Greyfriars Review, Vol. 7, No. 2

Women's Monasticism in the 12th and 13th Centuries

Jean Leclercq

"Il monachesimo femminile nei secoli XII e XIII"
Movimento Religioso Femminile e Francescanesimo nel Secolo XIII
Assisi 1980: 63-99
Translated by Edward Hagman, O.F.M.Cap.

1. Brief History and Classification

This paper covers a huge amount of material, since it deals with all forms of women's monasticism over a span of two centuries, except for the Franciscans, which are dealt with elsewhere. The subject is a very complicated one. For each period we must first consider the influence of the past. Next we must consider the new social, economic, political, cultural and ecclesiological realities that play a part in the development of women's monasticism. Finally there are the saints with their individual intuitions and charisms, who exercise an unpredictable influence on the development of the various forms of life. How to bring some order into such a rich assortment of material?

In the first place, it seems useful to sketch the broad outlines of women's monasticism and its evolution. In classifying its various expressions, we shall try to avoid imposing categories on the data from outside, and instead use categories from the data themselves. We shall see that certain perennial problems arise and continue to exist. Their solutions, limited though they are, do involve a number of common elements. Such limits are inherent in human nature, especially within the context of a specific culture, in this case that of the medieval West.[1]

---

[1] In a summary presentation such as this, I must limit myself to those studies that contain explicit references to data and texts. A particular source will be indicated only when it is explicitly cited in the text. The following works must suffice for a general bibliography: B. M. Bolton, "Mulieres sanctae," in *Women in Medieval Society*, S. Mosher Stuart, ed., University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976, 141-58; *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione (DIP)*, G. Pelliccia and G. Rocca, eds., 5 volumes published, Rome 1974-78; M. de Fontette, *Les religieuses à l'âge classique du droit canon. Recherches sur les structures juridiques des branches féminines des ordres*, Paris 1967; G. le Bras, *Institutions ecclésiastiques de la Chrétienté médiévale* (Fliche et Martin, XII), Paris 1964; R. Metz, *La consécration des vierges dans l'Eglise romaine. Etude d'histoire de la liturgie*, Strasbourg 1949; J. Rambaud-Buhot,

a) The Antecedents

The state of women's monasticism in the twelfth century is partly the result of what went before and partly a reaction to it. To understand women's monasticism we must first call to mind its antecedents. The task requires a bit of finesse, since an evolution so long and varied is difficult to summarize. Development assumed many shapes, not only from one age to the next, but even within the same period, depending on political, economic, social and cultural realities in a given country or region.

Monasteries of women had existed in the West since antiquity. Those who lived there drew their inspiration from texts and rules written for monks or nuns by Jerome, Augustine, Cassian, Caesarius of Arles, Columban and others.[2] The Rule of St. Benedict seems to have been unknown. It is first mentioned in the seventh century and we come across it more frequently in the eighth.[3] Besides prayer, the nuns' major service to the church consisted in the education of young girls, some of whom, though not all, would remain in the monastery. Thus education was the principal way in which the nuns contributed to the evangelization of England and the continent.

Prior to the eleventh century, monasteries of women were few in number, particularly in southern Europe, and few in members as well. Their growth and spread coincided with the growth of the aristocracy—Merovingian, Carolingian, and then feudal. Such monasteries were of three types. Some were neither connected with monasteries of men nor located near them. Others were part of a so-called double monastery. This was made up of of a community of men and a community of women, both under the authority of a single abbot or abbess. Lastly were those monasteries that might be called twins. In this case, communities of monks and nuns were located near each other, but with no dependence either way

Most monasteries of whatever category were familial, that is, founded by a family to which they belonged. The family would choose the abbess of the monastery and send its daughters there to be educated until they were old enough for marriage. To the same monastery were permanently consigned

---

"Le statut des moniales chez les Pères d l'Eglise, dans les règles monastiques et les collections canoniques jusqu'au XIIe siècle," in *Sainte-Faremoutiers*, Paris 1956; P. Schmitz, *Histoire de l'ordre de Saint Benoît*, VII, Maredsous 1956: "Les moniales."

[2]J. Rambaud-Buhot, "Le statut des moniales chez les Pères d l'Eglise, dans les Règles monastiques, et les collections canoniques jusqu'au XIIe siècle," 149-74.

[3]G. Lunardi, s.v. "Benedettine," in *Dizionario degli Istituti de Perfezione* (hereafter *DIP*) I (1974) 1222-48. See also below, Part 2, Section A.

those daughters who, for one reason or another, could not be married off. This also included widows.[4] The family would endow either the monastery as such or each individual nun.

This general classification includes, in turn, three categories of *nonnae*.[5] Nuns in the strict sense lived a rigorous life, like the monks, according to an approved rule. Then there were canonesses who, like the canons, led a less strict form of common life. These retained possession of their patrimonial goods. Finally there were recluses, who lived alone in a cell or hermitage located alongside a chapel or monastery or somewhere in the general vicinity.

With some differences, depending on the period and country, this was the general situation until the eleventh century. Troubles were a constant threat—Viking, Hungarian and Saracen invasions, along with other wars and calamities that did not favor either strict observance or material prosperity. Nevertheless, the second half of the eleventh century witnessed a renewal, beginning with the foundation of the abbey of Marcigny by St. Hugh of Cluny. It seems that this monastery, if not reserved to members of the upper nobility, at least consisted mostly of these. At any rate, certain abuses that had been introduced during the previous era were avoided. The forms of prayer, fasting and abstinence, and other customs of Cluny were adopted. The abbot of Cluny, either personally or through his delegate, received the profession of the nuns and kept watch over their observance. Efforts were made to accept only those who showed positive signs of a vocation. Separation from the world was reinforced and strict enclosure was imposed.

b) The Twelfth Century

The twelfth century saw a great flowering of women's monasticism. This outburst of fervor was already foreshadowed by the spontaneous reforms of the tenth century, Cluny and the great abbeys of the eleventh century, and finally the Gregorian reform. Now it also expressed itself in the area of women's monasticism. We can discern a threefold phenomenon—observance

---

[4] J. Leclercq, s.v. "Nobilità," to be published in *DIP*.

[5] The Latin word *nonna* is simply the feminine form of *nonnus*, which is the term applied to monks in the Rule of St. Benedict (63, 12) and in other ancient and medieval documents. It means "nun." Texts may be found in *Novum glossarium mediae latinitatis*. M-N, ed. Fr. Blatt, Copenhagen 1969, 1366-67. This clarification is necessary so as to avoid taking the term to mean "nurse," as does C. Baker, *Les contemplatives, des femmes entre elles*, Paris 1979, 286. *Nonna* continues to be a synonym for *monialis*, as in St. Bernard, *Ep. 114,, 3*, in *S. Bernardi Opera*, VII, Rome 1974, 299, 4: "Nonna et sanctimonialis...."

was stabilized, recruitment was broadened, and institutions and traditions were diversified.

