

What Gender Does to Religious Institutions

Reflections on Women's Religious Congregations in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

Recently, significant contributions to the study of religion and gender have been made, as evidenced by Belgian and Dutch literature, amongst others. Joan W. Scott has pointed out that, in these studies, gender is expressed and analyzed as a multi-layered concept – it can represent power, social institutions, or organization. It can express ideas of subjective identity and what is normative. This article explores religious female congregations of the Catholic Church in the first half of the nineteenth century and focuses on power relationships. It unpacks the use of gender in religious history and demonstrates that a gendered history of Catholic institutions is possible even when men define the institutional framework and exclude the women who are, in fact, already a part of it.

Keywords: methodology, gender history, Catholic Church, Catholicism, female religious congregations

Introduction¹

As the eighteenth century ended, the Catholic Church – confronted with the modern world – developed a creative reaction to cultural and political change. Most notably, in the period after the French Revolution, the Church invented and constructed new symbols of modernity despite holding onto their anti-modern tendencies. This was a project of Catholic re-conquest aimed at redefining the relationship between the Church and society's two major components: the working classes and women.² Postrevolutionary nuns thus, existed in a context where forms of collective devotion were

¹ I would like to acknowledge and express my gratitude to Silvia Mostaccio for her support.

² Caffiero, *La fabrique*, 14-17.

running out of steam and new practices were arising.³ These women found themselves at the centre of a tension between tradition and modernity. They were torn between the desire to obey the religious authority on which their very existence depended, and to depart from their traditional feminine role in the Church. Even though they had integrated the French Revolution into their frame of thought...the order Daughters of Charity, for instance, wanted to be called “citizens” of their community,⁴ nuns in general, found their Catholic religious affiliation placed conflicting demands on them.

Women’s demand for an apostolic role in the Church was not new and had already been a cause for debate during the Catholic Reformation.⁵ Going beyond the historiography that sees these women merely as objects of clerical repression by unilaterally powerful spiritual masters, Barbara Diefendorf, for example, has shown women contributing to Reformed Catholicism, including from a spiritual point of view.⁶ The late eighteenth century context of crisis made gender identities more fluid, offering women the opportunity to lead spiritual lives focused on mystical visions and apocalyptic piety. In the modern era, the practices of female religious included their use of piety as a tool of empowerment, as well as the positioning of women renowned for their holiness in the status of spiritual authority. As well, ascetic practices of the early modern period, considered a consequence for insulting God and needing to atone, took on an institutional form in the houses founded for a variety of believers from *dévôte* woman to cloistered nuns.⁷

Faced with women wanting an apostolic life, the Roman Church provided fluctuating responses on the status of religious women over the centuries. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) defined female religious life within the framework of enclosure.⁸ The question of simple vows was discussed at the end of the sixteenth century in relationship to new congregations of priests. And by the nineteenth century the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars had established their jurisprudence over members of congregations with simple vows. Women in these congregations, however, still had no right to the appellation of “nun”.⁹

This article focuses on the history of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, founded in France in 1820. This religious order was eventually present in

3 Suire, *Sainteté et lumières*, 16.

4 Brejon de Lavergnée, *Le temps des cornettes*, 450.

5 For an analysis of theological discourses on the forms of female apostolate in the seventeenth century, see Gay, *Le dernier théologien*, 327–398.

6 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*.

7 Diefendorf, ‘Rethinking the Catholic Reformation.’

8 Zarri, ‘La clôture des religieuses.’

9 Bonora, *La controriforma*, 68–82.

many European countries¹⁰ and offers an illustrative case that confronts Dutch and Belgian historiography on the revival of female convent life in the nineteenth century. A broader study of “Jesuit” women in the seventeenth century, gave rise to this article. That report focused on the construction of gender identity in the context of women’s religious congregations with an apostolic vocation. The main analysis revolved around relationships of power in religious communities, with a focus on gender, as a way to understand these relations of power.¹¹

At the heart of our case study is Madame d’Houët (1781–1858), the founder of the Faithful Companions of Jesus. Born Victoire de Bengy to a deeply religious family belonging to the French Catholic aristocracy, her family went into exile at their country estate during the French Revolution. Those close to the young Victoire felt that she had a strong and vigorous character. She married Viscount Joseph de Bonnault d’Houët (1782–1805) in 1804 and was widowed less than a year later. She gave birth to a son, Eugène de Bonnault d’Houët, in 1805. In 1814, the Jesuits took charge of a minor seminary at Saint-Acheul, thanks to a previously established relationship with the titleholders from the Fathers of the Faith. Madame d’Houët enrolled her son there and worked with the Jesuits. During the Hundred Days, she offered refuge to the Jesuit, Joseph Varin (1769–1850), who became her spiritual advisor. Father Joseph Varin was a crucial figure in the revival of post-revolutionary female convent life in the border area between France and Belgium. He inspired and encouraged several religious women to found apostolic congregations. Among his disciples were Sophie Barat of the Ladies of the Sacred Heart and Julie Billiart of the Sisters of Notre Dame, a congregation that would eventually settle in Namur. Alongside Father Varin, Madame D’Houët deepened her knowledge of Jesuit spirituality, and she gradually renounced the world and intuited a new form of religious life (1817). Varin tried to get her to join Sophie Barat’s Ladies of the Sacred Heart, but eventually allowed her to found her own society in 1820.

