Beyond Frontiers

History of the Daughters of Charity

19th–20th Centuries

Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée

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To Sister Évelyne Franc (1948-2024),
Superioress General of the Daughters of Charity

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Introduction

The Time of the Cornettes

A Time That Has Passed

Today, is not the time of the cornettes already over? It was in 1964 that the famous white headdress of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul with its raised wings disappeared from hospitals, clinics, and the streets, where people were used to seeing the sisters walking along two by two. It was a "holocaust" for Suzanne Guillemin, the superioress general at the time, conscious of the sacrifice demanded of the 45,000 sisters of her multi-national charity organization[1]: the end of an era for all those, Catholic or not, who, for three centuries, were accustomed to their discreet presence in the midst of every kind of poverty. "Our name, like our attire, personifies charity for everyone," wrote another superioress, Marie Lamartine, in 1895.[2] This simplification of the habit, in line with Vatican II, expressed more deeply the desire for a return to the roots and to the assumed simplicity of the seventeenth-century origins of the Little Company. It was also a way to resolve an internal problem that had been troubling them since the French Revolution: the Spanish sisters wore a different attire, which expressed a certain independence vis-à-vis French authority.

But half a century later, the time of the cornettes also seemed to have come to an end through internal exhaustion. With or without a habit, the "good sisters," that is, those active women, free to come and go to nurse and educate people, born of the extraordinarily fruitful creativity of a third status for women—neither married nor nuns, with no cloister of any kind other than that of a notarized contract or the conventual rule—no longer seemed to re-

spond either to the needs of society or to the aspirations of young women. There is no need today to take the veil in order to care for children or the sick, so religious vocations are more strongly attracted to contemplative communities, which answer other needs: a spiritual thirst in an era saturated by mass consumption and a break with the deceptive promises of freedom, as Charles Péguy wrote as early as 1912.[3] Perhaps the time of the cloistered nuns—those "virtuosos" of the faith, to use Weberian language—has succeeded the time of the cornettes, when, as simple parishioners, the countless good sisters produced by the nineteenth century simply wanted to be, above all, virtuosos of charity.[4]

The numbers do not lie.[5] In 2010, there were 18,000 Daughters of Charity, a significant number, with a median age of sixty-eight, but there were only 220 novices, scarcely more than 1%, or 4% if we add to that sisters who left the "seminary" or did not take their first vows. These numbers are not sufficient to assure generational renewal. The aging is even more pronounced in the Western world: in Europe, the median age is seventy-three, but in France, where there are hardly any entrances, it is eighty. It is not much better in Spain and Italy, other historical bastions of the cornettes, where there are a few vocations, but they do not compensate for an inescapable decline. North America, Australia, and Japan are following the same route (seventy-three years of age). Poland alone stands out, with a median age of fifty-eight and annual entrances of more than ten. Latin America presents greater contrasts in terms of median age (sixty-five years of age, but seventy in Argentina and forty-seven in Haiti) with a relatively larger number in Brazil and Colombia but with almost none in Central America. Asia (fifty-three years of age) and Africa (forty-seven years of age) are younger continents. Here also are countries on the move like Vietnam, India, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda, and so on, although in some of them modest numbers reflect fragile implantations. This tells us that the geographic balance of the Company is changing, mirroring a Catholicism whose vitality is shifting toward the countries of the global south. Do we also see in this a connection between poverty and lack of social protection, and new recruits among the Daughters of Charity? Without making correlations that might go into greater detail regarding the gross domestic product or the index of human development, we can affirm that the time of the cornettes has not ended everywhere. The services offered for more than three centuries by a French congregation internationalized

in the nineteenth century are still finding favorable ground, both in health and education. This way of life is still contributing to a certain emancipation of women. By that we mean that it offers them prospects other than the traditional roles often relegated to them. Nevertheless, there are also readjustments being made in the Western world. The Daughters of Charity are growing old along with it and, if they are closing more houses than they are opening—in Europe, fifty-three closings for sixteen openings in 2010—they know how to transform them into retirement homes which they share with persons of modest means. At a time when the end of life becomes an ethical issue, they testify to having something to offer the elderly, just as in the days of demographic expansion they responded by caring for children. In women's congregations everywhere, it is a time to invent the future.

