

ABSTRACT

“SS. Francis and Dominic in Renaissance Spain”

Adam G Beaver (Department of History, Harvard University)
abeaver@fas.harvard.edu

Recent research into popular piety in early modern Spain has revealed rather divergent popular attitudes toward the Franciscans and Dominicans. While the laity embraced the Friars Minor, structuring their devotional lives around local Franciscan houses at the expense of their own parishes, they remained aloof from the Friars Preachers, whom they regarded suspiciously as an order of wealthy university intellectuals.¹ Testaments have proven to be one of the clearest indexes of this unequal response: in sixteenth-century Granada, approximately 70% of all testators who requested burial in a habit opted for that of the Franciscans, while only 4% chose the Dominicans.²

This discrepancy in popular views of the mendicant orders is surprising in Spain, the birthplace of S. Dominic. The many possible explanations for this phenomenon might include the numerical superiority of the Franciscan presence in Spain, the Franciscans' long tradition of engagement with vernacular and commercial culture, and the successful propagation of the idealistic Observant reform. Yet there may be another, less appreciated, reason for the laity's preferences: the respective biographies of Francis and Dominic circulating in late medieval and Renaissance Spain. The Dominic who appeared in premodern sources was often less charismatic and less powerful an intercessor than Francis, who was regularly depicted in art and literature as an *alter Christus*. As Barbara Rosenwein and Lester Little have argued, “The Franciscans would have the great advantage of always having before them the immediate, personal example of their Christ-like founder,” while the Dominicans “in the second generation had practically to reinvent the legend of their founder before all memory of him had faded.”³

This paper will examine and compare a variety of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Spanish *vitae* of Francis and Dominic in an attempt to discern the relationship between their images and their orders' relative success.

¹ David Coleman, *Creating Christian Granada: Society & Religious Culture in an Old-World Frontier City, 1492–1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 99.

² Amalia García Pedraza, *Actitudes ante la muerte en la Granada del siglo XVI: Los moriscos que quisieron salvarse*, 2 vols. (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2002), II: 564–565.

³ Barbara Rosenwein & Lester K. Little, “Social Meaning in the Monastic and Mendicant Spiritualities,” *Past and Present* 63 (May 1974): 21.