Madame d’Houët then began a long struggle to have her society approved. When she first sought approval in 1826, there was no established procedure for applying to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. Moreover, any opposition put forth during the approval process, especially on matters of

10 In England and Wales, the Faithful Companions of Jesus, with fifteen houses founded during the nineteenth century, formed part of the middle tier congregations, which had founded 26% of the convents by 1900. By way of indication, the first Belgian foundation was established in Brussels in 1902, followed by one in Graty in 1903, one in Montjoie (Brussels) the same year and one in Namur in 1904. Mangion, *Contested identities*, 37–39.

11 Scott, ‘Women in History.’

episcopal or ecclesiastical authority, constituted a significant barrier. Madame d'Houët appealed to Rome in 1826 and 1837 to get official authorisation for the congregation. She had the support of a complex but well-organized network and steadily created an institution very close to the Ignatian model. At the same time, she preserved her intuition, authority, and a measure of autonomy in the face of male ecclesiastic authority.¹²

Compared to other Belgian congregations of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, Madame d'Houët favoured a smaller number of houses, but each with a larger number of members. Less than twenty years after their founding, there were 220 members in nine houses.¹³ In Belgium, there was exponential growth in the number of sisters beginning in the second third of the nineteenth century.¹⁴

In contrast to recent studies on gender and religious history, in which Belgian and Dutch historiography plays an important role, this article examines how women reconfigured the structures of the Church itself. The study applies several layers of gender analysis to the investigation. In the first place, we look at the organisation of social relationships. In this regard Madame d'Houët managed her relationship with her spiritual director by introducing God as a third term in a two-part equation. Next, we look at the successive masculine and feminine representations of a candidate for sainthood. In the process of canonization, the candidate's profile needs to be rewritten. We elucidate how this was done. And lastly, we study the way institutional relationships of power were reconfigured. On this point we discuss the modalities of religious life for Jesuits, but also for those women who aspired to become Jesuits.

In her path to legitimacy, Madame d'Houët found herself before the Jesuits, the bishops, the cardinals of the Roman Congregations and two popes, Leo XII and Gregory XVI. This brings us to consider the variation in *scales* as conceptualised by Jacques Revel.¹⁵ Revel uses a variety of equally valid scales of analysis to account for the "layered structure of the social". Recent analysis¹⁶ reveals that the concept of *scales* is key to understanding levels of governance and plurality in the Catholic world. Whereas the

12 Barthélemy, *L'appropriation du modèle jésuite*.

13 Recalculated from: *Parisien. Beatificationis*, 1950, 52.

14 Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*, 200–202.

15 Revel, *Jeux d'échelles*.

16 Silvia Mostaccio, Pierre-Antoine Fabre, Jan De Maeyer, Marina Caffiero and Alessandro Serra chose it as the title of the book *Échelles de pouvoir, rapports de genre*, and Anne-Sophie Lamine wrote on the "scale game" in the introduction to the book *Quand le religieux fait conflit*, echoing the questions opened up by Jacques Revel and his colleagues in their collective book on the historical and anthropological dimension of micro- and macro-analyses. From a political perspective, Jacques Palard noted in the same years the plurality of the logics involved. Cf. Lamine et al., *La religion de l'autre*; Palard, *Le gouvernement*.



LA R.M. DE BONNAULT D'HOUE T

NÉE DE BENCY

(Portrait fait de souvenir.)

Portrait of Madame d'Houët. Published in Martin, François, *Vie de Madame de Bonnault d'Houët, fondatrice de la Société des fidèles compagnes de Jésus*. Paris, 1863, p. ii.
Image Leuven, University Library: 5A28291.

Catholic Church has universal pretensions, scales, or hierarchical power, is nevertheless visible in all negotiations carried out in the functioning of the Church.

