

Introduction

The holy Synod, renewing the constitution of Boniface VIII, which begins *Periculoso*, enjoins [...] that the enclosure of nuns be carefully restored, wheresoever it has been violated, and that it be preserved, wheresoever it has not been violated; repressing, by ecclesiastical censures and other penalties, without regarding any appeal whatsoever, the disobedient and gainsayers, and calling in for this end, if need be, the aid of the Secular arm.¹

In its drive for reform, the Council of Trent (1545–63) allowed male regulars to become actively involved in the mission of Catholic recovery. Yet it imposed strict enclosure upon religious women, who should neither be seen nor heard. They were to live contemplative lives behind the high walls of their cloisters, abstracted, as it were, from the turbulent events of a society to which they allegedly no longer belonged. The ideal of strict *clausura* implied that cloisters should function as microcosms, separate from society at large. Contemplative nuns should die to the world as far as was humanly possible. This shift towards enclosure had wider consequences than could have been anticipated, particularly in terms of historical heritage. Until relatively recently, early modern contemplative nuns were all but absent from the pages of European history; moreover, the research that did exist implied – more or less explicitly – that the active endeavours of the Counter-Reformation held more intrinsic interest than cloistered forms of Catholic life in the seventeenth century. Excellent studies existed on mediaeval nunneries, but not much had been published on early modern convents, which were deemed to have little to offer.² It was as though historians shared a

common belief that 'there could be nothing interesting in the history of the nun'.³

Yet the seventeenth century is known as the century of saints, a time of vivid renewal in European Catholic devotion.⁴ The proliferation of contemplative cloisters was such that municipalities often were reluctant to accept new foundations in towns which counted several already. Since religious houses were exempt from the payment of local taxes, they could become burdens for any town, particularly in hard times. The movement of monastic growth was accompanied by the multiplication of less traditional endeavours. In the troubled religious context of the seventeenth century, when the old faith faced its first widespread and organised Christian contender in the growth of Protestantism, some female religious recognised certain limitations in the contemplative model. For instance, although they were not allowed to adopt the missionary lifestyle reserved for male endeavours like that of the Society of Jesus, French Ursulines negotiated significant modifications to the Tridentine decrees on enclosure in order to take on the teaching of girls from modest (even poor) social backgrounds in their innovative day schools. Thus, their evangelisation reached out beyond the walls of the cloister and implied daily and direct interaction with the world.⁵ Other congregations, such as the congregation of Notre-Dame, negotiated new forms of approved, semi-enclosed female religious life.⁶ More striking still was the figure of Mary Ward who, with a group of followers who became known as 'English Ladies', founded houses for the catechising and education of girls in several countries and defeated overwhelming odds in the process. With their decidedly apostolic and missionary vocation, Ward's 'wandering girls' addressed a crying need for a female equivalent to the male Jesuit mission. Yet by living an unenclosed life, they contradicted the decrees of the Council of Trent; moreover, they modelled themselves on the Society of Jesus, and as a result became caught in the crossfire of the bitter dispute which then raged between the secular clergy and the Society. Despite its undoubted timeliness and usefulness, Mary Ward's Institute was suppressed in 1631.⁷

Further developments in female involvement in seventeenth-century Catholic life saw devout laywomen forming companies which, although they answered a religious calling, remained secular in status. They often specialised in the catechising of girls, the care of the sick or charity to the poor. The region of Flanders abounded

in such informal groups, known as *beguinages*.⁸ In France, the most famous examples of this form of life were perhaps the Filles de la Charité founded by Vincent de Paul (1581–1660) and Louise de Marillac (1591–1660).⁹ In a majority of cases, however, these impromptu communities remained without religious status for a few years only, before giving in to institutional pressure and taking solemn vows under a recognised Rule. Such was the case of the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, founded by François de Sales (1567–1622) and Jeanne de Chantal (1572–1641).¹⁰ The women mentioned above were not contemplative in the Tridentine sense, since they vowed to work for the education of girls, which involved contact with the world and a degree of relaxation of *clausura*. These zealous *dévotés* carried the torch of their Catholic faith with militant fervour, challenging the gendered role definitions of the age. These were women worth writing about, or so did historiography imply.

