

Lost Causes

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I spent my formative years under the instruction of the Sisters of Mercy. They injected irony into that name, but they got the job done. One enduring memory is their mind-bending fixation on analogies. For example, "owl is to mouse like the insidious-depredation-of-Satan is to ...(insert your name here)". The lapsed parochialite is uniquely qualified to appreciate, in retrospect, a most telling analogy: nurse is to doctor like nun is to The nuns endured the daily muck and gore of educating the nascent soldiers of Christ, while the priests got all the glory. I'm not sure why they put up with this, but there may be a good reason that the good Sisters accepted their lot.

Joachim Tabellone, born in the Kingdom of Naples around 1132, was a Cistercian monk with a mission. He indulged a passion for divining the hidden meaning of the scriptures, in particular the books of Apocalypse and Revelations. When he died in 1201 his legacy was three books of biblical ruminations and the abbey that he founded at Fiore in the Calabrian mountains. No one since has been quite sure whether he should be venerated as a prophet or condemned as a heretic.

The basis of his renown was his inspiration regarding the three stages of the world, corresponding to the three aspects of the Trinity. According to Joachim, the Old Testament period was under the direct influence of God the Father. With the advent of Christ came the age of God the Son. The time was now ripe for the reign of God the Holy Ghost. A new era was being introduced, a culmination; in the new day man would not have to rely on faith because everything would be founded on knowledge and reason. Joachim predicted that this new epoch would begin about 1260, but that it would be won only after great turmoil. The reward would be the uniting of the Eastern and Western Church and the conversion of the Jews, with peace thereafter until the end of the world.

Less than a decade after Joachim's death, Francesco di Pietro di Bernardone (St. Francis of Assisi to you and me) started an order of itinerant preachers and social workers committed to poverty and dedicated to emulating Christ's life. The Franciscan Order mushroomed during the 13th century, accommodating those professed by vow as well as the religious laity. Within the order arose an extreme group known as the Spiritual Franciscans, which found inspiration in Joachim's writings, but, unfortunately, was inclined to add a spin of its own.

The Spiritual Franciscans contended that Joachim's books superseded the two Testaments and represented the Eternal Gospel of the new age. If this wasn't enough to antagonize the Church fathers, these Joachists decided that the Catholic priesthood itself was passing inevitably into irrelevance. As it turned out, the year 1260 came and went without any sign of cataclysm or the Holy Ghost. The Joachist doctrine was down, and Joachim's reputation with it, but not entirely out. The

Church hierarchy may have assumed that Joachim's teachings would wither as a matter of course, but the concept of a coming Age of Reason continued to resonate.

At about the time Joachim's predicted new age was not starting, Princess Blazena Vilemina, daughter of the king of Bohemia, appeared in Milan. Although her royal status was no secret, she preferred to dress as a commoner and reside in a Cistercian abbey as an oblate under the name Guglielma. She developed a following as a charismatic healer, miracle worker and peacemaker. In the latter regard, her noble pedigree attracted followers from the Della Torre family, which ruled Milan until 1277, and the rival Visconti family, which ruled for nearly two hundred years thereafter. Their devotion to her superseded hereditary animosity. After her death in 1281, Guglielma was buried in the abbey and her tomb became the center of a saint cult promoted by the monks.

A small group of devotees, the Guglielmites, crafted a theology around Guglielma. Their chief theologian was Andrea Saramita, a disciple of Guglielma who was well acquainted with the writings of Joachim. He was the principal author of a third testament that was to supplant the New Testament, much as Joachim's Eternal Gospel was earlier predicted to do.

The Guglielmite creed held that Guglielma was actually the Holy Ghost incarnate and that she would return in divine glory on Pentecost in the year 1300. This would signal the start of the new era in which the Christian Church would be replaced by the true church of the Guglielmites, which would be presided over by female popes. The Guglielmites attracted the passing attention of the papal Inquisition, but their small numbers and prominent adherents apparently saved them from condemnation, for a while. Galeazzo Visconti, son of Matteo Visconti, the ruler of Milan, was counted a member, and Maifreda da Pirovano, the sect's liturgical leader, was Matteo's cousin. Maifreda was granted the title La Papessa, vicar of the Holy Ghost on Earth, in anticipation of her impending replacement of Pope Boniface VIII. Her liturgical duties culminated in a solemn mass celebrated secretly on Easter of the year 1300. Guglielma did not return on Pentecost, but soon after the Inquisitors did. Maifreda and a few of the other leaders were burned as heretics and the sect disintegrated.

One could assume that it was more than the gender issue that finally exceeded the annoyance threshold of the inquisitors. The basic Guglielmite theology, however, had survived since its formulation by Joachim a century earlier. The fact is, Maifreda was toast, while cousin Galeazzo eventually replaced his father as ruler of Milan. In a candid moment, I bet the saintly Sisters of my elementary education would have admitted that Maifreda may have been lost, but the lesson was not.

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