

Douceline de Digne. First Beguine of Provence

A unique case in the world of the Beguines—and perhaps in medieval hagiography more broadly—we know of Douceline de Digne (1214–1274) thanks to the *Vida* (Life) composed in Occitan in 1279 by her disciple, Philippine de Porcellet. This was an unprecedented and bold act for the time: a woman writing the *Vita* of another woman.

Even more striking is the fact that the approval of the final text of the *Vida* was a collective process: "*We also know that an initial version of the Vida proposed by Philippine de Porcellet—in 1279, according to Albanès—was subjected to the rigorous scrutiny of the Beguine community at Roubaud. During this first reading, each member offered her opinion on what should or should not be included. Ultimately, however, the final word rested with Douceline's confessor, the Franciscan Josselin—Guardian of the Friars Minor convent in Marseille and later Bishop of Orange in 1272*" (Fritsch, p. 105).

The *Vida de la beneaurada sancta Douceline* is the only text that tells us about Douceline, her personality, her inner life, and her spiritual journey.

"*Experts believe this hagiography was written shortly after the Saint's death*" (Albanès, p. 37), which occurred in 1274, and that it was composed in Occitan to make it accessible to the "daughters," thereby keeping alive the memory of their holy mother, her virtues, her words, and her miracles.

It is worth noting, however, that the Beguines consistently used their local vernacular in all their writings.

Since 1315, this manuscript -Ms 13503- has been housed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. "*One of the distinctive features of this document is the language used. Having become a tool for study among all specialists of the Provençal language, it stands as the definitive linguistic reference work.*" (Duthois Bertrand, p. 7)

Meticulous academic research by Abbé J.H. Albanès established that *La Vida de la beneaurada sancta Douceline* was written by Philippine de Porcellet. His efforts to translate the text into French in 1879 prompted him, first and foremost, to verify its authorship. Rigorous examination clearly revealed that the author had to be one of the "daughters" [of the Beguine community] and that this person was Philippine.

Albanès's French translation, *La Vie de Sainte Douceline*—along with his extensively documented introductory study—was brought back to light by Claude Louis-Combet and published in 2020 in the Atopia series, featuring a preface by Combet himself and an afterword by Ernest Renan.

Focus on Philippine

Philippine de Porcellet, Lady of Artignosc, hailed from one of Provence's most established families. She had a sister who was abbess at Mollégès.

Married to Fouques de Pontèves, she bore three daughters but was soon widowed; shortly thereafter, she joined the Roubaud community, becoming a "daughter" to Douceline, the term the Saint used for her disciples.

While Douceline devoted herself to charity and caring for the sick—earning a reputation as a healer—Philippine organized and managed the Institution aided by her ability to read, write, and handle accounts. Coming from a wealthy and powerful family, she also provided for the Institute's material needs.

"Douceline called her her vicar and, out of humility, her prioress" (Fritsch, p. 126), and held her in special affection. She accompanied Douceline on the journey to found a second Roubaud house in Marseille, a house that would eventually close in 1414.

After the Saint's death, the Beguines chose Philippine to lead the institute, as she had previously served as vicar, a role Douceline herself had designated for her during her lifetime.

"Let no one be surprised that she was elected prioress... Philippine was a woman of intellect, yet this in no way prevented her from being a woman of heart; she had given her companions ample proof of this. She had shown herself to be truly both" (Fritsch, *ibid.*, p. 126).

Douceline: Nomen est omen

"Nomen est omen" (the name is an omen), so the Latins said, referring to the portent a name holds for a person's life.

This was certainly the case for Douceline. *"A note of quiet, transparent sweetness runs through the entire length of her story and permeates her prayer; the soliloquies of her soul, her visions, the mystical flights of her spirit, and the airy lightness of her body during moments of levitation,"* writes Claude Louis-Combet (p. 6), noting the "mellifluence" (sweetness) of her name.

Levitation was a visible phenomenon that sometimes occurred during the Saint's ecstasies, as she would rise a few centimeters off the ground. Skeptics sometimes subjected her to morbid and even cruel forms of curiosity. *"Douceline became a 'miracle-saint' and, to some extent, a source of amusement for a crude and tactless*

world. All manner of tests followed to verify the authenticity of her ecstasies” (Duthois Bertrand, p. 19).

One startling episode suffices as proof: *“Charles of Anjou was among the curious. He conducted an experiment that clearly reveals his brutality: he ordered a large mass of lead to be melted down and poured onto her bare feet in his presence. The Saint felt nothing at the time, but once she returned to her senses, she suffered terrible pain”* (de Porcellet, p. 247).

