

NAPOLEON AND THE REVIVAL OF FEMALE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN PARIS, 1800–14

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IN December 1807, representatives from thirty-five French female religious communities wrote to Napoleon, reminding him that their associations were ‘essentially religious’. They stated that any attempt to secularize them would bring about their death and they announced their wish to remain subject to the authority of the Church in all that concerned their spiritual lives and interior regimes.¹ These women, whom Napoleon had called to Paris especially, thereby warned the Emperor that although he may have been responsible for the official revival of their communities, he could not assume control over every aspect of their existence.

This essay examines an often-neglected episode in the history of the revival of the Church in France. The extraordinary growth of female religious communities in the nineteenth century is well known, yet there has been little investigation into the origins of this growth or the conditions that shaped it.² By looking at the process of re-establishment, this essay shows that the revival of female religious communities was neither preordained, nor easy. Those communities that attempted to re-form following the destruction of the French Revolution faced numerous challenges, especially in their relationship with the state, while the Napoleonic administration found itself forced to make concessions when dealing with the religious communities whose help it could not do without and whose continued presence seemed non-negotiable. The result was a revival that, although initially dictated from above, came to rest on a process of compromise and negotiation on both sides, the terms of which would characterize the

¹ Paris, Archives nationales (hereafter: AN), F/19/6247, *Adresse à Sa Majesté l'Empereur des députées au Chapitre général des Sœurs de la Charité* (2 December 1807).

² The one historian to have examined the subject in detail is Léon Deries, *Les congrégations religieuses au temps de Napoléon* (Paris, 1929). The second half of the book addresses female congregations. See also Victor Bindel, *Histoire religieuse de Napoléon*, 2 vols (Paris, 1940), 2: 47–55. More recent contributions are found in Claude Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin* (Paris, 1984), 67–151 and Jacques-Olivier Boudon, *Napoléon et les cultes* (Paris, 2002), 157–63.

growth of female religious communities throughout the nineteenth century.

The question of Napoleon and the revival of female communities has on occasion been presented as a battle between Napoleon and the nuns, from which the nuns emerged victorious.³ This interpretation rests upon a narrative of female constancy and virtue of the type that could survive any adversary, even Bonaparte.⁴ Yet, while female piety certainly played an important role in the revival of these communities, the advantages involved for the state must also be considered. Later historians have therefore considered the extent of Napoleon's role in their revival and ensuing growth.⁵ Although this is an important line of inquiry, it necessarily focuses on authorized communities and thereby overlooks the reunion of former monastic communities, which usually remained unauthorized.⁶ This essay attempts to adjust the parameters of the debate by examining the revival of both monastic religious orders, whose members took solemn vows and lived under the rules of enclosure, and secular communities, whose members took 'simple' vows and were permitted to undertake certain activities in society such as teaching, nursing, and serving the poor.⁷ It asks how this revival came about, why it developed the way it did, and what it meant for the women involved. The case-study of Paris, where reunited communities were under constant observation, offers essential insight into this process.

The French Revolution had officially suppressed all religious communities, yet the uneven application of its legislation meant that this destruction was neither complete nor permanent. The decree of 13 February 1790 had suppressed all communities whose members took solemn vows, offering them a pension upon their return to society.⁸

³ Deries, for example, writes that Napoleon was 'defeated by the nuns'. Deries, *Congrégations religieuses*, 221.

⁴ See, for example, Bindel, *Histoire religieuse*, 2: 203 and Jean Boussoulade, *Moniales et hospitalières dans la tourmente révolutionnaire: les communautés de religieuses de l'ancien diocèse de Paris de 1789 à 1801* (Paris, 1962), 10.

⁵ Langlois, *Catholicisme au féminin*, 111; and Boudon, *Napoléon*, 157–63.

⁶ Historians are often too quick to equate the anti-monastic laws of the Revolution with the end of monasticism, a point noted by Langlois himself. Langlois, *Catholicisme au féminin*, 67.

