

**From Penitence to Charity:
Pious Women and the
Catholic Reformation
in Paris**

BARBARA B. DIEFENDORF

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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BARBARA B. DIEFENDORF

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In Memory
Susanna Crane Boonstoppel
(1916–2000)

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This book about strong-minded and creative women was intended as an offering for my mother, but her great heart gave out before it was done. It is now dedicated to her memory.

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Prologue

The First D v te

On 11 September 1590, Marie Du Drac died, happy in the knowledge that Henri de Navarre's brutal siege of Paris had been lifted just twelve days earlier. As Du Drac had foreseen in her frequent revelations, God had "delivered the inhabitants of the city by extraordinary means and protected them from the rage and fury of the sworn enemies of the Catholic faith."¹ Or so we are told by her spiritual director, a friar of the Minim order named Antoine Estienne, who seized on the occasion of her funeral to deliver a lengthy oration lauding her piety, enumerating her devotional practices, and recounting her many "illuminations, ecstasies, and raptures."²

Born into a distinguished Parisian family in 1544, Marie Du Drac was married at the age of seventeen to one of her father's colleagues in the Parlement of Paris. Bearing her husband seven children in twelve years of marriage, she vowed after his death in 1572 not to remarry but rather to devote her life to God alone. Even during her marriage, Du Drac began to leave aside the "vanities of this world." Moved by a strong fear of the Last Judgment, she abandoned her jewelry and worldly attire, covered her hair, and donned garments so severe that friends and relatives expressed their shock. Beneath these somber robes, she wore a rough hair shirt. Often she fastened a four-inch horsehair strap tightly around her loins as well. She mortified her already frail body with fasts so extreme that they injured her health. When she fell ill shortly after her husband's death, the doctors informed her that she needed a cook more than a physician, so debilitated was her stomach.³

Although she prized above all else the contemplative life, she

only briefly considered entering a convent.⁴ Instead, she made of her well-ordered home a “little monastery” (the phrase was to become a cliché in the spiritual biographies of devout women), raising her children in the fear and love of God and emphasizing from their youngest age the virtue of humble obedience. She devoted the time not absolutely required for household tasks to solitary retreat in her study and to active engagement in works of Christian charity. Not content with distributing alms, she went into hospitals and the homes of the poor to help feed and tend the invalids there. She personally concocted medicines to bring to the indigent and, contrary to the social mores of her time, did not hesitate to help dress their wounds with her own hands. She also visited prisons to bring hope to the inmates and worked to secure their release, paying their debts herself if this was what was required to free them.⁵

Marie Du Drac set about reforming her interior life with the same vigor that she applied to her exterior, or so Estienne tells us. Initially at least, she examined her conscience so scrupulously that she spent long hours in confession, returning to her confessor day after day to add some new little sin she had just remembered. She ceased this practice when she came to believe that her scruples were themselves the product of obstinate pride. In 1570 she began to experience a form of mystical trance that both she and Estienne describe as being “drunk with God.” Initially untutored in mystical theology, Du Drac soon acquired spiritual advisers who instructed her in meditative prayer and deepened her theological understanding of the experiences she was having. These experiences were highly somatic, and her raptures were so powerful that she sometimes thought she would die of them. Sometimes in her ecstasies, she had visions, and Estienne attributes to her several prophecies as well.⁶

Du Drac’s faith was humble in the extreme. When asked to write an account of the special blessings God had given her, she wrote instead of her excess of sin. Her faith was focused on Christ’s passion and, above all, on his cross. Estienne describes a vision she had of Christ, wrapped in a purple robe and crowned with thorns, “holding a reed in each hand and bleeding in all the parts of his sacred body,” while “a very soft and lamentable voice” murmured “O my daughter, see how much I have suffered for you.” In keeping with her Christocentrism, Du Drac had a deep hunger for the Eucharist and took communion as often as possible—at least three times a week and daily during Advent and Lent. Her consciousness of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist was such that she often remarked that “if the misguided heretics . . . had only tasted the unmistakable delights with which her soul had been divinely nourished, this would have been more than sufficient to convert them from their heresy and bring them back into the bosom of our holy mother church.”⁷

Marie Du Drac did not experience Christ’s body in the sacraments of the church alone. It was quite literally her meat and drink, and she advised her “spiritual children”—the men and women who sought out her spiritual coun-

sel—likewise to find Christ in their daily bread. In common with other female mystics, she frequently employed images of Christ as food and dwelt on the act of consuming his body.⁸ She counselled those who sought her advice to pray before meals that Christ mortify their sensuality and fill them with the “spiritual meat” of his love, not allowing the “corporeal meat” they were about to partake of to impede this spiritual union. They should try while eating and drinking to envision the bites they took as being “sauced from the flow of his grievous wounds” and ask that “he unite you with him perfectly, just as this corporeal food is to your body.” “In drinking,” she added, “pray that he cause his precious blood to sustain, clean, and wash over the interior of your soul.” Each meal thus became an act of Communion, as Christ’s body and blood, consumed with and as food, continually cleansed and nurtured the believer.⁹

If Du Drac provided spiritual counsel to devout Catholics, she also undertook a more daring ministry in confronting Protestant friends and kinsmen, admonishing them for their lapse into heresy and persistently attempting to convince them of the error of their ways. Fervently devoted to the ultra-Catholic cause in the French Wars of Religion, she spared “neither gold, nor silver, nor any of the means that God had given her to aid in its affairs.” After learning that the son of a friend served as an officer in the Huguenot army, she commented that she would rather “not have any children than to have them turn out like that and not be supporters of the League.” To the end of her days, she avidly followed the fortunes of the Holy League, the ultra-Catholic faction that rebelled against the Crown in the name of Catholic truth and seized power in Paris and other French cities. Although she was on her deathbed when Henri de Navarre lifted the siege of Paris in August 1590, she rejoiced to learn that grain was again flowing into the starving city and demanded that visitors describe how Navarre’s followers reacted to their failure to subdue the rebellious capital. “I’ll bet they are thoroughly ashamed and embarrassed among themselves,” she remarked with satisfaction shortly before she died.¹⁰