Conversely, the Saint herself refused to expose her mystical inner life or to make these manifestations public. Silence and discretion, along with an aversion to ostentatious displays of her ecstatic moments, were firm cornerstones of her spirituality.

She possessed gentleness and patience, certainly, but also firmness and determination in establishing the Beguines project; this was directly inspired by a vision in which three women appeared to her, placed the cloaks they were wearing upon her head, and said, *"We belong to the order that pleases God; take this and follow us"* before vanishing.

"And the holy mother wished to be called a Beguine out of love for the Virgin Mary, her model, for she said that Our Lady was the first Beguine—and we believe she knew this through a revelation from God our Lord" (de Porcellet, p. 234).

This divinely inspired beginning, of which she never harbored any doubt, marked the start of the Beguines' presence in Provence. Douceline founded two Beguines communities, for which she herself proposed the Rule, suggested to her by her brother Hugues. She named them *Maisons Roubaud* after the local river, quickly attracting a large number of women, especially widows, from Provençal bourgeois and aristocratic families.

"Saint Douceline's institute was composed of pious individuals who wished to live apart from the world, leading a humble and mortified life, and to sanctify themselves together through acts of charity and meditation on Our Lord's Passion. It comprised three types of people: 1. children being raised in virtue; 2. older young women who renounced worldly life to embrace the house's rule; and 3. women who had been married and retired there after becoming widows." "There were also attendants responsible both for serving the community and for personally attending to its members" (Albanès, 82-83)

"The Ladies of Roubaud were not subject to enclosure and could live outside the community. They retained ownership and administration of their own assets, leading a life of moderate poverty. They had no church of their own, did not chant the Divine Office, and took vows only of chastity and obedience" (Duthois Bertrand, p. 15)

Douceline, for her part, was very demanding of herself; she had taken the three classic perpetual monastic vows -poverty, chastity, and obedience- in the presence of her brother rather than the bishop, and she deeply cherished the values of humility, simplicity, and compassion for the sick, following in the footsteps of her father, her brother Hugues of Digne, and the "Poverello" Francis of Assisi.

Douceline showed a marked inclination toward the bodies of the suffering sick, whom she would "*touch, tend, and soothe*" (Duthois Bertrand, p.17) and heal. Miracles occurred while she was still alive, and her fame spread. Several are recounted in the *Vida*; the most notable was the miracle performed for Béatrice of Provence, heiress to Raymond-Berengar V and wife of Charles of Anjou. Charles summoned Douceline to his wife's bedside during a difficult labor. The successful birth, accompanied by the saint's prayers, was deemed a miracle. Thanks to this, Douceline enjoyed special protection; she became godmother to the couple's daughter, an advisor to the House of Anjou, and a highly esteemed figure among the barons of Provence.

Carozzi's study, cited by Bertrand Duthois, "*lists 25 miracles; according to the author, these meet specific criteria, such as difficult childbirths, the healing of children, and the healing of Beguines*" (Duthois Bertrand, pp. 18–19). These criteria can certainly be explained by the Saint's, and indeed the entire Beguine community's reserve regarding men.

This is evidenced by the various Rules of the beguinages that have come down to us, which stipulated that only children under the age of seven could stay there, much like the children in the *Maisons Roubaud*.

Carozzi notes that three-quarters of the afflictions involved psychosomatic issues and that Douceline's actions, despite her lack of specific medical expertise, consisted primarily of inducing relaxation and a sense of ease. I would add that she also fostered an atmosphere of loving presence and trust in divine protection.

"*Douceline's body, and specifically her capacity for touch, seems to be the instrument of her miracles*" (Bertrand Duthois, pp. 18–19); yet this touch was born of prayer and a gaze fixed upon the suffering Jesus, a presence she recognized in every person she cared for.

Conversely, Douceline showed no gentleness toward her own body. Driven by a desire to conform herself to the suffering Jesus, she imposed upon herself a lifetime of sleep and food deprivation, as well as the use of a hair shirt and the wearing of rough pigskin. Furthermore, she would wake up every night to weep.

To better understand Douceline's personality, it is important to mention the significance of her family—particularly her brother Hugues—and the Franciscan ideal that deeply shaped their lives.

Family and the Franciscan Ideal

Douceline was born in Digne in 1214. Her father was a wealthy and generous merchant. Her mother died when Douceline was still very young.

Hugues was born in 1205 (d. 1256), making him nine years her senior. He was born around the time of Francis of Assisi's conversion, when the Saint was twenty-five, and became a follower belonging to the first generation of friars.

