This summer, I received a generous grant from the Indiana University Librarians Association to support travel to attend The World of St. Francis of Assisi Conference in Siena, Italy. This interdisciplinary conference brought together scholars from around the world who spoke on topics that consider the legacy of Francis of Assisi and the Franciscans from the perspective of such fields as history, art history, literature, English, theology, philosophy, Church history, and environmental studies.

At the conference, I presented my paper, “The Female Franciscan Body as Image,” which expands upon themes explored in my recently completed doctoral dissertation, “The Presentation of Incorruptibility: The Praesentia of the Female Saint.” The conference paper specifically analyzes the presentation and reception of the relics of Clarissan nuns through the lens of Franciscan iconography.

Hagiographic sources on the stigmatization of St. Francis assert that when the wounds were impressed onto his body, Francis was transformed into an image of the crucified Christ. Or, as St. Bonaventure would state, “the angelic man Francis came down from the mountain, bearing on him the effigy of the crucified, not fashioned by craftsmen’s hand in stone or wood, but scored on the parts of his body by the finger of the living God.”

The transformation of the body of a holy person into an image is also echoed in the stories surrounding early modern Clarissan nuns and female Franciscan tertiaries. Previous scholarship on sacred images in the lives of women has emphasized the belief that response itself could be gendered, i.e. that the female body could be altered by exposure to images. For instance, practices of dissection and embalming by evisceration in late medieval and early modern Italy, particularly within convents, reveal cases in which iconic objects are apparently found within the bodies of female religious. In this context, the female (considered to be passive) was positioned as the material on which an image was imprinted. My paper specifically examines the transformation of the female holy body into an image in the Franciscan tradition. I argue that female Franciscans followed Francis’ precedent to take Christ into their bodies. Like their spiritual forbears, these holy women were impressed as images of Christ.

My conference paper and the themes explored throughout also form the basis of an in-progress book project, tentatively titled, *Wax Mystics: Impressing the Female Relic Body*. The project investigates the iconographic and material vocabulary shared between the female relic (“incorruptible”) body and the tradition of rendering the entire body or its parts in wax in both sacred and secular contexts. The manuscript will undertake an examination of the relic body and its connections to the iconography and materiality of wax in early modern visual culture.

While in Italy, I was also able to visit several important sites for this research, including the town of Orta San Giulio. Orta features one of the Sacri Monti (Sacred Mountains) of Piedmont and Lombardy, a series of chapels and architectural features created in northern Italy in the early modern period (primarily 16th-17th centuries). These sites recreate Biblical narratives as polychrome three-dimensional *tableaux vivants*, or living pictures, with a painted backdrop in a series of chapels that rest upon a simulated topography. The *sacri monti* enable devotees (then
and today) to walk amongst and interact with clothed life-size polychrome figures made of wood, wax, or terracotta, and embellished with real hair and glass eyes. The *sacri monti* provide an important lens through which to examine how sacred sites utilized narrative to encourage a physical and temporal pilgrimage through a holy person’s life.