With the stabilization of observance came a greater balance in relationships with monasteries of men. Efforts were made to locate the monasteries of women nearby and to seek help from the men, but without becoming dependent upon them. There was also a greater balance in the area of austerity. For example, in most cases the abbess and nuns were not prohibited by the enclosure from going out in cases of necessity. They could even undertake long journeys—St. Hildegarde of Bingen preached in the public squares. The liberalizing of recruitment practices has sometimes been characterized as a "democratization." It meant that—at least in some monasteries—candidates were no longer excluded if they did not belong to the nobility or could not provide a dowry. Lastly, some already existing monasteries were joined to the new orders that had arisen at the end of the eleventh century, while other new monasteries were founded by these same orders. Thus emerged what we might call the new women's monasticism of the twelfth century. We can distinguish two categories of orders or institutes. The first were those which from the very beginning made special provision for nuns. Sometimes these were even accorded the first place. Then there were those orders that little by little began to accept nuns, sometimes reluctantly and not without resistance.

Chronologically speaking, the first and most original institute belonging to the former group was founded by Robert of Arbrissel at Fontevrault, France. His monastery was not only double but multiple. It included—in different buildings—communities of virgins, widows, converted prostitutes, lepers and nuns. The entire complex was governed by an abbess, preferably a widow, since it was believed that widows were more experienced than other women in administrative matters. Poverty and separation from the world were rigorously observed. The enclosure, which was strict, required grilles—and not only in those places where they had traditionally been used for administration of the sacraments. The nuns' faces were concealed behind lowered veils.[6] Since Robert had connections with Aquitaine and thus with Spain, we might speculate whether that was where he got the idea of separating women and men, as is the practice in Islam. His institute spread rapidly throughout France and England.[7]

---

[6]J. Daoust, s.v. "Fontevrault," in *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie ecclésiastiques* XVII (1971) 961.

[7]Ibid., 962.

The second of these new institutes, also very original, was the Congregation of the Paraclete.[8] Around 1129 the community of nuns headed by Heloise came to join Peter Abelard at the monastery he had founded under this name. Its foundation was confirmed by the bishop of Troyes and Pope Innocent II in 1131. On the whole, the Rule of St. Benedict had proven satisfactory for nuns, save for some textual changes adapting it to women.[9] But now for the first time it was sharply criticized by Heloise, who maintained that women could not observe it. In fact the things she denounced as incompatible were a few minor observances related to the habit and certain details in the hymns of the divine office. For both men and women the Rule retained its value as a spiritual program.

Nevertheless, Abelard responded to Heloise's wish by drawing up a new document which gave the community a complicated structure very different from that of traditional women's monasticism. He preferred to call the superior deaconess rather than abbess. Near the nuns' monastery there was always to be a monastery of monks, whose priests would serve as chaplains and whose laybrothers would take care of the heavier work. Supreme authority over the entire complex rested in the hands of the abbot, but he was to serve the nuns and not dominate them. Abelard also composed a new book of hymns and a history of women's monastic life in the form of letters. Finally he proposed a program of studies for nuns—a kind of *ratio studiorum* which drew much of its inspiration from St. Jerome. The Congregation of the Paraclete established five foundations during Heloise's lifetime. It lasted until 1793.

In 1131, the same year in which the Congregation of the Paraclete became an abbey, seven young women came together at Sempringham, in the diocese of Lincoln, under the direction of St. Gilbert.[10] In addition to the nuns, there were laysisters to serve them, laybrothers to work in the fields, as well as canons regular. The Gilbertines generally lived in double monasteries, the women following the Rule of St. Benedict and the men that of St. Augustine. The congregation grew and at its peak in the twelfth century counted a dozen communities in the British Isles. For a time Gilbert considered affiliation with the Cistercians, but the latter, in their general chapter of 1147, refused to assume the government of a community of nuns. We see here another example

---

[8]D.E. Luscombe, *Peter Abelard*, London 1979, 18-28; J. Leclercq, "*Ad ipsam Christi philosophiam.* Le témoignage monastique d'Abélard," in *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 46 (1970) 161-81.

[9]This is the case dealt with in the text edited by A. Linage-Conde, *Una regla monastica Riojana femenina del siglo X. El "Libellus a Regula S. Benedicti subtractus,"* Salamanca 1973.

[10]D. Knowles, s.v. "Gilbertini e Gilbertine," in *DIP* IV (1977) 1178-82.

of the reserve shown by some twelfth-century men's orders toward nuns—a fact that did not prevent them from accepting such responsibility later. Thus a new series of institutes, initially founded as orders of women, were later joined to institutes of men.

The first example of this long process of assimilation is found in the Cistercian Order.[11] From the beginning certain monasteries of nuns had what we might call a privileged relationship with the Cistercians. However, it would take nearly a hundred years of pleading on the part of the nuns and resistance on the part of the monks before true union was achieved. In 1120 the abbot of Cîteaux was St. Stephen Harding, known as the "third superior and reorganizer."[12] Around that time he founded—in his own name and not as representative of the order—a monastery of nuns at Tart. Following his wishes, the nuns lived there according to the Charter of Charity and the norms of the order. Within 30 years there were 18 daughter houses which were enough to make up a congregation in the proper sense.

Similarly, Morimond in 1128, and a few years later Hugh de Pontigny, founded communities of nuns. St. Bernard could not remain indifferent to such developments. Between 1115 and 1132, in conjunction with the abbots of Pontigny, Clairvaux, Morimond and Fontenay, he promulgated some statutes for the monastery of nuns at Jully. William of Saint-Thierry tells us that the wives of those among Bernard's 30 companions who had been married entered Jully. In 1170 Alexander III referred to it as the *institutio piae memoriae Bernardi.*[13]

Another method of permitting women to participate more fully in Cistercian life was known as affiliation. An example of this occurred in 1147 when the entire Congregation of Obazine was received into the order. The general chapter allowed Stephen of Obazine to remain abbot of the community of nuns located near his abbey, but with no commitment on the part of the order. Similarly, in 1188 the order accepted the abbey of nuns of Las Huelgas. Along with its foundations and the monasteries that soon associated themselves with it, it was organized into an order or congregation. Its first general chapter of abbesses was held in 1189, presided over by the abbot of Cîteaux in the

---

[11] M. Connor, "The First Cistercian Nuns and Renewal Today," in *Cistercian Studies* 5 (1970) 131-54.

[12] J. Leclercq, "A Sociological Approach to the History of a Religious Order," in *The Cistercian Spirit*, Spencer 1970, 136-39.