A Time of Plenty

The time of the cornettes was above all a time of plenty. It is quite amazing to observe its vitality. On the eve of the French Revolution, the Daughters of Charity numbered 3,000 and were already first among sisters dedicated to works of charity, with 400 establishments, mainly in France and Poland.[6] Following the suppression of secular congregations (decree of August 18, 1792), the dispersion of the motherhouse (October 30, 1793), the interruption of recruitment, and the local politics of the Reign of Terror, which saw a number of sisters leave their ministry, they began a timid return as early as 1795 and were officially recalled under the Consulate (decree of December 21, 1800). Nevertheless, the Company had lost one out of three establishments and four sisters out of ten, obliging it to limit its network, in the towns more than in the country, and in hospitals more than in parishes. This fragile situation, which revealed a lack of leadership challenged by new methods of regulation from the post-revolutionary authority—less hierarchical, more democratic—led to a grave crisis under the Empire. It almost swept away the newly re-established congregation, as happened with the Lazarists, who suffered the wrath of Napoleon.

Once these difficulties were resolved, the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul experienced a meteoric growth, beginning in the

1830s. Fewer than 2,000 sisters in 1820, they were 7,000 in 1860 and 10,000 in 1900. These numbers show that the Daughters of Charity were an integral part of a "congregational invasion," which surpassed them. Four hundred new communities were founded between the Empire and the Third Republic, representing three-fourths of the orders created between the middle of the seventeenth century and the middle of the twentieth century. At that same time, the number of women religious rose from 13,000 to 130,000, reaching a peak in French society of seven consecrated women per 1,000 women (four per 1,000 before the Revolution).[7] Superabundant, these vocations were exported throughout Europe and then the world, which was to be included in the time of the cornettes, beginning in the 1850s. In the United States, this occurred by joining with a strong local community; in the young Latin American countries emerging from Spanish and Portuguese decolonization that were trying to build modern health and educational systems; and in missionary and colonial territories of the Mediterranean and in Asia. Still, France merited special attention, both because of its steady number of vocations—in 1930 one cornette out of four in Europe and two out of ten in the world were French, for a total of 38,000 sisters—and also because it was the seat of authority of the general superiors, the repository of the "primitive spirit" consecrated by the holy remains of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, canonized in 1737 and 1934 respectively. Lastly, it was the model on which every foreign foundation was to pattern itself.

Literature and iconography have outdone one another in celebrating this world of plenty. If truth be told, the sister of charity was less often talked about than the parish priest. We find her installed as a nurse under the pen of Louis Roux in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840–42), and as a pharmacy sister in Le Paris de Maxime Du Camp (1869–76). For the former, she was "kind and useful to everyone, a capable and accomplished woman, doing everything good."[8] For the latter, the sisters were "admirable women found at the bedside of the sick and the orphan's cradle." The common people "had long known and loved them…."[9] This popularity was genuine since before the Revolution, and was the basis of the opposition of philanthropists in the Age of Enlightenment between useful religion and idle prayer, between Sébastien Mercier's flattering portrait of the "Grey Sisters" (1783) and the vices of *La Religieuse* of Diderot (1780). How-

