THE CONVENT: AN OPTION FOR QUÉBÉCOISES, 1930-1950[1]

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Au cours des quinze dernières années les historien(ne)s des femmes au Québec ont commencé à explorer l'importance des communautés religieuses de femmes dans la société canadienne-française. Le point de mire pour leur intérêt s'est déplacé vers la communauté en général, les raisons pour avoir choisi la vie de couvent, et les diverses entreprises de charité. De plus en plus d'historien(ne)s reconnaissent le besoin d'examiner la vie religieuse comme alternative au mariage et à la maternité. Étant donné la réalité religieuse et socio-économique du Québec dans les années 1930, la vie de couvent peut être vue comme une option attirante pour les jeunes femmes avec des aspirations professionnelles ou religieuses.

Within the last fifteen years historians of women in Québec have begun to explore the importance of religious communities of women within French-Canadian society. The emphasis has shifted away from finding heroines and models of piety among the nuns[2] (usually the foundresses or leaders), to an interest in the general membership, its reasons for choosing a convent life, and its various charitable endeavours. Not all agree on the nature of the contribution nuns have made, but more are recognizing the need to examine the religious life as an avenue that was open to women as an alternative to marriage and motherhood.

As recent scholarship has begun to redress the lack of attention paid to nuns over the years, two basic hypotheses about communities of women have emerged. One of these suggests that religious congregations absorbed marginalized women of the society, particularly widows and women *'d'un certain âge'* who were engaging in works of charity on their own.[3] It is Bernard Denault's contention that the clergy actively sought to direct the efforts of these women in accordance with its view of the role of the Roman Catholic Church in society.[4] Although Denault presents a convincing case for the growing hegemony of the Church in the realm of social services, he fails to treat nuns as agents on their own behalf. Denault would seem to suggest that it was the approbation of the clergy that saved these women from a life on the 'fringe.' At the same time he wants to make the point that it was to the advantage of the clergy to take over and direct the initiative of these women. Nevertheless, it is not at all clear by what magic this group of 'marginalized' and 'passive' women was transformed into an organization worthy of esteem.

Assessments of religious communities that are more sensitive to the aspirations of women have been put forward by Micheline Dumont[5] and Marta Danylewycz.[6] These historians have argued that the religious life represented an alternative to marriage, motherhood, and spinsterhood. Their approach acknowledges the desire of women to be involved actively in society. Dumont emphasizes the need to analyze the role of communities *"comme pôle d'attraction, pour l'ensemble de la population féminine; c'est d'évaluer leurs fonctions en regard des besoins sociaux de leur époque."*[7] Both Dumont and Danlewycz have stressed the fact that religious life was an attractive option for women as long as they were philosophically and economically constrained to attach themselves to a *'foyer.'* Dumont suggests that, in a society in which motherhood was held as the ideal for women, the notion of a *"maternité spirituelle"*[8] increased both the acceptability and the appeal of the religious life. Furthermore, Dumont argues that, once in the convent, some women used the religious life as a vehicle for occupational advancement and self-expression. According to Danylewycz, the convent offered nuns many opportunities unavailable to their lay peers.

The work of Danylewycz and Dumont also raises some rather difficult questions about the motivations and attitudes of the nuns. While Danylewycz found evidence of what she called "feminist praxis"[9] among the nuns, Dumont argued more explicitly that *"les religieuses (étaient) peut-être des féministes sans le savoir."*[10] Can one, however, argue that a latent feminism inspired these women to join the convent when, even by Dumont's own admission, many if not most nuns perceived themselves to be responding to a call from God to be of service within the Church? Does evidence of "feminist praxis" mean that religious life was a protest against the role assigned to women with the patriarchal structure of the Church? Or does challenging the authority of bishops and priests with regard to their own communities suggest that the nuns accepted the patriarchal structure, but sought to secure their own place within it? Furthermore, with regard to the 'proto-feminism' of some nuns, one might wonder whether this phenomenon actually motivated women to opt for the religious life, or whether it was an outgrowth of their experience after they entered.

It would seem that, for the majority of women, choosing the religious life did not constitute a conscious protest against the restricted lives of lay women in Québec. Nuns continue to describe their choice of the convent as a response to a call from God.[11] This is hardly surprising when the very validity of their 'vocation' is premised on the fact that their choice of the convent is seen in religious terms. It is quite possible that citing any other reason for wanting to enter may have been unacceptable to those responsible for screening entrants. Since there was, then, a religious rhetoric that was approved, and perhaps expected, it is difficult to assess motives for entrance.