⁷ For a discussion of the differences between regular and secular communities, see Derek Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 2003), 17–22.

⁸ *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860: recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des Chambres françaises, Première série*, XI (13 February 1790), 591.

While the majority of male religious took up this offer, most women, much to the consternation of the National Assembly, either hesitated or refused to leave altogether.⁹ Many remained in their convents for as long as possible. Although the communities that staffed France's schools, hospitals and prisons were initially conserved, they too were suppressed on 18 August 1792.¹⁰ Yet police records reveal that at least several hundred women quickly regrouped in Paris.¹¹ Members of the community of Saint Thomas de Villeneuve were even able to stay in their main house throughout the revolutionary decade.¹² As was often the case with revolutionary policy, a gap had opened between principle and practice, a gap which Napoleon found himself forced to address.

Napoleon believed from a young age that the Church was a danger to the unity of the state.¹³ Although he later came to appreciate the value of religion, particularly in terms of its influence over the populace, these early views clearly influenced his approach to reinstating religious communities. When he came to power as First Consul in 1799, Napoleon inherited a society divided in its attitude towards religion. A persistent Jacobin element was ready to interpret any sign of leniency towards the Church as evidence that revolutionary achievements were being compromised.¹⁴ Yet, on the other hand, public opinion had for several years been calling for the return of religion in society.¹⁵ This was at least partly influenced by the fact that, after a decade of disruption, primary education was almost non-existent and hospitals were in a state of ruin. Revolutionary experiments in hiring lay people to fill the roles of nursing and teaching sisters had been largely unsuccessful, and departmental assemblies were soon discussing the return of female communities to staff the nation's hospitals.¹⁶ The

⁹ Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder*, 258.

¹⁰ *Archives parlementaires*, XLVIII (18 August 1792), 350–6.

¹¹ Paris, AN, F/7/2514, 55–708. These records, dating from 28 June to 5 December 1793, provide the names of at least 252 former nuns living in the Section de l'Observatoire in Paris. Their addresses show that many of them were living together in small groups.

¹² Gaëtan Bernoville, *Les religieuses de Saint-Thomas-de-Villeneuve (1661–1953)* (Paris, 1953), 182–3.

¹³ Frédéric Masson and Guido Biagi, eds, *Napoléon inconnu: papiers inédits (1786–1793)*, 2 vols (3rd edn, Paris, 1895), 1: 148–50.

¹⁴ Paul Dudon, 'Le Concordat et les congrégations', *Etudes* 86 (Jan–Mars 1901), 623–44, at 629 and Bindel, *Histoire religieuse*, 2: 120.

¹⁵ See, for example, *Le Grondeur ou Le Tableau des Mœurs publiques* 3 (30 November 1796), 2.

¹⁶ Deries, *Congrégations religieuses*, 210–11.

solution, formulated at a time when negotiations for Napoleon's concordat with Rome had only just begun, was to re-establish religious communities under the auspices of the state.¹⁷

Their revival began with the re-establishment of the Filles de la Charité, or Sisters of Charity. In 1791, the congregation had staffed 421 institutions throughout France, forty of which were in Paris.¹⁸ The Sisters of Charity were both experienced and, at least until 1791, popular.¹⁹ Perhaps more to Napoleon's liking was their centralized structure, which saw all novices trained in Paris before being sent where needed in France.

The Minister of the Interior, Jean-Antoine Chaptal, authorized the re-establishment of the community in Paris by a decree of 1 nivôse year IX (22 December 1800).²⁰ He instructed the superior of the congregation, Antoinette Deleau, to summon her former companions to train young women to work in hospitals. To ensure the success of the enterprise, the government provided significant financial and material aid. As the Sisters' former mother house, seized in 1793, was being used for military storage, the administration donated the unsold house of another order.²¹ Chaptal also arranged the donation of an annual sum of 12,000 francs, to come from the general expense budget for hospices, and an annual pension of 300 francs to fund the training of girls from poor families. These measures ensured a steady supply of personnel but also tied the future of the community to the state.