Religious women at the crossroads of gender history and religion

Claude Langlois has suggested the “feminization thesis” as a way to understand nineteenth-century nuns.¹⁷ His expression “feminization of Catholicism” has become a multi-layered concept with such intellectual currency that it risks confirming gender stereotypes instead of properly historicizing them.¹⁸ Patrick Pasture, for example, has identified several dimensions of the feminization thesis: the increasing number of women in church membership and in devotions, the growth of female religious orders, the change in piety as it became typified by emotion and sentimentality, and, finally, “pietized femininity” – the association of femininity with piety in an increasingly narrow way. The work of Caroline Ford, meanwhile, explicitly combines several of these dimensions. Ford deals with the impact that the association between Catholicism and women’s religious practices had on the civil and social status of women in nineteenth century France. She is also interested in the fears and conflicts caused by large numbers of women entering congregations and religious orders.¹⁹ Marina Caffiero studies eighteenth century feminization from an institutional point of view. She looks at the structural transformation of female religious institutes with an emphasis on devotional practices especially those dedicated to the Virgin.²⁰ It should be noted that these elaborations of the “feminization thesis” have broadened the field of gender research to take into account representations of both the masculine and the feminine; these scholars have added the perspective of masculine piety.²¹

Overviews of women’s history do not always consider religious women – nuns, sisters, religious laywomen, etc.²² The subject of conservative women

17 In the 1980s, Claude Langlois’s work on the feminization of Catholicism was the gateway to studies on nineteenth-century female religious congregations. Cf. Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin*.

18 Pasture, ‘Beyond the Feminization Thesis,’ 8. See also Van Osselaer & Buerman, ‘Feminization Thesis.’

19 Ford, *Divided Houses*, 1–16.

20 Caffiero, ‘Femminile/popolare.’

21 Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*; Werner, *Christian Masculinity*; De Maeyer, ‘Les hommes d’œuvres.’

22 This malaise is reflected in the introductory textbooks on gender studies. The *Introduction aux Gender Studies*, published in 2008, does not devote a chapter to gender and religion; this keyword does not even appear in the index. However, the fourth volume of the *Histoire des femmes* by Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot devotes a few pages to the “feminization of the clergy”. The same goes for the *Blackwell Companion to Gender History*, which devotes a page to women’s religious experience. Cf. Bereni et al., *Introduction aux Gender Studies*; Fraisse & Perrot (eds.), *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, 176–180; King, ‘Religion and gender,’ 70–85.

is treated in much the same way.²³ Conservative women attract little interest in women's history, a field linked from its earliest days to feminist awareness. Nevertheless, studies devoted to religious founding or charismatic figures have appeared relatively regularly.²⁴ Recent research on religious congregations is articulated around the notion of *care*. Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée's history of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul holds a long-term perspective centred on assistance, charity and philanthropy.²⁵ Annelies van Heijst has written on practices of religious women in the Netherlands in her *Models of Charitable Care*.²⁶ Other works focus on foreign missions, seen as an obvious place of affirmation for women's agency.²⁷ In those investigations, agency is closely linked to the concept of gender and is defined as an individual's room to manoeuvre within the norms without falling into the binary of submission or resistance to the norms.²⁸

Researchers have also highlighted the historiographical shift from women's history to gender history and noted its use in the field of religious history.²⁹ Gender has become an operative category in the history of Christianity; the extent to which it is found in more recent works on religious women depends on the working hypothesis of the researcher.³⁰ Several Belgian and Dutch studies have focused on the real-world existence of religious congregations and have looked at the power relations between the Christian men and women who made re-Christianisation of society their goal.³¹

This shift from women's to gender history is not easy; it can be difficult to situate oneself in a field regularly referred to as "women's and gender history" when one uses the social and cultural construct of male and female.³² Joan Scott, who has theorized gender as a tool for analysis, insists that the

23 Della Sudda, 'Réseaux catholiques féminins.'

24 See in particular Langlois, *Le désir de sacerdoce*; Scaraffia, 'Fondatrici e imprenditrici'; Henneau, 'Récit de vie d'une sainte.'

25 Brejon de Lavergnée (ed.), *Des filles de la Charité*. In France, Anne Jusseaume dedicated her thesis to the sisters hospitallers and their *care* apostolate: Jusseaume, *Soin et société*.

26 Van Heijst, *Models of Charitable Care*.

27 Dujardin, 'Gender'; Paisant (ed.), *La mission au féminin*.

28 Montenach, 'Introduction.'

29 See in particular Muller, *Au plus près des âmes et des corps*; Brejon de Lavergnée & Della Sudda (eds.), *Genre et christianisme*; Cova & Dumons (eds.), *Femmes, genre et catholicisme*; Della Sudda & Malochet (eds.), *Pouvoirs, genre et religions*.

30 For example, Viaene's contribution on the Dames de Saint-André showed the *agency* of the sisters without using the concept. Viaene, 'The Second Sex.'

31 Van Heijst, Derks & Monteiro, *Ex Caritate*; Werner, *Christian Masculinity*; Pasture, & Arts (eds.), *Gender and Christianity*; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*; Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*.

