

Women and Worship in the Middle Ages

Goals

The primary goal of the project, *Women and Worship in the Middle Ages*, is to address the question, “In what ways were medieval women ‘visible’ in worship?” Visibility is of course a metaphor for every kind of participation in the liturgies of the church, verbal and nonverbal. It includes such matters as how women were named and addressed, how they were pictured in liturgical art, the liturgical ministries they engaged in, etc.

This requires that we know as much as possible regarding the full range of liturgies that women celebrated. Thus a subsidiary goal of this study is to identify and draw together at least representative samples of the voluminous and scattered literature on this subject.

Another goal is to explore as much as possible the consciousness that women, lay men and clergy had of women’s visibility in the liturgy, and the meaning this visibility had for them. Unfortunately, evidence is scant on these matters.

This study does not pretend to be the last word on the subject of women and worship in the middle ages. Another goal, therefore, is to invite others to extend this work both by broadening the horizons explored here, and by going into more depth on particular aspects of this subject.

Finally, this work seeks to promote increased ‘visibility’ of women in liturgical celebrations in our own time and in the future. This might in some cases be done by borrowing practices of medieval women that have been lost in the course of time. More often, probably, the medieval practices cannot be borrowed directly; our times and needs are so different from those of our medieval foremothers that this may not be satisfying. Instead, the liturgical experiences of medieval women hopefully will stimulate our imaginations to envision and create adaptations more suitable for a different era.

Background, Limits and Methodology

Background

Medieval women, in general, regularly participated in the liturgies of the church. Their lives reflected and were shaped by the daily, weekly, seasonal and annual round of liturgical rites. Worship marked birth, marriage or entrance into religious life, sickness and death. Liturgy was a significant part of women's life experience and one of the factors that shaped their identity as individuals and as members of church and society.

Many studies of medieval women - or of medieval lay folk or nuns in general - have considered one or another facet of women's liturgical life. However, liturgy has seldom been the primary perspective of these studies.

In addition, there have been many excellent studies of spirituality and popular religiosity in the middle ages; by and large they focus on extraliturgical concerns. Sometimes, of course, e.g., eucharistic devotion, there is considerable overlap with liturgy per se.

My perspective is that of a liturgist, and my primary concern is with the liturgical experiences of medieval women. I make extensive use of liturgical books.

Sources

The liturgical books of the church constitute one important set of sources. These include sacramentaries, missals, rituals (also called manuals), lectionaries, pontificals, etc. Here I have used only printed liturgical books; related materials in manuscript form have not been examined. Liturgical books tell us about the major rites of the church, and they contain texts and rubrics; except for those concerned with the office, they were written primarily for clergy.

Liturgical books show historical development and regional differences in the liturgical rites, but they also present a somewhat idealized and abstract view of liturgy. They tell us little or nothing about what actually happened, how lay women and men really participated, how liturgies were understood, or what influences they had on people's lives.

To supplement the information provided by the liturgical books, and in particular to try to "put a face" on liturgical celebrations, a whole range of other sources has also been consulted. These have to do with liturgical art and architecture, music, and the theology and practice of ministry. They also include wills, church inventories, parish and monastic account books, bishops' registers, lives of the saints, studies of religious communities, monastic records, canon law, theology, and the secondary literature in general.

Limits

To make this study manageable, I have imposed the following limits. This work will be concerned with the liturgies of the Western church only; Eastern liturgies will not be studied. It will also concern the mainstream of medieval religious life; heretical groups will not be considered. It extends roughly from the sixth century, the period of the earliest liturgical books, to the Reformation; the Roman missal of 1570 is a terminus. It will not consider the question of Mary in the medieval liturgy; this is a large subject all its own. It will not deal in any depth with liturgical music, especially hymnody; again, this is a large and specialized subject of its own. Finally, I will try to distinguish between the liturgy and extraliturgical devotions, and not consider the latter; this distinction is often difficult to make, and I make no claim to consistency of approach in this matter.

Nevertheless, I will not hesitate to stray beyond these stated limits if interesting information about women and worship is at stake.

Methodology

This is a qualitative, not a quantitative, study. I will ask, "In what ways were women visible in worship," and not, "to what extent" or "how often" or "how many."

In part, a qualitative approach simply honors the nature of the evidence. In many areas, there is not enough information to support quantitative analysis; many manuscript sources still need to be examined. It is also the case that many aspects of women's liturgical life were not recorded or are found only in footnotes and margins.

Another reason for taking a qualitative approach is that, for the most part, a quantitative analysis of available data is simply depressing - women are not much mentioned; their participation in liturgy was indeed limited.

Finally, the "political" goal of this study does not require a quantitative approach. Even single examples of various liturgical practices may be sufficient to stimulate our imaginations to see ways of increasing the participation of women now or in the future. I do not apologize for including rare and obscure references, therefore.

Despite what has just been said, in a few areas there is a good deal of information and some quantitative data are reported.

Additional Comments

First, although "women" will often be used in a general sense, it is recognized that this term refers to many diverse and distinct individuals. Medieval women varied in their experience of liturgy,

their understanding and appropriation of liturgy, etc. Some went to mass daily; others avoided this liturgy even on Sunday; some heard mass and said the office but were not particularly devout or pious. To the extent that is possible, evidence treating individuality will be reported.

Second, women (in general) celebrated a wide variety of liturgies, and celebrated them in diverse types of communities. Thus members of communities of women generally prayed the divine office in the absence of any men, including priests. When the ministry of a priest was required, as for the eucharist, he and one or several assisting ministers might be the only males present. (Male guests, servants and lay brothers also need to be considered here.) Married women, widows, and young unmarried women, in contrast, generally worshiped together with men in mixed communities. There was little distinction between lay women and lay men in the celebration of many liturgies, though I report what differences are noted in the sources. There were also special liturgies for some women, especially nuns, abbesses, etc., widows, and queens.

Third, it is important to recognize that all women participated in liturgical celebrations as *lay persons*. That is, women did not become members of the clerical state, they did not receive any of the minor orders, and they were not ordained to the major orders of diaconate or presbyterate (at least in the period under consideration here). Women therefore did not preside at liturgies that required ordained ministers, and they could not lawfully undertake subsidiary ministries such as altar server or reader (exceptions will be noted). This is a major limitation of women's liturgical participation, but it will not be considered at length. From the perspective of ordination, celibate women who were members of various kinds of women's communities were lay persons. As "religious" women, however, they had a status in the church that was distinct from those of other women.