

A CLERICAL COLLABORATION:
THE ROOTS OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *ANNUS DOMINI*

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For the last two decades, Christina Rossetti's devotional prose has received due if somewhat belated critical attention, both as a window into her religious poetry and as work important in its own right. The least discussed of these volumes is the first, *Annus Domini: A Prayer for Each Day of the Year, Founded on a Text of Holy Scripture*. This collection of 366 brief prayers is usually considered a straightforward and spontaneous response to Rossetti's debilitating, long-term struggle with Graves' disease, written during a period which Mary Arseneau aptly characterizes as "a hinge between two distinct portions of Rossetti's career" ("Our Self-Undoing" 5). However, if *Annus Domini* originated as a simple outpouring of gratitude to God for her recovery, why use this form? Why collects rather than a literary genre, or less structured prayers, or the daily meditations and "harmonies" Rossetti later created? To answer, we must understand the role of her friend Richard F. Littledale in providing much of the impetus for the project. The design of *Annus Domini* arose not in an unmediated expression of thanksgiving, but instead began in a deliberate collaboration between Rossetti and Littledale: an agreement that she would write collects to be included in his manual, *The Priest's Prayer Book*. Several of Rossetti's prayers (I find eighteen) appear uncredited in that book's fifth edition.¹ Finding them printed anonymously in Littledale's book accounts for the particular form Rossetti's prayers follow, allows us better to understand the nature of her relationship with Littledale, and shines an additional light on the process of her evolution into an essentially religious writer.

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Critical discussions of *Annus Domini* concur with the view expressed in Jan Marsh's biography, *Christina Rossetti: A Life*. Marsh describes *Annus Domini* as Rossetti's response to God in thanksgiving for recovery from her life-threatening bout with thyroid disease, "perhaps the outcome of a sacred obligation self-imposed during her illness" (413). David Kent and P.G. Stan-