In her spirituality, if not her politics, Marie Du Drac was ahead of her time. Contemporaries judged her behavior bizarre, even unseemly for a woman of her station, and took to calling her *la Dévote*, a nickname that, depending on the speaker, could carry overtones of either admiration or jest.¹¹ Half a century later, the ascetic practices and penitential spirituality that characterized Du Drac’s religious conversion had been broadly adopted by pious adepts of the Catholic revival. Like Du Drac, these women were called *dévotes*, and the term was still used in both derision and respect.

Marie Du Drac’s life, as recounted and shortly thereafter published by Antoine Estienne, offers us, as it offered her peers, a model of devout spirituality. Shocking to her contemporaries, her penitential and ascetic piety had a much greater appeal to succeeding generations of elite women, and many of her life experiences were common to later pious women. At the same time, Du Drac’s spiritual biography illustrates a profound tension within French

Catholicism, a contest over the nature and practice of the true faith. While many French Catholics saw her as an enviable model of feminine piety, others identified in her behavior the excesses of a faith gone wrong.¹²

This book seeks to explore the growing popularity of this contested spirituality, to explain its special appeal to women born to lives of wealth and comfort, and to trace its public and private consequences. It begins with the dramatic events that enlivened Marie Du Drac's final days, the rebellion of the Holy League. The explosive religious emotions touched off by these events indelibly altered French Catholicism. No longer an oddity, Marie Du Drac's penitential piety became the order of the day.

Introduction

Between 1604 and 1650, at least forty-eight new religious houses for women—more than one a year—were established in the city of Paris and its suburbs. This book tells the story of the revival of Catholic institutions and spirituality that produced such a stunning burst of religious construction and, more particularly, of the lay and religious women who built, supported, and inhabited these houses. It is a book about women (and men) who lived their lives on a plane of spiritual involvement that, extreme even in their own time, is in many respects shocking today. Tracing the rise of a newly ascetic and penitential religious fervor to the last, tumultuous stages of the civil and religious wars that reduced France to near anarchy in the late sixteenth century, the book explores the impact of this ascetic spirituality on the Catholic renewal that followed. I argue that the spiritual imperatives of self-mortification and renunciation of will that lay at the heart of this penitential piety profoundly influenced not just seventeenth-century religious life but also the values and behavior of devout lay people.

The wars of the Holy League ignited the ideal of a Catholic crusade. A crusading mentality found expression in communal rites of penitence and an ecstatic and apocalyptic spirituality. With the collapse of the League, collective gestures of atonement were no longer sanctioned, but for many devout Catholics a penetrating desire for expiation of both personal and collective guilt remained. Turned inward, this penitential piety found expression in extremes of asceticism modeled on the heroic acts of self-mortification attributed to saints of the early church. Men claimed this path for themselves,

but women insisted that they too had (as members of one newly founded order put it) “bodies capable of suffering, and wills as generous as those of men to undertake the sacrifice of their bodies.”¹ Heroic asceticism, although consistently gendered as male, was one spiritual path that was *not* barred to women, and the women who pursued this path gained a respect and admiration not otherwise accorded their sex. Their deeds, and the publicity given these deeds, had important consequences for the spiritual and material propagation of the Catholic Reformation in France. Well-publicized acts of renunciation generated a sympathetic and imitative response. They led to a rash of new vocations and spurred generous donations for the founding and expansion of monastic houses.

This process was, however, a self-limiting one. Heroic vocations inevitably declined, and the superiors of contemplative convents had to adjust to a new reality. By the 1630s social, economic, and political stresses worked to change both the internal structures of the new religious communities and their relationship to lay society. The same stresses caused pious women to readjust their religious values, and a preference for charitable service came to supplant penitential asceticism as the dominant spiritual mode. Without abandoning the goals of religious enlightenment and personal holiness, devout women increasingly looked to edify less favored members of their own sex. Moved by a sense of apostolic mission, they incorporated schools and programs for religious retreat into their convents and carried the same mission outside the cloister in lay congregations dedicated to educating and serving the poor. Although traditionally forbidden to preach or publicly teach doctrine, pious women capitalized on the Council of Trent’s call to catechize an ignorant laity to take up new religious roles. Even lay women, in joining newly formed charitable confraternities, were moved by an apostolic desire to save souls and not just a compassionate wish to help supply the material needs of society’s outcasts and the poor.

In sum, the practice of—and admiration for—heroic asceticism set in motion the Catholic renewal in France. Women played a key role in this process, by their leadership and by the example they set, but also by the fact that they appeared to triumph over the limitations of their sex at the same time that they paradoxically submitted unreservedly to gendered ideals of humility and obedience. Pious women were also instrumental in directing the Catholic revival toward new ends as the penitential impulse waned. They did not simply respond to the appeals of male reformers but worked actively alongside, and sometimes in advance of, these men. And yet, because the women maintained a rhetoric of female submission to male authority and wisdom, the active character and scope of their role have tended to be lost from view.

Examining the part played by elite lay women as patrons of reformed convents and by prioresses as spiritual leaders of these communities, this book reassesses women’s contributions to the movement commonly known as the

Catholic Reformation.² At the same time, I explore the assumptions about gender and gender roles that have served to obscure these contributions. In doing so, I illuminate the symbiotic ties that linked even the most reclusive contemplative nuns to lay elites. I also offer a new perspective on the active congregations and uncloistered communities that emerged during this period by allowing them to be seen not as the product of a long-thwarted apostolic vocation but as the expression of broadly evolving spiritual values and ideals.

