

Nicholas of Cusa and Monte Oliveto

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Nicholas of Cusa was no stranger to Orvieto and vicinity in 1463. He had visited the city twice in the immediately previous years, to enjoy scholarly leisure and improve his health. Like Pius II and Juan de Torquemada, he suffered from gout; and, like Pius, he sought relief outside Rome. His visit in 1461 also involved a successful effort, acting on behalf of Pope Pius II, to calm factional strife in the city between the Monaldeschi and Cervara families. Appointed to reform city and diocese two years later, Nicholas attempted to create a model diocese. Encountering strong opposition from entrenched interests, the cardinal failed, whether acting directly or through an agent, to make permanent constructive changes. Eventually he had to return to the Roman curia. Representatives of the city found Cusanus at Todi in the summer of 1464 with their complaints about his representative, the Carmelite Gaspar de Sicilia. Already ailing and distracted by Pope Pius' projected crusade, he sent the city a letter exhorting the citizens of Orvieto to cultivate peace, quiet and prayer.¹ These reform efforts have been described by Thomas Frank as the final example of Nicholas' optimism, his confidence that reform of the Church and society could be effected.²

While in Umbria in June of 1463, before his mission to Orvieto went sour, Cusanus visited the monastery of Monte Oliveto, the Mount of Olives. He may have desired to spend some time in a monastic setting, having once expressed to the monks of Tegernsee some years before a desire to give up a prelate's labors for a monastic cell:

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- 1 These visits to Orvieto are summarized in MORIMICHI WATANABE, *Nicholas of Cusa. A Companion to His Life and Times*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki, Farnham 2011, 370–376; ERICH MEUTHEN, *Nicholas of Cusa. A Sketch for a Biography*, trans. David Crowner and Gerald Christianson, Washington, D. C. 2010, 135–138, 145.
 - 2 THOMAS FRANK, *Cusanus und die Reform der Hospitäler von Orvieto (1463)*, in: *Renovatio und unitas – Nikolaus von Kues als Reformator. Theorie und Praxis der Reformatio im 15. Jahrhundert*, ed. Thomas Frank und Norbert Winkler, Göttingen 2012, 157–176 at 176.

»Nevertheless, I am drawn back very much from the highest things by the distractions of this world. Therefore, I told the brothers to have a cell prepared for me. Would that there were given to me the sacred leisure to be enjoyed among the brothers, who are free and see how sweet the Lord is. This desire probably had been heightened by his troubled episcopate in Brixen.«³

Our record of Cusanus' visit to Monte Oliveto is twofold. He preached his last recorded sermon there on Trinity Sunday, July 5, 1463. It was preached at the clothing of a young postulant from Bologna with the habit of a monastic novice.⁴ Cusanus conferred his own name on the aspiring young monk. This sermon is unusual in his corpus of 293 preserved in outline or in an extensive written form because it was recorded by one of the Olivetans themselves for their own edification.⁵ The other record is a letter the cardinal wrote to the young monk Nicholas, written in Montepulciano within the octave of the Feast of Corpus Christi in the summer of 1463, enlarging on some things said in the sermon.⁶

The cardinal reached Monte Oliveto on July 3, 1463, accompanied by two bishops and his own household. Whether or not they were expecting his arrival, the abbot general of the Olivetans, the elderly Bartholomaeus Politianus,⁷ and the monks present welcomed their illustrious visitor.

3 EDMOND VANSTEENBERGHE, *Autour de la docte ignorance. Un controverse sur la théologie mystique au XV^e siècle*, Münster 1915, Letter 8. MORIMICHI WATANABE, *Nicholas of Cusa and the Tyrolese Monasteries. Reform and Resistance*, in: *History of Political Thought* (1986) 53–72.

4 On novices in the earliest edition of the Olivetan constitutions available to the author, see *Regula S. Patris Benedicti et Constitutiones Congregationis Montis Oliveti*, Roma 1602, *Constitutiones*, pt. 2, 60–61, chapters 43–44. On the constitutions in general, see JOHN CUMMINS, *The Olivetan Constitutions*, in: *Ampleforth Journal* (December 1896) 149–164.

5 *Sermo CCXCIII*, h XIX, 681–691 at 681: »Sermo reverendissimi in Christo patris domini Nicolai de Alamania cardinalis sancti Petri ad vincula, quando vestivit unum iuvenem in hoc monasterio.« The Prologus, h XIX, n. 1, lin. 4–6, says the sermon was recorded »ut bene instructi volentes religionem nostram intrare sapientiae et intellectus et per consequens fervoris et devotionis augmentum consequantur [...]«.