A project to re-establish the very institutions banished with so much bile and effort in the preceding decade had to be handled delicately.²² Chaptal forestalled potential criticism in three ways. First, he presented

¹⁷ The Concordat made no mention of religious communities, although the Organic Articles (1802) suppressed all ecclesiastical establishments except chapters and seminaries and banned religious titles. 'Articles Organiques de la Convention du 26 Messidor an IX', reprinted in Jean-Etienne-Marie Portalis, *Discours, rapports et travaux inédits sur le Concordat de 1801* (Paris, 1845), 67.

¹⁸ Paris, AN, F/19/470, 'Tableau des établissements que les Sœurs de la Charité occupent dans le Royaume' (Paris, [May 1791]) and L//1054, dossier 2, pièce 52, 'Sœurs de la Charité, Liste alphabétique de leurs établissements tant en France qu'à Paris' ([n.d.]).

¹⁹ In April 1791 a series of attacks had been launched against the sisters in Paris and throughout France. See Paris, AN, F/19/470 'Note des maisons où les sœurs ont été le plus maltraitées' [n.d.].

²⁰ The decree is reprinted in Derics, *Congrégations religieuses*, 212–13.

²¹ Article 2 granted them the house of the Orphelines in the rue du Vieux Colombier.

²² Chaptal later wrote that 'the re-establishment of a religious corporation contrasted with all the ideas of the time.' Jean-Antoine Claude Chaptal, *Mes souvenirs sur Napoléon* (Paris, 1893), 71.

the revival of religious communities as the restoration of revolutionary law, which had initially permitted the women of 'establishments of charity' to continue their work. Second, he portrayed the Sisters of Charity as the only individuals who could fulfil the required tasks. The revolutionary decade had, he declared, shown that care for the sick could 'only be assiduously administered by those persons vowed by their state to the service of hospices and directed by the enthusiasm of charity'. Finally, throughout the text of the decree, he carefully avoided any terminology that could suggest that the Sisters of Charity was a religious organization. Sister Deleau became 'citizen Dulau [sic]', the congregation was now a 'corporation' and its future novices were called 'students'. The state may have revived a religious community, but Chaptal's wording suggests that this had little to do with religion. In meeting urgent social requirements, the administration here trod a careful line between appeasing one sector of the population and attempting to avoid the ire of another.

The upheaval of the Revolution ensured that restoration was no less difficult for the communities themselves. An 1802 circular sent by Antoinette Deleau drew attention to 'the infractions' that had crept into the observance of vows in the past decade. In some houses, the regular routine of prayer and work had been lost. Certain sisters had even used the banning of the religious habit as 'a pretext for following the spirit and maxims of the world', socializing openly with outsiders, making purchases at will, and even inviting visitors back to the convent.²³ One year later, Deleau again condemned the abuses brought by the 'sinister liberty' of the Revolution, noting, among other problems, excessive attention to hair and clothes and a lack of deference amongst the sisters of some houses.²⁴ While revival was being imposed from above, the superiors of re-established communities could find themselves attempting restoration of a different kind from below.

Not all communities could be authorized. In April 1801, the Minister of Police, Joseph Fouché, had ordered an inquiry into all houses in Paris where former nuns had reunited to live as a community.²⁵ Although incomplete, it identified 460 nuns living in seventy-

²³ Paris, Archives des Filles de la Charité, Dossier: Sœur Antoinette Deleau. Antoinette Deleau, *Circulaire* (Paris, 2 February 1802). The religious habit had been banned on 6 April 1792.

²⁴ *Ibid.* (Paris, 1 February 1803).