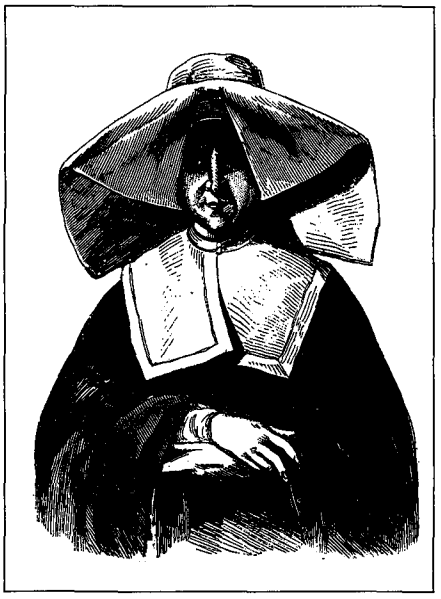
Difficulty does not, however, mean impossibility. Dumont and Danylewycz have been right to insist that the lives of the nuns must be examined. One can begin by studying women who entered communities during specific periods of

time in order to recreate as closely as possible the nature of the choices available to them. Admittedly it is dangerous to generalize on the basis of one group of entrants. Nevertheless, it seems this is the only place to start to delineate the broader picture. This paper will present some of the findings of a study of a Montréal-based community during the 1930s and 1940s.[12]

The Community under study was chosen for several reasons. This group was involved in virtually every aspect of the social services and numbered both professionals and non-professionals in its membership. One traditional work of the Community even into the 1930s was home-visiting, and the Sisters played an important part in the life of the rural communities in which they lived.[13] Their entrance requirements were not prohibitive, apart from canonical stipulations regarding age and legitimacy.[14] Although good health was seen as an asset, exceptions were made. There were no set levels of education to be attained prior to entrance, nor was a dowry actually demanded (although formally it was a requirement). These factors made this community more easily accessible to women who wanted a life of service to the Church. The young women usually brought with them what they could: a table service, a few articles of underclothing, and whatever their parents might want to give. The Community supplied the rest.

The major source of information for this study was the Community's Register of Membership, which includes the entrants' names and the names of their parents, as well as the occupations of the fathers. It records the location of the entrants' births and the locations from which they entered. The dates at which they progressed through various stages of training are also listed. In some cases a note has been made on their educational training. Necrologies and various commemorative booklets of the Community were also consulted. Although the Community had an English-speaking Novitiate in the United States, this study examines only those women who entered in Montréal.[15] In total we are dealing with 2,007 entrants over a twenty-year period.

The time frame selected for the study, 1930-1950, encompassed both a period of very successful recruitment of new members ot the Community (the first half of the



1930s) and a period of ominous decline in new membership (the 1940s). In Québec generally the population of nuns increased by 29% during the Depression and the years 1930-1934 were record years for recruitment of new members. Some have attributed the increase in membership to the economic dislocation caused by the Depression.[16] By contrast, the 1940s was marked by a return to prosperity occasioned by the Second World War , and by the recruitment of women into jobs previously denied them because of their sex. During this time growth of religious communities of women was 10% less than in the previous decade. The recruitment to this community faltered during the 1940s as 40% fewer new members joined. This study examines the extent to which the material conditions of existence may be said to have affected recruitment. The religious/political contexts of both the increase and decrease in membership were also studied.

Some broad patterns and conclusions emerged from the sources.[17] First of all, the ages at which the young women chose the religious life offers an insight into how women perceived their choice: whether they viewed it as their first choice, or their last hope, with optimism and enthusiastic idealism, or panic. The average age of the entrants over the twenty years was 21, and most of the women were between 18 and 24 years of age.[18] The average age of marriage in Canada during these years was approximately 25.[19] Almost half of those who entered in any age category left before it was time to pronounce final vows.

What all of this suggests is that, first of all, women chose to enter the convent at an age younger than that at which they might marry. That so many left implies that there was little stigma attached to leaving before final vows. (By contrast, leaving after final vows was viewed by the Church much as divorce was at the time). It would seem that many young women entered the convent to test their suitability for the life. Catholic girls at the time were encouraged to consider the possibility of a 'vocation,' and one could at least try the convent and then get out – unlike marriage. It would appear that most women who decided to enter the convent saw it as a positive first choice, rather than their only alternative when other things failed.