The book emerged from my frustration with discussions of women's role in the Catholic Reformation in recent literature on early modern religion and gender history. In both areas, the Catholic Reformation is most commonly depicted as a period particularly hostile to the female sex, a time when misogynistic male clerics reinforced their domination of church institutions by shutting women who longed to serve actively in schools, hospitals, and missions into strictly enclosed, reclusive convents to control their dangerous sexuality. To be sure, post-Tridentine clergy were charged with enforcing strict rules for monastic enclosure, but portraying women as hapless victims of repressive clerics, church dogmas, and family strategies deflects attention from investigation of their own religious values and choices. Some women enthusiastically supported the call for spiritual and institutional renewal that issued from the Council of Trent; others felt sufficiently well served by traditional institutions and resisted dramatic change. Advocates and opponents of Catholic renewal did not divide along simple gender lines.³

Interpretations of the Catholic Reformation's impact on women have also tended to be drawn very largely from research on Italy and Spain, ignoring significant regional differences in the social and cultural factors that shaped women's experience. Although church prelates wanted the Catholic Reformation to be a homogeneous, centrally directed movement across Catholic Europe, it was in fact a diverse and uneven process. The Catholic Reformation came later to France than to Italy or Spain, and the preoccupations of French bishops and the control they exerted over religious foundations in their dioceses cannot be inferred from foreign models. Moreover, French property laws and inheritance customs gave women significantly different rights and a different place in family strategies compared to their Italian and Spanish sisters. This inevitably affected the decisions individuals made regarding religious life and the relationship between convents and lay society.

Given regional differences in custom and law and disparities in bishops' attitudes toward reform and change, even France proved too broad a canvas for a fine-grained study of women's religious choices. I narrowed my field of vision to Paris when, drawing up a list of monastic foundations, I first sensed the magnitude of the revival that occurred in that city alone. Why, I wondered, were there so many new houses? Who sponsored these foundations? Who paid for them? And why were two-thirds of the new houses traditional, contemplative convents when all of the historical literature emphasized the powerful

attraction that new active, uncloistered religious congregations held for seventeenth-century women?

Clearly, the answers to these questions would need to be sought not just in the religious history of Catholic reform but in the broader social and political contexts peculiar to the Parisian experience. Paris's Catholic revival came hard on the heels of bitterly divisive civil war, and antagonisms rooted in these wars shaped the religious politics of the seventeenth century in important ways, at the level of the Crown but also at the level of the individual believer. It may be helpful to readers unfamiliar with this turbulent period in French history to briefly survey the key events that determined the character of French Catholicism between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries.

The religious wars that broke out in France in 1562 initially pitted French Protestants, often called Huguenots, against a Catholic majority that viewed the new religion as heretical and refused to allow its adherents the right to worship publicly in their traditionally Catholic state. Political rivalries deepened religious antagonisms and made it hard to secure a lasting peace. In August 1572 rumors of a Huguenot plot to seize the Crown led Parisian Catholics abruptly to murder several thousand Protestants in the infamous Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre.⁴ The unprecedented violence of the killings prompted the Catholic majority itself to divide, as a moderate faction, favoring peace even at the expense of compromise, emerged to oppose a more radical, ultra-Catholic party intent on putting an end to heresy at any cost. As king, Henri III tried to maneuver between the two factions but ultimately failed. When the death of his younger brother and apparent successor in 1584 left a distant cousin, Huguenot leader Henri de Navarre, as heir to the throne, the ultra-Catholics united in a Holy League. Increasing their pressure on Henri III, they demanded a decisive defeat of the heretics and the annulment of Navarre's right to the throne. The war that began in 1585 with a forced alliance between Henri III and the ultra-Catholic leader Henri de Guise soon dissolved into a three-way quarrel. Radical Catholics drove Henri III from his capital in May 1588. The revenge he exacted six months later in ordering the assassination of Henri de Guise touched off a violent rebellion, as cities and governments withdrew their obedience and prepared to make war against the king.

Paris was one of the first cities to throw its allegiance wholeheartedly behind the League. A chiliastic atmosphere overcame the city, as preachers drummed up support for the rebellion by invoking the Last Days. God is angered, they cried, by our failure to defend the true religion and by our ungodly ways. They called for a war to exterminate heresy and also a moral crusade. Paris must become a "New Jerusalem," a site of repentance and moral reform, to save the city from ruin and appease God's wrath. The emotional intensity of the League's seizure of power was reinforced when Henri III was murdered by a Catholic fanatic in July 1589 and the Protestant Navarre claimed the throne as Henri IV and then besieged Paris in an attempt to make good his claim.

With time, however, the ardor of some of the Leaguers faded. Tired of war, they accepted Navarre as king after he converted to Catholicism in July 1593 and allowed him to enter the capital in March 1594.

Generous in victory, Henri IV exiled only the most radical League leaders and attempted to win over the rest. Publicly demonstrating his new Catholic allegiance, he ostentatiously patronized Catholic causes and made a policy of ignoring past divisions. It took him until 1598 to win over the last of the rebellious princes, and he had to force his high court of Parlement to accept the compromise peace negotiated with the Huguenots that same year. Henri's policies of reconciliation were nevertheless sufficiently successful that his assassination in 1610 by an ultra-Catholic fanatic took many by surprise. Suspicion of a radical plot immediately welled up; the Jesuits in particular were accused of preaching tyrannicide and inspiring the assassin, François Ravaillac, to kill the king. Although Ravaillac insisted even under torture that he had acted alone, the assassination revealed the tense undercurrents still dividing French Catholics. At the same time, Henri IV's unexpected death brought a new uncertainty to the course of French politics by allowing power to fall into the hands of a queen regent ruling on behalf of a child king.

