stato di Lucca (henceforth ASL), Monastero di S. Michele di Guamo, 1, fols. 22r (18 kalendas Septembris), 24v (4 idus Septembris). A similar controversy is found in ASL, Dip., Miscellanea (23 March 1261). See also *Statuti dell'Opera di S. Iacopo di Pistoia volgarizzati l'anno MCCCXIII da Mazzeo di Ser Giovanni Bellebuoni*, ed. Sebastiano Ciampi (Pisa, 1814), c. 40; and Gosso, *Abbazie piemontesi* (above, n. 11), p. 164.

¹⁸ *Statuti di Bologna dall'anno 1245 all' anno 1267*, ed. Luigi Frati, Dei monumenti storici pertinenti alle provincie della Romagna, Ser. 1, Statuti 1-3 (Bologna, 1869-77), 1:479-80.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:479.

to claim such an exemption. By the early fourteenth century statutes were more refined. At Siena one could qualify for an ecclesiastical exemption only by living in a religious place and wearing a habit and a tonsure proper for the place or order. Further, one could not claim a tax exemption on any possessions reserved for personal use and not turned over to the church. And at Lucca each podesta was ordered to compose a "Book of *Conversi*." It was to include all *conversi* or oblates who had given their property and were living under the regulation of an ecclesiastical superior. Anyone not so registered would lose the right of exemption. "Rather, the Luccan podesta shall be held to proceed against such . . . as against other laymen of the Luccan city."²⁰ By a simple, functional definition the state was able to isolate those individuals that it considered to be "false *conversi*."

The church arrived at similar definitions, but not entirely for the same reasons. Certainly, as Bishop Enrico of Lucca acknowledged in his early-fourteenth-century synodal statutes, the state had an interest in establishing the norms governing conversions.

Some prelates of churches of the Luccan city and diocese and rectors of venerable and religious places, endangering their souls and defrauding the Luccan commune, receive some as *conversi* who, although they offer themselves and their possessions to God with their lips, remain in their houses and maintain secular businesses and offices just as before; they do this so that they can circumvent punishment when they have committed some offense and so that they can evade the burdens of the Luccan commune both real and personal.

Even while acknowledging communal interests, Enrico's own concern was not really with the laity — "desiring," he said, "as much as we can to guard with the Lord's aid against the danger to their [the rectors'] souls and the danger to the churches from scandals which because of this could occur between clergy and laymen."²¹ A similar concern is evident in a Florentine synodal statute of 1327 which prohibited parish priests from keeping a "widow or a *conversa suspecta*" as a housekeeper. The danger to be avoided was the danger to the soul of the priest and the possible scandal to the church.²²

²⁰ *Statuto del comune di Lucca dell' anno MCCCVIII*, Memorie e documenti per la storia di Lucca 3,3 (Lucca, 1867), pp. 224–25, Lib. III, rub. cxlv; p. 258, Lib. IV, rub. xv. *Il costituito del comune di Siena volgarizzato nel MCCCIX–MCCCX*, ed. Alessandro Lisini, 2 vols. (Siena, 1903), 1, dist. I, rub. VIII. Ludovico Zdekauer, "Statuti criminali del foro ecclesiastico di Siena," *Bullettino senese di storia patria* 7 (1900), 242, rub. i, and 257, rub. iv. *Statuti inediti della città di Pisa dal XII al XIV secolo*, 1 (Florence, 1864), pp. 48–49.

²¹ Raoul Manselli, ed., "La sinodo lucchese di Enrico del Caretto," *Miscellanea Gilles Gérard Meersseman*, Italia Sacra 15–16 (Padua, 1970), 1:220–21.

²² "Constitutiones synodales venerabilis patris domini Francisci Dei gratia episcopi Florentini" (7 August 1327), edited in *I capitoli del comune di Firenze*, 2 (Florence, 1893), 17.

The position of the *conversi* was underscored by their distinctive but humble dress. In northern Europe *conversi* could be ordered to wear untrimmed beards. In Tuscany beards were not discussed, but *conversi* were expected to be tonsured. Generally, *conversi* wore a habit of neutral color. *Conversi* in the Benedictine congregation of the Pulsanesi, which had major houses in Pisa and Lucca and less important houses in Florence and in the Lunigiana, seem to have worn the plain gray habit without the black scapular and cap worn by the monks. This is similar to the dress code of the hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena. Its *conversi* were to wear the simple gray habit with the hospital's insignia, but they were forbidden to wear, without special license, the cloak or the tunic. The tunic, cloak, and sometimes the cap were the usual signs that distinguished the monks from the *conversi*. For most monasteries and hospitals we have no precise descriptions of dress requirements — only promises to wear the habit *conversi* usually wore.²³

As less than full members of monastic communities, *conversi* were not allowed to take part in chapter meetings or elections of monastic officers. Hospitals and convents, however, were not dominated by clerics and thus *conversi* did play a role in their chapter meetings. The *conversi* of the bridge at Ponte a San Pietro in Lucca were allowed to consent to an exchange of lands along with the local clerics. Similarly at the hospitals of Santa Maria Forisportam and San Luca in Lucca, the lay *conversi* as well as the clerical *conversi* of the hospital took part in the hospital's affairs.²⁴

In hospitals, and perhaps in convents, too, a distinction was made between conventual and nonconventual members. In an attempt to identify the *frati a convento* of Santa Maria della Scala, who lived in the house and obeyed all the customs, and the *frati di fuori*, who lived outside and followed a less demanding schedule, Luciano Banchi suggested that the conventuals were friars and

²³ On beards see the discussion in *I laici* (above, n. 1) pp. 181–82; *Constitutiones canonicorum regularium Ordinis Arroasiensis*, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 20 (Turnhout, 1970), no. 235c; Hourlier, *Les religieux*, p. 260; Leone Mattei-Cerasoli, *La congregazione benedettina degli eremiti pulsanesi* (Badia di Cava, 1938), p. 15; and *Statuto dello spedale di Siena* (above, n. 14), pp. 53–54, cap. 42. On the question of tonsure for *conversi*, see Cox, *Juridic Status of Laymen* (above, n. 1), pp. 30–38; Landini, *Clericalization* (above, n. 3), pp. 30–32. On the custom in Tuscany, *Statuto dello spedale* (above, n. 14), p. 53, cap. 42: “che lifrati del detto Ospitale sieno tenuti portare onesta tonsura,” which seems to include *conversi* as well. Del Lungo, *Dino Compagni*, 1:56, indicates that it was required at Florence. *Statuto del comune di Lucca* (above, n. 23), pp. 224–25, Lib. III, rub. cxlv, requires tonsure of all who wish to claim ecclesiastical immunities in communal courts. The *Frati gaudenti* wore a white tunic with a gray mantle and a white shield with a red cross; Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, 2:818. The Third Order of Friars Minor wore the symbolic cord around their waists.

