

H-France Review Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 71

**Martinus Cawley, trans.,** *Send Me God: The Lives of Ida The Compassionate of Nivelles, Nun of La Ramée, Arnulf, Lay Brother Of Villers, and Abundus, Monk of Villers, by Goswin of Bossut.* Brepols Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, 6. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. 258 pp. Black and white illustrations. \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 027-10268-39.

Review by Laura Wertheimer, Cleveland State University.

Martinus Cawley's *Send Me God* is an engaging translation of the hagiographic biographies, or *Lives*, of two men and one woman who lived in the Brabant region of the Low Countries in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The texts, written by Goswin, cantor of the Cistercian monastery of Villers, chronicle the lives of a nun called Ida "the Compassionate" of Nivelles, a lay brother named Arnulf, and one of Goswin's fellow monks at Villers, a man named Abundus. Goswin's texts both recount the tales of individuals representing different facets of thirteenth-century spirituality and offer fascinating glimpses into their connections to the larger social and spiritual worlds around them. Cawley's translations will be useful to scholars of medieval religion, valuable to instructors teaching the history of the Middle Ages, and interesting to anyone seeking to learn more about traditions in Christian piety.

*Send Me God* begins with Barbara Newman's introductions to the hagiographic genre and to Goswin's world. Hagiographic lives, that is, texts dedicated to showing the holiness of a saint or a potential saint, were not necessarily authored by people with personal acquaintance with their subjects. Rather, they may have been pieced together from other sources, including oral accounts from those who did know the holy person, or stories of posthumous miracles performed at his or her intercession. Serving as exemplars of pious behavior, saints' lives may rely on certain tropes rather than "real" accounts of the saints' behaviors, but these tropes can still offer insight into contemporary ideas about sanctity, some of which were common to all and some of which could vary according to the saint's gender and earthly position.

As Newman explains, social change in expanding medieval cities and the appearance of numerous new forms of the religious life in the twelfth century produced ideas about holiness not prevalent in the early Middle Ages; Goswin's three subjects represent three different types of these new holy people. Newman subsequently discusses characteristics of some late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century piety, which included ecstatic, mystical visions of Christ or his mother, intense devotion to the Eucharistic host, and both asceticism and self-inflicted suffering that, like Christ's Passion, was believed to expiate the penitential sufferings of others.

Since the publication of Caroline Walker Bynum's highly influential *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, the combination of these forms of devotion has been best known as characteristic of women's piety, but they were not uniquely feminine.[1] Each of these characteristics appears in one or another of Goswin's *Lives*, but his texts reveal far more than the spirituality of the individuals chronicled within them. Rather, as both Newman and Cawley emphasize, *Send Me God* reveals Goswin's subjects operating within spiritual networks that are far less evident in contemporary lives of other holy people.

Newman's discussion is followed by Cawley's introduction to Goswin himself, to the religious houses in which his subjects lived, and to the composition of his works. Goswin, cantor of the abbey of Villers, identified himself as the author of only one of his works, that of Arnulf; the other two have been assigned to him through analysis of the subject matter and his literary style. He wrote Ida's *Life* at the

suggestion of his abbot and probably composed Arnulf's for the same reason. He did not know Ida personally, met Arnulf toward the end of the latter's life, and was a friend of Abundus. Abundus' *Life* is therefore the most intimate account of his subject's story, while Ida's, pieced together from accounts he heard from visitors, probably is most influenced by the hagiographic conventions that Newman discusses.

Goswin's account, following one such convention, says that Ida was attracted to the religious life from early childhood. At the age of nine she entered a house of Beguines, that is, a typically urban institution in which women shared a life of devotion without living under a monastic rule. Declining the marriage that her family arranged for her, Ida became a Cistercian nun, eventually living at the house of La Ramée, which was under Villers' supervision. Ida's *Life* vividly illustrates those characteristics of female piety that Bynum discusses: mystic connection with Christ, dedication to the Eucharist, and surrogate penitential suffering for others. Ida was caught up in rapturous visions of Christ as an infant, as an adolescent, and as a bridegroom. She received communion as frequently as possible, to the point that God created for her opportunities to take communion when her circumstances made attending Mass impossible, and sometimes ate little but the host. Goswin's text contains a variety of morality tales in the form of Ida delivering correction to those who sought out her advice, or giving it spontaneously to those who had not requested it.