In the last twenty years, however, this area of research has evolved greatly. Carried by the swelling wave of publications in women's studies, scholars began to inscribe contemplative women within the histories both of the modernising state and of a Church in the full swing of reform. To begin with, nuns were often presented in a dual manner. Some showed them as the hapless victims of family strategies and institutional greed, a representation encapsulated in Diderot's *La Religieuse* (1796), and which had persisted ever since. Others preferred to depict them as strategists who managed to avoid these constraints in female communities (as portrayed in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* in 1668). But more recent studies have started to dispel long-held assumptions about convents in general.¹¹ They have revealed a variety of make-up and practice, and encouraged historians to view convents as heterogeneous 'comprehensive schools' rather than a 'homogeneous sisterhood of like minds'.¹² They have demonstrated that, despite strict decrees on enclosure, cloisters interacted with their patrons and remained very much part of a city's life. Nothing can exist in a vacuum, and many convents became adept at social networking, becoming important elements of urban life. Contemplative women can no longer be seen simply as the guardians of a medieval past, nor as reactionaries who refused the changes of their day.¹³ The history of nuns has brought depth and nuance to the fields of religious history, of course, but also to the history of education, to family history, to social history, to cultural and art history, as well

as to literary scholarship and women's studies. The study of convent life is by definition a multi- and inter-disciplinary field, linking religion and ideology with considerations about gender and the body, but also with textual, cultural, political and societal issues.

Despite the progress made in research on religious women, the history of early modern English nuns so far remains relatively understudied – unsurprisingly so, since so many factors played to their disadvantage. As women, they belonged to that half of humankind which was for so long deemed unworthy of study; as enclosed nuns, they were believed, like their Continental Sisters, to have nothing to offer to our understanding of society. And finally, as English Catholics, they were deliberately kept out of the historiography and literary canon of early modern England. Their faith excluded them from society at large, and from the grand narrative of the Protestant nation.¹⁴

After the 1559 Act of Supremacy gave the monarch authority over the state and the Church of England, the Act of Uniformity abolished Mass and enforced conformity to Anglican practice. Governments passed a series of penal laws prohibiting Catholicism on English soil and later, over the course of the seventeenth century, a veritable arsenal of laws was deployed to ensure orthodoxy to the established Church. In response, the Roman faith retired within the sphere of the household, where it was practised by extended families and tight networks of believers, behind closed doors. A consequence of these particular circumstances is that studies of English Catholicism have long focused upon the history of the clerical mission, unveiling the hardships faced by men who defended the Roman Catholic Church against the major threats of Protestant evangelism on the one hand, and acculturation on the other.¹⁵ Many have dwelt upon the mission's internal politics and explored its desire to act as a counter-power to the Protestant state. Others have highlighted the secular involvement without which Catholicism in England could hardly have survived, and much is now known about the lay people who bolstered the work of the missionaries.¹⁶ Some of these were women, and the appealing stories of unabashed recusant ladies braving both penal laws and armed officials have been told, initially with a highly partisan agenda and more recently in more in-depth academic studies.¹⁷

But the history of English Catholicism is also a history of exile. Those who wanted the freedom to live their faith openly and

without fear of reprisals had little choice other than to leave their homeland. On the Continent, they initially found asylum in cities such as Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Douai or Louvain, before settling in other urban centres. In France, Paris became a major centre of English exiles, as did Rouen.¹⁸ Others gravitated towards universities and colleges further south, such as Valladolid, Madrid or Rome, and a large number also entered existing religious houses.¹⁹ The English government quickly became aware of these activities. In 1571, 13 Eliz. c. 3 aimed to put a stop to this Catholic emigration; it declared that subjects leaving England without the queen's licence, and not returning within six months, were to forfeit their goods, chattels, and the profits of their lands. Soon, the sending of children abroad for the purposes of education was specifically targeted, and the transfer of money from England to the Continent was monitored and regulated by the penal laws. In 1603, 1 Jac. 1 c. 4 ('Act for the due execution of the statute against Jesuits, seminary priests, etc.') strengthened the Elizabethan legislation against religious exile and added a penalty of £100 for families sending one of their children to the Continent. In time, the parliaments of James I and Charles I also increased the penalties against Catholics at home, especially with the laws passed in 1605–6 in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot and in the late 1620s in the wake of the threat posed by the proposed marriage between Prince Charles and the Spanish Infanta Maria Anna. Life for English Catholics was increasingly difficult, and sending relatives away had become a very challenging enterprise. Yet, progressively, English exiles settled in a wide variety of locations all over the Continent. It has been estimated that between 3,000 and 5,000 English Catholics went into exile between the years 1598 and 1642.²⁰ Many more joined them later.