6 The young man was called Nicholas Albergati in the edition by GERDA VON BREDOW, see *Das Vermächtnis des Nikolaus von Kues. Der Brief an Nikolaus Albergati nebst der Predigt in Montoliveto (1463)*, Habilitations-Schrift Heidelberg 1953. However, the letter only addresses him (26) as »te Nicolaum Bononiensem«, while the *Sermo* describes him as »unus studens qui ex Bononia venit« (h XIX, n. 3, lin. 12). SECONDO LANCELOTTI, *Historiae Olivetanae libri duo*, Venezia 1623, 51, in the Bavarian State Library, accessed via Europeana on 18 May 2014, says: »Bononiensem adolescentulum«. See more recently, KIRSTIN ZEYER: *Der sogenannte Albergati-Brief des Nikolaus Cusanus*, in: *Litterae Cusanae* 5, 2 (2005) 69–75.

7 LANCELOTTI, *Historiae Olivetanae libri duo* (see above n. 6) 50; MODESTO SCARPINI, *I monaci benedettini di Monte Oliveto*, San Salvatore Monferrato 1952, 96–97.

The monastery had been founded in the fourteenth century, but it was given its present decoration only after Cusanus' death in 1464. We do know that he saw an image of the Olivetan arms, a cross atop three green hills, for he mentioned this in the sermon:

»In the monastery I also saw the standard of the holy cross set up on a mountain, three [hills] and one [cross], with flourishing green olive leaves around it [...].«

This emblem of the order stood at the entry of the monastery and in the cloister.⁸ The olive leaves fit the biblical Mount of Olives, with the garden of Gethsemane, while the hills could denote both Calvary and the Tuscan countryside with its olive groves.

Our Olivetan recorder indicated that the cardinal behaved in a fitting, pious manner while at the monastery:

»He conducted himself quite laudably. For they presented themselves humbly, devoutly, honestly and modestly, and, as if they were monks, observed the divine offices and silence, so that all the monks marveled; and they fasted on the days on which ember days occurred. And the most reverend lord cardinal celebrated mass every day, even when he arrived and when he left us.«⁹

This may explain, at least partially, how the monks could ask so eminent a personage to preach at a monastic ceremony, the clothing of a novice, whether or not they knew of some personal connection of the cardinal to the postulant.

Monte Oliveto had had its own connections with the Roman curia in the recent past. During the Great Western Schism, Gregory XII, the

8 *Sermo* CCXCIII, h XIX, n. 16, lin. 1–10: »Et dico de isto Monte Oliveti. Considero tres monticulos et solum unus habet crucem, alii non, duo habent arborem olivarum a dextris et a sinistris. Ita mihi videtur vidisse, si bene conicere potui, et in ingressu huius loci superius ad arcem crucis et in claustro. In monasterio quoque ego vidi vexillum sanctae crucis super montem trinum et unum erectum cum olivis virentibus foliis asstantibus, et omnia ista aliquid significant, aliquid indicant et important.« This emblem appears in Olivetan manuscripts; see MILVIA BOLLATI, *The Olivetan Gradual. Its Place in Fifteenth Century Lombard Manuscript Illumination*, London 2008, figures 2, 4–6, 16.

9 *Sermo* CCXCIII, h XIX, n. 2, lin. 9–19: »Ipse autem cum duobus episcopis se comitantibus et universa familia sua, donec in eodem monasterio fuit, valde laudabiliter conversatus fuit. Nam ita humiliter, devote, honeste et modeste se exhibuerunt, ac si religiosi forent stando in officiis divinis et in silentio, ita quod omnes monachi mirabantur, et ieiunando illis diebus, in quibus quattuor tempora occurrerunt. Et reverendissimus cardinalis omni die celebravit, etiam quando venit et quando a nobis recessit.« LANCELOTTI, *Historiae Olivetanae libri duo* (see above n. 6) 51 mentions the sermon and then adds: »Impensis omnibus satisfacit.«

Roman claimant to the papacy, assigned the monastery of Santa Giustina in Padua to the Olivetans in 1408 but reserved a pension from that monastery to his nephew Cardinal Antonio Correr as commendatory abbot.¹⁰ This form of papal patronage may explain why the privileges assigned by Julius II a century later forbade both granting Olivetan monasteries *in commendam* and assigning pensions drawing on their fruits.¹¹ Also, in 1430, Cardinals Antonio Casini and Niccolò Albergati devised reforms for the Olivetan congregation, especially focused on visitation and monastic stability.¹² The monks later, in 1437, modified these constitutions to better match their needs.¹³