These dramatic events had a powerful impact on the character of French Catholicism and on the Catholic revival that had begun with Henri IV's consent as a platform for the consolidation of his rule. Many prominent members of the devout circles associated with the Catholic renewal—the *dévots*, as they were known—had actively supported the League. However quick or slow to reconcile themselves to their newly Catholic king, they had experienced firsthand the emotionally charged atmosphere of Leaguer Paris, and their spirituality reflected its penitential and apocalyptic strains. Profiting from the king's desire to conciliate his former enemies, they gained his cautious support for the foundation of new, reformed convents and lobbied for official acceptance of the decrees issued half a century earlier by the Council of Trent.

The latter issue was yet another source of tension among French Catholics. Many magistrates and clerics were Gallicans who favored a relatively independent, albeit Catholic, church and opposed the ultramontanism of the *dévots*, who looked to Rome for leadership and reform. The tensions carried over into foreign policy, as the ultramontanes tended to favor Catholic unity and policies that worked toward this end, while Gallican Catholics were more open to policies based on strategic considerations and reason of state. Expressions of Catholic religiosity were inevitably freighted with political implications. This became particularly apparent when Henri IV's death brought about the regency of Marie de Medici, a devoutly Catholic and foreign queen.

Henri IV tolerated the *dévots* and even subsidized their religious foundations and charities, but the support he extended them was cautious and strategic. He knew how much opposition they could still muster. Marie de Medici, by contrast, supported them out of personal inclination, because she

shared their religious values and priorities, and they quickly gained a prominent place at court. A political satire published in 1614 made this point well. Purporting to advise women on the new fashions and modes of discourse that would gain them favor at court, the piece catalogued the attitudes and behaviors characteristic of the *dévots*. Advising women above all to learn to speak eloquently of God, it recommended that they attend services at newly introduced religious orders, adopt the leaders of these orders as their personal spiritual directors, and confer with them an hour or two each day. They should also cultivate connections to new women's orders, visiting the Ursulines and having aunts or cousins among the Carmelites, so as to regularly visit there as well. The piece named names and was obviously written by a close but not sympathetic observer of devout circles, for it went on to satirize the credulity of the *dévots* and demeaned their beliefs by depicting them as strategies for gaining altogether worldly ends.⁵ It underscored the influence the *dévots* had gained at court but also revealed the suspicion with which they were viewed by those who did not share their religious values.

The lack of unanimity in Catholic opinion made Marie de Medici's patronage of reformed religious orders all the more important to the success of the Catholic renewal. Elite women imitated her in visiting newly established convents and competed to sponsor additional houses where they might enjoy the special privileges accorded founders. The aristocratic revolts that troubled the regency did not interrupt the new foundations and may even have helped spur the movement along by encouraging the wives and widows of rebellious princes to stake out their own circles of influence with conspicuous gifts to new convents. By contrast, the queen mother's tumultuous relationship with her son, Louis XIII, had a negative impact on the *dévots* and on the policies they promoted at court.

The young bishop of Luçon, Armand du Plessis de Richelieu, who first caught Marie de Medici's eye in 1614 and rose to power through her favor, disagreed with the pro-Catholic foreign policy advocated by the *dévots*. Bishop, later Cardinal, Richelieu worked to convince Louis XIII not only to avoid entering the Thirty Years War on the Catholic side but also to covertly support the Protestant princes battling against the Holy Roman emperor and king of Spain, both Habsburgs, on the ground that Habsburg supremacy posed more of a threat to French security than did neighboring Protestant states. At the same time, he encouraged Louis to put an end to the independent political and military power the Protestants enjoyed in France by right of the Edict of Nantes. The issues were contentious ones, and policy debates became the object of public polemics. Advocates of a neutral or pro-Protestant foreign policy depicted themselves as "good Frenchmen," while portraying the *dévots* as "big-ots" engaged in a falsely pious cabal and as deliberate or unwitting tools of Spain. Some polemicists even resurrected the history of the League to recall

an earlier occasion on which naïve clerics and ultra-Catholic lay men had allowed religious enthusiasm to triumph over political wisdom.⁶

The Catholic revival continued to spread in this polemicized atmosphere. Even Richelieu's ultimate triumph over Marie de Medici and the *dévo*t party in 1630 did not bring the movement to a halt. The queen mother's forced exile was financially disastrous for several convents to which she had promised gifts she could no longer pay, and the arrest of Keeper of the Seals Michel de Marillac was profoundly unsettling to the Carmelites, whom he had helped to establish in France. But patronage of the new orders had long since expanded beyond the original circle of *dév*ots. A generation of women who had not experienced the wars of the League had come of age and begun to impose a new religious sensibility on the Catholic revival. Although they admired the ascetic prioresses who led the reformed houses founded during the initial stages of the postwar expansion, their spirituality was not fundamentally penitential but rather charitable in orientation. It also reflected François de Sales's gentler spirit and more optimistic love of God. The change was a natural and perhaps inevitable one. All intense enthusiasms eventually wane; the institutions they spawn stagnate and become irrelevant unless able to evolve in new directions. In the case of the Catholic revival, this natural fading was in some quarters accelerated by theological quarrels over the nature of true penitence and the virtue of contemplative retreat. At the same time, increasing sensitivity to the growing misery of the peasantry and the dreadful conditions of the urban poor provided a fresh direction for pious women who desired to live out their faith.