²⁵ Paris, AN, F/7/6291, pièce 70 (Paris, 27 germinal, year IX [17 April 1801]).

seven different houses.²⁶ Some of these were informal reunions, perhaps driven by financial need. Others were remnants of former Parisian communities or even more formal re-establishments. The Carmelites of the rue de Vaugirard, for example, had gathered in 1797 when Camille de Soyecourt, a Parisian Carmelite, used her inheritance to purchase a new residence in which to re-establish the order.²⁷ Authorization of such well-known monastic orders, however, posed too great a risk. The problem grew as new communities, often founded in the provinces, began to establish branches in Paris where they felt their presence was most needed. One such community, the Dames des Sacrés Cœurs de Jésus et Marie, arrived in 1804. Although they would later take on a small amount of teaching, their chief purpose was to atone for the Revolution through the Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, a purpose that would seem to preclude official approval.²⁸

Napoleon attempted to resolve the situation with the decree of 3 messidor, year XII (22 June 1804).²⁹ The decree was principally aimed at the male community of the Pères de la Foi, present in Paris since 1800 and suspected of hiding Jesuits.³⁰ Yet it also stated that all authorized and unauthorized communities had to submit their statutes and rules to the Conseil d'Etat for approval or be dissolved. It thereby sent a powerful message to all reunited religious communities in France that the price of revival was to be constant surveillance.

Yet there seems to have been little attempt to clamp down on unauthorized communities and section authorities were confused about how to proceed.³¹ Jean-Etienne Portalis, the minister for ecclesiastical affairs (the 'Ministre des Cultes'), meanwhile granted numerous provisional authorizations.³² Teaching orders were particularly favoured, both for the purposes of education and because of their perceived

²⁶ Ibid. 'Maisons où sont réunies les ex-religieuses pour y vivre en communauté' (1801).

²⁷ Henriette de Vismes, *Camille de Soyecourt, Carmélite au grand Cœur, 1757-1845* (Paris, 1938), 102-4.

²⁸ [Anon.], *Notice sur Madame Henriette Aymer de la Chevalière: fondatrice des Dames des Sacrés Cœurs de Jésus et de Marie, et de l'Adoration perpétuelle du Très Saint-Sacrement de l'Autel* (Paris, 1835), 16-17.

²⁹ Paris, AN, F/19/6256, 'Projet de décret sur les Associations religieuses' (3 messidor, year XII [22 June 1804]).

³⁰ The Jesuits had been dissolved in France in 1764. See Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder*, 153-6.

³¹ See, for example, Paris, AN, F/7/3001, 'Opinion' (2 complémentaire, year XII [18 September 1804]).

³² Langlois, *Catholicisme au féminin*, 114-15.

ability to influence the poor.³³ The Ursulines, the Visitandines, and the Dames de Saint Maur were all authorized in the spring of 1806.

Their statutes demonstrate the state's efforts to impose a standardized organization upon female communities.³⁴ Authorized communities were to be placed under the jurisdiction of the ordinary, or local ecclesiastical authority, with the aim of limiting influence from Rome and maintaining state control. Articles concerning the possession and disposal of property ensured that nuns, rather than being dead to the state, were now subject to its rules like any other citizen. Even the internal regime of a community was now an official matter.³⁵ These attempts to reshape the character of female religious communities represented perhaps the greatest impact on their revival.

Yet unauthorized monastic communities continued to escape official interference. In 1807, the author of one ministerial report seemed resigned to the fact that 'as long as there were Catholics in France' there would be individuals who would deliver themselves to this 'genre of life'.³⁶ The state therefore pursued a policy of tacit toleration, deciding that cloister was acceptable as long as it was 'purely voluntary', that the wimple and the veil were 'objects of little importance, and a costume like any other', and that as long as the state did not exempt female religious communities from Episcopal surveillance, or recognize the civil death imposed by solemn vows, the 'renaissance' of monastic communities could not be proven.³⁷ It was hoped that if these communities were tolerated, disruption would be avoided, and that if they remained unauthorized, they might eventually die out. Like the institution of the monarchy, monasticism had become another *ancien régime* institution restored in all but name.

Napoleon was meanwhile planning the centralization of authorized female communities, a project that began with the 1805 appointment

³³ See, for example, the discussion of the importance of religious education in Paris, AN, F/19/6247, 'Rapport général sur toutes les associations de dames charitables existantes actuellement dans l'Empire' (30 October 1807).