The bond uniting Douceline and Hugues was incredibly strong, interwoven with affection and Franciscan ideals. In his younger sister, Hugues found "*a kindred spirit, open to all his spiritual daring... he literally took possession of his sister. He held all the advantages of seniority in age and knowledge, as well as a captivating way with words and a physical presence marked by both serene strength and irresistible passion. Together, they formed a pair of rare beauty, driven by a religious fervor that translated into action, going far beyond mere depth of feeling*" (Louis-Combet, pp. 10–11).

"Hugues, who was preparing—without conscious ambition—to assume a prominent role in the Order of Friars Minor, found in his sister his female counterpart: a shadow-self capable of surpassing him in self-sacrifice, true humility, and the capacity for loving silence and spiritual communion." "As the years went by, he increasingly discovered in her what Saint Francis had perceived in Saint Clare: his own image in feminine form—his open, self-giving, and surrendered self" (Louis-Combet, p. 11).

To grasp, at least to some extent, the charismatic power of Hugues, it is worth recalling that his sermon on justice—delivered at Hyères before Louis IX (Saint Louis) upon the king's return from the Seventh Crusade—converted the monarch, who remained a penitent for the rest of his life. Louis IX himself was responsible for founding the *Grand Béguinage* in Paris, which enjoyed royal protection until its closure in 1471.

Her unconditional admiration for her brother went hand in hand with a general distrust of other men and a radical intolerance toward her fellow sisters who deviated from this rule.

Douceline's Franciscan spirituality constantly emerges in the *Vida*, and references to Saint Francis are numerous. Her virtues appear to be those enumerated by the Saint in Bonaventure's *Leggenda Maggiore* (Major Legend): humility, obedience, poverty, austerity, piety and innocence, charity and service to the sick, steadfastness in contemplation, understanding of the Scriptures, and the spirit of prophecy;

furthermore, they shared a love for all creatures and a commitment to placing the poor at the center of their lives.

Douceline and Hugues were also drawn to the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore. Hugues owned all of his works, and his sermons thundered with the terrors and hopes of the new Apocalypse.

"Predating the radiant presence of the Poor Man of Assisi, the figure of Joachim of Fiore—the visionary from Calabria, at once commanding and enigmatic—captivated the minds of Hugues and Douceline. A Benedictine monk living in the twelfth century, Joachim deciphered, within his reading of the Bible, the announcement of a new era—both spiritual and historical—that would usher in the reign of the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament had brought humanity the law of the Father. With the Gospel and the books of the New Testament, the law of the Son had taken hold... There remained the advent of faith in the Holy Spirit, of which Joachim was the prophet" (Louis-Combet, pp. 13–14).

As if to seal their profound and enduring bond, in 1275 Douceline's body was laid beside her brother's in the Church of the Friars Minor in Marseille, a building later demolished in 1524. And today? *"We may surmise that the bones gathered here, and subsequently transferred to the Major Church (known today as the Vieille Majeure), included those of Douceline and her brother"* (Fritsch, p. 117).

In conclusion

Douceline was a Beguine who chose to make a perpetual vow of chastity, poverty, and obedience before her brother rather than the Bishop. *"She never belonged to any religious order and always lived in the secular world"* (Albanès, p. 81), even though she had stayed at the Poor Clares' convent in Digne while her brother was traveling to Naples. She thus adopted a lay lifestyle that was well-known in Northern Europe, though not in Provence.

It was thanks to her that the Beguines emerged in Provence, also known as the *Dames de Roubeau* due to their social background. The Beguines of the two Roubaud communities (Hyères and Marseille) were permitted to retain their personal assets, thereby helping to support the Beguine community. Enclosure was not required by their Rule; they *"could leave the institution and even live outside it"* (Albanès, p. 83). They were city dwellers, fully integrated into the society of the time. Their attire was secular, modest, and dark-colored, featuring a linen or white cloth head-covering known as a *béguin*, a term that has survived in the French vernacular.

More adept at ecstasy than at writing, Douceline shared an intense bond with trees, birds, and flowers from her earliest childhood.

A prolific miracle-worker, she performed healings that brought her renown even among influential figures, most notably the Counts of Provence. Prone to ecstasies and levitations, experiences she refused to display publicly, she sometimes became the object of morbid curiosity.

She died at the Marseille Beguine community, surrounded by her fellow Beguines, Franciscan friars, and the Sisters of Sion. Crowds of people from Marseille flocked to her, recognizing that she already possessed the aura of a saint.

Thanks to the *Mémoires d'Elles* association (2019) and the more recent *Amis des Béguines de Provence* (2026), Douceline and the Provençal Beguines are re-emerging from historical memory with renewed vitality.

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November 2026

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The English language of this text has generously been reviewed by Cathy Gaspard (snow_chaty@yahoo.com). I am very grateful to her.

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