Charitable visits to hospitals, prisons, and even the houses of the poor had always been viewed as a praiseworthy part of a devout lay woman's routine. Only gradually, however, did pious elites come to see serving society's less favored members as an admirable and sufficient end for religious life. Before this could happen, women needed to change their orientation toward the poverty that surrounded them. They needed to see the poor not just as objects of compassion but as lost souls who needed to be saved. They also needed to believe that this redemption could be best effected through direct intervention and not merely through prayer. They needed to internalize their devout faith so thoroughly that they were overcome by pity and a determination to help those who remained ignorant of the truths they considered essential to salvation. Where the generation of women who helped initiate the Catholic revival hoped to save the lost souls of the heretic Protestants by their prayers, their daughters sought to shoulder a still broader mission in becoming apostles to the poor.

To do so required at least the tacit consent of the ecclesiastical officials charged with supervising female religious life. The Council of Trent had ordered the strict enclosure of all religious women, and reform-minded bishops needed very good reasons if they were to ignore this rule. Women's expansion

into active religious vocations proceeded cautiously on this account. Profiting from the greater freedom allowed secular women, the leaders of the new charitable communities initially remained in worldly dress, refused to take vows, and called their groups simple “societies” or “confraternities” to evade the requirement for religious cloistering. Gaining official approval for these communities only years (sometimes decades) after their humble start, they invented a new form of semireligious life.

Paris’s bishops granted official recognition to the new congregations of *filles séculaires* (secular nuns) in large measure because they recognized the important work that the Ursulines and other reformed orders were doing in catechizing and educating young girls, and they wanted to extend this instruction to the urban poor and rural communities outside the reach of the cloister. They were also prompted by the sense of impending social crisis that grew up in Paris during the second quarter of the seventeenth century. Although people had a poor understanding of the reasons for the growing misery they saw about them, they could not help noticing the ever larger numbers of beggars they encountered in city streets. They were very aware of the repeated waves of famine and pestilence that caused sharp rises in mortality in the Parisian countryside in the late 1620s and early 1630s, though they would have had no clear understanding that these crises were symptoms of a long-term decline in the peasants’ standard of living, which had made them increasingly vulnerable to famine and disease, as well as prompting many to immigrate to the city in hopes of food and work. Nor would Parisian elites have understood their own role in the pauperization of the regional peasantry. They would not have recognized that, in rushing to purchase the lands of debt-ridden peasants, they were effecting an enormous transfer of wealth from the countryside to the city; nor would they have understood that, in directing the revenues derived from their country estates to urban consumption, they were further increasing the distance between rich and poor. And if they did recognize the extent to which the tax exemptions they enjoyed on account of their bourgeois or noble status had shifted the state’s fiscal burden onto the shoulders of the peasantry, this was not a situation they were willing to change. The hefty tax increases that had resulted from the renewal of war against the Huguenots and then war against the Empire and Spain fell on precisely the persons least able to pay.⁷

Without understanding the full measure of the problem, much less comprehending its underlying causes, urban elites were nevertheless aware that poverty was increasing and prepared to respond positively when Vincent de Paul and other popular preachers made charity to one’s neighbor the frequent theme of their eloquent sermons. The same charitable impulse that gave birth to the new congregations of *filles séculaires* prompted lay women to found confraternities that aided the poor directly with nursing care, warm clothes, and food and also raised funds for orphanages, hospitals, and asylums for

endangered girls. Efforts to assist the populations of Champagne and Picardy left destitute by invading armies in 1636 and 1637 served as the model for larger-scale fund-raising activities in the early 1650s, when the midcentury wars of the Fronde brought the economic crisis to its peak. Competing armies again laid waste to France's northeastern provinces and, for more than five months in 1652, devastated the Paris region as well.

The Fronde had begun in 1648 as a tax revolt by Parisian magistrates angered by the imprudent policies of Anne of Austria, serving as regent for the boy king, Louis XIV. Although the judges and their allies in the popular classes were quick to make peace, the impetuous princes who joined the rebellion continued to battle the queen regent and her detested minister and favorite, Cardinal Jules Mazarin, in hope of gaining a greater voice in affairs of state. Unable to articulate any broader goals than their own personal and selfish ones, the princes soon lost what popular support they had at the start. They nevertheless fought on erratically, shifting alliances opportunistically, until their rebellion at last fizzled out. The declaration of Louis XIV's majority in 1651 put an end to their claim to act on the king's behalf and in his best interests, and the revolt made no fundamental changes in the politics of state. Its economic legacy was more enduring. The destructive campaigns of 1652 reduced the already impoverished Paris region to famine. Disease spread among the weakened population, mortality rates climbed, and still more peasants were dispossessed. Recovery was slow. For nearly another decade, ruined buildings, ravaged vineyards, and abandoned fields were common sights in the Parisian hinterland. Only after about 1664 did prices and production return to something approaching their prewar rates.⁸

The Fronde also had negative consequences for the *dévots*, many of whom had been at least temporarily drawn to the party of the rebels, whose cries for reform appealed to their rigorist morality. Most quickly became disillusioned with the princes and reconciled with the king before the end. They nevertheless lost credit with Louis XIV and never enjoyed his full confidence or favor. Moreover, a number of the rebel princes and their wives had been generous patrons of the reformed religious houses. The debts they incurred on account of the Fronde put an abrupt halt to this patronage. Just as Marie de Medici had done several decades earlier when forced into exile after her quarrels with Louis XIII, Frondeur aristocrats defaulted on promises to newly founded convents.

Although it by no means brought an end to the Catholic Reformation, the Fronde did mark a watershed in it. As such, it makes an appropriate termination point for this book. By the Fronde's end, the high ideals, rapid expansion, and innovative new forms of religious life that characterized the initial phase of the Catholic revival had given way to a new era of consolidation but also internal dissension and stress. The accommodations that Catholic reformers made to the new circumstances that prevailed during the personal rule of

Louis XIV deserve a separate study. The present work focuses rather on the period of innovation and rapid growth bounded by the wars of the League and the Fronde.