²⁴ For *conversi* involved in capitular meetings in hospitals and convents, see Archivio di Stato di Pisa (henceforth ASP), Dip., S. Maria (7 February 1305), S. Bernardo (26 July 1320); ASL, Dip., Opera S. Croce (30 July 1198), S. Ponziano (28 March 1201), Spedale (14 November 1227); and *Regesto del capitolo di Lucca*, ed. Pietro Guidi and Oreste Parente, *Regesta Chartarum Italiae* 6, 9, 18 (Rome, 1910–33), nos. 1386 (19 February 1178), 1562 (19 September 1187), 1610 (11 May 1190), 1656 (28 July 1192).

the outsiders were *conversi*. There is, however, no indication that the terms were used in this way. At the hospitals of San Domenico in Pisa and San Jacopo in Altopascio, there were *conversi* who lived in the house and took part in chapter meetings.²⁵ In monasteries these conventuals may have been required to attend night offices. But it is probable that, like the *conversi* of Santa Maria della Scala, many had only to get themselves to the first mass of the morning before the elevation of the host. The only certain requirement for nonconventuals was that they occasionally come to the church or hospital. At Siena the *frati di fuori* were to come to the hospital each Sunday and present themselves to the rector or his vicar. After presenting themselves before their rectors on Sundays, the Tuscan *conversi* may have recited "Preciosa est in conspectu Domini," as some North European *conversi* did, and possibly heard a sermon.²⁶

While *conversi* were held to be less than clerics, they shared one characteristic with their more prestigious brothers — the required alienation of personal property. St. Benedict described the theological and historical precedents for giving up personal property, but local bishops and ecclesiastical statutes were more likely to require such an act in order that the new convert not be a "burden," that is, that he be "useful." The phrase was vague enough to include both the wealthy and the hardworking. Santa Maria della Scala was to restrict the number of women it accepted to the number sufficient to care for the female infirm and the foundlings. But the hospital seems to have allowed some of them to retain control of their own property. The statutes stated that *conversi* who did not offer all of their goods were expected to support themselves. The doorkeeper of the refectory at Santa Maria della Scala was ordered to refuse entrance to those who retained personal possessions. Yet alienation of personal property was the one absolute requirement for a *conversus*. According to Benedict XII, one could only be a *conversus* if one gave "se et sua."²⁷

In statutes religious leaders underscored the position of *conversi* by distinguishing their dress, their role in religious services, and the care that should be taken to insure that they were useful. Yet other writers often described *conversi* as *barbati*, *illetterati*, *idiotae*, or at least *humiles*. We have already noted Salimbene's low opinion of nonclerical Franciscans — a group similar to *conversi*. The well-known Dominican preacher Humbert of Romans was of similar views. He observed that *conversi* were from poor backgrounds and drawn to that status simply by good bread.²⁸

²⁵ *Statuto dello spedale di Siena* (above, n. 14), p. 76; ASP, Dip., S. Michele (7 December 1314); ASL, Dip., Altopascio (22 June 1227).

²⁶ *Statuto dello spedale di Siena*, p. 61, cap. 54; pp. 85–86, rub. 91; pp. 87–88, rub. 95. *Constitutiones Ordinis Arroasiensis* (above, n. 23), no. 219.

²⁷ Bonduelle, "Convers" (above, n. 13), cols. 576–77; St. Benedict, *Regula*, cap. 33; Manselli, "La sinodo lucchese" (above, n. 21), p. 221; *Statuto dello spedale di Siena*, pp. 52–53, cap. 41; pp. 55–56, cap. 47; p. 61, cap. 54, cap. 55; pp. 75–76, cap. 56; p. 76, cap. 57.

²⁸ Alexander Murray, "Religion among the Poor in Thirteenth Century France: The Tes-

The picture of humble, unlettered, and carefully regulated *conversi* fades rather quickly if we turn our attention to court records and private documents in which Tuscan *conversi* appear. They did not necessarily see their status as a humble or lesser one. In 1199 a well-to-do Pisan became a *conversus* of the monastery of San Salvatore with the understanding that one of the fields he gave should be used to found a hospital for women and that the hospital should accept him "as a *conversus* or a monk as he chooses." So too at Lucca, where a couple became *conversi* but provided that their infant son should be allowed to choose at some later date whether he would be a monk, a *conversus*, or a layman. And in a pious bequest a woman founded a hospital for the care of wayward girls who would be given the choice of becoming nuns or *conversae*. *Conversi* not only found their status to be a worthy one — at times it seems to have carried real dignity. After having been insulted and pushed out of a field by a layman, one Luccan *conversus* demanded that the man be summoned to bishop's court "ad satisfactionem vestri honoris." Contempt shown toward a *conversus* was, he implied, contempt for the whole ecclesiastical establishment.²⁹

While the number of *conversi* seems to have dropped dramatically in northern Europe during the thirteenth century, oblations were exceedingly frequent in parts of Tuscany. I have found in the diplomata of the State Archives of Pisa and Lucca and in the Archiepiscopal Archive of Lucca records of 231 individual oblations by *conversi* during the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth centuries. In the diplomata of the State Archives of Lucca one finds about eleven extant declarations of conversion each decade between 1191 and 1311. Between 1100 and 1190 there were only ten all told; between 1311 and 1350 there were only eleven. At Pisa, too, extant conversions are only prevalent after 1190 — but they do not seem to break off as dramatically after 1310. While this seems to indicate a dramatic rise in the number of *conversi* about 1200, it may only reflect accidents of preservation. It is possible that twelfth-century *conversi* were often laborers who brought little more than their labor to a religious institution. Thus there would be little reason to preserve the document of conversion. It is also possible that because of communal attempts to regulate conversion in the thirteenth century, institutions became more careful about preserving documents than they had been previously.