More positive interactions can be found in privileges granted by the popes, by Gregory XI, the last pope before the Great Western Schism, and then three popes after the Schism, Martin V, Eugenius IV and Pius II.¹⁴ Pius visited the monastery in 1462, writing that the region abounded in olives (as was fitting for the monastery's name), as well as vines, fruits and nuts. He praised the monks in his *Commentaries* and observed their vegetarian diet. His privilege was granted in the context of this visit together with indulgences.¹⁵ (Pius built his privilege in part on the one granted by Eugenius.¹⁶) These good interactions, combined with Cusa-

10 Gregory later revoked this concession to his nephew; see VALERIO CATTANA, *Momenti di storia e spiritualità olivetana (secoli XIV–XX)*, Cesena 2007, 49–52. Gregory then named another kinsman, Ludovico Barbo, abbot, reserving a substantial pension to the cardinal; see *ibid.*, 52–57.

11 Princeton University MS P 97, f. 8^v: »Quod Monasteria non possint in comendam uel administrationem obtineri«; *ibid.*, fol. 9^r: »Non potest pensio reseruari super fructibus alicuius monasterii. Nec ius aliquid acquiri [...]«. The Princeton manuscript is a collection of Olivetan privileges issued during the Reign of Julius II; see DON SKEMER, *Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Princeton University Library*, 2 vols., Princeton 2013, vol. 2, 313–315.

12 ANTONIUS BARGENSIS, *Chronicon Montis Oliveti (1313–1450)*, ed. Placidus M. Lugano, Firenze 1901, 76–82, accessed via the Internet Archive, 22 April 2014.

13 LANCELOTTI, *Historiae Olivetanae libri duo* (see above n. 6) 39–40, 44. The Olivetans received a copy of Gregory XI's letter favoring the congregation; see *ibid.*, 50.

14 Princeton MS P 97 (see above n. 11) ff. 39^v–47^r.

15 LANCELOTTI, *Historiae Olivetanae libri duo* (see above n. 6) 47–48; *Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope. The Commentaries of Pius II, an Abridgement*, trans. Florence A. Gragg, ed. Leona C. Gabel, New York 1962, 293–294.

16 *Bullarum privilegiorum ac diplomatum Romanorum Pontificum amplissima collectio [...]*, ed. Carolus Cocquelines, vol. 3, pt. 3: ab Eugenio IV ad Leonem X, scilicet ab anno 1431 ad 1521, Roma 1743, 113–116, annotated with references to the later privilege of Julius II.

nus' visits to Orvieto, may explain the willingness of the Olivetans to have a cardinal visit their mother house, and even more to ask him *deprecantibus monachis* to celebrate mass and preach.

The sermon, as recorded was delivered in the monastic church just before the main mass of Trinity Sunday or within it, at the offertory. Cusanus was the celebrant, as well as the preacher. According to the Olivetan account:

And since he would sit, garbed in vestments fitting for such a solemnity, a seat [was] prepared for him before the great altar.¹⁷

The sermon began with an interrogation of the professed monk who presented the young man and of the postulant himself. We can imagine an elderly cardinal interrogating a young man, but the young man may have been (for reasons I will mention later) fairly fragile in appearance. The young man asked for the Olivetan habit, but the cardinal asked him if he knew for what he was asking.¹⁸ Then he launched into an explanation of what being a monk involves. Although not monastically trained himself, Nicholas had a sufficient interest in the contemplative life to lay out an explanation that might have daunted a less determined youth. He expected, almost certainly, a positive reply to this exposition.¹⁹

Nicholas was quick to distinguish between the habit and the monk. He quoted a proverb to the effect that »the habit does not make the monk« [Walther 10534a], continuing »but life and precious and praise worthy conduct [do],« citing a papal decretal, c. *Porrectum*, *De regularibus*, [X 3.31.13] to that effect.²⁰ His definition of a monk is not novel, but it bears quoting at length:

17 *Sermo CCXCIII*: h XIX, n. 3, lin. 1–8: »Unde cum in die sanctissimae trinitatis, quae occurrit tunc quinta die iulii 1463, pro sua reverenda mansuetudine et humilitate acquievisset deprecantibus monachis, ut missam maiorem celebrare deberet, et cum iam indutus vestimentis ad tantam solemnitatem condecens ante altare maius in sede ad hoc sibi praeparata consedisset, exorsus est sermocinando loqui [...].«

18 *Sermo CCXCIII*: h XIX, n. 3, lin. 15–21.