32 Della Sudda & Von Tippelskirch, 'Introduction.'



Convent and school of the sisters of the Faithful Companions of Jesus in Belgium (Uccle, Avenue Montjoie), c 1940. The first FCJ residence in Belgium was established in 1902 because of the Law Against Religious Associations in France (1901). Image: Leuven, KADOC, Collection Postcards.

political aspect of gender is a key to analyzing power. She uses gender as an analytical tool for society as a whole – whether looked at from a public or a private perspective. Her work has led to the integration of gender issues in economic, political, and military history, to name a few. At this point, gender has become practically indispensable in any historical study. Furthermore, the rise of cultural history with its wide variety of methodologies, has solidified the use of gender as a tool for analysis.³³ Thus, the concept of gender³⁴ has evolved. It has moved from women in general to the dynamic between men and women, to the dynamic between masculinity and femininity. It is not fruitful, however, to definitively separate gender history from women's history; the concept of gender has not ruled out the need for women's history.³⁵

33 Researcher's use of gender as a category of analysis has recently been criticized by Jeanne Boydston, who does not see gender as abstract and universal, but as a particular process of cultural construction, in constant evolution, leading to distinct social and cultural formations. Boydston, 'Gender as a Question,' 575–576.

34 To put into perspective the evolution of the word gender ("genre") in French, see Clair, *Sociologie du genre*; Buscatto, *Sociologies du genre*. It should be noted that these two syntheses, valuable for beginners in gender studies, do not deal with religion. Sue Morgan's chapter in a collective book devoted to gender and religion emphasizes the importance of also including religion within gender studies: Morgan, 'Rethinking Religion in Gender History.'

35 Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 187.

Applications of a multi-layered concept

The founding impulse of Madame d'Houët was "to be a Jesuit". When it came time to promulgate rules and a constitution for her new religious society, she adopted those of the Society of Jesus. Her appropriation of the Jesuit model provoked conflict and negative reactions in the hierarchy of the clergy. Using the rules and Constitution of the Society of Jesus to shape a feminine religious life was a direct challenge to post-Tridentine Catholic norms that said nuns who made solemn vows had to live within the enclosure (*clausura*) and that the superior of the community was subject to the Ordinary (*ordinarius*) or local executive. Madame d'Houët, however, insisted on the model of apostolic life precisely outside this framework. She wanted solemn vows, a General Superior for life and to be subordinated only to the Pope, just as the Jesuits were.³⁶

Gender is used here as a relational and socially constructed term. As such, the term places restrictions on individuals while also allowing them to exist according to their perceived sex. This leads to genders in the plural; not just masculine and feminine but multiple ways for expressing gender.³⁷

Relational aspects

According to Linda Woodhead, gender and religion intersect in relationships of power. She writes, "it is no longer easy to overlook the ways in which contexts of gender change and anxiety have flushed out religion's central and abiding concern with gender roles and relations, and revealed it as one of the key sites in society for the defence or negotiation of unequal distributions of power."³⁸ This is important because Christianity had not only sacred power in the nineteenth century, but social, cultural and political power as well. In Woodhead's view Churches have reinforced "existing gendered distributions of power" and provided women "with ideological and practical means to combat coercive forms of male power."³⁹ Like other works before

³⁶ Medioli, 'An unequal law'; Zarri, *Recinti*, 68–82.

³⁷ Clair, *Sociologie du genre*, 92–94. Anthony Favier underlines the contradiction in presenting, in a fixed way, how individuals engage in masculinity or femininity, since gender norms only exist because individual and social actors are constantly reappropriating these norms, each in their own way and their own path, in an ever-changing context. Favier, Anthony, *Égalité, mixité, sexualité*, 193.

³⁸ Woodhead, 'Gender Differences,' 583.

³⁹ Ibid.

it,⁴⁰ this article was designed as an analysis of the mutual construction of gender and religion, thus acknowledging gender and religion as two social dimensions embedded in the same context – a context that cannot be analyzed without studying the experiences of both the women and the men involved in the Church.⁴¹

Madame d'Houët created space for her own spiritual authority. Without questioning the Catholic system, she played up her visions and her ability to persuade the ecclesiastical authorities. Gender relations, shaped and authorized by men, were notably challenged by this type of visionary audacity. The French Jesuits tested Madame d'Houët's resolve. They presented institutional arguments against the very name of Madame d'Houët's order and its constitution, arguments that would eventually also be raised by the central government of the Society of Jesus. Meanwhile, Madame d'Houët's memoirs show that she deployed a rhetoric of humility in arguing her side of the case. Alison Weber has described Teresa de Ávila using a similar rhetoric; both women made certain forms of spiritual power accessible.⁴²

In her writings,⁴³ Madame d'Houët insisted that she was completely submissive to her director and even more decisively submissive to divine authority. For example:

Authority of the director	Divine authority
« J'étois toujours prête comme il disoit à mettre le marche en main au bon Dieu, je lui disois souvent mon pere ne vous laissez pas a tout cela c'est bien franchement que je ne veux rien, et si vous voulez me le [le projet de fondation] defendre je serai bien alors assez forte pour resister aisitot qu'il vouloit me gronder [...] » ⁴⁴ .	« Un jour après la communion une voix intérieure me dit he quoi ne sui je pas assez puissant pour remplacer un homme mortel que ce que le p. Varin mon serviteur et rien de plus, il est venu ici quand je le lui ai commandé et il en est reparti quand je l'ai voulu » ⁴⁵ .