Conversi were most likely to be found in monasteries (45% of extant oblations) or hospitals (34%), but some of the 185 *conversi* whose institutional affiliation can be known were associated with convents, local churches, and

timony of Humbert of Romans," *Traditio* 30 (1974), 295–96. Humbert was specifically describing Cistercian *conversi*.

²⁹ ASP, Dip., S. Michele (15 July 1199); ASL, Archivio dei Notari, Filza 1, Reg. 2 (Ser Cassiano di Romano), fols. 29v–31v (17 November 1251); AAL, Libri antichi (henceforth LA) 10, fols. 52r–53v (2 April 1334), and 7, fol. 100r (22–29 October 1285).

operae and even with the bishop of Lucca. While absolute numbers will never be known, *conversi* were numerous, perhaps as numerous as monks. The monastery of San Ponziano in Lucca apparently had six monks and three *conversi* in 1223. The necrology of the Benedictine monastery of San Michele di Guamo on the Luccan side of the Monti Pisani lists 180 monks and 170 *conversi* as having been members between the late twelfth and the early fourteenth century. Yet this total probably does not include the monastery's numerous deathbed conversions. In 1296 a notary, Ser Bonaventura del fu Orlando, requested burial in the church of San Michele. In making a sizable bequest to the monastery, he declared that he had already put on the habit of a *conversus*. But the monks do not seem to have considered him to be a true *conversus*. If he was included in the necrology, it was as one of the several Bonaventuras, none of whom was listed as a *conversus*.³⁰ In the Marches, Piedmont, and the lower Po Valley, too, the number of laymen in and around monasteries seems to have been quite high.³¹

Not unexpectedly, *conversi* tended to come from areas near the religious institution they were joining. Although there were exceptional cases of Lucchesi or Spoletini joining Pisan monasteries, most *conversi* chose to stay much closer to home. Most of the extant oblations to the monastery of San Michele di Borgo in Pisa indicated that the entering *conversus* already lived in Kinzecca, the district where the monastery was located. A clear picture of the local nature of oblations emerges from a Pisan document of 1320. In that year a young couple offered themselves to the "hospitali mulierum posito in Carraria Gonnella civitatis Pisane," and were accepted by the rector with the consent of twenty-nine *conversae*. Fifteen of the twenty-nine came from Pisa or its immediate suburbs, mostly from Kinzecca; another five were from various parts of the Pisan and Luccan dioceses; and the final nine all came from the lower Arno Valley near Pontedera. This last group may indicate that the hospital had a preferred recruiting area for servants. At the very least, both San Michele di Borgo and the women's hospital indicate the kind of strong local ties religious corporations could have.³²

³⁰ For San Ponziano see ASL, Dip., S. Ponziano (28 May 1223); for San Michele di Guamo, ASL, San Michele di Guamo, no. 1; for Ser Bonaventura, AAL, Dip., E 18 (27 November 1296). In the will, redated in his house, Bonaventura declared that "judico corpus meum sepelliendum apud ecclesiam Sancti Michaelis de Guamo . . . et modo corpus meum idui pannos monacales et habitum monacalem dicti monasterii sicut habeant et portant fratres seu conversi dicti monasterii." San Michele eventually took possession of his lands because appended to this copy of his will were two leases of the property made by monastic officials. *Conversi* do not seem to have been regularly enumerated in visitation documents. See, e.g., ASP, Ospedali riuniti, no. 2642, fols. 48v (12 December 1310), 54v–55v (12 March 1310), 257r–v (1318).

³¹ Luttrell, "An Umbrian Abbey" (above, n. 12), p. 185; Gosso, *Abbazie piemontesi* (above, n. 11), pp. 161–66.

³² ASP, Dip., Primaziale (19 November 1247), records one who had been from near Spoleto, now was living in the *contrada* of S. Clemente, and wished to become a *conversus* of the *opera* of the cathedral of Santa Maria; ASP, Ospedali riuniti, no. 2642, fol. 274r–v, records the transfer

Conversi were not only numerous, they seem to have come from all classes in Tuscan society. In those cases where their possessions are listed, *conversi* seem to have been at least modestly well off. At least ten of the identifiable Luccan and Pisan *conversi* were from wealthy patrician or noble families, including a count of Montemagno from Pisa and a Mordecastelli and an Allucinga (the family of Pope Lucius III) from Lucca. The remaining *conversi* were as likely to be notaries and artisans as the expected shepherds and farmers.³³

Regardless of social background, *conversi* were most likely to be married and elderly. Married couples making joint oblations represent 54% of the 231 extant oblations. Single women, who represent 20% of the oblations, were most often widows (25 of 45). Only three to five of the *conversi* were certainly in their twenties. One couple had an infant son. Others were still young enough to be living with their parents. But most were older, probably beyond childbearing years.³⁴

According to their oaths of oblation, members of this diverse group were expected to conform to the same set of rules. Oaths emphasized only obedience to the abbot rather than the monk's vow of stability, conversion, and obedience. Typically, they consisted of a vague promise "to observe the life and rule that *conversi* of the said monastery are accustomed and held to observe."³⁵ The formula implies contract rather than profession. The typical monk's profession was a *professio super altare*. After having made his testament and having made a formal declaration before the assembled chapter, the novice was taken into the church to the main altar, where he would make his profession of stability, conversion, and obedience. The oath before the altar clearly sacralized or at least created a sacred context for the contract.³⁶

of a *conversus* from San Michele di Guamo near Lucca to San Michele degli Scalzi just outside of Pisa; ASP, Dip., S. Bernardo (26 July 1320), records the acceptance of two *conversi* by the rector and the twenty-nine *conversae* of the hospital.