19 *Sermo CCXCIII*: h XIX, n. 5, lin. 1–3: »Audi ergo et intellige bene, quid importet tua petitio, et postea, cum postea, cum intellexeris, respondebis mihi, si vis assequi quod petisti.«

20 *Sermo CCXCIII*: h XIX, n. 6, lin. 1–5: »Quare ergo petis talem habitum, cum ex ipso non efficiaris melior vel sanctior, quia ›habitus non facit monachum‹, sed vita et conversatio pretiosa et laudabilis, ut in capitulo *Porrectum* de regularibus?«

»A monk, as is found in C. 16 q. 1 c. 8, is named from *monos*, which is alone, and *chus*, and, therefore, a monk should be alone so that he better be free and pray to God; and he should be used to solitude, so that he can be quiet more freely, intent on the contemplation of things celestial and the fellowship of the angels and be given over to the divine office.«²¹

Nicholas, however, did not dwell on this at length. He said that not just the mass but a procession to be held »on account of the imminent war with the Turks« required brevity.²² Therefore, the cardinal, as noted above, spoke of the Mount of Olives, the namesake of Monte Oliveto, to which Jesus withdrew on the eve of His Passion. The three green hills of the Olivetan arms were connected by him to the Trinity.²³

Perhaps with the crusade in mind, he preached on the text »Whoever wishes to come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me« [Mt. 16:24].²⁴ He applied the text to the young postulant, telling him this is what it meant to be a monk of Monte Oliveto:

»Since, therefore, you are a youth, do you not fear to bear the cross and almost die? Indeed it will be necessary to die to the world and, being born again as if for God, because no one can enter into the kingdom of heaven unless he is born again, according to the words [addressed] to Nicodemus in John 3[:24] and elsewhere, »Unless a grain of wheat falls, it will be dead on the earth; it will not bear fruit« John 12[:24]. The novice was to die to himself and carry the cross.«²⁵

The cardinal also told the young man that he had to be like a good olive tree, an Olivetan, »standing by the cross,« the leaves of which were green

21 *Sermo* CCXCIII: h XIX, n. 8, lin. 2–9: »Monachus, sicut habetur XVI q. prima capitulo (octavo), dicitur a ›monos‹, quod est solus, et ›chus‹, et ideo monachus debet solus esse, ut melius possit Deo vacare et orare, et in solitudine versari debet, ut liberius et quietius contemplationi caelestium et in societate angelorum sit intentus et in officio divino sit mancipatus.«

22 *Sermo* CCXCIII: h XIX, n. 15, lin. 1–7: »Sed quoniam missarum solemniam sumus celebraturi et processionem facturum propter Teucrorum imminens bellum, ad praesens tali materia ommissa redeamus ad propositum nostrum et videamus quid significet iste Mons Oliveti, qui est ›mons pinguis‹ et pretiosus. ›in quo beneplacitum est Deo habitare in eo.«

23 See above n. 6.

24 Another context might be the Passion piety of the Devotio Moderna; see Devotio Moderna. Basic Writings, ed. John Van Engen, Mahwah 1988, 88.

25 *Sermo* CCXCIII: h XIX, n. 17, lin. 8–16: »Immo vero et mori mundo oportebit et Deo vivere renascendo denuo, quia nemo potest in regnum caelorum intrare, ›nisi renatus fuerit‹, iuxta illud Iohannis 3^o ad Nicodemum, et alibi: ›Nisi granum frumenti cadens in terra mortuum fuerit, ›non affert fructum‹, Iohannis 12^o capitulo. Et ideo tu debes occidere animam tuam, si illam amas, abnegando te ipsum et crucem portando.«

even in winter.²⁶ The prospective novice was expected to persevere in prayer as Jesus did on the Mount of Olives during the agony in the garden, when He sweated blood [John 1:1; Matthew 26:42; Luke 22:44].²⁷

The young man was offered the chance to turn back if he lacked the virtues necessary to attain holiness. He was to reply with words given to him by the cardinal:

»Lord, I understand enough what you said and know and confess myself not to have at present – am not able to attain at present – such virtues and the meaning of such words, that is, ‘monk of Monte Oliveto,’ but I hope to act like one who enters on the study of divine and mundane letters, or one who professes the mechanical arts, who attains not suddenly and quickly the perfection of the subject or science or other art which he desires to learn, but little by little and day by day pursues it [...].²⁸

The novice was becoming, in this simile, an apprentice.