Women and men in the religious life appear in Ida's *Life* more frequently than members of the laity, but the latter also came to seek her reading of the states of their souls--and often a prediction of the dates of their deaths. Ida did not hesitate to reprove her visitors who were hiding sins, but she could also be stirred to pity for them and for her sisters at the abbey when they suffered spiritual tribulations and temptations. According to Goswin, when Ida was so moved she would begin to vomit blood, a sign that God had permitted the exacerbation of her own illness so that her pain could lift temptation from others or even alleviate the penances of those in Purgatory. Despite the inclusion of such stories, however, Goswin did not emphasize Ida's physical suffering to the degree that some chroniclers of other women's lives did. Goswin's biography (which Cawley supplements with other contemporary works mentioning Ida) follows Ida to her death at the age of thirty-two, concluding with accounts of miracles that occurred either at her tomb or thorough contact with her relics. These miracles served as further evidence of Ida's holiness, but neither she nor the two men Goswin wrote about were formally canonized.

Goswin's next subject is a man named Arnulf. While Ida's religious vocation appeared in childhood, Goswin says that Arnulf at first led a dissolute youth but then changed his ways and pursued a life of upstanding Christian virtue. His entrance into the religious life was indirectly instigated by a woman who, smitten by his beauty, crept into his bed one night; Arnulf escaped seduction but not temptation and was thereafter plagued by the desires of the flesh. Seeking more discipline, he entered the Cistercian lay brotherhood, which was a quasi-monastic life for men who served as manual laborers on Cistercian estates. Arnulf found, however, that the Cistercian life was not rigorous enough for him. With his abbot's consent, Arnulf devised greater and greater tribulations for himself, beginning with the adoption of the hair shirt and moving his way up to wearing clothing made of hedgehogs' pelts under mail, binding himself with cords that cut into his skin, and whipping himself bloody.

Cawley suggests that Abbot William of Villers may have requested that Goswin write Arnulf's *Life* in a form of competition with the nearby abbey of Aulne, who had its own renowned lay brother in a man named Simon, and while Simon makes no appearance in Arnulf's life, the theme of competition runs throughout it: Goswin says that Arnulf outdid his namesake Arnulf, bishop of Metz, because the latter only wore a hair shirt while Arnulf also wore hair gaiters and hair socks; indeed, the suffering Arnulf inflicted upon himself was greater than that experienced by the martyrs (pp. 135-37). Arnulf did not practice Ida's Eucharistic devotions, but he too experienced ecstatic visions, often of Mary rather than Christ. As with Ida, people sought out Arnulf for his advice on spiritual matters, and requested his intercession with God on their own behalf or for the sake of others.

Like Ida, Arnulf's endurance of pain constituted a charitable act that lifted temptation from others or alleviated their penitential sufferings, so that he would lock himself away in a hut and flagellate himself while chanting rhymes naming each individual who benefited from each stroke and exhorting himself to be "manly" and endure suffering for their sakes (pp. 147-48). Arnulf died some twenty-six years after his entrance into the Cistercian brotherhood, and though Goswin recounts the story of a scrap of Arnulf's hair shirt freeing a young woman from severe pain, he had no other posthumous miracles to report.

The third of Goswin's *Lives* is that of his friend Abundus. Like Ida, Abundus hailed from an urban background. His father sent him to school at the local church to learn enough writing and math to help with the family business, but Abundus found that he preferred prayer to accounting. With the encouragement of his mother and his sister, who was already a nun, Abundus entered the abbey of Villers. After some years of devout living there, he began to have visions of Mary, whom the Cistercians particularly honored. Abundus' *Life* is not marked by the bodily suffering, either self-inflicted or natural, that is evident in the *Lives* of Ida and Arnulf, nor does it indicate that his reputation spread as widely as theirs did. Rather, those who received Abundus' intercession were more typically his fellows at Villers or otherwise in the religious life, and they were more likely to receive aid in overcoming temptation than in expiating the sin of having given in to it. It would appear that Goswin predeceased Abundus, and his *Life* is incomplete.