Most of the entrants also came from those areas where the Community had houses, so the young women would have had some familiarity with the nuns. Another factor which may have influenced entrance was that approximately 20% of the entrants had a sibling in the Community. Not only did the presence of a sister in the Community constitute a positive role model, but in an age when contact with family and friends was strictly controlled after entrance, the knowledge that one was not 'alone' would have been most reassuring.

To establish the socio-economic background of the entrants, the occupations of their fathers were analyzed. Farmers' daughters were disproportionately represented. Not quite half of those who entered and more than half of those who stayed, came from the farm. Since the nuns did not provide any educational facilities for the elite of the society where upper-class young women would have come to know them, the underrepresentation of professionals' daughters is not surprising. Nor did the poorest elements in society provide many members for this group. In fact, the diversified ministry in which the Community was engaged, and the rural location of many of the convents, put the Community in contact with precisely those kinds of women who entered.

The educational background of the women who entered seems to reflect the characteristics of the general female population. Most had completed the equivalent of Grade 8; many had a year or two of high school. A few had teaching certificates or professional training. Unfortunately, however, the records are not

entirely complete with regard to this aspect of the entrants' backgrounds.

To appreciate the choice represented by the convent, one must understand what other options were available to women. In the 1930s, not surprisingly, the economic climate was most unfavorable for Québécoises. Fifty percent of the women who worked outside their own homes were engaged in 'service.' For many, if not most, this meant domestic service, the mainstay of 'working' women during the Depression. The professions of teaching and nursing were increasingly taken over by the nuns who, for example, took up teaching positions at a faster rate than the laity. This was understandable when nuns could be hired to teach for a pittance – even less than the already low-paid lay teachers.[20] Finally, the attitudinal climate of the 1930s did not favour women in the workplace. The Francoeur Bill introduced in the Québec legislature in 1935 went so far as to seek to exclude women from the workforce unless they could prove need.[21]

At the same time that there was a great deal of hostile rhetoric aimed at those women who were trying to make a living, the clerico-political elites continued to extol the role of wife and mother within the French-Canadian context. The image of the nurturing female also encompassed those women who would dedicate their lives to the service of others in the Church. So, during the 1930s when most women found the workplace inhospitable, religious communities offered attractive alternatives where women could enjoy legitimate power and respect. Young women were being fed a steady diet of what was acceptable for them and they had the time to try out the religious life – a life that was often linked to a profession.

What changed in the 1940s? As has been shown, the age of entrants and the percentage of those with kin remained fairly constant. Farmers' daughters continued throughout the period to be overrepresented in the Community. What this meant, particularly in the 1940s, was that the Community continued to draw on a diminishing sector of the population. Whereas 27% of Québec males were employed in the agricultural sector at this time, 39% of the recruits came from farms.

Another consideration is the type and scale of work undertaken by the nuns during the 1940s. The eight new foundations of the Community in these years included an orphanage for boys, an elementary school for the children of workers in a munitions factory, a rest home for their own nuns, an educational institute, and three hospitals. The Community was being forced to give its members some occupational/professional training to work in larger institutions, particularly hospitals. Many Sisters were assuming supervisory or administrative roles. Nuns were less frequently to be found making home visitations. In a real sense, the life of the nuns was becoming more professionalized in terms of occupations, and the scale on which they were asked to perform certain works militated against their spending much time with potential new members. Since recruitment depended to a great extent on informal and individual encouragement, this could have been a problem.

Throughout the period under examination, education continued to be a relatively unimportant factor in both entrance and declining enrolment. Catholic women, generally, were not encouraged to receive any other training than that which would prepare them for motherhood. Until education would become a means of occupational advancement for women rather than a preparation for one's 'vocation,' it seems unlikely that it could be considered a factor in diminishing recruitment.

What did change then? Clearly one must consider the occupational opportunities occasioned by the war. Women in Québec, as elsewhere, took part in war industries and enjoyed the autonomy that resulted from their employment.[22] Unlike other areas in Canada where hesitation about women at work was perhaps a little more muted by patriotic fervour, the Québécoises were exposed to vitriolic attacks by the clergy for their selfishness and wanton disregard for the welfare of their children when they went off to work.[23] In a sense, the clergy laid all its cards on the table in an attempt to keep women at home. One might argue that the experience many women gained in the workplace belied the most outrageous claims of the clergy with regard to their moral jeopardy. This contradiction may have been but one element corroding the credibility and authority of the clergy, especially with regard to their pronouncements about women. It would be hard to argue that the expectations of women did not change over the war years. One might also wonder whether those who worked during the war merely delayed entrance. There is no evidence to suggest so within this community. It would seem that those who postponed entrance never, in fact, entered the convent.