Cusanus continued at length, speaking of the virtues a young monk would need. These he compared with Peter, James and John, who accompanied Jesus to the mountain on the occasion of the Transfiguration [Matthew 17:1–9, Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36] and to Gethsemane. These three he identified, respectively, with obedience, poverty and chastity. The qualities expected of a good Benedictine monk, once he had left the world.²⁹ The cardinal warned him, as part of obedience, to follow the rule of Benedict,

26 *Sermo CCXCIII*: h XIX, n. 18, lin. 1–4: »Si vis esse in Monte Oliveti, prius effcairis bona oliva, quae iuxta crucem stans habet folia virentia semper, et numquam ei cadunt etiam tempore hiemali.«

27 *Sermo CCXCIII*: h XIX, n. 19, lin. 1–11: »Et ut sis semper viridis et vivus in fervore devotionis, considerare debes, quomodo dominus noster Iesus Christus ita perseveravit in monte isto oliveti in fervore devotionis cum pinguedine orationis quod, dum imminente sibi tempore passionis suae secundum humanitatem suae carnis in agonia constitueretur propter imaginem mortis durissimae quam sufferre habebat, perseveravit in oratione et bona voluntate implendi semper Patris voluntatem et pertulit sudorem sanguineum [...].«

28 *Sermo CCXCIII*: h XIX, n. 22, lin. 1–12: »Tamen certum non habeo, quid sentias propter ea quae ego dixi tibi. Et si tu diceris mihi: »Domine, ego satis intellexi ea quae dixistis et scio et confiteor me non habere ad praesens nec esse compotem in instanti posse assequi tales virtutes et significationes talium nominum, videlicet monachi Montis Oliveti, sed spero facere sicut ille, qui intrat studium litterarum divinarum mundanarumque aut qui alias artes mechanicas profitetur, qui non subito et repente perfectionem studii ac scientiae vel alterius artis quam arripit assequitur, sed paulatim et de die in diem proficit. Ita et ego de virtute in virtutem intendo post hoc principium et assumptionem habitus sancti proficere et totis viribus studium novi hominis labore improbo, qui omnia vincit, arripere et diebus ac noctibus insudare iuxta meam possibilitatem, donec cum Dei adiutorio praedictas virtutes et alias, quae ad statum monachi erunt necessariae, opportune assequar [...].«

29 *Sermo CCXCIII*: h XIX, n. 29 lin. 1–n. 30 lin. 19.

not deviating even to follow the rule of Augustine or Francis in doing something good. His monastic calling required submission of his will to the rule.³⁰ Nicholas urged the postulant:

»And so, son, act according to the Lord's counsel. *Pray, lest you enter into temptation*, and pray urgently that the Lord will grant you the grace of following and perfecting what you choose, because you cannot do anything at all without Him.«³¹

And he warned the would-be Olivetan that, once he had put his hand to the plow, he should not turn back [Luke 9:62].³² The young postulant, on his knees, affirmed his desire to become a monk of Monte Oliveto. He said that he had long considered this calling and that he would not give it up even if offered a bishopric or a cardinal's hat.³³

Having concluded his sermon, Cusanus authorized the abbot general of the Olivetans to give the young man the habit. He shed his secular clothing, and the cardinal clothed him with Olivetan garb. Then Nicholas, with tears in his eyes, raised up the new novice. The cardinal gave him his own baptismal name, Nicholas, as his name in religion. This name he interpreted as »victorious«, triumphant over the machinations of Satan.³⁴

Shortly after leaving Monte Oliveto, Cusanus addressed his letter to the new novice from Montepulciano, where he was staying. The tone of

30 *Sermo* CCXCIII: h XIX, n. 24, lin. 10–16: »[...] si tu faceres aliquod bonum opus, quod contineretur in regula sanctum Augustini vel Francisci, quod esset contra regulam sancti Benedicti, tu male faceres, licet opus in se bonum esset, nec esse oboediens. Et sic Petrum non haberes tecum.«

31 *Sermo* CCXCIII: h XIX, n. 30, lin. 11–19: »Itaque, fili, facito iuxta consilium Domini: ora, ne intres in temptationem, et ora instanter, ut Dominus concedat tibi gratiam exsequendi et perficiendi quod peroptas, quia omnino sine ipso nihil possumus facere ›nec sufficientes sumus ex nobis quasi ex nobis bonum cogitare, sed sufficientia nostra ex Deo est‹, ut ait Apostolus ad Corinthos II capitulo 6º [actually 3:5].

32 *Sermo* CCXCIII: h XIX, n. 32, lin. 3–6.