ever, the iconography is much richer and borrows from various milieus. This included propaganda posters showing Napoleon I visiting the sisters at the *Invalides* (1808), and Napoleon III and Eugénie visiting the nursery of the famous Rosalie Rendu (1854). There were also the paintings of Théobald Chartran at the Sorbonne (1889) or of Pablo Picasso (1896) glorifying the role of the physician—Laennec for the former—while including in the picture a Daughter of Charity in the hospital or making a home visit. Countless holy cards were exchanged among women, on which the cornettes were frequently associated with the orphan girls of their workrooms and celebrated a virtue. Postcards circulated during World War I, witnessing to a popularity renewed in the field hospitals of the battlefront and the hospitals of the rear guard. Superb black and white photos from great agencies like Roger-Viollet played on the lights and shadows of the white cornette and the gloomy, poverty-stricken streets through which the sisters made their way. The anti-clerical iconography expressed in the press was linked to the Republican situation of the years 1880–1914 and, in particular, to the school offensive. By metonymy, the cornette, above all, represented every type of sister, as in today's advertisements or fashion shows which have not been able to resign themselves to the disappearance of an iconic headdress that became the sign, as in a Barthesian mythology, of pure generosity.[10]

"*Tonton*, you said the cornettes are finished!" chanted some Parisian nurses to François Mitterand, the president of the Republic, during a general assembly shown on television on October 14, 1988.[11] Contrary to a vulgate whose errors we shall point out, the sisters did indeed pursue the professionalization of the hospital and of nursing care in France, in Europe, and in the United States. Their gradual withdrawal, from 1960–70, ended nevertheless by identifying them with a parental model of care more than with a professional model. Of these two types of competency, the first was based on inherited or feminine virtues, whereas the second—masculine—claimed to come from acquired learning.[12] Clearly, the Daughters of Charity made the choice of the former, whether it was a question of the pharmacist or the teacher in the nineteenth century, or of the nurse or the social worker in the twentieth century. Beyond this arbitrary representation—working by dedication or in order to earn one's living—it should be recalled that those feminine identities were less sharply defined in the periods that

concern us. The lay social worker of interwar period was formed on the model of the "good sister." Listen to what one of them, born in 1912, had to say:

> I considered my profession a vocation, and I freely chose celibacy. For me, this profession was not compatible with marriage and bringing up children. Many social workers of my generation are unmarried women. My parents were reluctant but respected my choice. The studies were free. Of course, my entourage and my school friends didn't understand; they thought that I wanted to become a nun.[13]

On the contrary, entering the convent might have seemed to many girls and their parents a means of acquiring a profession, of being assured of a job, or even of a guarantee for their old age in societies that did not have any social security other than family.

Religious History, Gender Studies and the Global Turn

Beyond Frontiers (*19th–20th Centuries*) is the sequel to *The Streets as a Cloister (17th–18th Centuries)*, but the two works, which cover two distinct epochs, can be read separately.[14] The first volume, borrowing its title from Vincent de Paul—"the Daughters of Charity will have for cloister the streets of the city"[15]—tried to emphasize the creation of a unique way of life which, at the same time, integrated the renewed spiritual demands of the Council of Trent and the freedom of movement outside a firmly established cloister necessary for the relief of suffering. In truth, the "Servants of the Poor" were not the only ones to experience this contradiction, but they came after others and benefitted, above all, from the juridical astuteness of their founder. He chose an ordinary structure, the confraternity, in which the sisters made only simple vows, renewable annually, while committing themselves to the demands of an authentic religious life. This model, in the minority under the *ancien régime*, became more common at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the form of congregations with a superior general. Hierarchical and centralized, these congregations were capable of reacting efficiently to demand by the sending of trained sisters at little cost.