[13] J. Leclercq, "Études sur saint Bernard et le texte de ses écrits," in *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis* 9, 1-2, (1953) 192-94.

presence of many abbots of the same order. But two years later the general chapter refused to compel the Spanish abbesses to take part in the chapter of Las Huelgas. It was not until the end of the century—1199 to be exact—that the abbot of Cîteaux and Innocent III officially made Las Huelgas an affiliate of Tart, with its own general chapter and its abbess entrusted with visitation of the daughter houses. Only in the thirteenth century did the Cistercian general chapter begin to legislate formally for the monasteries of nuns. Thus they were recognized as part of the order.[14]

The Carthusians were another new institute that apparently originated around the middle of the twelfth century.[15] The nuns of Prébayon in Provence adopted the liturgical books of Chartreuse and the constitutions drawn up by Guido I (the Elder). They may also have taken certain elements from the Rule of St. Caesarius or from the customs of Cluny. But unlike the other orders that were strongly cenobitic, these nuns provided for an element of solitude, which resulted in their being characterized as semi-eremitic. Economic necessity constrained them to retain common life. They lacked the necessary means to erect dwellings like those of the Carthusians, and so they adapted themselves to the buildings they had. What in reality was a response to financial considerations, they and the Carthusians later elevated to the level of theory and a spiritual program.

Among the founders of new orders of canons regular was St. Norbert of Xanten, whose preaching around the year 1120 aroused the enthusiasm of women in the region of Valenciennes. These women wished to live according to his spirit as followers of the canons of Prémontré. Thus it happened that a number of double monasteries were soon founded.[16] But due to practical difficulties the general chapter of 1137 decided to separate the monasteries of men and women. The popes, however, insisted otherwise. In spite of unfavorable circumstances, these women continued to increase in numbers, and by the middle of the twelfth century they counted more than a thousand members. Nevertheless, in 1198 Innocent III confirmed the decision of the general chapter not to accept sisters. Yet in spite of such obstacles they continued to exist as a parallel branch of the order, but without being part of it.[17]

---

[14] J. M. Canivez, *Statuta Capitulorum Generalium Ordinis Cisterciensis*, VIII, Louvain 1941, *Indices*, 339-40. In the thirteenth century, 39 statues from 24 general chapters appear with the rubric: *Moniales. 5. Rebelles aut alias culpabiles*, 340.

[15] A Carthusian Nun, s.v. "Certosine," in *DIP* II (1975) 773-75.

[16] F. Petit, *La réforme des prêtres au moyen âge. Pauvreté et vie commune*, Paris 1968, 92-98.

[17] B. M. Bolton, *Mulieres sanctae*, 142.

The canons of the Second Order of Prémontré were only one of many examples of women's monastic institutes that, beginning in the twelfth century, sprang up around monasteries of canons regular or were joined with them, sometimes as part of a double monastery. Because of their similarity to the canons regular they were called canonesses regular. Although they followed the Rule of St. Augustine, their customs and observances were generally no different from those of women's communities that originated in traditional monasticism, or from the twelfth-century communities that were affiliated to the new monastic orders of men.

We may summarize by saying that this century maintained continuity with the past and gave women's monasticism a stable and relatively homogeneous form that was to be preserved. Some of its observances would gradually become stricter, thanks to an increase in the number and rigidity of the laws that were passed. This legislation, however, failed to remedy certain abuses. These abuses in turn produced aberrations that persisted and sometimes became worse. The twelfth century was both a moment of equilibrium and one of expansion.

c) The Thirteenth Century

The thirteenth century's only noteworthy addition to traditional monasticism as it had been received from the past and more or less revitalized during the twelfth century, was an overall lessening of recruitment, even among the nobility. Due in part to lack of money, which could have provided support for more nuns, many communities—perhaps even the majority—consisted of just a few members, sometimes only two or three. Some monasteries ceased to exist entirely. New foundations were exceptional. Although it is wrong to speak of general decay, women's monasticism was showing signs of aging, and nothing could be done, either by the men's monasteries or by the Holy See, to remedy the situation.

Greater rigor existed in the new monasteries founded during the twelfth century or in those associated with the new orders of men. These continued to establish new houses. Communities were kept larger, usually between one and two dozen nuns, depending on the economic situation of the particular monastery. Ties with men's orders were strengthened, and monasteries of nuns lost the relative autonomy they had enjoyed in the past. Conflicts between them and neighboring monasteries of men were not unusual.

It is hard to list general characteristics, so varied were the circumstances. For this reason we are especially grateful to have a number of scholarly monographs. One such work by Catherine F. Boyd is devoted to the Cister-

cian monastery of Rifreddo in Saluzzo.[18] Statistics tell us that over the years this monastery varied between 12 and 24 members, the average being 20. We also see conflicts between the nuns and the Cistercian monks of the neighboring abbey of Staffarda. These conflicts revolved mostly around the chaplain and laybrothers that the abbot was supposed to send to live at Rifreddo. Very often the popes would take the side of the nuns in these matters. Similar problems arose with the Carthusians. The local superior of the nuns found her power increasingly reduced in favor of either the prior of the nearby men's monastery, his vicar delegate for the nuns, or the visitor assigned them by the general chapter.

Among the new orders founded in the thirteenth century we shall pass over the Poor Clares since they are the subject of other presentations at this assembly. It was during this same century that the Carmelites abandoned their eremitic, monastic and contemplative origins for a new form of life, that of mendicant friars dedicated to the apostolic life. They did not have any particular ties to communities of nuns. We find the first mention of *conversae* and *manumissae* in a contract of association with a Carmelite parish at Lucca in 1284.[19] Beginning with the fourteenth century, individual women were received into the order as *conversae* (*beatas* in Spanish; *pinzochere* in Italian). Later, especially in Italy, entire communities requested affiliation.

Dominican nuns were associated with the Friars Preachers from the time of St. Dominic, who founded four monasteries—at Prouille, Toulouse, Madrid and Rome.[20] Their evolution parallels that of other women's institutes. At first different from traditional monasticism, later they were led gradually to adopt its style of life. In the Monastery of Holy Preaching founded at Prouille in 1206, the religious seem originally to have been nuns and "preacheresses." At any rate, they aided the Friars Preachers directly and devoted themselves to education. But like Dominic's other foundations, they too were gradually transformed into cloistered nuns similar to all the others. As far as possible, they observed the Customs of the Dominicans, especially in the area of liturgy. Many of them were converts, either from the Catharist heresy or from a life of immorality. From this point of view their vocation was—more so than in other institutes—one of penance. Their contribution to the activities of the Do-

---

[18]C. E. Boyd, *A Cistercian Nunnery in Medieval Italy. A Story of Rifreddo in Saluzzo, 1220-1300*, Cambridge, Mass. 1943.

[19]J. Smet, *The Carmelites. A History of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, ca. 1200 A.D. until the Council of Trent*, Rome 1975, 103.

[20]L. A. Redigonda, s.v. "Domenicane, monache," in *DIP* III (1976) 780-93.

minican Order came to consist more and more in the fact that they shared in the apostolate of the friars, about which they were kept well informed. We have, for example, the wonderful correspondence consisting of 50 letters (1222-36) between Bl. Jordan of Saxony, master general of the order, and Bl. Diana of Andalò, foundress of the monastery of St. Agnes at Bologna. In this case juridic ties were accompanied by a friendship that was intense, intimate, pure and beautiful.