33 *Sermo* CCXCIII: h XIX, n. 35, lin. 1–13: »Tunc iuvenis, qui erat ante eum genuflexus, respondit hilari vultu et devoto aspectu cum gravitate et omni modestia: ›Reverendissime domine, ego quasi per annum super hac materia cogitavi et tandem deliberavi iam sunt menses sex, et consideratis considerandis statui et firmavi propositum meum, et inspirationem divinam executioni mandare decrevi in tantum quod, si summus pontifex vellet me promovere ad episcopatum vel cardinalatum in casu, quo ego vellem desistere a proposito meo, ego nec propter aliam mundi prosperitatem desisterem.«

34 *Sermo* CCXCIII: h XIX, n. 36, lin. 8–15: »Qui post traditionem habitus cum lacrimis ex devotione tanti fervoris deosculatus est iuvenem et ait: ›Tu vocaberis nomen meum, videlicet Nicolaus, id est frater Nicolaus, qui interpretatur victoriosus.‹ Et sic esto victoriosus contra Satan et eius machinationes [...].«

the letter is notably sad, as if the author is addressing not only his mortality but his addressee's. The entire text can be read as a spiritual last will and testament. In part, Nicholas based his text on the sermon, which said he was urged to record. The letter does reflect what the cardinal said in his sermon; but it is more philosophical in nature, including an argument that nature serves humanity:

»The creator, therefore, constrains all things sensible, heaven and earth and all that is in them, by an amorous rational nexus of nature to serve humanity, in which is the living image of God.«³⁵

This was because humanity alone on earth was »the living image of the creator.« This similitude was based on the intellect, a subject not present in the sermon as recorded. The intellect, in this context, is assimilative. The closer the human intellect came to the divine, the more completely it reflected its exemplar.³⁶ Here Cusanus shares the Renaissance emphasis on the Christian as created in the »image and likeness« of the divine exemplar.³⁷ The cardinal compared this resemblance to a painted image made to resemble a real thing, the invisible image, as closely as was possible to the artist.³⁸ Nicholas, however, did not ignore the pitfalls of pursuing resemblance to the divine. Falling away from the divine life into brutal existence, he said, meant falling into death and corruption.³⁹ Even

35 VON BREDOW, Das Vermächtnis des Nikolaus von Kues (see above n. 6) 28: »Constringit igitur creator omnia sensibilia, caelum et terram et quae in eis sunt, amoroso nexu rationali naturae, ut serviant homini, in quo est viva dei imago.«

36 Ebd.: »Nostra autem intellectualis natura, cum se dei vivam imaginem intelligat, potestatem habet continue clarior et deo conformatior fieri, licet, cum sit imago, nunquam fiat exemplar aut creator.« On *assimilatio* in the *Idiota de mente*, see CLYDE LEE MILLER, Reading Cusanus: Metaphor and Dialectic in a Conjectural Universe, Washington, D. C. 2003, 110–111, 127–133.

37 CHARLES TRINKHAUS, In Our Image and Likeness. Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought, Notre Dame, Ind. 1995; PAULINE MOFFITT WATTS, Nicolaus Cusanus. A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man, Leiden 1982, 134, 138–140; MILLER, Reading Cusanus (see above n. 36), 116–127.

38 VON BREDOW, Das Vermächtnis des Nikolaus von Kues (see above n. 6) 28: »Sicut si pictor sui ipsius visibilem imaginem dipingit, illa manet ut facta est, sed si foret talis pictor, qui artis suae intellectualis pingendi intellectualem et invisibilem imaginem facere posset, utique illa imago artis, si perfecta foret imago intellectualis et vivae artis, se ipsam clariorem et similiorem facere posset, quando se suo factori conformaret.« At 34, »Veritas igitur rosae est in intellectu rosam cognoscente, cuius rosa est imago.«

39 VON BREDOW, Das Vermächtnis des Nikolaus von Kues (see above n. 6) 30: »[...] quando autem magis a divina vita recedit et se vitae brutali immiscet, tanto plus morti et corruptioni fit similior [...]. Ideo omnis spiritus rationalis cadens ab amore dei sui, qui est eius veritas et exemplar, in aeternam mortem ruit.«

those who did not fall away could not achieve full assimilation into the divine.⁴⁰

Turning to the Olivetan order, Cusanus invoked the image of the cross on a threefold mountain, which represented the Trinity, one in three and three in one.⁴¹ Nicholas reminded the newly-clothed novice of the three mountains on the Olivetan arms, three and yet one, while saying that the essence of the Trinity is perceived only by the intellect.⁴² Cusanus also placed before the novice once more the difficulties he faced, all of which had been underlined in the sermon at the monastery. The novice was reminded that he was enlisting with Christ, rejecting »the prince of this world,« »the prince of death.«⁴³ The ceremony of clothing with the Olivetan habit in the place of all previous garb was compared in the letter to putting off the »old Adam« and putting on the new one, Christ.⁴⁴ The old Adam had been proud, and so the novice was to submit to his superiors in obedience. The old Adam was of the flesh; but the new Adam, Christ, was of the spirit. He was to be imitated. A monk was to have firm faith in Christ, as well as obedience.⁴⁵ Incorporation into Christ, however, was not just intellectual. It involved receiving Christ in the Eucharist, assimilating, just as the intellect assimilated. Christ was the