Beyond the drama of the civil wars with which this period began and ended, it is unified by Paris's emerging role as a social, cultural, and political capital under the first Bourbon kings. With a population that grew from roughly 250,000 residents to 450,000 during the first half of the seventeenth century, Paris was the largest city in northern Europe until overtaken by London in about 1650.⁹ Its vast population reflected its complex social and political role. The preferred place of residence of Henri IV and Louis XIII, Paris housed a great many aristocrats who made up the royal court. It was home to the Parlement of Paris (a high court of justice with sovereign jurisdiction over more than half of France), several other sovereign courts that dealt with taxes and finances, and a good share of the kingdom's growing administrative bureaucracy, along with the families of the high magistrates and royal officials who staffed these institutions. It also was home to a bourgeoisie consisting largely of merchants (or ex-merchants) who had grown wealthy in luxury and wholesale trades, along with the middling-level officials, bureaucrats, and lawyers who supported the city's administrative and judicial functions. Paris also contained thousands more retail merchants and artisans, a vast population of workers, a large number of students, and a growing number of poor, but the *dévot*es instrumental in the city's Catholic revival came from the top levels of Parisian society. Although a few came from families that might be considered part of the old aristocracy, proportionately more were wives or daughters of men who had acquired noble status by serving as presidents of sovereign courts or through other royal offices that conveyed the privileges of nobility. Still others were daughters or wives of men who, as counselors in the sovereign courts, enjoyed the personal prerogatives of noble status but not the privilege of passing hereditary nobility to their children. The remainder came from the upper reaches of the bourgeoisie. Their fathers and husbands were not engaged in trade but lived from investments and property while often also exercising non-noble offices in the royal bureaucracy or the households of great aristocrats.

Contemporaries would have been acutely conscious of the gradations in rank and hierarchy that distinguished various members of this group, and it is important to be attentive to these differences when discussing, for example, the influence that an aristocratic donor's family standing might have given her at court or in communications with church prelates. When taken as a group, however, the fine gradations in social rank that distinguished one pious woman from another are for the most part irrelevant. They shared a common piety, and the nature and magnitude of their acts of charity differed more according to wealth than to status. Moreover, whether aristocrats or technically still bourgeois, all of these women, by comparison with the vast majority of the population, stood very near the top of the social scale, and I have adopted the rather

amorphous term “elites” as a kind of shorthand to signal the collectively high level of social distinction enjoyed by the group when further precision is not necessary.

The fact that virtually all of the women who led the renewal of religious life in Paris came from elite families and enjoyed the patronage of women even higher up the social ladder may have insulated them from some of the negative presumptions experienced by women in other cultural milieus. Indeed, it is likely that circumstances in Paris were more favorable to female achievement than they were elsewhere in Europe. Two women, Marie de Medici and Anne of Austria, served as queen regent during the first half of the seventeenth century, and aristocratic women had a prominent place in their courts. Proximity to literary salons where women played an important part made it easier for Parisian women to take on other leadership roles, as did the mores of elite society, which allowed women a relatively large role in family strategies and domestic affairs. Sovereign court magistrates and other royal officers, for example, commonly expected their wives to manage not just their urban household but also their rural estates, so that the men could devote their own energies to their professional tasks. This meant the women hired and fired estate managers and supervised their work; they oversaw the harvest and storage of crops, ensured that rents were collected and peasants fairly treated, contracted for building repairs, and assumed a number of other responsibilities that required the skillful handling of both money and personnel. Parisian men also not uncommonly named their wife, instead of a male kinsman, as executor of their estates and administrator of the properties inherited by their children.¹⁰ The experience—and the confidence—Parisian women gained from administering what were often extensive properties stood them in good stead when they went on to found religious communities, build convents, and invent new forms of semireligious life.

The laws and customs of the Paris region also served women relatively well by giving them a stronger claim to family properties than they enjoyed in many other parts of Europe. Customary law in the region was fundamentally egalitarian. With the exception of the special advantage the eldest son had with regard to noble properties, siblings shared equally in their parents' estate, regardless of sex. Daughters played an important part in their family's social and economic strategies. They were not simply “dowered off” at marriage and excluded from the parental inheritance; rather, their marriage portion was considered an advance on the parental succession and deducted from their share of the estate.¹¹ And because the special claims of the eldest son applied only to noble properties, even in aristocratic families, daughters might inherit significant wealth. Women also frequently inherited property from brothers who died childless, as the laws of collateral inheritance favored siblings over more distant kin, regardless of sex. These legal traditions, along with the hazards of war, which gave aristocratic males an abnormally high death rate, allowed for

the emergence of the rich heiresses whose benevolence built the new convents and funded the new communities of the Catholic reform.

Customary law and practice also help explain why so many of the key donors were widows. A woman's property remained under her husband's control throughout their marriage. The law was equipped with a number of checks intended to prevent a spendthrift husband from dissipating his wife's estate, but she could not dispose of any property herself without his permission. Only in widowhood did she gain full control of her inherited properties, along with half of the community property acquired over the course of the marriage and a portion of the husband's estate known as a "dower." She could not spend all of this money freely; the same laws that had protected her property rights also worked to protect the claims of children, siblings, and even more distant kin to certain forms of inherited property.¹² As we shall see, the property rights women enjoyed under Parisian law allowed them to become important patrons of new religious institutions, but they also permitted family members to challenge and sometimes interfere with promised donations. More than one community launched an ambitious building project only to be caught up short when the anticipated funds failed to materialize.