Yet despite the tremendous creativity shown by the monastic orders in the twelfth century and the new orders in the thirteenth, women's monasticism everywhere was forced to adopt earlier and more traditional forms. And although this monasticism was not more austere—much less more rigid—it was, in fact, more uniform. But precisely at this point a law comes into play, a law that we find at every great moment in the history of spirituality—the Spirit cannot be extinguished. Institutions, it is true, may prevent the Spirit's inexhaustible fruitfulness from manifesting itself in new forms of life. But in that case the Spirit emerges, so to speak, from the Christian soil through unexpected and sometimes apparently unauthorized channels and raises up new forms of life outside the institution. This is what happened in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Two new forms of life arose, one in response to the need for solitude, the other in response to the need for common life. These new forms were for women who desired to consecrate themselves to God but were unable or unwilling—sometimes for economic or social reasons—to enter the traditional institutes of the past.

The need for solitude was accompanied by new developments in the eremetic life. There had always existed female hermits or recluses who lived dependent on a nearby monastery of monks or nuns. But the beginning of the thirteenth century saw an increase in the number of urban recluses. These lived in the heart of the city or in the suburbs, either alone or with one or more companions. They might also live in places where the need for intercession was more greatly felt at city gates, bridges, hospitals, cemeteries. The faithful provided for their material support; their spiritual needs were taken care of by the bishops and clergy. This form of life was extremely widespread and exercised its own deep and distinctive influence. It became the subject of the *Lives* of its saints and the object of praiseworthy Rules. The entire subject has been studied elsewhere.[21]

---

[21] J. Leclercq, *Solitude and Solidarity: the Case of Medieval Recluses*, soon to be published.

There were also religious women who were unable or unwilling to enter one of the existing orders. This gave rise to the movement usually referred to as the Beguines, which arose spontaneously in many parts of Europe.[22] It was indeed a spontaneous generation. "They have recently risen from out of the dust" (de pulvere nuperrime surrexerunt) wrote a certain John de Deo in describing a group of them.[23] They were known in various places as *sorores paenitentiae*, *bizochae*, *pyzocarae*, *mantellatae*, *vestitae*, and other names as well. But they were mostly called Beguines. The origin of the name has given rise to many hypotheses but remains obscure. Be that as it may, these were *mulieres religiosae* who in the second half of the twelfth century began to establish themselves in semi-religious communities in the city. Soon some of them were attracted by the preachers of Catharism, who were only too happy to welcome them and use them for the spread of their own ideas. Since these women were looking for a life of austerity, they sometimes found in Catharism the realization of their desires. Hence we must distinguish, right at the start, these "heretical" Beguines from those who were orthodox and form the subject of this discussion.

The phenomenon was extremely varied. Its expressions ran the gamut, from forms of life similar to traditional or contemporary monasticism, to forms so different that some were more like that of the recluses. The oldest and most explicit historical mention comes from Wallonie, especially the diocese of Liège, between 1170 and 1200. At first many of them lived in their own homes *(in domibus propriis)*, but later they were grouped into quasi-monastic villages called beguinages, and into houses grouped around a church or chapel with the help of some *boni viri*, either clerics or laymen. The existence of such beguinages is attested around the year 1233. Some of these religious women devoted themselves to works of charity such as the care of lepers. All of them set aside ample time for prayer in common, either in the nearby chapel or in the solitude of their house. They were not bound to strict obedience, as were nuns, but they did observe celibacy. They strongly emphasized poverty, especially in the beginning.[24] During the century between 1230 and 1330 they were so widespread that some of the beguinages had hundreds of members. One particular group, with spiritual ties to the Friars Minor,

---

[22]A. Mens, s.v. "Beghine, Begardi, Beghinaggi," in *DIP* I (1974) 1165-80; L.K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*, Ithaca 1978, 128-30.

[23]Du Cange, 579, s.v. *Pyzocarae*, cited by G.G. Meersseman, *Ordo fraternitatis. Confraternite e pietà dei laici nel Medioevo*, in collaboration with G.P. Pacini, Rome, 1977, 375.

[24]Bolton, "Mulieres sanctae," 145.

arose in Provence in the first half of the thirteenth century with the name "Ladies of Rouboud."[25] There were also other pious associations or "companies" that were true religious orders, designated as such and different from the so-called third orders that appeared alongside the first and second orders of Sts. Francis and Dominic.

The Beguine movement has been described in the biography of St. Marie d'Oignies, whose *Life* by the canon regular Jacques de Vitry is a long and idyllic description of this new type of nun. Jacques had lived at Oignies since 1207. Ordained a priest in 1210, he was confessor to Marie, formerly a Beguine and recluse, who died in 1213. Jacques also mentions her and her emulators in his other writings—the *Historia occidentalis*, the *Exempla*, and the *Sermons to the Beguines*. In 1216 he was chosen by the crusaders to be bishop of St. John of Acre. While passing through Rome on his way to his diocese, he received permission from Pope Honorius III for these religious women "to continue to live together in their house and to urge one another to do good through mutual exhortations" throughout the kingdom of France and the Empire.[26] Scarcely a year had passed since the Fourth Lateran Council's prohibition of the foundation of new religious orders. Thus this new form of religious life gradually assumed its distinctive shape and was approved, all the while the new forms of monastic life were being assimilated to the old. Still the history of women's monasticism—very disappointing from this point of view—did not exclude a certain openness to new possibilities in the future.

2. Perennial Problems

a) Recruitment among the Nobility

Based on the developments we have just sketched, the first and most important thing we notice is the influence of the nobility. It was a factor almost from the very beginning of western monasticism in the fourth and fifth centuries. As the administrative structures of the Roman Empire crumbled, power passed into the hands of the Christian families, who constituted a new aristocracy. Those families living in the regions invaded by the barbarians from the North fled to southern Gaul where they established monasteries. These were the so-called familial or noble monasteries. They were like private churches whose continuity was assured by an aristocratic family. Although this was certainly an advantage, it was not without problems. The phenomenon

---

[25] P. Péano, s.v. "Beghine di Provenza," in *DIP* I (1974) 1180-83.
[26] Ibid., 1170.

continued to manifest itself, with some variations, throughout the Middle Ages and after.[27]

All of this was certainly contrary to the original purpose of religious life, namely to create a society inspired by gospel ideals and modeled on the apostolic community of Jerusalem. In such a society all things would be held in common by the members, who were regarded as equals in the one family of God. Saintly legislators and reformers constantly tried to evoke this ideal. In the sixth century St. Benedict insisted on it strongly. The fact of noble birth must not create distinctions of any kind among the monks. But social pressure in the opposite direction was so strong that the abuse was reintroduced. In the seventh and eighth centuries the Venerable Bede spoke of a society without class distinctions.[28] In each subsequent age, reformers and founders of new orders would speak in the same way. But a reaction of defense—what has been called the noble reaction—continued to reappear and nearly always prevailed. No doubt monasteries with ties to the nobility fulfilled a social and political function—to pray for those in power. But this was small compensation for the negative consequences that flowed from it.