Female religious life had developed beyond the boundaries of the traditional monastic model and offered alternatives which turned towards the world. In this context, Catholic Englishwomen could choose between various types of religious modes to live out their vocations on the Continent. As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, some of the women who left England in the early seventeenth century joined Mary Ward's Institute. Despite breaching Tridentine decrees with their active mission, the English Ladies considered themselves as religious. Yet such an innovative and atypical lifestyle was not the choice of the great majority of

postulants to religious exile.²¹ In great numbers, they embarked upon an enclosed life which was, ideally, to be secluded and separate from secular life.

The only female community to survive the English Reformation was a group of Bridgettines at Syon Abbey (near London), which had relocated first in Flanders and in northern France before finally settling in Lisbon in 1594. But Portugal was far from the English coast, whereas the shores of the Spanish Netherlands or northern France offered the advantage of geographical proximity. English aspirants to the religious life therefore usually preferred to join established Continental convents, which implied that they had to adapt to communities in which they often struggled with local customs and language difficulties. Such was the case of Mary Ward herself when she initially joined the Poor Clares at Gravelines before founding her own Institute. Sometimes several postulants gravitated towards the same community and constituted small pockets of Englishness amidst Continental houses; this was the case, for instance, of the estimated twenty-eight Englishwomen who joined the Augustinian Canonesses at Louvain.²²

As the number of religious exiles grew over time, houses specifically for the English were founded; this solved language problems and recreated spiritual homes away from home, carrying the standard of a specifically English brand of Catholicism. The convents benefited from the political support of French and Spanish leaders; in Flanders, foundations were endorsed by Archdukes Albert and Isabella, who generously patronised several communities and attended the inaugural ceremonies of the first English convent. Founded in 1598 by Lady Mary Percy with the specific purpose of welcoming her compatriots, the Brussels Benedictine convent was soon followed by foundations from other Orders: Poor Clares (1606), Augustinians (1609), Carmelites (1618), Sepulchrines (1642) and Dominicans (1660) all opened their own houses. Most of these, in turn, grew sufficiently to warrant offshoots in different locations, until finally there were twenty-two English convents in the Netherlands, France and Portugal. It has been estimated that 3,271 women became nuns in those convents between 1600 and 1800.²³

Continental nuns, particularly Italian, Spanish and French, became recognised objects of study before their English counterparts. Indeed, until quite recently, the history of English nuns remained

the niche of Catholic scholars and Catholic presses. But although post-Reformation English nuns were left out of the national historical construct for a long time, it is now being revealed that they did take an active part in the construction of English history.²⁴ The publications of a few scholars have heralded a new era for the study of early modern English convents in exile. Since the turn of the millennium, they have taken a little-known aspect of history into the spotlight and advanced our understanding of the roles played by English nuns in various fields. Caroline Bowden's initial interest in Catholic contributions to girls' education led her to discover some unsuspected political involvement on the part of Mary Knatchbull who, when abbess of the Benedictine community at Ghent, helped Charles II to gather funds and intelligence in preparation for his return to England.²⁵ Since then, Bowden has published on a wide range of nun-related issues, such as education, politics, national identity, economic life, spiritual life and literary production in more depth, revealing fascinating insights into a multifaceted and yet little-explored world.²⁶ Claire Walker's work also has unveiled a wealth of sources which had so far remained untapped. Walker's study of conventual involvement in England's politics has offered clear-sighted interpretations of the nuns' support of the Stuart cause and also, more critically, of the reasons for their being written out of history in subsequent years. She has argued that Knatchbull's role was never made public, at least in part because it did not benefit Charles's political agenda to reveal his alliance with nuns – women who were seen by many, in England, as defectors from the state and Church, and as dangerously misled. Walker's publications show that nunneries, although enclosed and contemplative, played an important role in the economy of the towns in which they developed. Far from being insignificant, convents were bulwarks of resistance against the Protestant state and potential places of subversion. They facilitated the circulation of news, of ideas and of people from one side of the Channel to the other, and acted as bridges between English and Continental Catholicism.²⁷