40 NANCY HUDSON, *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa*, Washington, D. C. 2007, 148–149, 175–176.

41 VON BREDOW, *Das Vermächtnis des Nikolaus von Kues* (see above n. 6) 44: »Religio vestra Montisoliveti vocatur, et ipsum unitrinum montem figuratis. In unitate igitur montis est trinitas et in trinitate unitas.«

42 Ebd.: »Et quia ante quantitatem et locum est essentiam sine qua nihil est, si in ipsam essentiam unitrini montis intueor per intellectum, nihil miror de divina.«

43 Ebd., 52: »Volo nunc te admonere, fili mi, quemadmodum feci ante altare domini, dum te monachali veste religionis sanctae Montisoliveti vestirem, ut semper memor sis te ad militiam christianam accessisse ad eiciendum principem mundi, qui est princeps mortis, foras, ut eo evicto Christus, rex pacificus, tui dominetur.«

44 Ebd., 32: »In memoria tenes, fili mi, cum a me devote habitu monastico indui peteres et tibi petitionis tuae difficultatem ex nominis etymologia ante oculos ponerem, tu nihilo minus non desistebas, sed te a deo in sancto proposito post longam deliberationem firmatum asserebas, quod potius decapitari quam non monachari eligeres, confisusque (quod) divina misericordia, quae te ad hoc instigavit, etiam profectum daret, te veteribus vestibus exutis novis indui in signum quod veterem terrenum Adam, a quo habuisti, ut hunc modum in maligno positum intrares, cum actibus suis exspoliare et novum te caelestem Adam, a quo haberes introitum in alium aeternum beatumque mundum, indueres.«

45 Ebd., 36, 38, 40.

monk's mediator and nourishment, also his master, teaching him how to progress toward union, and the exemplar of that union.⁴⁶ The young man was urged to become, as a monk, »a living hymn and a vessel created to praise God.« Removed from the world, he was to sing these praises.⁴⁷

We should not forget, in reading this letter, how recently both Cusanus and the monks had celebrated the feast of Corpus Christi. The text addresses the ubiquity of Christ in the Eucharist, echoing some of the cardinal's concerns about wonder hosts, like the bleeding hosts at Wilsnack, which, as he saw them, diverted the faithful from true faith toward what could be considered idolatry. Even in the case of Andechs, in which Nicholas accepted the hosts as documented, he tried to limit their display to rare occasions.⁴⁸

The letter speaks with some sadness about death. The young Olivetan, as noted above, was told that he has joined a new knighthood, combating the devil, »the prince of death.« Christ overcame that prince through his own death. Only He could do this.⁴⁹ Monte Oliveto was a place set apart, a place like the garden of Gethsemane to which Jesus withdrew before his Passion [Matthew 26:36 and Mark 14:32].⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Cusanus

46 Ebd., 46. Cusanus described the Eucharist as the sacrament of incorporation. DONALD F. DUCLOW, *Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa: Eucharist and Mystical Transformation*, *Eckhart Review* 17 (2008) 44–61.

47 VON BREDOW, *Das Vermächtnis des Nikolaus von Kues* (see above n. 6) 32: »Circa ista igitur, fili mi, assuefacias speculationem tuam et teneas firmiterque credas te esse vivum hymnum et vas in dei laudem creatum, et fac ut sis cithara intellectualis, in se ipsa laudes dei decantans, atque quod religio tua ad hoc sit tibi a deo persuasa et impressa, ut laudes eius relegatus a mundanis illecebris devotius possis decantare.«

48 VANSTEENBERGHE, *Autour de la docte ignorance* (see above n. 3) 130, 153–155. MITCHELL B. MERBACK, *Pilgrimage and Pogrom: Violence, Memory and Visual Culture at the Host Miracle Shrines of Germany and Austria*, Chicago 2012, 163–170; MORIMICHI WATANABE, *The German Church Shortly before the Reformation: Nicolaus Cusanus and the Veneration of the Bleeding Hosts at Wilsnack*, in: *Reform and Renewal in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Studies in Honor of Louis Pascoe, S. J.*, ed. Thomas M. Izbicki and Christopher M. Bellitto, Leiden 2000, 208–223.