Even in Paris, women's activities were constrained by age-old assumptions about the innate inferiority of their physical, intellectual, and moral capacities, and yet elite women did enjoy certain advantages over the majority of their sex in this regard. Class bias was at least as powerful as gender bias in the hierarchical society of early modern times, and women who came from elite families were often tacitly—and sometimes explicitly—viewed as exceptional and credited with capacities superior to those of others of their sex. Elite status also potentially influenced women's practice of piety in several ways. Taught from earliest childhood to subordinate their own wishes to their parents' command, girls from upwardly mobile or socially prominent families knew that their future marriage or placement in a convent would be dictated more by family strategy than by personal desire. And although they were raised to accept this lack of personal autonomy as natural, some girls inevitably had a hard time accommodating themselves to the choices made for them. Religious devotion served a dual role here. It helped young women trapped in loveless marriages to accept the life their parents had chosen, but it also offered them a small arena of personal liberty, for however much law and custom subjected a woman to her husband's authority, her soul remained her own. The Catholic Reformation enlarged this limited sphere of autonomy by encouraging devout women to develop their interior life. It also permitted unhappy wives and widows oppressed by the disadvantages they suffered in a male-dominated society to occasionally escape from their secular concerns into the female-centered world of reformed convents. Wives and widows alike sought spiritual guidance at parlor grilles from prioresses who, despite their reclusive vocation, were

widely respected for their wise counsel. Under certain circumstances, lay women were even admitted to the seclusion of the cloister.

This book stresses the religious impulses that brought lay women and reformed nuns together in these ways, but the social benefits elite women may have sought in patronizing reformed convents should be acknowledged as well. However piously motivated, gifts that resulted in the founding of convents, building of chapels, and erection of altars were a form of conspicuous consumption. The women who offered these gifts not only acquired for their family the intercessory prayers of whole convents of nuns, but they also publicized their family's wealth and, implicitly at least, allowed them to bask in a reflected godliness. Paradoxically, reformed convents served as refuges where elite women might escape from secular concerns at the same time that their patronage of these institutions helped establish their family's worldly honor.

Beginning with one civil war and ending with another, this book chronicles the rise of two distinct but related spiritual impulses. The mystical and penitential piety with which devout women responded to the wars of the League began to wane by the 1630s, just as the new surge of compassionate charity that peaked with the Fronde began. Although the book's title, *From Penitence to Charity*, implies a simple evolution from one dominant spirituality to the other, the relationship between the two was necessarily more complex. The penitential asceticism these women practiced was intensely permeated with the desire to emulate the *caritas*, or self-sacrificial love, displayed by Christ. The impulse to charity thus inhabited their penitential piety from the start. And if the intensity of the ascetic impulse waned by the 1630s, the transition from penitence to charity was neither thoroughgoing nor complete. Although the ascetic practices I describe bear strong resemblance to those of medieval holy women, I by no means wish to suggest that the Catholic Reformation was characterized by the definitive abandonment of antiquated, or "medieval," forms of piety in favor of a more comfortably familiar and "modern" spirituality.¹³ Even at midcentury, many devout women engaged in bodily mortifications quite alien, and even disturbing, to modern sensibilities. Even women who had abandoned hair shirts, flagellation, and other forms of corporal discipline practiced internalized forms of deliberate self-humiliation and denial of will. Seventeenth-century women avidly devoured the published lives of Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Genoa, and other late medieval holy women, and they often quite consciously modeled their own behavior on these lives. Moreover, late medieval and early modern women drew on a common repertory of earlier saints' lives and spiritual writings praising ascetic renunciation as a path to godliness. The tendency toward penitential mysticism that emerged so powerfully in devout circles in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France should not be considered just a stale remnant or last bizarre revival of outdated practices and vanishing beliefs. Rather, it was a response to histori-

cally specific events and attitudes and, as such, developed its own distinctive logic, character, and momentum.

Penitential asceticism has a long history in Christianity, as it does in many other religions. It is part of a large repertory of characteristic forms of spiritual expression and modes of living out one's faith. Just as Christian spirituality can be warmly emotional under certain circumstances and coolly rational under others, so too can it encompass a wide range of attitudes toward the bodily expression of true piety. It can focus heavily on the necessary cultivation of certain behaviors, or it can ignore adherents' behavior with an almost antinomian disregard. The central preoccupation of the historian of religious practice is not to trace a characteristic form of spiritual expression back to its most distant theological and historical roots, but to explain why, among many possibilities, this particular set of ideas and behaviors came to the fore at a given time and place.

The tendency of seventeenth-century women to model their behavior on that of earlier holy women nevertheless complicates the historian's task. The pious biographies that were written in surprising numbers in the seventeenth century have been an extremely important, but never unproblematic, source for this study. Sometimes written by nuns but most often authored by the subject's spiritual director or another male cleric, the biographies are closely patterned on earlier saints' lives. Didactic in purpose, they were crafted to offer models of piety to admire and emulate. As such, they are a complex blend of literary trope, observed behavior, and documented accomplishment.¹⁴ It is not always easy to distinguish one from the other. For example, the biographer of Barbe Acarie, founder of the Discalced Carmelite Order in France, relates how, visiting hospitalized soldiers during the wars of the League, she overcame her repulsion for the soldiers' festering sores by lowering her face to them so as to inhale more deeply their putrefaction. Barbe Acarie may have deliberately modeled the gesture on an incident recounted in the life of Saint Catherine of Genoa (who almost certainly modeled her own gesture on that of Saint Catherine of Siena or another, earlier saint), or her biographer may merely have attributed the act to her because it was part of his own repertory of the behaviors of saints.¹⁵ In the end, whether or not Acarie actually inhaled the putrid wounds of hospitalized soldiers is less important than the model of devout charity she offered in mingling freely with injured men, offering spiritual counsel but also abandoning class expectations by tending the wounded with her own hands, which was testified to by witnesses at her beatification proceedings. The literary trope of breathing in putrefaction is nevertheless instructive, signaling the humble submission and trust in divine providence the biographer wished his readers to admire and potentially imitate.