The first such consequence was that superiors were often chosen by the head of the family who owned and endowed the monastery. Since they were chosen either because of their solidarity with that family, their administrative ability, or because they shared the ideas and favored the interests of the rich and powerful, they were inclined to govern in a secular, sometimes even military style. They would command their powerless subjects to obey under blind obedience. The only way the subjects could respond was with heroic obedience (which is normally rare), or with grumbling and interior rebellion.[29]

Another consequence, even more serious, was that monastic life was for all practical purposes reserved to the nobility. Those nuns who were not nobles were the exception. Some monasteries even practiced a kind of exclusiveness, admitting none except nobles, sometimes even specializing in a particular class of nobility—imperial, regal, upper, middle or lower. In addition, the recruits

---

[27]J. Leclercq, s.v. "Nobiltà," soon to be published in *DIP*. The importance of the nobility and the relative consequences for all areas of religious life have been thoroughly discussed by A. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, Oxford 1978, p. 317-415: "Nobility and Religion."

[28]H.M.R.E. Mayr-Hartling, *The Venerable Bede, the Rule of St. Benedict and Social Class*, Jarrow Lecture 1976.

[29]J. Leclercq, "Pour l'histoire de l'obéisance au moyen âge. I. Une épitre sur le murmure," in *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 41 (1965) 125-30.

for these monasteries were generally taken from their families in childhood or adolescence, without their free choice. Sometimes during a pregnancy it was decided ahead of time that if the child turned out to be a girl, she would become a nun. In many cases the right of primogeniture allowed only the firstborn son or one of the daughters to marry and inherit the family property, which had to be kept undivided. The other daughters, such as those who were handicapped in some way or for some reason could not contract a marriage compatible with the family interests, as well as widows who were not allowed to remarry—all of these were placed in the monastery without their consent.[30] Noble ladies who remained in the world sometimes had the right to ask an abbess to provide them with a nun as servant or companion.[31]

This monasticism of class was so ingrained in people's minds that even a saint like Hildegarde in the twelfth century justified it or at least tried to, giving reasons that to us seem rather unconvincing. For example, she appealed to the distinction that exists among the nine choirs of angels, who do not mingle with one another. Such a notion was opposed-again in the twelfth century-by the anonymous *Mirror of Virgins (Speculum virginum)*. The author distinguishes between "true" and "false" nobility. The former is spiritual, the latter is carnal and worldly.[32] Thus canonists and church legislators often accepted a situation for which no effective remedy seemed to exist.

It is hard to give statistics, both in absolute numbers and even in the relative proportion of nuns who were nobles. But the sources we have and the studies that have been made confirm our impression that even in the new orders, which were founded on principles of spiritual reform, the majority of the nuns belonged to the nobility. Many of these were in the monastery against their free choice. Does this prove that as nuns they were unfaithful or unhappy? Such does not seem to be the case. Apparently the general mentality of both men and women, along with the program of formation, were enough to

---

[30]P. Scheutem, *Das Mönchtum in der Altfranzosischen Profandichtung (12-14 Jahrhundert)*, Münster in Westf. 1919, 26-34: *Monchsberuf und Eintritt.*

[31]The following example bears witness to this custom: "A certain noble lady requested an abbess to give her one of the nuns as her companion. The abbess gave her a nun who was humble and patient. And so she asked for another. This time the abbess gave her one who was proud, contentious and impatient. She kept the latter, saying that this was what she needed in order to help her grow in patience." Ed. J. Th. Welter, *La Tabula exemplorum secundum ordinem alphabeti...*, Paris-Toulouse 1926, 157, n. 213.

[32]M. Bernards, *Speculum virginum. Geistigkeit und Seelenleben der Frau im Hochmittelalter*, Köln-Graz 1952, 148-52; 221-22. Examples of temptations to pride arising from the fact of noble birth are given by G. de Martel, "Un exemple de sermons ad monachas au moyen âge," in *Studia monastica* 19 (1977) 347.

maintain a remarkable fidelity to monastic life. Of course we do have some poems or songs—actually a very small number—written by unhappy nuns. These are very similar to the so-called *chansons de mal mariées.*[33] In either case it is hard to distinguish the literary element, namely the gratuitous invention and artifice common in such writings, and the part that is genuine and real. But the universal theme of these laments is how their authors were forced to become nuns, their suffering, and their desire to be freed from the obligations of a life they did not choose.

New forms of life—the hermitage and the beguinage—appeared at the end of the twelfth century as alternatives to traditional monasticism, ancient or new. They seemed to assure, at least in principle and in their origins, vocational freedom of choice and equality among the members. But many of them began once again to accept, preferentially or even exclusively, only women who were of the nobility or bourgeoisie, or who were rich.

b) Forced Vocations and the Enclosure

The history of the enclosure has already been recounted elsewhere.[34] It suffices here to summarize the main points. Since the sixth century it had been the subject of decrees by bishops or local councils. These were more concerned with controling the admission of men into the monastery than with granting permission for the abbess or nuns to leave. The latter would go out as required by social relations or the demands of business. Their enclosure was no different from that envisioned for monks in the Rule of St. Benedict. Some nuns had a tendency to go out more than was appropriate. The fact that local ecclesiastical authorities frequently had to reaffirm the obligation of enclosure shows that it was the object of infractions, even within the limits then established. On all these points, the same problems continued to exist in the traditional monasteries of the twelfth century as well as in those founded later.

But from the twelfth century on, enclosure became stricter in the new monasteries, no matter whether they were united to one of the older orders (for example, Marcigny to Cluny) or one of the newer orders. Laws were made governing the most minute details—doors, keys, walls, grilles at the confessional and sometimes even at the window through which the nuns could

---

[33] A number of songs by nuns who were in the cloister against their will have been edited by P. Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*, Oxford 1968, 357-60; P. Bec, *La lyrique française au moyen âge (XIIe-XIIIe siècles). Contribution à une typologie des genres poétiques médiévaux*, Paris 1977-78, II, 20-22; compare I, 74-75.

[34] J. Leclercq, s.v. "Clausura," in *DIP* II (1975) 1166-83.

communicate with outsiders. The enclosure proper to recluses was gradually applied to cenobites. The idea that the monastery was a prison where one entered and freely remained out of love—an idea valid for monks as well as nuns—was illustrated by new symbols.

The reason most often given for strengthening the enclosure was the belief that women's virtue is more fragile than that of men. For example, a certain Idung of Prüfening in the twelfth century wrote some very revealing pages on the subject. A deeper (and unexpressed) reason was the vulnerability of men, especially clerics. These felt the need to protect their own virtue by avoiding the sight of women consecrated to God, even though they could meet any other women every day.[35] But the main reason was that since a good number of nuns were in the monastery against their own will, it was necessary to discourage opportunities for them to meet men, as they desired. Aelred of Rievaulx has written a detailed account of a certain Gilbertine nun whose fled the cloister around the year 1160.[36] She had been placed in the monastery of Watton at the age of four by the Cistercian Henry Murdach, who was later archbishop of York. Her flight led the Gilbertines to enact stricter provisions regarding the enclosure.

