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Profession of Maria Scolastica Casellati
In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment
Northeastern Italy (Veneto, diocese of Treviso), April 16, 1774

One leaf on parchment, ruled in hardpoint (justification c. 220 x 114 mm.), written in dark gray ink in Roman script (title line in capitals) in single column on 13 lines, all letters slightly touched in gold, capitals throughout in gold, two 2-line initials in gold, FULL ILLUMINATED BORDER (described below), one pinhole at the top of the document, a few very small stains, otherwise in very good condition. Dimensions c. 215 x 305 mm.

This possibly unique, illuminated document preserves the poignant moment in the life of a nun, when she took the veil and made her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. It survives as a formal record and commemoration of an important life event, like the more well-known diplomas from Italian universities, the Venetian *Ducali*, and the Spanish *Carta ejecutoria*, which continued the tradition of the handwritten and illuminated manuscript into the modern era. We have not discovered any other illuminated professions of nuns, although perhaps they exist and have not yet garnered the attention they deserve.

PROVENANCE

1. This document was made at the Benedictine Monastero di San Teonisto in Casier, in the diocese of Treviso. The name of Maria Scolastica Casellati and the date were added to the document on April 16, 1774 when she professed her religious vows in this monastery. The coat of arms in the lower margin of the illuminated border is that of the monastery and contains the device "PAX" (peace).

San Teonisto was the oldest monastery in the diocese of Treviso, first mentioned in 710. Dedicated to the fourth-century bishop and martyr, St. Theonistus, whose relics are in the cathedral of Treviso, from the ninth century it was a dependency of the Abbey of San Zeno of Verona.

2. Bookseller's or owner's marks on the verso in pencil: "LIX/24/125," "Maria Scolastica Caselatto," "420."

TEXT

f. 1, "IN NOMINE DOMINI NOSTRI JESU CHRISTI. AMEN. Anno ejusdem Nativitas millesimo septingentesimo septuagesimo quatro Ego Soror Maria Scolastica Casellati de Tarvisio promitto stabilitatem meam, & Conversionem morum meorum, & Obedientiam secundum Regulam Sancti Patris Nostri Benedicti coram Deo, & Sanctis ejus, quorum Reliquiae habentur in hoc Monasterio Sancti Theonisti de Tarvisio. . . . In cujus rei fidem hanc promissionem manu propria subscripsi."

ILLUSTRATION

The document is presented within a large border decorated with curving acanthus leaves in gold that harbor large realistic flowers (including a rose, a peony, and lilies). The Virgin and Child with angels appear in the clouds in the top margin, while Saint Benedict, holding an abbot's crozier, kneels and gazes at her from the left margin, a book with his rule and his mitre at his side. In the right margin, Saint Scholastica, Benedict's sister, kneels next to a book of the rule surmounted by a dove, evoking the moment of her death, when Benedict had a vision of her soul ascending to heaven. The arms of the monastery are painted in the margin below the text.

A religious profession is a public vow taken by a person entering a religious order, in which the promise is made to observe the three evangelical counsels: chastity, poverty and obedience. Before professing her vows, a woman hoping to become a nun would undergo a postulancy, when her aptitude for the religious life of the order would be tested from six months to two years. If after her postulancy she and the order determined that she could continue living within the order, she received the habit and undertook the novitiate, a period of one to two years of training as a novice before taking her final vows. Activities during this period normally consisted of study, prayer, participation in the canonical hours, manual labor, spiritual exercises, tests of humility, and reflection, often under the guidance of a novice mistress. At the end of the novitiate, the novices took their initial, temporary vows, or were asked to leave. One to three years after taking the temporary vows, the novice would petition to make her perpetual profession, those permanent, solemn vows pronounced by Maria Scolastica Casellati on 16 April 1774.

The document attests the presence of Paulo Francesco Giustiniani (1715-1789), the bishop of Treviso (1750-1787), at the profession, as well as the abbess of the convent. Maria Scolastica signed her profession document with a simple cross, "In cujus rei fidem hanc promissionem manu propria subscripsi" (as proof of this promise, signed in her own hand). In the early modern Veneto, the soaring marital dowry-rates and the tradition of patrilineal inheritance in aristocratic families caused a surplus of single girls, who ended up in convents; monastic dowries were substantial, but not as large as matrimonial dowries (Scippa Bhasin, 2014, p. 20).

Only a small percentage of medieval charters were illuminated (see the project at University of Graz, Online Resources). This much later example of an illuminated document should be studied in the context of more well-known examples, including diplomas from Italian universities (Baldissin Molli, et. al., 1998; Farini and Pivato, 2005; Maggiulli, 2016), Venetian *Ducali* (Szépe, 2018), and Spanish *Carta ejecutoria*, all of which continued the tradition of the handwritten and illuminated manuscript into the modern era. We have not discovered any other illuminated professions of nuns, although perhaps they exist and have not yet garnered the attention they deserve.

LITERATURE

Baldissin Molli, Giovanna, Luciana Sitran Rea, and Emilia Veronese Ceseracciu, eds. *Diplomi di Laurea all' Università di Padova (1504-1806)*, Padua, 1998.

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Farina, F. and S. Pivato, eds. *Honor et meritis: diplomi di laurea dal XV al XX secolo: mostra documentaria realizzata in occasione del 500 anniversario della fondazione dell'Università degli studi di Urbino*, Rimini, 2005.

Lowe, K. *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy*, Cambridge, 2003.

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Scippa Bhasin, C. "Prostitutes, Nuns, Actresses: Breaking the Convent Wall in Seventeenth-Century Venice," *Theatre Journal* 66:1 (2014), pp. 19-35.

Szépe, Helena Katalin. *Venice Illuminated: Power and Painting in Renaissance Manuscripts*. New Haven, Connecticut, 2018.

ONLINE RESOURCES

University of Graz, Illuminated Charters Project

<https://illuminierte-urkunden.uni-graz.at/en/>

Collection: Illuminierte Urkunden

<https://www.monasterium.net/mom/IlluminierteUrkunden/collection>

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