³³ ASP, Dip., S. Martino (21 October 1343), Primaziale (9 July 1200), San Lorenzo di Rivolta (25 August 1230), S. Bernardo (15 May 1258), S. Maria di Pisa (23 April 1268), S. Martino (29 July 1282). Dinelli, *Dei sinodi* (above, no. 12), pp. 171-72. AAL, Dip., + S 66 (10 August 1239), AH 100 (8 December 1329) and * R 12 (18 August 1266). For wealthy but otherwise unidentifiable *conversi* see ASP, Dip., S. Martino (29 July 1218); and ASL, Dip., Tarpea (13 July 1218), S. Maria Forisportam (12 February 1224).

³⁴ It is difficult to identify widowers since, unlike widows, there was little legal reason for them to identify a deceased spouse. Thus I may be underestimating the number who had been married. It is nearly impossible to find much information about age. I have guessed about age on the basis of a few declarations which included a mention of age and of oblations which included consent clauses by living parents or adult children. It is significant that unlike many wills, these oblations by couples or by women who were still married do not contain any provisions to take care of children conceived before but born after the oblation.

³⁵ AAL, Dip., + S 100 (28 December 1335). See also ASL, Dip., Fregionaia (25 April 1246 and 8 April 1247) and Altopascio (15 June 1270).

³⁶ Hourlier, *Les religieux* (above, n. 10), pp. 187-91; Joseph H. Lynch, "Monastic Recruitment in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries: Some Social and Economic Considerations," *American*

Profession by *conversi* exhibited a marked contrast. There was no requirement that the profession had to take place before an altar or even in a church or a monastery. In 1276, when Talente del fu Bellomo and his wife Orsella del fu Fabriano became *conversi*, they made their profession to the treasurer of San Michele di Guamo, who represented the abbot. In this case the treasurer traveled to the couple's house several miles from the monastery; the couple's neighbors acted as witnesses. Even the notarial record of the ceremony tended to obscure all but the basic contractual agreement between the couple and the monastery. Certainly most oblations did occur in churches and chapels, but at Lucca, and to a lesser extent at Pisa, probably one-third of the oblations occurred in private houses or under open porticos where notaries usually tended business.³⁷

The formula followed by the *conversi*, the *professio in manus*, is a feudal-monastic oath containing little of the sacralizing implications of the *professio super altare*. The *conversus-to-be* made his promise of obedience "on bended knee with his hands closed between the hands of the venerable . . . abbot."³⁸ The implication was one of commendation, of placing oneself under the personal power of another, rather than of profession to God. This was clearly stated in a late-twelfth-century conversion: "Corso put himself as a *conversus* in the hands of Gaudio, by the grace of God abbot."³⁹ In the body of the document the would-be *conversus* might stress the desire for conversion, a wish to serve God, or a need for repentance, but he used the same phrases he could have used in a simple transfer of property to the monastery.⁴⁰

After giving self and property to the monastery, the *conversus* then made a promise of obedience to the abbot. According to Cistercian and Vallombro-

Benedictine Revue 26 (1975), 427; Philipp Hofmeister, "Die Rechtsverhältnisse der Konversen," *Österreichische Archiv für Kirchenrecht* 13 (1962), 16 f.

³⁷ AAL, Dip., AG 37 (10 January 1277). Similarly, ++ T 62 (13 March 1274), "in ecclesia Sancti Blasii"; ++ C 67 (1318), "in domo habitationis ipsorum jugalium"; ++ V 12 (4 March 1294), "in ecclesia Sancti Silvestri"; + V 3 (19 September 1259), "in domo posita prope predictum monasterium." ASL, Dip., S. Ponziano (6 March 1224), in the house of the redacting notary; Altopascio (15 June 1270), in the house of the principals.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, ++ T 31 (6 February 1341), "flexis genibus et clausis manibus suis inter manus venerabilis patris . . . abbatis." The phrase was never uniform and in some cases could become absolutely Guicciardinian: "tenentes manus suas in suas manus ut moris est," AG 37. Most often the notary only wrote "mittendo se in manibus": e.g., ASL, Dip., S. Ponziano (6 March 1224).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, AG 90 (8 December 1186): "Sic idem Corsus misit se per conversum in manu Gaudi Dei gratia abbatis suprascripti monasterii."

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, + V 3 (19 September 1259): "ad honorem et reverentiam Dei omnipotentis et beate virginis Marie sanctique Michaelis Archangelis pro salute et remedio anime sue et pro remissione omnium peccatorum suorum et pro salute et remedio animarum patris et matris sue et pro salute et remedio anime domine Perfecte uxoris sue et pro remissione omnium peccatorum suorum et predictorum parentum eius et predicte uxoris sue reddidit et obtulit se ipsum Bonaiuntam per conversum Deo et ecclesie et monasterio sancti Michaelis de Guamo. Et insuper obtulit Deo et dicto monasterio omnia bona sua. . . ."

sian usage, obedience implied stability and conversion, or poverty, chastity, and obedience as later professions would have put it. Tuscan *conversi* almost always did promise obedience, but the nature of the stability, poverty, and chastity remains an open question. In 1237 Pariscio del fu Campanello of Chiasso and his wife India confessed that they had been *conversi* of the monastery of San Michele di Guamo for the past year or more. This was a confirmation of an earlier profession of which, for whatever reason, there was no public record (“cum de predicta publicum scriptum non esset”). This confirmation was made in Pariscio’s house, complete with gardens, beside the church of San Pellegrino in Lucca. Little had changed with the conversion. The couple still lived in Lucca in their comfortable house. They continued to collect sizable rents which only passed to the monastery or to other pious institutions after their deaths.⁴¹

As the experience of Pariscio and his wife suggests, the chastity implied by the vow of obedience seems to have been a limited one. A majority of the *conversi* did convert as couples. They usually remained in their own homes, and even those who chose to move closer to their adopted religious houses usually continued to live together.⁴² Whether these couples were, or were expected to be, continent is difficult to know. The notarial summary of the conversion is of little help because normally it noted only that the couple promised “to follow the usual customs of *conversi* of the house,” or some variant of this phrase.⁴³ In several cases couples separated because of the illness of one spouse. Only three couples actually spoke of chastity or continence. One couple did promise “castitatem honestam.”⁴⁴ In the 1250s Count Ubaldo di Montemagno and his wife converted and gave themselves to the convent of Santa Croce in Pisa, “protestantes quod non intendent per hec verba continentiam profiteri.” In 1313, a couple that became *conversi* of the hospital of San Domenico dei Trovatelli promised “obedientiam, reveren-

⁴¹ Ibid., AL 93.