An attempt has been made to show that the unusual realism of this account has a reforming intent.[37] According to the same text, the cruel punishment inflicted on the man responsible for the nun's flight was aimed primarily at lessening the disgrace to her and her monastery due to her failure to observe bodily and spiritual chastity. The Watton incident leads us to believe that the nuns of certain monasteries—whether they had a religious vocation or not—agreed on a number of values, such as honor and fidelity. To these were added observances such as the enclosure, which at first was relatively open. The nuns supported one another in maintaining these norms. Thus any violation of

---

[35] *Argumentum de quatuor quaestionibus*, ed. E. Demm, *Reform Mönchtum und Slavenmission im 12. Jahrhundert*, Lübeck-Hamburg 1970, 121-25. This same text has been edited more carefully by R.B.C. Huygens, "Le moine Idung et ses deux ouvrages *Dialogus duorum monachorum*," in *Studi medievali*, s. 3a, 13 (1972) 354-64; the sources that are identified in the notes indicate that Idung depends above all on St. Jerome, but also on profane authors—Cicero, Juvenal, and Horace (cited four times).

[36] P.L. 195, 789-96.

[37] G. Constable, "Aelred of Rievaulx and the Nun of Watton: an Episode in the Early History of the Gilbertine Order," in D. Baker, *Medieval Women* (Studies in Church History. Subsidia, 1), Oxford 1978, 205-26. This fine article is filled with information, not only about the Gilbertines, but about women's monasticism in general during the twelfth century, the development of legislation with regard to the enclosure, and relationships between men's and women's branches of religious orders during the twelfth century.

them would produce a reaction of defense. Mutual trust could be re-established only by means of strict laws and material safeguards.

The first intervention by the papacy in the matter of enclosure for nuns came with Alexander III in the second half of the twelfth century. It had to do with the Gilbertines. During the thirteenth century a vow of enclosure would be imposed on some new institutes. But the year 1298 is especially important, for it marks the promulgation of a universal and perpetual law by Boniface VIII, in a decree whose first words are revealing: *Periculoso ac detestabili quorumdam monialium statui...* ("The dangerous and detestable condition of certain nuns..."). [38] Thus a universal law was established based on the particular case of "certain" nuns whose conduct was "dangerous and detestable."

But what was the object of concern? Not the nuns' life of prayer but their *integritas*. To protect this integrity, measures were adopted for all times and places: *perpetuo irrefragabiliter valitura..., in quibuslibet mundi partibus*. It is true that the pope refers later to the spiritual freedom that was traditionally considered one of the conditions of contemplative life and practically synonymous with it: *servire Deo liberius* ("to serve God more freely"). But this motive is secondary. The most important reason and the one most frequently reaffirmed is avoidance of all occasions of lust *(lasciviendi opportunitas)*. The enclosure becomes a good in itself. It holds the first place, and everything else must be sacrificed to it, beginning with poverty. Cloistered life demands revenues and reduces the opportunities for working. The only reason envisioned for leaving the monastery is to deal with secular matters, particularly those of an economic or political nature. Thus the abbess or prioress may leave in order to swear fealty to their sovereign, to pay him homage *(homagium)* for the feud *(feodum)* they hold from him, since they depend on the princes of this world *(principes saeculares ac alios dominos)*. A long section is addressed to the latter, appealing to them to keep such occasions to a bare minimum. After another allusion to the danger *(periculum)* that can be avoided only by placing nuns under enclosure, a warning is given that anyone who violates this decree shall incur the acrimony of the pope.

This document aroused opposition, especially in traditional monasteries but even in those of the newer type as well. Some nuns appealed to the fact that by their profession they had promised to observe the enclosure envi-

---

[38] *Sextus liber Decretalium*, lib. II, tit. XV, cap. un., ed. A. Friedberg, *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, II, Leipzig 1922, 1053-54.

distinct from the dowry required for daughters who were to be married. This latter institution had undergone developments in Roman law, then in the Germanic code, and finally in that of the various European countries. While the dowry was usually obligatory on the part of the parents and was the object of a contract between the spouses' two families, the donation made when a daughter entered the monastery was supposedly free and spontaneous. But in actual fact it was frequently imposed and considered normal. It could even be a kind of guarantee of the authenticity of a vocation. Without it, some parents might have found it a bit too easy to dispose of one or more of their daughters, thanks to a free reception into the monastery. The same problem and the same solution also existed for sons.

Like all practices, this one was subject to abuses. And in fact such was the case as the donation was imposed and the established sum was increased. The reformers and founders of new orders strove to keep admission free, at least for those girls whose parents were unable to make the donation. But they did not always succeed. In the schools of the twelfth century, certain canonists and masters of the sentences were of the opinion that the donation was a form of simony. While condemning it as such, they failed to take into account the economic conditions that justified it. But they were probably dealing with a false problem.[42] In 1215, Innocent III and the Fourth Lateran Council stated: "Since the evil of simony has infected many nuns to such an extent that scarcely anyone is received as a sister without paying a price, and even though they wish to use poverty as a pretext to soften the evil of this vice, we completely prohibit...."[43] The prohibition was only partly effective. It was not until the Council of Trent that the donation was entirely dissociated from simony, accepted as legitimate, and regulated by law.

Thus, with the donation as with the enclosure, laws having a universal and perpetual nature were enacted to deal with abuses whose causes were not recognized. In practice it was admitted that, in accord with tradition, an offering might accompany the entrance of a young person into the monastery, provided it did not become a matter of obligation or any kind of legally binding promise or contract. The reason that continued to justify this practice

---

[42]This entire development has been the subject of a well-documented volume by J.H. Lynch, *Simoniacal Entry into Religious Life 1000 to 1260. A Social Economic and Legal Study,* Columbus 1976. He also presents a bibliography, ibid., XIX, n. 30 and 202, n. 62. See also F. Cubelli and G. Rocca, s.v. "Dote," in *DIP* III (1976) 968-72.

[43]*Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta,* ed. G. Alberigo et al., Freiburg in Breisgau 1962, 240, can. 64.

was that most monasteries of women were too poor to accept candidates without a donation. But their economic difficulties resulted from the fact that the nuns were prevented by the enclosure from doing the kind of work that would have allowed them to earn their living in a largely rural economy. By themselves they could not even provide for the administration of their own property. The stricter the enclosure became, the more necessary the donation became, the more it assumed the character of an obligatory dowry, and the more communities of women had to depend on men who could work for them and administer their goods.

d) Growing Masculine Domination

The relations between women's monasticism and orders of men and church authorities in general were determined by the same things that led to stricter enclosure and the practical requirement of a dowry. In the first place, there was a fear of the dangers to monks, religious and clerics from their association with women consecrated to God. There was also a concern about the time and effort required to provide nuns with spiritual assistance, to the detriment of occupations proper to their own state as monks or religious. Finally there was a desire not to add to the economic woes of their own monastery by assuming financial responsibility for a monastery of women that might be entrusted to them. Thus, with the partial exception of Fontevrault, men's orders were generally reserved when it came to helping the nuns at first, and then when the problem of governing them arose later. Even so, the nuns gradually lost the autonomy they had enjoyed in the beginning and found themselves more and more controlled by men.