³⁴ See, for example, Paris, AN, F/19/6256, 'Statuts des Sœurs de la Visitation' (1 May 1806).

³⁵ See, for example, a complaint from Cardinal Fesch about investigations into the 'interior regimes' of female communities. Paris, AN, F/19/6247 (Fontainebleau, 11 November 1807).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 'Rapport général sur toutes les associations de dames charitables existantes actuellement dans l'Empire' (30 October 1807).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

of his mother, known as Madame Mère, as the official protector of the Sisters of Charity and other nursing sisters. Napoleon had long been concerned by the number and variety of female religious communities and disliked the fact that they were involved in such similar activities.³⁸ He now envisaged their unification under the Sisters of Charity, imagining a type of army of nuns to staff the nation's hospitals and charitable institutions.³⁹ Portalis senior warned against this proposal, stressing the unique history and identity of each community.⁴⁰ Above all, he believed that 'where a religious institution is concerned, it would kill the institution to separate it from what makes its soul.'⁴¹ Despite this advice, the plan continued to circulate and became one of the main points of discussion at the meeting Napoleon called in Paris in 1807 for all authorized communities.

The General Chapter opened on 27 November 1807 in the hôtel of Madame Mère and closed on 2 December, the anniversary of Napoleon's coronation. The occasion was in many ways a publicity stunt, but for the sisters present it offered the opportunity to voice the concerns raised by their state-managed revival. Among these was the proposed unification to which, as Portalis had predicted, they strongly objected. Citing their differences in history, character and routines, they argued that 'fusion' would destroy the 'happy rivalry' between them that came from doing the 'same good by diverse means'.⁴² The very point that irritated Napoleon was thereby presented by female religious communities as advantageous. The deputies also protested against being granted only provisional authorization, arguing that it made them feel merely 'tolerated and suffered'. This temporary status, they argued, discouraged potential members, put off donors, and damaged the 'zeal' of the faithful.⁴³ The sisters also used the meeting to request greater

³⁸ Deries, *Congrégations religieuses*, 220.

³⁹ Napoleon to Portalis, Letter No. 8749 (17 May 1805) in *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier* (Paris, 1958–70), 10: 519.

⁴⁰ 'Rapport à l'empereur sur les congrégations religieuses de femmes s'occupant du soin des maladies et des pauvres, 13 Prairial, An XIII' [2 June 1805] in Portalis, *Discours*, 480–94, at 488–91.

⁴¹ 'Rapport à l'Empereur sur la nécessité de ne laisser établir dans l'état d'association religieuse qu'avec l'autorisation du gouvernement et après avoir pris connaissance de ses statuts [...] (24 fructidor an XIII)' [11 September 1805], in Portalis, *Discours*, 532–3.

⁴² Paris, AN, F/19/6247, 'Adresse à Sa Majesté l'Empereur des députés au Chapitre général des Sœurs de la Charité' (2 December 1807).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

financial aid and to ask that the state put an end to the interference of hospital administrators in their professional and religious activities.

These concerns, championed in a report by Madame Mère, did not go unheeded.⁴⁴ A decree of 3 February 1808 granted numerous allowances and donations to all authorized communities and a circular sent by the Minister of the Interior attempted to clarify the role of hospital administrators.⁴⁵ Plans to unify different hospital congregations were temporarily discarded. The state thereby confirmed its commitment to the revival of these particular female communities while showing that it could be persuaded to do so on their terms.

It continued, however, to pursue centralization in other areas. Yet several projects to give the Ursulines sole responsibility for female education in France remained unrealized.⁴⁶ A project to unify those communities responsible for female imprisonment under the Refuge de Saint Michel similarly failed as the order's houses fought to keep their autonomy.⁴⁷ Again, the administration found itself forced to rescind its plans for centralization as female communities asserted their individual identities.