Historiography shows a renewed interest in the "good sisters," although historical work is more plentiful for the early modern than for the modern period, and more in the English-speaking than in the French-speaking world. The general impact of secularization can be seen in this, with the religious factor being downplayed in post-revolutionary society, even to its possible extinction, an effect also of the greater separation of public and private, masculine and feminine, political and religious spaces, which has led to a relative invisibility of the second sphere. Yet via both religious history and the history of women, religious women have emerged from the silence of history.[16] In that regard, the work of Claude Langlois (1984)[17] was a milestone, as well as the works that were inspired by it, to establish, then discuss, a feminization of religion in the nineteenth century: a feminization of practice, piety, and personnel.[18] Along with this, if we look only at the British example, laywomen first capture our attention. Through their philanthropic activities, they showed themselves capable of going beyond the limits set for them by Victorian society.[19] Agency provided a key to the "*terra incognita*" history of religious women (Susan O'Brien)[20] and led to a study of their "complex identities."[21] The work of American historians like Sarah Curtis and Rebecca Rogers, marked by gender studies, but taking France as a field of study, contributed to the resurgence of certain issues, stressing the place of women religious in the history of education or of women missionaries in colonial history.[22] The focus on women has always had the effect of curbing the emergence of questioning the relationships of power within religious institutions.[23] Like recent works on the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa and the White Fathers, one can question the manner of guardianship of the Lazarists over the Daughters of Charity.[24] In what areas was this done: political choices? the daily practice of charity? spirituality? Were there any variations, as at the time of the Revolution, when there was a lack of authority, followed by the firm takeover of superiors general Dominique Hanon, then, in the nineteenth century, by Jean-Baptiste Étienne? Were there areas favorable to control, such as the council of the Company, the Parisian heart of authority, or, on the contrary, of relative autonomy, such as distant mission countries? Can the hypothesis be made that such a guardianship also protected the cornettes from the claims of competing masculine authorities, be they ecclesiastical or civil?

Another historiography, if we may call it that—without disregarding their differences—a history that is global, transnational, interwoven or connected, struggled to include religious women, and even to give attention to the religious factor.[25] It has benefited from the tradition of missionary studies that gave us the great panorama of Élisabeth Dufourcq (1993), but, at the same time, nurtured a lack of confidence in the eurocentrism of a history that would once again focus world attention on the categories of the West.[26] Nevertheless, religious congregations took a transnational approach attentive to non-state actors.[27] The Daughters of Charity contributed in this way to the increased circulation of persons (sisters) but also of devotions (the Miraculous Medal) and types of youth movements (Children of Mary) in Europe, its colonies, and the new worlds of the nineteenth century. They provided educational and medical knowledge and transmitted a common culture that participated in the "globalization"[28] of the world in which the connection between European civilization and Catholicism would be respected. The martyrdom of the Daughters of Charity of Tianjin in 1870 could thus be interpreted, beyond the political context of unequal treaties, as the expression of a Chinese concern regarding Western medical practices. We will also see the cornettes, unmarried women, encouraging another less domestic, more professional model for women in the Muslim Ottoman Empire.[29] In a word, they were perceived as "feminists,"[30] who were promoting a cultural and religious shift. We might ask ourselves whether they did not reinvest their gains in this in the Europe of the 1920s. Such an approach allows us to reconnect the events wrongly separated by national historiographies like the political history of religious personnel. A similar chronology could be observed in Europe and in Latin America: a massive recourse to the Daughters of Charity, who enjoyed a quasi-monopoly of public service in the area of assistance, education, and caregiving in the early nineteenth century. There was a noticeable turnaround beginning in the years 1860–70, marked by a positivist intellectual context, which led nations and their elites to try to recover the areas given over to the church. Thus, the sisters were part of the migratory movements and political exiles in the Atlantic world.

Without a claim to any theorization whatsoever, the intensive study of a congregation[31] like the Daughters of Charity offers an appropriate analogy—neither too small (*micro*) nor too large (*macro*), but in the middle (*meso),* so to speak—a manageable archival

corpus, the possibility, at last, of articulating different scales—from local to transnational, from biography to group portrait—allowing one to ask of religious history questions arising both from gender studies and from the "global turn."[32]