40 Höpflinger, Lavanchy & Dahinden, 'Introduction,' 627; Herzog, & Braude (eds.), *Gendering Religion and Politics*, 8–9. Sol Serrano also argues for the joint study of the political, religious and gender dimensions of the nineteenth century *clausura* in Chile. Serrano, 'El ocase de la clausura,' 535.

41 De Gasquet, 'Religion.'

42 Weber, *Teresa of Avila*.

43 *Parisien. Beatificationis*, 1950, 69.

44 Translation: 'I was always ready, as he used to say, to demand a decision from the good Lord. I often told my father: don't get tired of all this, it is quite frankly that I want nothing, and if you want to defend it [the foundation project] I will be strong enough to resist as soon as he wants to scold me.'

45 Translation: 'One day after communion, an inner voice said to me 'What, am I not powerful enough to replace a mortal man? Who is Father Varin? My servant and nothing more. He came

One of the major challenges found in Madame d'Houët's *Mémoires* was her proof that she did not do her own will, but that of God, which, by definition, surpassed that of men. Integral to this was Madame d'Houët's view that true spiritual direction grew out of a personal relationship with the divine. In the *Mémoires*, Father Varin, who was in the position to authorize the congregation's founding, congratulated Madame d'Houët for "doing her will." This provoked "great disgust" in Madame d'Houët, who insisted she was nothing more an instrument of God's will.

In all her work, Madame d'Houët had to deal with the notion that women were more likely than men to mistake the fruit of their imagination or the devil's whispers for the voice of God, a potential vulnerability considered the path to false visions or false revelations. Thus, confirmation of her visions by a spiritual director was all the more crucial. Flying in the face of this, she questioned ecclesiastical authority and referenced her inner voice. The language of humility in her *Mémoires* was in fact, contradicted by her other language – that spoken to the higher authority. Her insistence on this direct communication was what opened a space where her foundation project could be confirmed.

Representations

In the early twentieth century, after a significant life on the fringes of orthodoxy where she worked to shift the lines defining religious life for women, Madame d'Houët was introduced as a candidate for beatification and canonisation.⁴⁶ She was advanced to the designation "venerable" in 1970. Each step of the canonisation process saw the pontifical power exert more control over the way people perceived of her anticipated sainthood.⁴⁷ Madame d'Houët was declared virile. This article thus, pushes back against essentialist positions, and looks at the various forms of "masculinity" performed by the foundress. It explores the gendered representations of Madame d'Houët in *Lives*, the book written after her death to propose her canonization and then in her extended Cause for sainthood.

The *Lives* of Madame d'Houët proclaimed her to be a "canonisable" figure who corresponded to the model of female holiness. It progressively smoothed out the virile elements associated with the foundress and insisted on their exceptional nature. Paradoxically, the general context in which *Lives* was

here when I ordered him to and left when I wanted him to.'

46 On the canonisation process, see Misztal, *Le cause di canonizzazione*.

47 Delooz, *Sociologie et canonisations*, 39.

Martin (390–391)	Stanislas (307; 318)	de Rancé (98)
On s'est plu à la représenter, ainsi que nous l'avons dit à la fin du chapitre précédent, comme une femme dure, austère, pliant tout à sa volonté, presque entièrement dépourvue de cette onctueuse affection de son sexe, qui gagne les cœurs et les attire à Dieu par les liens de la tendresse et de la douceur. Rien n'est plus faux que cette idée ; il y avait en elle des entrailles vraiment maternelles. Et nous pouvons affirmer que nulle mère n'aima jamais sa fille comme madame d'Houet a aimé ses religieuses. ⁴⁸	Celles des Fidèles Compagnes de Jésus, qui l'ont connue, savent combien elle les aimait toutes, mais d'un amour vraiment et purement surnaturel, ayant uniquement en vue le bien général de la Société et le bien particulier, selon Dieu, de chacune des âmes qui lui étaient confiées. 'Voyons nos fautes, bien ; mais ne nous en désolons pas. Je vous répète que je vous pardonne, et vous aime de tout mon cœur, malgré vos défauts et les miens.' ⁴⁹	J'ai été bien soignée dans ma famille quand j'étais jeune, affirme une religieuse... Mais si j'étais restée dans le monde, jamais ma mère n'eût fait pour le rétablissement de ma santé, la moitié des sacrifices que n'a jamais hésité à faire ma bien-aimée supérieure. ⁵⁰

written was quite the opposite: in the twentieth century after the Second Vatican Council, nuns advocated for the renewal of religious life, and they directly challenged the inferior status of women in the Church.⁵¹