⁴² In 20 of 37 cases in which the place of residence was stated or inferred, the couples remained together. See, e.g., ASL, Dip., S. Nicolao (16 January 1224), Certosa (10 May 1247), Miscellanea (22 August 1267), Fregionaia (14 July 1195), Fregionaia (4 March 1277), S. Maria Corteorlandini (3 February 1287), S. Ponziano (15 May 1301), S. Ponziano (6 November 1304), Spedale (7 April 1339); and ASP, Dip., S. Lorenzo (10 March 1192), Primaziale (1272, day and month missing), S. Martino (29 July 1282), S. Lorenzo (1283), S. Maria di Pisa (10 November 1287), S. Michele (7 December 1314).

⁴³ ASL, Dip., Fregionaia (8 April 1247): “promittendo obedientiam et stabilitatem loci sic conversos et oblatos ipsius loci.” S. Croce (9 September 1251): “sicut moris est fratres reddi et dedicari.” AAL, Dip., + S 100 (28 December 1335): “vitam et regulam observare quam conversi dicti monasterii consueti sunt et observare tenentur.”

⁴⁴ ASL, Dip., Altopascio (23 February 1243) and S. Frediano (28 August and 1–30 September 1304): cases in which couples separated because of illness. S. Maria Corteorlandini (6 July 1309): a couple promise “castitatem honestam.”

tiam et castitatem matrimonialem.”⁴⁵ The only other specific promises of chastity were by widows or other single individuals.⁴⁶

In matters of continence Tuscan *conversi* may have imitated the behavior of the Mendicant Third Orders and the Order of Penitents. As Gilles Gerard Meersseman has shown, the old requirements of absolute continence for voluntary penitents had given way by the late twelfth century to a more restricted understanding of the vow. While unmarried or widowed individuals were still expected to maintain absolute chastity, couples were required to be continent only during fasts and vigils.⁴⁷ This rather narrow definition of continence was probably informally adopted by Tuscan *conversi*. If this was the case, “castitas matrimonialis” may have meant continence for only a restricted number of days each year.⁴⁸

Stabilitas loci as practiced by Tuscan *conversi* seems to have been equally vague. In several cases, the *conversi* acknowledged a superior’s right to demand stability in a specific place, but often they were given, as were two brothers in 1287, the right “of living . . . [in a rural district] wherever they wish until [the abbot] retracts the right from them.” Other *conversi* made similar vows of stability in the locality in which they were living. And finally, some were given the right of choosing whether to remain in their homes or move to the religious house.⁴⁹

Even though numerous *conversi* continued to live in their old districts, there is ample evidence that the hospitals and monasteries tried to provide space in or near their churches and chapels. At Siena, it would appear that the hospital of Santa Maria della Scala owned most of the houses on certain nearby streets and reserved them for its *conversi*. Similarly, the convent of

⁴⁵ ASP, Dip., S. Bernardo (15 May 1258): the couple give themselves “pro devotis,” which canonists would have agreed carried no vow of chastity. S. Michele (16 October 1313): the couple “obtulerunt se . . . pro commissis et oblatis” of the hospital, which was under the patronage of the monastery of San Michele di Borgo. The abbot of San Michele after having received their promise of “obedientiam, reverentiam et castitatem matrimonialem” welcomed them “ad beneficium monasterii, . . . ponendo manus suas super capita eorum et recipiendum manus eorum intra manus suas.”

⁴⁶ ASL, Dip., S. Croce (9 September 1251); ASP, Dip., S. Marta (6 May 1316), S. Silvestro (2 March 1322), S. Martino (20 January 1337); AAL, Dip., ++ A 22 (18 May 1343).

⁴⁷ Meersseman, *Ordo fraternitatis* (above, n. 2) 1:294–99.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:301, notes that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the phrase “Fratres de Poenitentia sive Continentia” only implied this limited continence. It is no doubt significant that one of the couples who became *conversi* promised obedience “secundum ordinem suprascripti Sancti Augustini et secundum ordinem matrimonialem”; ASL, Dip., S. Agostino (18 November 1311).

⁴⁹ ASL, Dip., S. Maria Corv' rlandini (3 February 1287): two brothers with the consent of their wives became *conversi* of the convent of S. Quirico and S. Matteo di Casale. After their promise of obedience the abbot gave them the license “standi et morandi in terra de Compito ubicumque vellent usque quod dictam licentiam eis recantabit.” Similarly Altopascio (23 February 1243) and S. Nicolao (16 January 1224).