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the tide truly turned for the study of early modern English nuns, thanks to an ambitious Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Leverhulme project based at Queen Mary University of London and carried out by Caroline Bowden. Entitled 'Who Were the Nuns? A Prosopographical Study of the English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800', the

project began with the accurate locating of all the primary sources documenting the lives of the twenty-two convents-in-exile. That task alone, along with the cataloguing it involved, was monumental. The project team then elaborated a searchable database giving each known nun an identity number (UID) and a form containing the details of her dates of birth, clothing, profession and death, her parentage, the convents she joined, the offices she held, the publications she was involved in, all the details which are relevant to that particular individual.²⁸ As the project advanced, it allowed a clearer view on recruitment, social status, regional associations, management, office-holding, reasons for leaving convents, spiritual direction and many more issues relating to religious life in exile.²⁹ These initial insights have since provided invaluable stepping-stones for other studies to explore the links between the exiled convents and their local environments, as well as their attachment to a decidedly English identity.³⁰ In addition, a growing number of literary studies have shed light upon the writing activities of the monasteries.³¹ Nuns chronicled the histories of their own communities and, as they did so, they became record keepers, historians and hagiographers, in charge of the perpetuation of their communities' memories. They also wrote about their lives before and after they entered the convent, and such life writing played an important part in the proselytising endeavours of writers who aimed to edify through the dissemination of inspiring Catholic lives. Others expressed their views about issues relating to the governance of communities; they revealed fascinating glimpses into the ways early modern nuns envisaged their relationship to male Orders and authorities, and how they construed the level of autonomy of their own communities. Some translated spiritual texts in order to make them accessible to their Sisters, or copied the manuscripts necessary for the private reading and spiritual guidance of individuals. Finally, many documented their spiritual experiences, usually from a practical, personal point of view. In these writings, they did not so much theorise about spirituality as devise means to live it in a satisfying and fulfilling manner; they recorded their thoughts, their feelings and their prayers both in prose and in verse.

Thanks to these recent studies across a range of disciplines, we know more than ever before about English religious women in exile. As literary scholar Frances Dolan has pointed out, they 'worried about money, struggled with language problems, fought

about doctrine, and did hard or at least tedious physical work on an exhausting schedule'.³² Their real lives had little to do with the stereotypes found either in English anti-Catholic pamphlets or in French anticlerical literature, both of which contributed to robbing these communities of their resolve and their diligence in popular imagination. Yet there is much that remains to be explored, particularly where the gap between prescriptive guidebooks and lived experience is concerned. Nuns were excellent record keepers, chroniclers and hagiographers, but they also wrote, for themselves, a much more intimate type of literature. Where they have survived, such writings paint a lively, rich and multifaceted picture of conventual life.

The purpose of this book is to offer some insight into the lived experience of the individuals who embraced the monastic life in the seventeenth century. It aims to compare how nuns were supposed to live with how they actually lived. For that purpose, the Benedictines appeared as a sound choice for several reasons. As Trent commanded, they embraced a life of enclosed contemplation and did not leave the cloister. Their existence therefore fitted the prescribed pattern more precisely than the mixed life preferred by the Augustinian canonesses, for instance. The Rule of St Benedict was reputedly fair and moderate; it focused on purity of intention, on humility and on core religious virtues, yet without the more stringent demands of the deeply ascetic Third Order communities, like Franciscans or Carmelites. Again, in this respect, the Benedictine Rule fitted the letter of the Tridentine decrees on female religious life. Moreover, Benedictine nuns thrived in the seventeenth century, and their archives document all aspects of contemplative life in exile.