Lives was a composite drawn by three contributors: Abbot Martin, published in 1863⁵², Father Stanislas in 1895⁵³ and a last one written by Sister Thérèse de Rancé published in 1978.⁵⁴ How did these hagiographers represent the foundress who did not correspond to “natural” feminine virtues? For example, the concept of maternal love presented a challenge

48 Translation: 'As we said at the end of the previous chapter, she was portrayed as a hard, austere woman, bending everything to her will, almost entirely devoid of that unctuous affection of her sex, which wins hearts and draws them to God by the bonds of tenderness and gentleness. Nothing could be further from the truth than this idea; her entrails were truly maternal. And we can affirm that no mother ever loved her daughter as Madame d'Houet loved her nuns.'

49 Translation: 'Those of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, who knew her, know how much she loved them all, but with a truly and purely supernatural love, having in mind only the general good of the Society and the particular good, according to God, of each of the souls entrusted to her. 'Let us see our faults, well; but let us not be sorry for them. I repeat that I forgive you and love you with all my heart, despite your faults and my own.'

50 Translation: 'I was well cared for in my family when I was young,' said a nun. 'But if I had stayed in the world, my mother would never have made for the restoration of my health half the sacrifices that my beloved superior never hesitated to make.'

51 Rousseau, *Françoise Vandermeersch*.

52 Martin, *Vie de Madame de Bonnault d'Houet*.

53 Stanislas de Marseille, *Notice sur la vie*.

54 De Rancé, *Comme une flamme*.

to each of them. They overcame this by tempering the strong character of the foundress and presenting other so-called natural qualities.

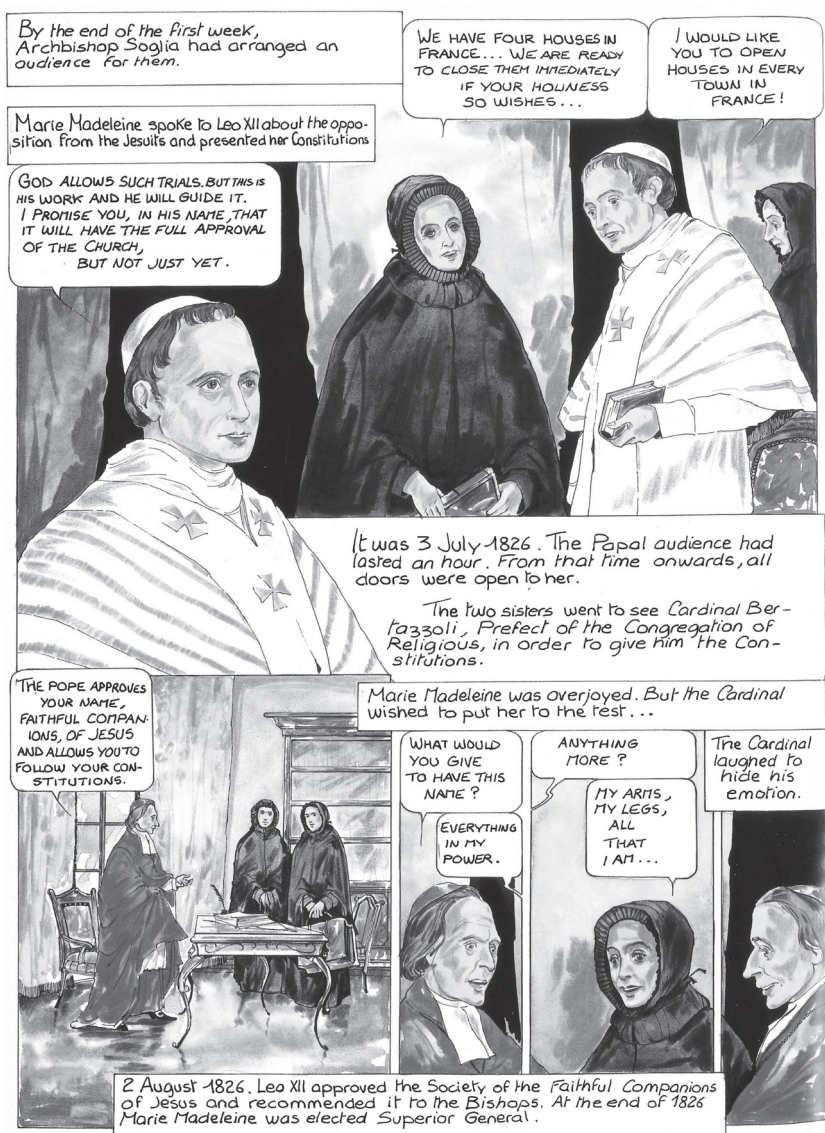
Abbot Martin was the only one to take maternal love as proof that Madame d'Houët could not be the hard and austere woman portrayed in certain testimonies. He strongly defended her by speaking of the love she had for her religious family, the love for her son being merely a starting point. The angle chosen by Father Stanislas reported a supernatural, almost divine love, which was not so much to be linked to maternal love as to God's love for all souls. For Father Stanislas, therefore, to be loved by Madame d'Houët was to experience God's love on earth. As for Thérèse de Rancé, she presented the testimony of a nun who had lived at the Faithful Companions of Jesus and thought the foundress was even more loving than her own mother. Like Father Stanislas, Thérèse de Rancé linked the office of Mother Superior with the love that suffused the entire congregation.