Goswin's tales of Ida, Arnulf, and Abundus reflect various matters of concern to the contemporary Catholic church and to Christians in general. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, for example, the rise of a profit economy in rapidly-growing urban areas raised doubts about the moral legitimacy of some urban professions.<sup>[2]</sup> This anxiety is evident throughout the *Lives*: Ida fears that the money she inherited from her father came from ill-gotten gains, and both Ida and Arnulf encountered women condemned to purgatorial sufferings because they had lived comfortable childhoods supported by money that ought to have gone to the needy (pp. 37-38, 45-46, 191). Arnulf's constant war against his body was potentially discomfiting to Goswin and his contemporaries because the institutional church in that time was struggling against heretical groups such as the Cathars, whose dualistic beliefs led them to renounce all things physical as a source of evil and corruption.

Goswin therefore emphasized that Arnulf escalated his efforts to subdue his flesh solely with his abbot's permission, though it was sometimes given reluctantly and only after Arnulf hounded him to distraction. (One cannot help but wonder whether Goswin also highlighted this last point so as to reassure anyone considering adopting Arnulf's religious vocation that he would not be expected to don his shirt of hedgehog pelts). Cathars' renunciation of the flesh also led them to deny the doctrine of transubstantiation and to reject veneration of Mary as the mother of Christ; Ida's visions of a child appearing in the priest's hands during the elevation of the host and Abundus' visions of Mary's bodily assumption into heaven proved their own orthodoxy and reaffirmed Catholic doctrines that were under attack (pp. 63, 232-33).

None of these things were unique about Goswin's *Lives*. Rather, what is most notable about the cantor of Villers' works is the sense of community that runs throughout them. On the most concrete level, Goswin's tales of his protagonists' interactions with their brothers and sisters in religious orders gives the reader a variety of engaging glimpses into life within a monastic community. On the more abstract level, however, Goswin's *Lives* are significant because their stories of individuals' piety were not stories of individualistic spirituality; rather, they show the saints at the center of spiritual networks. Ida and Abundus had visions of Christ and the Virgin Mary presenting themselves to all the sisters and brothers around them; in one of Abundus' visions, only he could see the Virgin fanning overheated monks at their labors, but all the brothers felt the reinvigorating effects of her care (pp. 59, 234). Christ sent to other people visions of God showing Ida his special favor and used her to convey messages to those needing spiritual correction, and Arnulf could secure a mystical experience for those who asked him to "send me God" (e.g. pp. 57, 68-69, 171-81, 183-84). In brief, both these holy people and those around them saw

their visionary gifts as something to be shared with others, rather than enjoyed solely by the saint.

A few closing points should be made about Cawley's translation, which is not strictly faithful to the texts. Cawley has made some structural changes to the *Lives* by breaking chapters into subchapters and changing or adding to chapter headings (which is useful, as the book has no index). He has made some minor changes to content, such as identifying by name individuals whom Goswin left anonymous. More important, however, is the freeness of the translation. Cawley tries to catch Goswin's voice instead of his words by changing his syntax when he feels that doing so would better convey the main point of Goswin's sentence, and "turning Latin nouns into English adjectives, phrases into adverbs, active verbs into passive" (p. 23). Cawley's notes state that he initially wished to assign a unique English parallel to each of Goswin's Latin words, but found that doing so flattened the nuances of Goswin's texts and was incompatible with his intent to make the translation enjoyable to read. His decision to privilege style and flow over literal accuracy is, in my opinion, a wise one. It is also, however, somewhat contradictory to his introductory notes emphasizing the significance of Goswin's vocabulary in Ida's *Life* (p. 12), and may narrow (though certainly not eliminate) *Send Me God's* scholarly usage.

"Enjoyable" is in the eye of the beholder, especially in the idiosyncratic world of academia, but the work is eminently readable and will be highly accessible to a variety of audiences. It will indeed be enjoyable to those interested in the topic, and will be no chore for those who encounter it as assigned reading. Faculty teaching both graduate and undergraduate courses addressing medieval spirituality would do well to put it on their syllabi.

## NOTES

[1] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

[2] See Lester Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978).

Laura Wertheimer Cleveland State University l.wertheimer@csuohio.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Review* Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 71

ISSN 1553-9172