This general development, with certain variations, was found to some extent everywhere, beginning in the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon lands. In secular society women benefited from a statute that was more or less the same as that for men. This fact was reflected in the church and in monasticism. But after the Norman conquest of England, continental notions of society, inherited from ancient Roman tradition, were imposed there as elsewhere.[44] "The monks must live in their own monastery" declared one of the first pieces of legislation of the Order of Cîteaux.[45] Thus the nuns were given a minimum

---

[44]N. Hunt, "History of the Benedictine and Cistercian Nuns in Britain," in *Cistercian Studies* 8 (1973) 157-69; J. Leclercq, "The Tenth Century English Benedictine Reform," in *The Ampleforth Journal* (1980), soon to be published; S.M. Stuart, "Introduction," in *Women in Medieval Society*, 8-10.

[45]*Instituta monachorum Cisterciensium de Molismo venientium*, c. 15, ed. C. Noschitzka, "Codex manuscriptus 31 Bibliothecae Universitatis Labacensis," in *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis* 6

number of priests as chaplains and laybrothers to help them in their work. We have sermons that are addressed to nuns by nuns but written by a monk.[46] An *exemplum* related by Jacques de Vitry bears public witness to the fact that the indiscretions of certain Dominican confessors of nuns did not help their good reputation at all.[47] In sum, we can apply to women's monasticism as a whole the conclusions of a scholar who has devoted her historical research to those orders that gained despite their affiliation to an order of men:

> We have seen how difficult it was for communties of women to achieve this kind of integration. We believe we have sufficiently proven that the predominant feature common to all nuns of this period was the difficulty they had in getting their brothers to accept them.
>
> Why did they not try to resolve their difficulty by establishing themselves as independent orders? The fact of the matter is that, with the (uncertain) exception of Fontevrault, there were no orders of women in the classical period.
>
> This lack, we believe, was not due to feminine reserve. This, we have seen, was practically nonexistent in the case of certain women who were very strong in defending their rights. More likely it was the result of fidelity to the initiatives of their venerable founder and respect for the norms established by him. The enclosure also plays a part, but we have noted that its observance was often lax, in fact if not in writing. The popes were always favorable toward nuns when it was a question of their being joined to one of the larger orders. But they were no doubt wary of too much autonomy and never had to favor the creation of an order specifically for women. It would seem that men's orders should have welcomed such autonomy, for it would have freed them from their obligations. This does not seem to have happened. Urged by devout women, these men evidently concluded—consciously or not—that it was preferable to maintain a

---

(1950) 15. This is cited and commented upon by R. de Ganck, "The Cistercian Nuns of Belgium in the Thirteenth Century seen against the Background of the Second Wave of Cistercian Spirituality," in *Cistercian Studies* 5 (1970) 136.

[46] G. de Martel, *Un exemple de sermons "ad monachas" au moyen âge*, 342-52; *Prediche alle donne del secolo XIII*, ed. C. Casagrande, Milan 1978, 32-42, 86-92, 137-73.

[47] "Some young Dominicans, said to be very religious and apparently zealous (but lacking in knowledge) came into a region where religion was flourishing, especially among nuns and other similar groups of virgins. Here they began to preach and hear confessions. Since they were holy men, one of these women manifested to them under the seal of confession her weaknesses, temptations and sins that they might help her especially by their prayers. They, however, began to rashly suspect that the other women were the same. Moreover, they preached to other orders of priests and brothers, whose morals only serve to drag down religion, that these congregations of holy virgins were brothels rather than religious houses. Thus by spreading the faults of a few among everyone and disgracing as much as they could the religion of God and those who fear Him, they brought scandal to many."

state of subjection. And even if this was embarrassing to them, it seemed more in conformity with tradition and the habitual attitude of the church.[48]

e) Virginity and Marriage

There is a final question to be asked. Was women's monasticism prejudicial to marriage? Some would say it was. What was the true situation? First of all we must make a preliminary distinction. Monasticism for women in no way presupposed virginity. We have seen that many nuns were widows or had separated from their husband with his consent. We shall not linger here over the question of when or how the consecration of virgins came to be associated with monastic profession in some institutes.[49] With regard to the monastic state itself, there was no distinction as yet between theoretical statements and the actual notions held my most Christians. The idea that the married state was not held in much esteem is at odds with a great number of texts and facts.[50] In the first place, there is the constant reaffirmation directed against all forms of Catharism that marriage is a good and that its bond persists even if the spouses should separate in order to enter the monastery. Writing against his adversaries, Egbert of Schönau (†1184) states: "Unlike you, we do not counsel this separation for anyone."[51]

A certain superiority of voluntary celibacy over marriage continued to be affirmed, following a tradition that went back to St. Paul and the fathers of the church. But as the latter themselves had done, constant warnings were given against the pride that could arise from this very superiority.[52] There was also the solemn prayer that has been part of the ceremony for the consecration of virgins from the beginning until today. Here it is explicitly stated that it is not a question of diminishing the honor due to marriage, since the blessing given to holy matrimony from the beginning always remains.[53]

---

[48]M. de Fontette, *Les religieuses à l'âge classique*, 153.

[49]An ample bibliography may be found s.v. *Consacrazione delle vergini*, *DIP* II (1975) 1613-27.

[50]I have indicated these texts and facts in *Monks and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, soon to be published.

[51]*Sermones contra Catharos*, 5, 2, in *P.L.* 197, 27.

[52]This doctrinal aspect has been studied by M. Bernards, *Speculum virginum*, cit., and E.S. Greenhill, *Die geistigen Voraussetzungen der Bilderreihe des Speculum Virginum. Versuch einer Deutung*, Munster in West. 1962.

[53]Here is the text as cited several times by R. Metz, *La consécration des vierges*, 143, n. 18, 146, n. 433: "Although the honor of marriage is not diminished by prohibitions of any kind and the original blessing pronounced on holy wedlock endures, nevertheless there are more lofty souls who spurn the matrimonial union of husband and wife, and who desire the sacrament, not by imitating what is done in marriage, but by choosing what is signified by it." This text is found in

If we consider the entire body of spiritual literature dealing with monastic life and marriage, we get the impression that it is speaking of two vocations, each with its own joys, duties and risks. The primary intent of such literature seems to be to justify whatever vocation the individual has received. If anything may have led to a lessening of esteem for conjugal life, it is to be sought in secular literature—courtly, goliardic, or whatever. And even this was not yet well-defined in many "romantic" writings.[54] As far as spiritual writers are concerned, especially those of the twelfth century, they use married love to help describe the deepest mysteries of the faith. This fact leads us to believe that they knew and appreciated the reality that lay behind such metaphors.[55] We can even detect in many of them a certain tendency to present an idealized picture of conjugal life.