Several other factors seem worthy of consideration in trying to account for waning interest in this community. The occupational explosion for women during the war did not last. Active programmes were begun by 1944 to encourage women 'to go back home.' Most women did, and on the surface, life seemed to return to 'normal.' Some married women, however, remained in the workforce, and these relatively few women can be seen to have kept the door open for others. These women did not have the best jobs, but their presence in the workforce suggested to others that marriage need not necessarily preclude paid employment.

One occupation that did make a difference for women during and after the war was clerical work. Employment in an office was generally considered an acceptable middle-class occupation, and one that was not already monopolized by nuns. Women were thus able to begin to conceive of work outside the 'vocational' range traditionally presented to them.

In another important development in the mid- to late-thirties, rural lay female teachers, and later their urban counterparts, began to challenge the clerical hegemony in their field.[24] These women were actively resisted by the government which seemed accurately to perceive that they were picking away at the underpinnings of a system that relied on the 'cheap labour' of the nuns. Similarly, in the mid-1940s, some nurses saw the need to unionize in order to withstand the pressure to turn them into 'lay nuns.'[25] While neither of these efforts at organization could be construed as mass movements, they represent an incipient awareness that women who chose not to enter the convent had a right to a profession and to a living wage.

In the realm of provincial politics the struggle to obtain female suffrage continued without success throughout the 1930s. While many see the granting of the vote to women in Québec in 1940 as a political ploy or a class-specific concern, it seems that this event can also be viewed as part of a nascent challenge to clerical control in Québec. The fact that Premier

Godbout stood up to Cardinal Villeneuve, threatening to resign and leave his position open for an avowed anti-clerical if female suffrage were not granted, suggests that Godbout knew that he could successfully defy the iron grip of the clergy.[25]

What all of this suggests is that regardless of how slow or how minimal social change may have seemed at the time, it was probably the most important factor in accounting for declining enrolment in the Community. The emergence of clerical work provided middle-class women with an alternative to more traditional pursuits. The growing militancy of some teachers and nurses was forcing open the doors of these professions of women who wanted a career and an income on which to live independently. The changing attitude which resulted from married women's decisions to stay at, or go back to, work was part of a larger awareness that women had a right to a just wage and reasonable working conditions. Although they faced the hostility of many of their male counterparts, their presence allowed for the possibility of greater choice for women.

Given the religious and socio-economic reality of Québec in the 1930s, then, the religious life can indeed to seen as an attractive option for young women with occupational or religious aspirations. Accordingly, the Community shared in very successful years of recruitment to the religious life throughout Québec. In the 1940s, however, the seeds sown by those women who stood up against the image of women propounded by the clerico-political elites began to bear some fruit in the gradual opening of options for women other than marriage and the convent. In this context the Community experienced a rather dramatic decline in new members as women looked elsewhere for life choices.

In all of this, however, we must not lose sight of the fact that the women who entered the convent spoke of their choice in relation to a specific 'call from God.' Despite the subjectivity of such an assertion, recruitment patterns reveal much about the nature of their 'vocation.' As more convent records are made available in the future, the role and importance of these women will be more clearly understood.

[1]I would like to thank Nora Campbell, Ruth Brouwer, Franca Iacovetta, and Ian Radforth for their comments on an earlier draft.

[2]The terms 'religious women,' 'nuns,' and 'Sisters' will be used without specific reference to any canonical distinctions.

[3]Bernard Denault et Benoît Lévesque, *Eléments pour une sociologie des communautés religieuses au Québec* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1975), p. 11.

[4]Hereafter the Roman Catholic Church will be referred to simply as 'the Church.' The clergy mentioned throughout the paper can be assumed to belong to this Church.

[5]Micheline Dumont-Johnson, "Les communautés religieuses et la condition féminine," in *Recherches sociographiques*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (janvier -avril, 1978), pp. 79-102.

[6]Marta Danylewcyz, "Taking the Veil in Montréal, 1850-1920: An Alternative to Migration, Motherhood and Spinsterhood," Address to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, June, 1978. See also: "Changing Relationships: Nuns and Feminists in Montréal, 1880-1925," in *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, Vol. 14 (1981), pp. 413-434.

[7]Dumont-Johnson, "Les communautés . . . ", p. 82.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 87.

[9]Danylewcyz, "Changing relationships . . . ", p. 419.

[10]Dumont-Johnson, "Les communautés . . . ", p. 102.