San Romano in Lucca had houses in the piazza beside the church. The monastery of San Michele di Guamo also bought most of the houses near the monastery and by the 1270s it had a cloister specifically for the *conversi*. Many of the *conversi* living in houses beside their institution were guaranteed proper amounts of food and clothing. The *conversi* were usually promised that they would be kept *cum rectitudine*. In one of the few cases where temporal benefits were enumerated, the widow Teccina and her daughter (with her husband's consent) declared that they wished to become *conversae*. After their promises and sizable gifts of property and rents, they were promised food and shelter. They were to receive a villa with a garden near the monastery, a vineyard with fruit and shade trees, a *carro* of wine, six pounds of oil, and twenty-four *stai* of wheat each year. In addition, they were to receive the rents from two fields beside their house. This might be typical of the comfortable simplicity to which well-to-do *conversi* retired.⁵⁰

These well-to-do, comfortable *conversi* probably represent a majority of the converts. But alongside them there was a minority who did serve. Many monasteries and hospitals had *conversi* who were involved with administration for long periods of time. One served as treasurer of San Michele di Guamo for over twenty years. Similar *conversi* could be found in nearly all the hospitals and monasteries. Others were local agents, shepherds, and servants. In monasteries and convents, however, the servants tended to be hired from the outside. In the necrology of San Michele, only one *conversa* is identified as having been a servant.⁵¹ *Conversi* of hospitals and *opere* were

⁵⁰ *Statuto dello spedale di Siena* (above, n. 14), pp. 80–82, cap. 84–85; Dinelli, *Dei sinodi* (above, n. 12), p. 172. For San Michele see, e.g., ASL, Dip., Serviti (22 November 1271), where the cloister is first mentioned: "Actum Guami in claustro conversorum." AAL, Dip., AG 90 (8 December 1186): "Corsus in vita sua debet habere victum et vestimentum et calciamentum cum rectitudine secundum possibilitatem loci, et alia bona sua reservavit sibi ad faciendum quicquid ei placere." Similarly + S 100 (28 December 1335). Cf. ++ V 12 (1277), where the rights of *conversi* were limited "ad voluntatem dicti abbatis et donec abbati placuerit." See also AG 37 (10 January 1277), and + S 99 (23 December 1279); and ASP, Dip., S. Michele (15 June 1199), Primaziale (20 December 1206), S. Martino (21 April 1271), Primaziale (8 Feb. 1317). For Teccina and her daughter AAL, Dip., + S 100 (28 December 1335): "unam petiam terrae que est cum domibus curatis, una solariata et cum curte et vinea et orto et ficibus et nucibus et ceragis et avellanis et aliis super se posita in territorio communis Sancti Caxiani de Guamo in loco dicto 'alle converse.'" For similar agreements see ASP, Dip., Primaziale (20 November 1206) and S. Martino (21 April 1271).

⁵¹ Fr. Aiuto was a *conversus* and official of San Michele di Guamo between 1253 and 1279; see, e.g., AAL, Dip., ++ V 1 (9 January 1253), and Archivio Capitolare di Lucca, Diplomata, E 172 (1 August 1279). On other working *conversi* see, e.g., ASL, Archivio dei Notari, Filza 1, Reg. 2 (Ser Cassiano di Romano), fol. 45r–v (25 February 1252): a *conversus* of San Salvatore di Sesto near Lucca had charge of grain stored in various villages near Sesto; fols. 58v–60v (2 November 1257): one Aldizzo "conversus et syndicus" of the hospital of San Lorenzo in Treponzio near Lucca represented the hospital in an exchange of land. Similarly ASL, Dip., Altopascio (3 February 1187), S. Maria Corteorlandini (9 February 1200). On servants see, e.g., ASP, Ospedali riuniti, no. 2642, fols. 36v–37r, 190r–v; ASP, Dip., S. Martino (29 July 1282); and ASL, San Michele, no. 1, fol. 23r (5 kalendas Septembris): "Tedine servite nostre converse," the only one of the 170 *conversi* named in the necrology who was identified as a servant.

most likely to have to work. At Lucca several *conversi* of a newly founded and poor hospital received communal permission to continue to practice their secular trade. A *conversus* of the opera of the cathedral of Santa Maria di Pisa agreed to support himself and his wife for a time at least. And finally a couple promised the hospital of San Domenico of Pisa in an unusual and inaccurate burst of eloquence that they needed nothing from the hospital since "they wished to live at their own expense and from the labors of their hands just as the command of the prophet is written: 'you shall eat the labors of your hands and they are blessed and it shall be well with you.'" Even those who were too old to follow a trade or manage lands could be expected to perform at least symbolic labors. At Santa Maria della Scala in Siena, all the brothers, sisters, and *conversi* were expected to carry bread knives so that they would always be ready to serve bread in the refectory of the guests.⁵²

Nothing of what we have described as typical of Tuscan *conversi* would necessarily have bothered the legal theorists or the religious or civil authorities. But officials must have been concerned by the casual way in which a *conversus* could blur legal distinctions, declaring to be a "true *conversus*" even while continuing to retain personal property. *Conversi* used the phrase *obtulit se* as required and followed it with reservations *oblatione non obstante*. They similarly seem to have ignored the formal requirements imposed by governments. In oblations they promised obedience and even stability, according to their rector's will, but there was no discussion of tonsures, habits, or place of residence — essential formal requirements in both secular and religious law. For whatever reasons, the late medieval oblations reflect only imperfectly the legal norms of both church and state.

While admitting the material advantages to be gained by conversion, we need not be entirely cynical about those who claimed to be "inflamed by God" or who wished to follow the precepts of the prophet. If we concede that for the religiously inspired *conversus* the most important aspect of conversion would have been the right to wear the habit and the right to be included in the prayer life of the institution, then the disregard for legal

⁵² On petitions to continue to practice a secular trade, ASL, Rifformagioni, 21, p. 45 (29 August 1346); 26, pp. 41 (2 March 1347) and 281 (31 December 1347). I thank Dr. Christine Meek for having called these cases to my attention. ASP, Dip., Primaziale (8 February 1317): "Angelus vectolarius qd. Johannis de Cappella Sanctorum Cosime et Dagmiani" and his wife become *conversi* of the Opera of the cathedral of Pisa. He promised to continue his trade "pro cuius et dicte sue uxoris victualibus et dispendiis necessariis habendis." S. Michele (7 December 1314): Guccius calularius qd. Amadoris and his wife become *conversi* ("commissi et oblati") of the hospital of San Domenico in Pisa, giving themselves and all of their possessions; "nichil ab ipso hospitali quirentes vel exigentes pro victu vel vestitu suo sed propriis expensis viventes et de laboribus manuum suarum ut illud prophete implere valeant sic scriptum est, 'labores manuum tuarum manducabis, beati sint et bene eis sit.'" The reference is to Psalms 128.2: "Labores manuum tuarum quia manducabis, beatus es et bene tibi erit." *Statuto dello spedale di Siena* (above, n. 14), pp. 96–97, cap. 103–4.

categories might be understandable. The distinctions between professed and nonprofessed *conversi* were legal and apparently without spiritual impact. In actual practice it does not seem to have affected the right to wear the habit or the right to inclusion in the necrology. Thus the convert could have retained the right to usufruct or the right to dispose of possessions, the right to live outside the religious institution, or the right to a life of *castitas matrimonialis*, or of only limited chastity, without losing the benefits of conversion.