They were, however, more objective when speaking of the monastic life, which they knew better. It would be interesting to know how many bishops and preachers used expressions like those of St. Hugh, bishop of Lincoln, from 1186 to 1200: "The kingdom of God is not reserved to monks, hermits and anchorites.... All who are true Christians must have hearts that are open to love, lips that are faithful, and bodies that are pure." His biographer added: "The man of God developed these ideas when he was describing and defending the proper nature of these virtues and their reciprocal differences. He taught that married couples who remained within the limits of their state should not be regarded as lacking the virtue of chastity any less than others. They would be admitted to the glory of heaven equally with virgins and those who practiced voluntary celibacy."[56]

Conclusions

The Misfortune of Being a Woman

The history of women's monasticism in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is admirable and full of dramatic elements. On the one hand, a great spiritual institution, the heir to a long history of doctrine, virtue and examples of holiness, constantly tried to rejuvenate itself. It endeavored to free itself from

---

the Leonine Sacramentary and in all later sacramentaries and pontificals. It was probably written by St. Leo himself. See Metz, ibid., 146.

[54] This fact has been emphasized by P. Ménard, *Les lais de Marie de France*, Paris 1979, 134-41.

[55] *Monks and Marriage*, cit., ch. VII.

[56] *The Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. D.C. Dorrie and H. Farmer, London 1961, 46-48. That esteem for celibacy was the exception, while an orientation toward marriage was common, has been shown by A. Murray, *Reason and Society*, 342-49, 373 passim.

the social and economic factors that had profoundly shaped it in the West following the barbarian invasions and the resulting feudal society. On the other hand, people and circumstances prevented it from realizing its full potential. What was left of women's monasticism after its oppression by the nobility, or what was spontaneously reborn—since there is no such thing as a classless society—was not enough to permit it to free itself from the influence of the nobility. The resulting consequences were obvious in the area of recruitment, an increasingly strict enclosure, and the need for endowments given by the rich and powerful to monasteries or individual nuns.

In the face of efforts to revitalize women's monasticism, church laws appealed to the past. This led, for example, to the paradoxical result that the thirteenth century saw the imposition of strict enclosure and even a vow of enclosure for women religious, something never envisioned by the founders or foundresses. This inability on the part of church authority to meet new spiritual needs with new structures gave rise to a large number of religious women who found in the hermitage or beguinage an opportunity to dedicate themselves to the service of God and the church. This they could not do in monasteries of either the older or newer type. The fact that the church's administrative apparatus was slow to act—or even unable to do so—produced in the end results that were positive for its spiritual life. While it is possible to strengthen the old laws even though they no longer respond to new needs, it is impossible to prevent the Spirit from finding solutions for both the present and the future—solutions that will be approved only much later.

Two attitudes seem to dominate this entire story. First of all, there was a fear that nuns would be contaminated by the world. The thought that their example might be a positive influence on the world is totally missing. One result of this growing rigid material separation would be the creation of "externs" who went outside and whose virtue was beyond reproach. Secondly, there was the conviction that women constituted a special category of human beings. They were thought to lack those qualities that would enable them to control their own destiny, take responsibility for themselves, and govern themselves-in short, to respond to the inspirations of the Spirit without depending on the decisions of monks, religious or ecclesiastics. This is just one of the many areas in which we can see a general antifeminist attitude, although it varies in degree. St. Bernard, for example, displayed it less than some others.[57] Whether expressed or not, this disdain for women, including nuns,

[57] J. Leclercq, *S. Bernard et les femmes*, in the process of being published.

was rooted more in the the pre-Christian philosophical traditions of Greece and Rome than in Christian revelation. St. Jerome played a large part in its dissemination.[58] In the Middle Ages it gave rise to opinions that seem excessive to us, but were no more so than what ancient authors, Christian and pagan alike, had already expressed with more vehemence than good taste.[59]

To illustrate these points it suffices to cite one witness, the twelfth-century Benedictine Idung of Prüfening. He raised the question of whether monks and nuns who followed the same Rule of St. Benedict should have different laws regarding the enclosure. His response was that the fragility of the female sex demanded a stricter protection *(custodia)*. After drawing examples from the pagan myths of Greek and Roman antiquity, he goes on to say: "The female sex, whose care is the subject of our discussion, has four very great enemies. Two of them are internal: carnal concupiscence and the curiosity that goes with feminine fickleness. Two come from outside: the rash appetite for the pleasure *(libido)* of men, and the pernicious envy of the devil to accomplish evil. Moreover, unlike men, women can lose their virginity whenever they are violated." The author goes on for many pages to develop these considerations, basing himself mostly on a single author, who not surprisingly turns out to be St. Jerome. He compares consecrated virgins first to the angels, then to spouses of Christ. He insists frequently on the danger for men to look at them. He recalls the examples of rape mentioned in the Old Testament. He seems to forget that his examples are spiritual in origin and cannot be interpreted literally, or at least that they must be applied equally to all Christians of both sexes. He fails to mention the fact that men can look at any number of women outside the monastery without being aroused to any special curiosity by the fact of their virginity. He concludes: "This sex must not be left free to govern themselves, given their natural tendency to fickleness and the temptations that come to them from outside, which they cannot resist on account of their weakness."[60]

The forcefulness and insistence—one might almost say violenceof this text are disconcerting. Theologians and spiritual writers of broader mind and heart than this obscure Idung surely could not have put their signature to it without some hesitation. Nevertheless, in the thirteenth-century controversy

---

[58]D. S. Wiesen, *St. Jerome as a Satirist. A Study in Christian Latin Thought and Letters*, Ithaca 1964, 113-65: "Women and Marriage."

[59]J. Leclercq, "Un témoin de l'antiféminisme au XIIIe siècle," in *Revue bénédictine* 80 (1970) 304-09.

[60]Ed. E. Demm, *Reform Mönchtum*, 121-25.

over the possibility of women becoming priests, we find similar expressions. For example, St. Thomas says: "The fundamental limit of woman's nature and that which renders her incapable of being ordained is her state of natural subjection *(quia mulier statum subjectionis habet)*."[61] According to St. Bonaventure "the man *(vir)* is the image of God by reason of his sex."[62] Duns Scotus states: "After the Fall, women cannot possess any degree of superiority in the human race."[63] Thus they cannot hold any power of orders. But with regard to the acts of jurisdiction that some of them exercised, we find in the ordinary gloss on the Decretals an opinion that is by now familiar from our study of the history of women's monasticism: "They cannot pronounce sentences, with the possible exception, according to custom, of those who belong to the nobility."[64]

Did women at least have an equal chance to attain canonized sanctity? In principle, yes: "The church constantly glories in her fundamental belief, according to which in the heavenly city there will be no discrimination. At least in the next life men and women will be equal."[65] But the statistics demonstrate that "it was much more difficult for women than for men to be recognized as saints."[66] Not only that, but among those canonized the majority is still made up of those who were of noble birth.[67]

---

[61] F. Cardman, "The Medieval Question of Women and Orders," in *The Thomist* (1978) 587.

[62] Ibid., 589.

[63] Ibid., 592.

[64] Ibid., 596.

[65] J. T. Schulenburg, "Sexism and the Celestial Gynaeceum from 500 to 1200," in *Journal of Medieval History* 4 (1978) 119.

[66] Ibid., 129.

[67] This article was translated from French into Italian by Valerio Cattana, O.S.B.