The first English convent to open on the Continent was the Brussels Benedictine house (1598). Its first abbess, Dame Joanna Berkeley, had been clothed in 1580 at St Peter's Abbey, a French convent in Rheims. She therefore had the necessary experience of the Rule of St Benedict to be a competent first abbess for the new English house. The convent grew rapidly, and with overcrowding and strong disagreements about the issue of confessors, it was soon necessary to start a new foundation, at Ghent (1624). Brussels had initially been strongly associated with Jesuit direction, but this closeness became the object of a bitter and protracted dispute, causing the house to loosen its bond with the Society of Jesus in favour of secular confessors before re-asserting its initial Jesuit bent from

1650 onwards. The Ghent house was less troubled in its choice of confessors: it was entirely devoted to the Society of Jesus and chose to follow Jesuit rather than secular direction whenever possible. Other foundations were, in turn, made from the Ghent convent: first in 1652 at Boulogne (relocated to Pontoise in 1658), then Dunkirk (1662) and Ypres (1665). These foundations fell under the authority of their local bishops and embraced Jesuit spirituality. In parallel, a separate endeavour led to the foundation of another house at Cambrai, in 1623. It originated from the initiative of two Benedictine monks, Dom Rudesind Barlow, President General of the English Congregation (1621–29) and Dom Benedict Jones, Superior of the London District of the Order, who gathered nine postulants to create this new monastery. At Cambrai, the nuns depended upon the authority of the Benedictine Fathers and were keenly attached to Benedictine advisors. The house then expanded and created its own filiation in Paris (1652). Although it followed its motherhouse in its spiritual heritage, the new Paris convent was compelled to fall under diocesan jurisdiction, like the others, rather than adopt the model of Cambrai. Thus, the Cambrai house was distinctive as the only English Benedictine convent placed under the direction of the Anglo-Benedictine Congregation. The Benedictine nuns therefore offer an interestingly mottled picture of various strands of spirituality within the same Order.

Another important factor in the choice of the English Benedictines for this monograph is the wealth of manuscripts they have preserved: although scattered in many depositories on the Continent and in England, their archives abound in both clerical guidance papers and personal documents written by the nuns themselves and for their own use. They were also involved in an unusually large number of publications, either as authors or as dedicatees. This wide variety of material offers a remarkable degree of detail. Many of the Cambrai, Paris and Pontoise documents were seized in the aftermath of the French Revolution and are now kept in state archives, whilst manuscripts about Ghent and Brussels are mostly kept in various ecclesiastical archives. Some of the papers, particularly letters which were addressed to correspondents in England, are kept in the British Library in London and the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Many more documents, concerning all the houses, remain in the private custody of the Sisters' descendants in English convents. Some, particularly chronicles and obituaries, were published in the

course of the twentieth century, in specialist publications for the use of the communities³³ or as special issues of Catholic Record Society publications.³⁴ Others, relating to the Bakerite spirituality which flourished at Cambrai, have been published more recently in special issues of the *Analecta Cartusiana*.³⁵ But overwhelmingly, the writings of the English Benedictine nuns remain in manuscript form. They give rich information about the foundations, although to varying degrees, since some houses lost very large portions of their records when they returned to England (such was the case of Pontoise, Dunkirk and Ghent), whilst others preserved more of their papers (the Cambrai and Paris convents, for instance, were more fortunate). For these reasons, some houses will feature a little more prominently than others in this volume. Moreover, the Ypres house will be alluded to but not studied at length here. After some initial difficulties when it was founded in 1665, it soon blossomed as an Irish project, and adopted a different outlook from its sister houses; its history is closely bound to the story of the Church in Ireland and therefore does not fit very easily in a study which explores traits of religious Englishness in exile. The Ypres community was the focus of a dedicated volume which documents its history in great detail, and it deserves investigation in the broader context of early modern Ireland and Britain, an endeavour which lies beyond the scope of this book. Marie-Louise Coolahan, for instance, recently wrote about issues of national identities and Irish culture in English convents, including the Ypres Benedictine house.³⁶