[11]A Questionnaire was distributed as part of the research for my thesis, "In the Spirit: Entrants to a Religious Community of Women in Québec, 1930-1939" (M.A. McGill, 1983). The responses to the question, "Who suggested the religious life to you?" were revealing both in content and in emphasis. Almost unanimously the nuns attributed their being in the convent to a call from God. The use of phrases like 'God alone' or 'Jesus Christ Himself' followed by exclamation marks or periods indicated that there was some sensitivity to the suggestion that they may have had other motives for being there.

[12]The period of the 1930s was the focus of my M.A. thesis cited above. Subsequently, I profiled entrants to the same community during the 1940s in a paper that was part of the doctoral requirements at York University. The Community requested anonymity in exchange for the use of their material. Consequently, it will be referred to as 'the Community' throughout.

[13]For example, in the absence of undertakers, the nuns were often called when someone died, and they would take care of the wake.

[14]Canon law required that an individual be at least 21 when she professed final vows. Because the training period in the Community was about five years long, entrants were not usually accepted before the age of 16. Canon law also required than an individual be legitimate or legally adopted. The Superiors seem to have had some discretionary power with regard to this canon because a few entrants were noted as being "illegitimate."

[15]Some who entered in Montréal were from the New England milltowns, but it was assumed that they probably shared in the French-Canadian mentality since they chose to return to Canada and to be trained in French.

[16]The relation between the Depression and recruitment to religious communities is made by Marc Lessard and J.P. Montminy in "Les religieuses du Canada: âge, recrutement, et persévérance," in *Recherches Sociographiques*, Vol. 8 (1967), p. 18. It is also part of the argument of Bernard Denault.

[17]For a more detailed analysis see B.J. Cooper, "In the Spirit . . . ."

[18]The ages ranged from 16 to 43.

[19]This figure is used in the absence of more specific data on Québec.

[20]One wonders about the extent to which the nuns realized the political implications of their accepting certain jobs. In *Histoire du Catholicisme au Québec: le XXe siècle*. Tome 2, De 1940 à nos jours (Mon-

tréal: Boréal Express, 1984), p. 176. Jean Hamelin certainly suggests that the nuns were resented for taking the jobs from which the laity could have benefited.

[21]Although the bill was never passed, Madeleine Trottier and Robert Mayer suggest that the bill did not pass not so much for lack of electoral support, but for the administrative difficulties inherent in obtaining the required proof. Trottier and Mayer, "Images de la femme au Canada français," in Michèle Jean (ed.), *Québécoises du 20e siècle* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1981).

[22]The reaction of Québécoises to the wartime experience is recorded in Geneviève Auger and Raymonde Lamothe, *De la poêle à frire à la ligne du feu* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1981).

[23]In 1942 the Jesuit-sponsored Ecole Sociale Populaire published the tract, *Le Travail Féminin et la Guerre* in which the authors accused women of being " . . . séduites par une propagande intéressée ou aveugle qui faisait consister la dignité de la femme, non pas dans son rôle d'épouse, de mère et de reine du foyer, mais dans l' "affirmation de sa personalité," dans la "liberté de se faire sa vie," et dans son "emancipation" (p. 2).

[24]The rise of these unions has been explored by Marîse Thivierge in "La syndicalisation des institutrices catholiques 1900-1957," in Nadia Fahmy-Eid and Micheline Dumont (eds.), *Maîtresses de maison, Maîtresses d'école* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1983), pp. 171-189.

[25]Johanne Daigle, "L'éveil syndical des 'religieuses laiques:' l'émergence et l'évolution des infirmières de Montréal, 1946-1966," dans Marie Lavigne et Yolande Pinard (eds.), *Travailleuses et féministes* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1983), pp. 115-138.

[26]This event is recounted in Thérèse Casgrain, *A Woman in a Man's World* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), pp. 92-94.

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OURSTORY: KATHERINE AND ME

The tiny Polish lady
limps in to work offering
fresh-baked Easter cakes, tart
garden apples, or spindly
backyard flowers; but always,
her presence brings a hug.

She worries her sentences
with accent, stumbling words
recall the hell of concentration
camps carried to Canada: Katherine
has trouble understanding
the war is over

for us who never lived it.
Terror stutters on her
tongue teaching me
the courage of speech;
teeth embedded like mountains
ranged deep in my life.

When my friend limps
in to visit, we don't talk
easy, I take her
flowers and cake served
with apples and caring,
a mountain to live by, yet

I don't know how to thank her.

Claire-Leah Wright
Toronto, Ontario.