It is significant too that these lives were nearly always written by contemporaries with extensive firsthand knowledge of their subjects. Male biographers were often the confessors and spiritual directors of the *dévotes* whose lives

they recorded and therefore privy to their most intimate revelations. Female biographers were invariably sisters in religion. The few authors who did not know their subject personally were careful to point out that they relied on both written and oral testimony from men and women who did. The biographies thus appear to be largely reliable when it comes to describing the basic events of their subjects' lives and the general tenor of their spirituality, even if we must allow for the exaggeration and distortions that inevitably ensue from the dictates of the genre to which they conform.

The biographies serve not only as sources of information about the lives of pious seventeenth-century women; when taken as literary sources, they also reveal a wealth of information about the assumptions and attitudes of devout Catholics toward gender differences and gender roles. Biographers inevitably shaped their subject's life to fit an idealized pattern of female behavior intended to serve as a model for contemporary women. While selectively emphasizing those aspects of a woman's behavior that reinforced traditional gender roles, most authors tended to pass quickly over aspects of their subject's life that deviated from or contradicted traditional norms. Beginning with the 1621 biography of Barbe Acarie by her spiritual director, André Duval, women's active role in shaping Catholic institutions and values in seventeenth-century France began to be obscured by a literature that emphasized submissive obedience.

This de-emphasis on the active part pious women played in shaping institutions was related to the sex of the authors as well as to the biographies' intended readership. Male authors most often addressed their books to a lay audience, whereas female authors tended to write for their sisters in religion. Both had didactic purposes in writing pious lives and sought to inspire their readers to moral rectitude and spiritual advancement. Intending even biographies of religious women to teach their female audience how to live in the world, male authors were more likely to bring in gendered examples of submissive behavior than were women writing for an all-female audience. They also tended to view chastity in more sexualized terms than did female authors, who described a more all-encompassing need to reserve oneself uniquely for God. On the whole, however, differences in both substance and style between male-authored and female-authored or autobiographical accounts proved less significant than I originally anticipated. Male authors may have been more learned in theology, but the literary sources on which they drew most heavily were saints' lives and not theological treatises. Ranging from the *vitae* of desert fathers to Teresa of Avila's autobiographical *Life*, first published in a French edition in 1601, these writings were the common property of pious women and men, as was the rich literature of mystical and affective spirituality that influenced the way authors of pious biography interpreted the religious experiences of their subject. Neither male nor female authors wrote with the intention of subverting the gendered value system of their time. Close analysis of some passages in these biographies nevertheless reveals that their subjects



Frontispiece for *Modèle de la Perfection Religieuse*, by Abraham Bosse. Typifying the new genre of edifying spiritual biographies, Jean Auvray, spiritual director of the Benedictine nuns of Hautes-Bruyères, depicted Jeanne Absolu, a Parisian *dévôte* who took religious vows at Hautes-Bruyères at the age of sixty, as the very “model of religious perfection.” Bibliothèque nationale de France.

were not so narrowly bound to traditional values and behaviors as their authors made them out to be.

I should explain one convention adopted in this book. It concerns the names used for the women who figure in the work. Although a French woman did not legally adopt her husband's family name when she married, it was customary to address her by her husband's name in polite society and, by extension, in seventeenth-century biographies and historical writing. For example, contemporaries referred to Louise de Marillac, the wife of Antoine Le Gras, a secretary to queen mother Marie de Medici, as *Mademoiselle Le Gras*, even though she continued to sign her correspondence and contracts with her birth name. In the seventeenth century, the honorific "*Madame*" was reserved for noble women; "*Mademoiselle*" was used for the upper reaches of the bourgeoisie, whether married or not. Legal documents conventionally identified a woman by her birth name but also her marital status, husband's name, and very often his professional status and titles. To avoid the confusion of calling women by more than one name, I have chosen to use their birth name except when they are titled nobles, in which case I use the title by which they were most commonly known. It would depart too radically from accepted usage to call Jeanne Frémyot, baronne de Chantal, just Jeanne Frémyot, and so I have retained the more standard Jeanne de Chantal (alternatively, the baronne de Chantal, or just Chantal). I have made one exception to these conventions. Barbe Acarie is too well-known by that name to adopt instead her birth name of Aurillot. Following seventeenth-century usage, however, she is referred to as *Mademoiselle Acarie* rather than the honorific title of *Madame* adopted by later biographers.

The narrative argument of this book—its story of change over time—imposes a roughly chronological structure on the chapters that follow. Chapter 1 tells the story of women's participation in the Holy League and the impact of this experience on their spirituality. It examines both ardent supporters of the League and their royalist opponents, many of whose husbands left them behind in Paris to defend the family properties while they served in the king's army or courts, and concludes that the trauma of civil war awakened in women affiliated with both political factions a powerful desire for the expiation of sin. Convinced that the wars were signs of God's impending judgment, they sought to appease his wrath through acts of rigorous asceticism and humble penitence. The women introduced in this chapter went on to play key roles in founding the first reformed religious order established in Paris after the wars, the Discalced Carmelites of Teresa of Avila's reform.¹⁶ The ascetic practices in which they engaged as lay *dévot*es during the decade that intervened between the League's defeat in Paris and the founding of the Carmelites in 1604 are the subject of chapter 2. This chapter also establishes a context for understanding the demand for new reformed religious orders by examining the state of female monastic life in Paris at the end of the sixteenth century. It explains