Recent publications on the convents in exile have taken a broad approach over the *longue durée*, spanning both seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁷ This study, however, will be restricted to the seventeenth century. The circumstances and practices surrounding English Catholicism, both at home and abroad, underwent deep changes after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and over the course of the eighteenth century. Although they remained steadfast supporters of the Stuarts, exiled Benedictine nuns did not become very actively involved in Jacobite politics. Their hopes for the imminent conversion of England, which had known such highs and lows from the death of Elizabeth I, the accession of James I, the events of the Civil Wars, the Restoration and the accession of James II, were momentarily dashed. Moreover, politics at home evolved during the course of the eighteenth century. Although the Roman Catholic Relief Act was not passed until 1829, the practice of Catholicism

was no longer subject to the stringent persecution of earlier days. Issues such as recruitment of girls into convents, economic stability or political involvement were deeply linked with such changes. The spirituality of eighteenth-century nuns was also a little different from that of their predecessors. Their contemplative *modus vivendi* evolved, new practices emerged, trends in spirituality shifted. For all these reasons, this study will focus on the earlier, formative years of conventual life in exile, which offer a more consistent picture for the purposes of a monograph.

In an effort to compare the prescriptions and ideal of contemplative life with the lived experience of nuns, this study is divided into two broad parts, one exploring general and communal issues of recruitment, management and the interface with the world, and the other dealing with more personal issues and the rapport of spiritual individuals with their bodies. The first four chapters focus upon religious life within the enclosure and beyond; they highlight the tension between the ideal of a cloistered contemplative life and the reality of survival and expansion in the English Benedictine convents. Chapter 1 offers an exploration of the prescriptive literature used by the Benedictines and shows that the contemplative ideal demanded that nuns consider themselves as utterly dead to the world. They were to sever their links to others, both outside and inside the cloister, and become strangers even to themselves. Yet such a complete separation from the world was hardly possible. It was, in fact, incompatible with the very survival of convents which, as Chapter 2 demonstrates, depended greatly upon recruitment strategies to create links of support between convents and those who had major stakes in them. Moreover, as Chapter 3 illustrates, communities in exile were highly dependent upon networks of patrons in neighbourhoods where, as foreigners, they lacked the backing of locals. They were in constant negotiations with secular interlocutors regarding properties, security, funds, supplies or taxes, and never died to the world fully. They maintained daily commerce with the outside, to ensure the prosperity of their communities. Perhaps more strikingly, as Chapter 4 highlights, they took an active part in the mission of Catholic recovery in England. Despite their enclosure and lack of mobility, they played an important role in the spiritual welfare of their fellow Catholics back home. They offered lodging to English Catholic ladies, and were involved in the writing, translating and publishing of spiritual texts; their recusant friends valued

their prayers highly, ever hopeful of their efficacy in bringing about the return of the faith to the kingdom. Moreover, many nuns were related to missionaries in England. Some, like Abbess Knatchbull at Ghent, were active supporters of the exiled Charles Stuart, to whom they offered valuable services. These Sisters pursued an ideal of secluded contemplation, lives of spirit detached from the petty concerns of the world; yet, at the same time, they managed the complex realities of life in exile and a spiritual zeal for the re-Catholicisation of their homeland, which made them important players in the ever uncertain world of early modern English Catholicism.

After exploring the links of the cloister with the world, the study delves into the realm of the private, even intimate, experience of spirituality. The next four chapters of the book confront the nuns' common spiritual ideal of disembodied purity and their personal apprehension of their physical (and therefore flawed) selves. In their efforts towards spiritual perfection, many of them struggled to reconcile what they really experienced with what they hoped to achieve. The personal experiences of individuals could rarely be smooth or straightforward and their relationships with emotions (and more generally with the body as the channel of emotions) were multilayered and complex.³⁸ The lens of emotionology³⁹ offers new readings of religious experience; it highlights some emotions as particularly religious, ranging from performative emotions (such as ceremonial tears) to deeply personal feelings of doubt or hopelessness, thereby revealing insights into the history of their collective and individual experiences of spirituality.

Chapter 5 explores the lives of the Benedictine convents as 'emotional communities' with their own systems of feeling and modes of emotional expression.⁴⁰ The nuns' writings reveal their efforts to comply with clerical prescriptive literature on emotions; they adopted an orthodox discourse, decrying human emotions as hindrances on the road to spiritual perfection. Yet they also unveil a more multilayered and complex relationship with these natural emotions in which many nuns struggled to reconcile what they really *did* feel with what they knew they *should* feel. Chapter 6 moves on to show that the negative discourse towards emotions was counterbalanced by a typically Christian 'hypervaluation of love'.⁴¹ Nuns sought to experience perfect union with their heavenly bridegroom and the bliss of His divine love. Benedictines such as Margaret Gascoigne or Gertrude More, as well as other, less famous

(sometimes anonymous) Sisters, documented their mystical yearnings and their personal experiences in their search for divine love.