49 VON BREDOW, *Das Vermächtnis des Nikolaus von Kues* (see above n. 6) 52: »Nemo autem principem illum vincit nisi Christus qui ait: confidite quia ego vici. Christus autem non nisi morte principem mortis vicit, neque tu confidas te Christo fortiolem.«

50 Ebd.: »Locus ille mons, hortus et Getsemani, scilicet vallis pinguium, nominatur.« On the relationship of the letter to Olivetan Passion piety, see GIORGIO PICASSO, *Tra umanesimo e >devotio<*. Studi di storia monastica raccolti per il 50° di professione dell'Autore, ed. Giancarlo Andenna, Giuseppe Motta and Mauro Tagliabue, Milano 1999, 120.

reminded the young man to have Christ with him in that withdrawn place, for the devil would go to him if Christ were absent.⁵¹ And he was to take with him obedience (Peter), poverty (James) and chastity (John), as any monk should. Fervor in prayer could set even these aside for a time.⁵² Cusanus concluded the letter with an exhortation to obedience – the novice monk, dead to himself, would be alive in Christ – and a request for the novice's prayers. This probably was an echo of the belief that a new monk died to the world. He was to mortify his will as part of this process of self-dying in which Christ's will became alive in him. This included obedience to the monastic prelate set above him as Christ's legate.⁵³

It is hard not to think, however, that Cusanus had his own death in mind; but he may also have thought the young man frail of body. Nicholas may have let the young man's fervor overcome his doubts about physical frailty in a would-be monk. The sermon, as recounted by our unnamed Olivetan concludes:

»[...] afterwards the aforesaid youth lived quite devoutly, fervently and laudably for three months or thereabouts, so that he was pleasing to all. Thereafter he was struck with a most painful infirmity. He fell asleep, made a blessed end and died quite devoutly. Before that he was consoled with a certain glorious vision and revealed it to his spiritual father, and he predicted the hour of his departure. He went quite gloriously to heaven, for which praise to God forever! Amen.«⁵⁴

51 VON BREOW, *Das Vermächtnis des Nikolaus von Kues* (see above n. 6) 54: »Nam in omni loco ubi Christus abest Satan adest.«

52 Ebd., 56: »Et quamvis non longe a Simone Petro, Iacobo et Iohanne, qui sunt columnae religionis, sit etiam in oratione recedendum, obedientia enim Simonis, supplantatio temporalium Iacobi et castitas Iohannis omnem monachum associare debent, tamen excellentia fervoris orationis etiam illos ad tempus licentiat.« On »Simon« (Peter) as meaning obedient in Cusanus' preaching, see THOMAS M. IZBICKI, *An Ambivalent Papalism: Peter in the Sermons of Nicholas of Cusa*, in *Perspectives on Early Modern and Modern Intellectual History. Essays in Honor of Nancy S. Struever*, ed. Joseph Marino and Melinda W. Schlitt, Rochester, N. Y. 2001, 49–65 at 52.

53 VON BREOW, *Das Vermächtnis des Nikolaus von Kues* (see above n. 6) 56: »Fac igitur, ut mortifices propriam voluntatem et in te vivat voluntas Christi victoris et eius legati, scilicet patris religionis, secundum voluntatem Christi in tibi praelato movearis et ad cuncta sine omni retinentia quasi iumentum dirigaris.« On Cusanus' idea of legation for Christ, see THOMAS M. IZBICKI, *Cusanus Preaches Reform: The Visitation of St. Simeon, Trier, 1443, and the Legation Topos in His Sermons*, in: *Renovatio et unitas – Nikolaus von Kues als Reformer* (see above n. 2) 105–116.

54 *Sermo CCXCIII*: h XIX, n. 37, lin. 1–9: »Et postea praedictus iuvenis vixit valde devote, ferventer et laudabiliter per tres menses vel circa, ita quod omnibus gratus erat.

Nicholas of Cusa would live little more than a year after his visit to Monte Oliveto. He died at Todi on August 11, 1464 while journeying to Ancona in support of Pius II's proposed crusade against the Turks.⁵⁵ Thus the sermon and the letter may be considered the cardinal's last words about the monastic life, with its perils and its promise of spiritual together with intellectual rewards.

Et postea acerbissima infirmitate flagellatus fuit et quievit in beato fine ac valde devote obiit. Prius cum quadam gloriosa visione consolatus fuit et illam suo patri spirituali manifestavit et horam sui exitus praedixit. Et sic gloriose in caelis ivit. De quo laus Deo in saecula saeculorum. Amen. «

55 MEUTHEN, Nicholas of Cusa (see above n. 1) 138–139.