The spiritual advantages of being a *conversus* of a hospital, parish church, or monastery were very similar to those accruing to the better-known Penitents, Third Order Mendicants, and Humiliati. In all of these cases laymen found a form of *imitatio Christi* appropriate for lay sensibilities. It was elastic enough to fit a number of different situations. It was an *imitatio* that did not require, as St. Benedict had advised, a strict communal discipline and isolation. As Jacques de Vitry observed of early-thirteenth-century lay movements, "all the faithful of Christ who serve the Lord . . . and live by the orders of the greatest single abbot" can be called regulars.⁵³ Despite the similarities, the thirteenth-century *conversi* were not preachers and they practiced something less than apostolic poverty. But they were not the leaders, the saints who began religious movements. They were individuals who had to balance their religious desires with secular responsibilities they could not always leave behind. And then, too, by 1260 the Franciscans themselves had ceased to be a movement of radicals who inhabited caves and hovels near Assisi.

This desire for an elastic, loosely defined status was running counter to perhaps the most important trend in late medieval society — the movement within both secular and ecclesiastical institutions to define the borders between secular and religious society and to define the relationships of individuals to institutions. To the extent that *conversi* claimed religious status, they would have been viewed as "draft dodgers" and tax evaders by communal governments. And at the same time their implied claim to remain in the secular world and to submit only to very loose clerical supervision was a direct challenge to religious administrators. The very fact that the term

⁵³ Jacques de Vitry is quoted in M.-D. Chenu, *Man, Nature and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chicago and London, 1968), pp. 221–22. The most recent study of the religious movements is Lester Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, New York, 1978). From his examination of the attitudes of the laity and the lay-oriented religious movements, it is evident that while all reacted negatively to wealth, there was no one single understanding of the Christian's relationship to property or even stability. Like many others who have studied the religious movements, Little has had to restrict his investigation to the leaders, the exceptional personalities. The Humiliati and the Vicentine communitarians seem initially to have preferred to live in married communities; as Brenda Bolton has observed, the Third Order of the Humiliati was initially the most popular. See Bolton, "Sources for the Early History of the Humiliati" (above, n. 4), p. 130. On the communitarians, Meersseman, *Ordo fraternitatis* (above, n. 2), 1:305–54.

raised conventual or monastic images reminded both secular and religious authorities of the conservative ideals to which *conversi* could be held.

By the mid-thirteenth century, as noted above, communal governments had begun to define just who could qualify for exemptions from taxes, military aid, and litigation in communal courts. The pressures on *conversi* continued to mount, and by the early fourteenth century Bishop Enrico of Lucca had substantially accepted civil statutes on the status of *conversi*.

Henceforth, no rector of any church of the Luccan city or diocese, secular or religious, ought to receive as a *conversus* . . . any man or woman who is burdensome or useless or who is not of good reputation or who is in fraud of the Luccan commune or any community of the Luccan district, or who is received while obligated in any lawsuit. . . . And those shall be understood to be burdensome or useless and received fraudulently who, remaining in their houses just as before, do not wear properly the habit of a *conversus* or who immerse themselves in secular business and affairs just as before.⁵⁴

Enrico's definition of a proper conversion is almost exactly the same as one offered by the bishop of Fiesole at about the same time.⁵⁵

Two decades before the publication of Enrico's synodal statutes, Bishop Paganello of Lucca had begun to enforce a similarly strict definition of the status of *conversi*. He excommunicated the rector of the parish church of Vaiano for having accepted a *conversus* without episcopal approval. Less than a month later he excommunicated a *conversa* who had refused to reside in the convent of Pontetetto. And two years later Paganello raised a sentence against a vagabond *conversus* only after the penitent promised "to remain and obey the commands of the church and the lord vicar of the bishop" and to return to and remain at the hospital of Buita.⁵⁶

Just as the movements of *conversi* were being restricted, *conversi* were losing the right to be married. Certainly some couples continued to join, especially the hospitals, but after 1300 the number was dramatically lower. They were further being made nonvoting subjects. In 1358, a papal visitor specifically prohibited the famous and powerful hospital of San Jacopo of Altopascio from accepting married men. If they were married, they were to have no voice in the chapter, nor could they make any claims for maintenance.⁵⁷ Thus ended the long tradition of equality between cleric and layman within the hospital of Altopascio.

Even those *conversi* who met the episcopal requirements still had to face dubious communal officials. Throughout the early fourteenth century the

⁵⁴ Manselli, "La sinodo" (above, n. 21), p. 221.

⁵⁵ Richard Trexler, ed., *Synodal Law in Florence and Fiesole, 1306-1518*, Studi e Testi 268 (Vatican City, 1968), pp. 192-93.