Put simply, the contemplative ideal rejected the physical in favour of the spiritual, and treated the flesh as a stumbling block on the way to religious perfection. Yet, as Chapter 7 shows, what nuns felt even during moments of perfect prayer, when they were at their most spiritual, was by necessity experienced through the body. At Brussels and Ghent particularly, nuns related their experiences of divine love as highly physical moments of union, mediated through the senses. The corporal shell which they sought to subjugate was, at times, the very locus of their spiritual bliss. Such ambiguity towards the senses was felt keenly amongst the different Benedictine communities and led to issues of discernment regarding mystical spirituality. Finally, Chapter 8 deals with the body as a witness of spirituality. Through accounts of long-lasting diseases and extended deathbed scenes, and by relating the marvels which occurred to some corpses, conventual obituaries, biographies and chronicles conferred on the body a central place in the construction of spirituality. For nuns, to die was to be born to a truly spiritual life united with God. But death (with the protracted period of illness which often preceded it) was not simply an individual experience: a good death edified and strengthened the entire community. Beyond the grave, accomplished nuns lived on as exemplars, and their sufferings served as witnesses to their divine election. The hagiographical obituaries written by the Benedictine Sisters demonstrate a strong desire to propose new models of sanctity.

The story of the English Benedictines is an intrinsically English one. The documents of the communities illustrate specifically national issues. They echo the circumstances of the Catholic diaspora and the strategies adopted by minorities in exile. The manuscripts also indicate very clearly that nuns were affected by the divisions between seculars and Jesuits, and the strife which plagued the English mission on issues of spiritual practice, governance and influence. Through the new perspective of female religious communities, these sources bring nuance and depth to the history of a conflict which has been studied predominantly from the point of view of the clergy. Taken as a whole, rather than individually, the archives of the Benedictines of Brussels, Ghent, Boulogne (relocated at Pontoise), Dunkirk, Cambrai and Paris provide a detailed and intricate picture of the complexities of English female Catholicism

in exile. Yet, beyond their English specificities, they also show that these convents partook of the same general circumstances as their Continental counterparts and were inscribed within the same post-Tridentine context as Italian, French or Spanish cloisters. They yield precious insights into the personal and communal experiences of a piety striving to live up to highly challenging spiritual ideals, and allow a better understanding of what nuns felt and lived.

Notes

- 1 Decree on regulars and nuns, 25th session of the Council of Trent, 4 December 1563. See H. J. Schroeder (ed.), *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1978).
- 2 A brief look at publications shows that medieval nuns continue to attract inter-disciplinary studies: David Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995); Janet Burton and Karen Stöber (eds), *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008); Barry Collett (ed.), *Female Monastic Life in Early Tudor England: With an Edition of Richard Fox's Translation of the Benedictine Rule for Women, 1517* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); Paul Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality in Late Medieval English Society: The Dominican Priory of Dartford* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2001); Elizabeth Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Pericoloso and Its Commentators, 1298–1545* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997); Anne Müller and Karen Stöber (eds), *Self Representations of Medieval Religious Communities: The British Isles in Context* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2009); Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England: Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350–1540* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998); Nancy Warren Bradley, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Anne Bagnall Yardley, *Performing Piety: Musical Practices in Medieval English Nunneries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
- 3 Olwen Hufton, 'Whatever happened to the history of the nun?', Hayes Robinson Lecture Series 3 (2000), 1–32. Quotation at p. 5.
- 4 See Louis Chatelier, *L'Europe des dévots* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988).
- 5 On the active apostolate of the Ursulines in seventeenth-century France: Philippe Annaert, *Les Collèges au féminin: Les Ursulines, enseignement et vie consacrée aux dix-septième et dix-huitième siècles* (Namur: Vie Consacrée, 1992) ; Philippe Annaert, 'Monde clos des cloîtres et société urbaine à l'époque moderne: les monastères d'Ursulines dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux et la France du nord', *Histoire, économie et société* 24:3

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