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Nil Sorsky: The Authentic Writings (review)

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doing staked out new authority for themselves): Colomba Guadagnoli in Perugia; Lucia Brocadelli in Ferrara; Osanna Andreasi in Mantua; Stefana Quinzani in Soncino; and two exceptions to the rule, an Augustinian nun in Milan, Arcangela Panigarola, and a silk weaver in Racconigi, Caterina Mattei. The case studies allow the details of the behind-the-scenes maneuvering to be observed, but deeper patterns, such as the constant invocation to—and attempt to trace a line of descent from—St. Catherine of Siena, are also analyzed. The overriding message is that the split between supporters and opponents of Savonarola ensured that, even after his death, two ideological factions continued to feed off their opposition to each other, fighting for control over his posthumous reputation. The women under discussion here claimed to have had visions in which they met and held conversations with Savonarola, who often had gained the status of a saint in heaven. This type of endorsement of someone who had been excommunicated and burnt at the stake shows how these women's zeal was only increased by the difficulties and dangers of being on the losing side in this ferocious ideological clash.

The study highlights the importance of the contested political context in which convents operated in Renaissance Italy. The secular rulers often shared considerable control over convents with various ecclesiastical authorities, but life inside the convent was also so politicized that sometimes religion seems to have been eclipsed. In a fascinating section, the author discusses new material she has found on Lucrezia Borgia, who masterminded a move against Lucia Brocadelli because Brocadelli had openly criticized her father, Alexander VI. The fallout from this meant that nuns from another convent were allowed to gain a commanding position (indeed, one was elected prioress), an anti-Savonarolan confessor was appointed, and *clausura* was enforced, which all cut Brocadelli off from conduits to power within and without the convent, and thus silenced a key, vociferous champion of Savonarola's memory.

This is an important new book, setting the record straight in complex areas like the intertwining of politics, religion, geography, and reputation. It is thoroughly to be recommended.

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Nil Sorsky: The Authentic Writings. Translated, edited, and introduced by David M. Goldfrank. [Cistercian Studies Series, Vol. 221.] (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications. 2008. Pp. xxiv, 369. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-879-07321-3.)

The work of Nil Sorskii (d. 1508) is the culmination of medieval Russian monastic spirituality. A major figure in his own lifetime, he left a small body of writings that contained his conception of the monastic life and continued the traditions of Orthodox asceticism. After his death his followers turned toward a struggle over the propriety of monastic landholding, eventually losing to the

followers of Nil's contemporary, Joseph Volotskii. Nil's heritage soon moved to the margins of Russian religious history and was revived only in the nineteenth century, leading to his recognition as a saint in the twentieth.

The study of Nil's work has long been burdened with the controversy over his own attitude to monastic landholding. Nineteenth-century scholars used the works of his followers and his own preference for hermitage as evidence for his rejection of landholding. This conception was at best a great exaggeration, and Ia. S. Lur'e demonstrated its limits as early as 1960. More recently, Fairy von Lilienfeld, G. M. Prokhorov, and other historians have turned to Nil's ascetic writings, correctly seeing them as the core of his legacy. Nil has inspired several translations into Western languages, including one into English by Father George Maloney (New York, 2003) in the series *Classics of Western Spirituality*. In this new translation Goldfrank offers two improvements over Maloney's version. One is a much more complete introduction, summarizing and discussing the latest scholarship on the various textual issues, Nil's use of Byzantine monastic writings, and the controversies about his relationship to Joseph Volotskii. The other improvement is a translation much closer to the original, not mediated by later adaptors and commentators as is the case with the Maloney translation, in Goldfrank's view. Goldfrank also places in italics the many quotations and references to earlier ascetic writers.

The result is a version of considerable interest to scholars, if somewhat less accessible to other readers. Goldfrank believes in more literal renderings and thus conveys more of the flavor of the text, its quirks as well as its rhetoric, than other translators. He takes the reader into the mental world of Russian monastic spirituality, emphasizing to what an extent Nil was part of a living and continuing textual tradition as well as a tradition of practice. He is very careful about the translation of the technical vocabulary, of words for *mind* and *intelligence*, and particularly the crucial term *pomysl*, which renders the Greek *logismos*. There were eight such *pomysly/logismoi*, from gluttony to pride, the ancestors of the seven deadly sins of the West. Goldfrank departs from other translators, Maloney included, who employed "thought" for *pomysl*, which is literally correct, but somewhat misleading, and puts in its place the English "urge." This choice seems better, since "thought" excludes the association of desire in *pomysl*. Goldfrank might have overcorrected here, since American readers, at any rate, may take *urge* in a much too emotional, even carnal, sense. In any case, he provides a careful discussion (pp. 86–95) of the issues, and the reader will be able to make any mental adjustments that seem necessary. One wishes more translators were so conscientious.

In the introduction Goldfrank's rather colloquial style ("ascetic smorgasbord," p. 30) and American references (Kinko's student packets) may make it a bit inaccessible to the international reader. Its solid content, however, rounds out an exemplary edition and translation.