The problem came to a head with a schism amongst the Sisters of Charity after they finally received definitive authorization on 8 November 1809. This required that, like all authorized communities, they be placed under the spiritual direction of the local ecclesiastical authority. But the congregation had traditionally been directed by a male superior from the Lazarist congregation and when the current superior, abbé Hanon, protested, he was imprisoned. The Ministry's subsequent efforts to impose its policy produced a rupture in the congregation which lasted for two years, led to the departure of over fifty sisters, and was resolved only with the expulsion of 165 others. The new minister for ecclesiastical affairs, Félix-Julien Bigot de Préameneu, was forced to realize that he had misjudged the situation.⁴⁸ The episode again displays how the Napoleonic regime, in orchestrating the revival

⁴⁴ Paris, AN, F/19/6247, 'Rapport de Madame sur le Chapitre général des Sœurs de la Charité' (27 November 1807).

⁴⁵ Langlois, *Catholicisme au féminin*, 122 and 129.

⁴⁶ See for example the project of February 1814, a draft of which remains in Paris, AN, F/19/6247.

⁴⁷ Deries, *Congrégations religieuses*, 223.

⁴⁸ Langlois, *Catholicisme au féminin*, 132–5. The documents concerning the affair are held in Paris, AN, F/19/6344.

of female religious communities, had underestimated the importance of tradition.

Increasingly unable to dictate the exact terms of the revival, Napoleon resorted to monitoring it with greater ferocity. This was partly achieved through the creation of the Petit Conseil in October 1807, charged with finding out everything there was to know about France's religious communities. In 1808, a major census was organized.⁴⁹ As relations with Rome deteriorated, police surveillance was increased to assess the loyalty of female communities. An 1811 report on thirty-nine known reunions in Paris claimed, for example, that the Carmelites were 'dangerous papists', while the Sisters of Charity were 'reasonably papist' but 'precious for humanity'.⁵⁰

Although both authorized and unauthorized female communities would continue to be closely monitored and officially subject to the law, many were by now gathering enough momentum to take charge of their own growth. Authorizations increased after 1810 and already authorized communities continued to expand with state support. In 1810, the congregation of the Mère de Dieu, for example, requested and was granted a new building to accommodate its expanding novitiate.⁵¹ By 1815, approximately 400 women were joining the religious life each year.⁵²

In 1805, Portalis had warned Napoleon he would 'kill' religious institutions if he attempted to separate them from their souls.⁵³ The minister had, as usual, identified the crux of the issue, a fact witnessed two years later when the nuns that Napoleon called to Paris warned that state interference in religious matters would mean the death of their associations. As it happened, there were no brutal deaths for female communities, although some did fade away. Rather, a process of conciliation and tolerance unfolded on both sides which rested on the Napoleonic administration recognizing and permitting the diversity of female communities, albeit under strict surveillance.

⁴⁹ Paris, AN, F/7/8071 and F/19/6293, 'État général des congrégations religieuses de femmes' (1808). The results are discussed in Boudon, *Napoléon*, 161–2.

⁵⁰ Paris, AN, F/19/470, 'Etat des maisons ou réunions religieuses existantes dans Paris' (5 March 1811).

⁵¹ Paris, AN, F/19/471 [Letter to the Minister of the Interior] (27 July 1810).

⁵² Boudon, *Napoléon*, 162.

⁵³ 'Rapport à l'Empereur sur la nécessité de ne laisser établir dans l'état d'association religieuse qu'avec l'autorisation du gouvernement et après avoir pris connaissance de ses statuts [...] (24 fructidor an XIII)' [11 September 1805], in Portalis, *Discours*, 532–3.

Napoleon and the Revival of Female Religious Communities

The revival of female religious communities demonstrates the paradox created by a state that wanted to retain and secularize the services of religious communities but which wanted to bring these communities, like the Church, under its own control. Examining this revival reveals how both Napoleon and female religious communities were forced to address the unsolved problems of the Revolution, problems which raised questions of liberty of religious belief and practice, and of who, in a modern state, should be responsible for education, nursing, charity, and for shaping a moral society.

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