The Allure of the Archives

What was still missing was access to the sources. If truth be told, the initiative came from the congregation, which opened its archives to me—a privilege that was granted only rarely to an earlier generation of researchers but which today has become widespread.[33] Claude Langlois justified his statistical approach by the impossibility of writing a monograph; Odile Arnold worked essentially from the rules printed by congregations and the biographies edited by sisters, available in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* of France. On the other hand, Yvonne Turin commended the generosity of the Sisters of Christian Doctrine of Nancy and the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Good Shepherd of Clermont-Ferrand, while, at the same time, regretting the reticence of other congregations which understood only "silence or hagiography."[34] In other cases congregations gave reasons of longstanding caution, or reasons specific to the Company, such as the long kept "family secret" of the illegitimacy of the foundress, Louise de Marillac,[35] or reasons common to congregations of women, justly suspicious when faced with a dispossession of their archives, of which the French Revolution had given an early example. In addition, they were faced with a scholarly use of their history, very different from the edifying aim in the obituaries of deceased sisters.[36] Nevertheless, the contrast, on one hand, between a strong internal request for history, increased since *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965) and the present need to support a heritage in a community that was more and more international, and, on the other, the absence of their own resources in order to write a truly scientific history, led to a recourse to a professional historian.[37] What remained was to come to an agreement, that is, to find the appropriate distance, sufficiently sympathetic for anyone who was expecting, on the one hand, an understanding of the interior of a social and spiritual experience, but sufficiently critical for someone who, on the other hand, wanted to put this his-

tory in perspective, so as not to yield to the monographic illusion and, even less, to hagiography.[38] In short, it was as an "outsider" in many aspects that I presented myself to Sister Evelyne Franc, the superioress general; as a man, a young lay academic. But it was as an "insider" that I had to prove myself. The groundwork had been laid by my dissertation on the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, in which two figures of social Parisian Catholicism set the stage: Frédéric Ozanam and Sister Rosalie Rendu.[39] Here I have to commend the trust that was quickly granted me, and continued by the recently deceased superioress general, Sister Kathleen Appler, the devotion of the archivists of the motherhouse and the provinces of the Company, the welcome of the provincial superiors (visitatrixes) and local superiors (sister servants) of the houses which offered me hospitality, and the companionship of the Lazarists of rue de Sèvres in Paris and DePaul University in Chicago. Each and every one has made possible a history which goes far beyond this book.[40]

The archives of the motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity form the principal basis of this study. Like other congregations with a superior general, there is a strong internal administrative culture similar to that of modern states. Circulars, contracts, records of personnel and establishments, correspondence, inspection reports, surveys, and so on—quite an accumulation of documents, overwhelming in many respects, have been generated and preserved. This is an indication of the activity of a general secretariat that became larger and expanded with sisters from foreign countries, in order to be able to communicate with the "provinces." What was missing, however, was a history of the collections in order to understand, for example, what took precedence in the preservation of documents at uncertain political moments. Although the revolutionary government confiscated the juridical and fiscal archives, the community rescued symbolic documents like council minutes and the letters of the founders up to their death in 1660, but evidently abandoned the rest. A few references here and there supply what the historian sometimes owes to chance: such as the hostile laughter of deputies at the National Assembly, depriving us of the reading of a petition of Sister Deleau in 1791,[41] or the excessive prudence in 1870 which led to "removing catalogues, records, and so on, from the secretariat of the community."[42] On the contrary, what a happy discovery in 1848, of a letter from Louise de Marillac, which "perfectly supported our respectable superiors in their desire to remain as close as possible to the early practices."[43]

This confirmed the young superior, Father Étienne, in his desire to reestablish the two Vincentian communities in imitation of the founding period. We only find what we are looking for.

As rich as they were, it was, however, necessary to cross check the archives of the Daughters of Charity, in particular those of the motherhouse, with public archives (national and departmental archives, archives of Public Assistance, and so on) and other private collections (archives of the Congregation of the Mission, of the diocese of Paris, and so on). For this task, we limited ourselves to France because the worldwide scale was too vast for just one researcher who, nevertheless, had the good fortune to have at hand, in Paris, documentation from the foreign provinces of the Company—cross checked in the case of America with the archives preserved in Emmitsburg, Maryland—and, at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* of France, access to a rich foreign bibliography, allowing him to carry out a transnational history.