In the Cause for sainthood, the testimony of Madame d'Houët's grandson contradicted the image of maternal love depicted by the hagiographers: "Je me souviens de cette réflexion humoristique de mon père qui disait : 'Vous avez de la chance, mes enfants, vous avez une grand'mère qui sera peut-être un jour canonisée. J'en ai eu tous les ennuis, vous, vous en aurez l'honneur, tandis que vous avez une mère qui ne sera sans doute jamais canonisée, mais qui est parfaite pour vous'. Mon père avait beaucoup d'imagination et n'était pas toujours pondéré".⁵⁵ The grandson's testimony shows the difficulty of navigating between Madame d'Houët's abandonment of her son in favour of her work, and the maternal love she exemplified as "mother" of a congregation "who has fulfilled her duty" to God. It reveals one of the many tensions evident in the construction of a female saint when viewed through the lens of gender norms.

Institutions

A study of the Faithful Companions of Jesus shines a light on Roman institutions and reveals what Madame d'Houët's reconfiguration of gender relations meant for those in Rome who defined gender boundaries. How and when

⁵⁵ Translation: 'I remember my father's humorous reflection when he said: 'You are lucky, my children, you have a grandmother who may one day be canonized. I had all the trouble, you will have the honor; while you have a mother who will probably never be canonized, but who is perfect for you'. My father had a lot of imagination and was not always balanced.' *Parisien. Beatificationis*, 1938, 90–91.



14

One page of the comic strip *Faithful Companions of Jesus: a society founded by Marie Madeleine Victoire de Bengy de Bonnault d'Houët* by Pascal Croci (Paris: Editions du Rameau, 1985; also published in French and Italian). It is an example of the hagiographic production in the twentieth century.
Image: Leuven, KADOC, Heritage library: KBRB26333.

did an experience outside the norm threaten the Church? This is the type of question that confronted the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars during Madame d'Houët's life, and which arose with even greater acuity for the Congregation of Rites after her death.

In Madame d'Houët's work, the Church's gender norms were subject to experimentation. Hers was work carried out by women with limited room to manoeuvre and yet, their very work transformed the norms and, possibly, the Church itself. It is within this framework that Florence Rochefort and Maria Eleonora Sanna discuss "gender mutations". Rochefort and Sanna's concept explains the reconfiguration of religious norms by those who would question and mobilize for or against the normative system.⁵⁶ The Faithful Companions of Jesus circumvented religious norms enacted by the Church by putting into practice a project separate from Jesuit institutions. They appropriated some Jesuit norms but created an alternative norm, and thus induced change – embedded in gender – to religious normativity.

Directly following the founding of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, Madame d'Houët constructed an institutional and hagiographic model that was manifestly "feminine" even as it borrowed from the Ignatian model. The temporal gap between the implementation of Madame d'Houët's project, and the establishment of new institutional practices for religious women, underscores the requirement that solid experience be gained before attempting to reshape religious norms. The most direct path to approval for her foundation would have been to imitate other forms of female religious life already in existence. Madame d'Houët, however, at the risk of moving away from those who dictated the norm and of being excluded, stuck to her appeal for a change in the norms. She was framing institutional change articulated around issues of power.⁵⁷ Her death reinforced the dilemma. Would the establishment of female religious houses follow the Church hierarchy? Or if they struck out in an innovative direction, would they be recognized by Rome?

Making the journey to Rome to receive Papal support was an important step for French and Belgian religious leaders during the first half of the nineteenth century. This was especially true in the context of the renewal of religious life.⁵⁸ For the Netherlands, Marit Monteiro has argued that a way to create female autonomy was to ensure that the rules were strictly applied.⁵⁹

56 Rochefort & Sanna, *Normes religieuses et genre*, 15.

57 Pelletier, 'Institution(s) Religieuse(s)', 552.

58 Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*, 189–193.

59 Monteiro, *Vroomheid in veelvoud*, 57.

The rise of apostolic congregations in the first half of the nineteenth century, however, was largely unsettled – Rome struggled to define the legal contours of female religious congregations.⁶⁰ Even more, Rome wrestled with the role of a female superior general.⁶¹ Rome's uncertainty opened space for experimentation. From a gender perspective, the process of institutionalization crystallized tensions and served to mark the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable appropriation of the Jesuit model.