⁵⁶ AAL, Libri antichi, 4, fols. 36r (22 June 1283), 36v (9 July 1283); 6, fol. 15r (19 November 1285).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 21, fol. 137r-v (5 November 1358).

bishop of Lucca had to threaten and cajole officials from Lucca and several of the smaller communes who were incarcerating, trying for debt, and taxing *conversi* who were, according to the officials, evading rightful duties. There are few cases for which we have details, but it does not seem correct to assume that all of these *conversi* were simply fraudulent. The best known of these cases involved two widows who had become *conversae* of the monastery of San Michele di Guamo and who were being taxed by officials from the *contrada*, or district, of the city in which they had lived before conversion. In 1312 and 1313 the syndic of San Michele was almost continually found in communal courts trying to protect mona Pina, widow of Lando Gualterone, and mona Teccia, wife of Tomaso Franchi.⁵⁸ The issue in Pina's case seems to have been whether or not she could still be considered an heir of Lando and therefore liable with the other heirs for taxes which the estate owed in the *contrada* of San Bartolomeo in Silice. Similarly, the *contrada* wished to tax Teccia's possessions along with those of her husband. The monastery maintained that the pair could not be compelled to pay taxes because Pina had been a *conversa* for ten years and because Teccia no longer lived in the *contrada* and did not have any of her husband's possessions. The local officials seem to have been concerned only about the disappearance of a goodly sum from their tax roles. They did not raise the question of conversion or residence. Their evidence consisted of a presentation of tax records and *estimo* volumes indicating that in the past, at some previous, unnamed date, the two women had been taxed with their husbands. The argument rested on a single rubric of the communal statutes ("De filio familias morante divisim a parte"). The basic thrust of the rubric was a definition of when a father and son or two brothers could be taxed as members of separate households. The rubric continued: "a man and wife shall have one estimation [of wealth for tax purposes]. If a woman lives apart from her husband, she cannot be taxed unless the woman has unencumbered possession of goods of her husband; then she shall be held to come under all burdens for her estimation either with or without her man."⁵⁹ In Pina's case the *contrada* seems to have claimed that her husband's estate was worth L 1,300 and that she got L 650 for which she should be liable. (According to the necrology she did present L 650 to the monastery.) In Teccia's case the *contrada* argued that she had been taxed with her husband and that she took a part of that

⁵⁸ Episcopal letters in defense of *conversi* are found in *ibid.*, 7, fol. 39r; 13, fols. 26r, 69r, 71v; and 20, fols. 77r-v, 86r-v. The case involving Teccia and Pina is found in AAL, Dip., + G 74 (1312): ser Fredo Alchieri, syndic and advocate of San Michele di Guamo, petitioned that the two women be exempted from exactions "pro dato libero decem per centum et pro flor. duobus per centum lucane comuni"; ++ V 61 (2 April 1313): a consilium of a judge, Jacopo of Barga, supporting the petition; and + V 57 (29-30 October 1313): ser Fredo again appealed, this time successfully, that all assessments and legal sanctions against them should be voided.

⁵⁹ The communal statute cited by the *contrada* is *Statuto del comune di Lucca* (above, n. 20), p. 328, Lib. V, rub. lxiii.

wealth with her when she left. Over the course of two years the monastery continued to argue that, as they were required to do, the two had left the *contrada*, given up their properties to the monastery, and no longer shared in the possessions of their husbands. The monastery further presented the documents by which the two had converted. When the court finally ordered that "the ladies themselves and the monastery for them must not be molested," it seems that the formal criteria agreed upon by the commune and the bishop were the deciding factor. Thus because of the church's desire not to be "burdened" and the civil government's campaign against "false clerics," little evasion was possible. But as the case of the two widows also shows, even for those who converted for the most pious of reasons and who did meet the commune's legal guidelines, conversion might still be difficult. Certainly there could have been little tranquillity for the two widows.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the number of *conversi* declined in the early fourteenth century. Further, those who did convert were more likely to call themselves "true *conversi*" and actually to take up residence in or near a religious institution. The immediate impression is one of a loophole closed. But such an assumption probably undervalues the real religious interests of the laymen who converted. Their desires to serve God, find a better life, and pay for their sins reflect authentic religious needs. For even as bishops and commune made more difficult this semimonastic *imitatio Christi* which included allusions to medieval Christianity's great monastic past, Tuscany witnessed the growth of what many writers have called "civic Christianity." The term implies an emphasis on charitable and social work as opposed to conventional monastic penance. It is observable in lay participation in the selection of parish clergy, religiously inspired charitable bequests, and most obviously in the growth of religious confraternities.⁶⁰

The lay piety of the Renaissance has often been seen as a radical break from the earlier Benedictine or Augustinian piety. And yet the pious institutions and the confraternities offered many of the same *foci* for individual piety formerly available to *conversi*. Members of confraternities wore special habits; they had regular meetings including homilies, ritual, and vernacular

⁶⁰ On civic Christianity and lay piety generally, see David Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia* (New Haven and London, 1967), pp. 241–58; Gene Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1969), pp. 172–212; and Marvin B. Becker, "Aspects of Lay Piety in Early Renaissance Florence," in Charles Trinkaus and H. A. Oberman, eds., *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Thought 10 (Leiden, 1974), pp. 190–98. Natalie Zemon Davis, "Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion," *ibid.*, pp. 307–37, observed that confraternities shared certain pious styles with monasteries (p. 322) and that confraternities could adapt themselves "to such different memberships over six hundred years" (p. 316). On confraternities see, e.g., Gennaro Monti, *Le confraternite medievali dell'alta e media Italia*, 2 vols. (Venice, 1927); Gilles G. Meersseman, *Ordo fraternitatus* (above, n. 2); Brunetto Quilici, "La chiesa di Firenze dal governo del 'Primo popolo' alla restaurazione guelfa," *Archivio storico italiano* 127 (1969), 317; and Charles M. de la Roncière, "La place des confréries dans l'encadrement religieux du contado florentin: L'exemple de la val d'Elsa," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome, Moyen Age, Temps Modernes* 75 (1973), 31–77, 632–71.

religious poetry; “abbots” corrected immoral or impious behavior; they could live where and as they pleased; and they could marry.⁶¹ In fact, the new popularity of confraternities probably did not represent such a remarkable shift in piety. Because of a loose structure and monastic allusions, confraternities offered the laity essentially what they had formerly acquired from oblation: a reasonable way to follow “the commands of the greatest single abbot.”

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

⁶¹ See generally Meersseman, *Ordo fraternitatis*.