Vincentian Itinerary

Every good history is, first of all, chronological. The present one begins on July 13, 1789, a short eruption in the long life of a congregation. The Daughters of Charity observed helplessly the pillage of the neighboring convent of Saint-Lazare, prelude to the revolutionary days that would sweep away the *ancien régime*, and they underwent the first inspection of their own home (Chapter 1). The mounting tension, followed by the violence they suffered, were connected to the question of oaths, and it was a very sad revolution experienced by many sisters: public whippings, a return to their families where they had to work, and sometimes marry, and, for seven of them, imprisonment and even execution under the Reign of Terror (Chapter 2). Alone with their conscience, claiming in the age of democracy a new freedom of choice, some sisters, protected by the local authorities where needed, preferred to maintain charitable works in which the Company was reinstated in 1800 by an authority that wanted to remedy the disorganization in the hospitals and in caregiving (Chapter 3). Alas, the period of the Empire, facing the competing authority of the Archdiocese of Paris and the Lazarists regarding the guardianship of the Daughters of Charity,

led to an internal "schism" in which the political powers interfered. As in a replay of the Revolution, "refractories" and "constitutionals" among the sisters were in conflict with one another until, in 1811–12, Napoleon himself authoritatively put an end to this. Then, in 1814–15, a pontifical mediation became involved (Chapter 4). From that time on, the Daughters of Charity were on a solid basis and the nineteenth century became their "great century," marked by an unprecedented growth. This was based on sociological factors as the recruitment showed, but it was also symbolic, as indicated by bearing a name which would become a trademark—Sisters *of Saint Vincent de Paul*. During a period when public assistance was partially privatized, close collaboration with the State was also one of the factors essential to their success (Chapter 5). Versatile in a conception of caregiving that was less professional than compassionate, the sisters still had to fulfill growing demands of competency that entailed a first attempt at specialization and the emergence of professional training (Chapter 6). Managing a growth that was also international raised the question of the unity of the Company, which put in place governmental tools aimed at implementing the strict exportation of a French model. Although the United States accepted this relatively well, Spain, on the contrary, was a case of fierce resistance, in which religious and political factors were inextricably involved (Chapter 7). At the service of nations which delegated to them part of the nursing and educational tasks, the Daughters of Charity were, in fact, particularly sensitive to political contexts (Chapter 8). They had a very painful experience of this, beginning in the years 1860–70, marked by expulsions (Portugal), exile (Mexico), and even martyrdom (China). From the 1880s on, Republican France was the scene of a school war which, paradoxically, entailed a professionalization that had been acquired by the sisters obliged to earn their certification (1881) to save their public schools. Soon they had to resign themselves to opening private schools (1886) and invested a tremendous pedagogical effort in keeping up with a new competition (Chapter 9). The laws of 1901 and 1904 signaled a new step in the anti-congregational policy that ended with abandoning the educational ministry, but a relative accommodation was made in the areas of nursing and caregiving (Chapter 10). The "Sacred Union" marked a reprieve, and the sisters spared no effort on the home front all during World War I. Thus, they were able to maintain traditional ministries like the orphanages that were so numerous at the time of industrialization and European migrations, in

Liverpool and Baltimore, for example (Chapter 11). They were also able to be present at the birth of the modern nurse to respond to the challenges of the professionalization of caregiving (Chapter 12), and to establish new fronts of education for the common people and of trade unions (Chapter 13). New roles of sisters emerged between the two wars: the educator, the social worker, and the unionist. The Daughters of Charity wanted to train young women for careers in a more service-oriented economy, while also preparing them for their role as wife and mother (home economics). This formation also included the spiritual support of the Children of Mary, the name of which showed the importance of Marian devotion, beginning in 1830 (Chapter 14). Sisters were encouraged to take a fresh look at the apparition narratives of Catherine Labouré and to observe the complex management by the Lazarists of a veritable mystical overflow. In fact, two other seers, Justine Bisqueyburu (1840) and Apolline Andriveau (1846), who were less well-known, contributed to reinforcing the Marian aspect or, on the contrary, to rebalance a Christ-centered aspect closer to the French School of Spirituality and the harmony of new spiritual inclinations.

The Daughters of Charity have received much, but they have also given much. Their popularity is rarely denied. May this book be the witness of the time of the cornettes.

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