The network mobilised by Madame d'Houët was similar to that organized by Anna de Meeûs (1823–1904), a Belgian foundress who faced the same dilemmas a few decades later. Both obtained results in Rome, but it cost them their link to the Society of Jesus,⁶² who felt the women's advance had been at the Jesuit's expense.

At every *scale* of power within the Catholic Church, the project of Madame d'Houët forced the ecclesiastic hierarchy to take a stand on women's forms of religious life. When she submitted her request for approval to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in Rome in 1826, the Jesuits opposed the project. This is most clearly illustrated by Michele Zecchinelli (1778–1856), a consultant who provided a *votum* on her petition. After Madame d'Houët obtained an oral approval for her congregation from the pope and had been authorized to use the name "Faithful Companions of Jesus", Zecchinelli still argued against what he perceived as problematic issues.

Zecchinelli, writing in a *votum*, gave eight reasons why the Faithful Companions of Jesus should not be approved, and directly proposed nineteen modifications to the project.⁶³ His main argument revolved around issues he considered specific to men, such as the apostolic ministry. He saw it as incompatible with female solemn vows and the *clausura*. He took a negative stand on an array of things including women's nature, the probation, the generalate for life, the fourth vow, the Spiritual Exercises, the public catechism, the missions, and the uncertain progression between grades. Zecchinelli also resorted to a historical argument, identifying the Faithful Companions of Jesus with the suppressed *jésuitesses*. The changes Zecchinelli proposed aimed to transform the institutional form of the

60 Rocca, *Donne religiose*.

61 Mostaccio, 'Donne, clero e modello ignaziano.' The examination of this issue in terms of gender relations is not new. In the seventeenth century, the Jesuit Théophile Raynaud (1583–1663) sought to explain the nature of the jurisdiction of the abbess de Fontevraud without casting doubt on the virility of the men who obeyed her. Cf. Gay, *Le dernier théologien*, 381.

62 Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*, 300–307.

63 General Archives of the Society of the Sacred Heart (hereafter AG SSC), H-I, 2, box 2, cahiers 4 et 5. *Animadversiones in Institutum piarum feminarum S.J. recens in Gallia introductum*.



Saint Peter's Square in Rome, c 1850. Detail of the litho 'Rome', edited by Vve Turgis, Paris, 1849. Image: Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Cartes et plans, GE DL 1849-30.

Faithful Companions of Jesus, which he insisted, could not be identical to the Society of Jesus.

The arguments used by the Jesuits to prevent their name and Constitution from being used without their approval, were based on the social division between men and women legitimized by the Church. They aimed to discredit Madame d'Houët's project and protect their "exclusivity". The Jesuits said the Constitution did not have the same meaning for men and women since they engaged in different practices. As well, they maintained that allowing for congregations such as Madame d'Houët's, would imply a new distribution of power.

This resonates with the theoretical analysis proposed by anthropologist, Saba Mahmood, who used Foucauldian analysis to explain power as a set of strategic relationships that cut across all spheres of life. It is similar also to the position taken by Judith Butler who situates agency within power structures.⁶⁴ Madame d'Houët's agency contributed to the emergence of alternative norm and forms for women in religious life. After Madame d'Houët, these forms were more or less socially recognized and yet remained in opposition to the dominant gender norms – constituting a type of "gender mutation."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

⁶⁵ Rochefort, & Sanna, *Normes religieuses et genre*, 20–21.

The congregation of Madame d'Houët survived, unlike the previous and similar failed enterprises of early modern times. This achievement was a feat of great importance even if it remained in tension with dominant norms enacted by the Church.

Conclusion

To date, historiographical research on the history of women in religion often starts from representations or identity and norms but does not question the Church as an institution. Because gender relations overlap in ecclesiastical hierarchies, it is possible to write the history of religious women and yet focus on catholic institutions, including the top hierarchy in Rome.

This article has discussed two ways to understand these gendered aspects of ecclesiastical institutions: firstly, when faced with demands made by women, an institution will redefine its identity and structure. This was demonstrated most revealingly by Zecchinelli in his *votum*. Secondly, the place of women within a men's institution, especially in a context where vagueness surrounds the position of superiors, requires the researcher to use the concept of gender in their reasoning. Only in that way can power relations and their impact on institutional structures be investigated and understood.

The same applies to gender representations. What the hagiographical work produced on Madame d'Houët in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emphasizes, is that the Church continued to reaffirm a configuration of gender relations inherited from the early modern era. Once the conclusions had been stripped down to the institutional level, and even after the Second Vatican Council, nuns continued in a state of inferiority no matter the fervour with which they questioned their position.

These analyses of gender, when taken to their institutional conclusion, show that gender history can shed light on the history of an institution as a whole.

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