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Honors Thesis

Women under Monasticism in Renaissance Italy

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I. Introduction

Since the time of its founding, women have flocked to participate in the spirituality offered by the Catholic Church. However, the relationship between the Church and its female followers was often strained throughout the period of the Renaissance. Despite their genuine desire to actively participate in their church, some women found themselves pushed out of the Church for a number of social and religious reasons. This paper seeks to discuss the factors that lead to the marginalization of women in the Catholic Church, as well as the ways in which women practiced their religion despite their limitations.

II. The Early Church

Several factors affecting the position of women in the Catholic Church during the Renaissance had roots in the formation of the early Church. One of the most important factors was the development of the idea of women as both Eves and Marys, sinners and redeemerers. The many implications created by this idea would seriously affect the ways in which the Church viewed and dealt with women.

Early church fathers used the Biblical stories of Eve and Mary to illustrate what they believed was every woman’s primary vice and means of redemption. Eve condemned mankind with her weakness for temptation, a vice that caused her fall from God’s grace. As punishment, all of mankind bears the burden of her original sin, which keeps mankind from receiving God’s grace. Mary, on the other hand, saved mankind by giving birth to Jesus Christ, a man free from original sin because he was born of a virgin. It is through Christ that Christians believe mankind can once again be restored to God’s grace. This
idea is reflected in St. Jerome’s statement that “[d]eath came through Eve: life has come through Mary.”¹ The church fathers believed that all women would follow one of these two paths, but it was up to each to decide which path she would choose.

In his letter entitled “The Virgin’s Profession,” St. Jerome discusses the two life paths women could choose. He states that the best chance a woman has for salvation is to remain a virgin for the entirety of her life, and he gives several reasons for believing this. First all of, in choosing to remain virgins, women become “brides of Christ,” and as such are better than all other women on earth.² This is because by staying close to Christ “carnal love is overcome by spiritual love, desire is quenched for desire,” and thus women’s propensity to give in to temptation is diminished by their desire to know God.³ Jerome believes virgins are also able to see things differently than the unchaste, as the unchaste “cannot appreciate the beauty of the soul, they only regard the beauty of the body.”⁴ It is this special ability that makes virgins more spiritual, but it also puts them in danger of attack from both their families and other men. Jerome therefore entreats virgins to guard their virginity because “no vessel of gold or silver was ever so dear to God as the temple of a virgin’s body.”⁵

Another reason Jerome believes it is better to remain a virgin is simply the consequences of getting married. While he does admit that marriage offers a respectable life for women, it is not as respectable as choosing virginity, and married women should therefore “take their pride in coming next after virgins.”⁶ He also says that the choice to give up one’s virginity brings with it a great risk. He uses the example of a woman who

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² Ibid., 85.
³ Ibid., 89.
⁴ Ibid., 103.
gives up her virginity for marriage, only to be widowed seven months later. Jerome laments that she gave up her “crown of virginity” for the “pleasures of wedlock”, which, to her misfortune, lasted for a very brief time.\textsuperscript{7}

Jerome also mentions other disadvantages of marriage. These include “pregnancy, a crying baby, the tortures of jealousy, the cares of household management, and the cutting short by death of all its fancied blessings,” as well as the possibility of death during childbirth.\textsuperscript{8} In light of all these things, he believes that virginity is definitely the better of the two choices. He does, nonetheless, describe some means of redemption for those who choose marriage despite these arguments.

Jerome says “the widowed state ranks as the second degree of chastity.”\textsuperscript{9} This statement hints at the belief that there are ways to gain spiritual respectability even after marriage. The underlying reason for this is that the society of the early Middle Ages appears to have defined virginity in a number of different ways. Three different lifestyles won women the distinction of being virgins, regardless of whether they were virgins in truth.

The first way a woman was considered a virgin was by living among other female virgins, as in a monastery. Most of the women who entered monasteries did so at a very young age, usually around the age of eight, and so these women tended to be actual virgins. Another way women were deemed virgins was by living in either in a clerical household with other virgins or as individuals in private houses with male virgins. An example of this is a woman who married and bore her husband children but later in life

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 105
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 57.
convinced him that they should take a vow of chastity. Thus they lived out the rest of their lives together as celibates. The last way a woman was considered a virgin was if she had lost the virginity of the body but displayed virginity of the soul. This was usually an honorary distinction given to women who had been raped or had lost their virginity through some other similar circumstance. Virginity in the literal sense was not necessarily the key to attaining the distinction of being a virgin.\textsuperscript{10}

Actual virgins who frequented public baths, attended banquets, and participated in any other social activities were rarely considered true virgins, as true virginity was believed to be a permanent state of being that was the result of an ascetic mindset.\textsuperscript{11} This idea is echoed in Jerome’s discussion of the difference between “good” and “bad” virgins. He says that virginity “can be lost even by a thought.” He describes some women as “evil virgins, virgins in the flesh, but not in the spirit,” and these women are “shut out” by Christ.\textsuperscript{12} Even these women, though, could redeem themselves by changing their behavior.

Because of the Biblical story of Mary Magdalene, prostitutes were one group of women often targeted by Christian missionaries for reform. In fact, many early women saints were reformed prostitutes. The story of Saint Pelagia the Harlot is one example of such a woman. This story tells how Pelagia gave up a life of prostitution and luxury to live as a hermit in the desert. Several years had passed since Pelagia’s disappearance into the desert when James, the narrator, is sent into the desert to meet a monk of very great renown named Pelagius. Upon his second visit to Pelagius James finds that Pelagius has died. While preparing the body for burial, James and the other men performing the burial

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 83.
ritual discover that Pelagius is in fact the lost prostitute, Pelagia, who had disappeared years ago. The story ends with James marveling at this transformation of this woman from a beautiful, wealthy prostitute into a renowned desert hermit.¹³

The story of Pelagia is indicative of two important societal sentiments. On the one hand, it shows that people did believe women were capable of throwing off the sinful nature they inherited from Eve. However, it brings to light the perceived differences between the characters of men and women. Pelagia was believed to be a man because she behaved in the way society expected men, not women, to behave. Generally, early church fathers believed that in light of their propensity for sin and their weak character, women could not be trusted to behave properly. This belief causes the restriction of women’s involvement in the Church throughout the period in various ways.

Since the foundation of Christianity, many women had been responsible for establishing churches and monasteries. These women often donated their own homes and land for the foundation of monasteries and entered the monasteries as nuns once they were established. However, they have never been ordained as priests by the Church.¹⁴ This in and of itself has always seriously hampered the participation of women in the Church, but they have been pushed out of the Church in other ways as well.

The monastic movement developed very early in the history of Christianity. It first originated in the desert of Egypt where it was practiced in an eremetic, or solitary, form. The first monks, or desert fathers, were hermits who either lived alone or in small groups in caves, huts, or brick cells far out in the desert. They supported themselves by farming

¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Jerome, 63.
small patches of land or making palm frond baskets that they could sell to visitors. The majority of their time was spent praying, working, and reading and memorizing scripture. They paid as little attention as possible to the needs of their bodies by practicing such habits as fasting often and living chastely. Ultimately their goal was to remove themselves from the sinful influences of both society and their bodies, which they believed would secure their place with God after death.\textsuperscript{15}

Women, however, seem to have been left out of this early form of monasticism. Despite the existence of stories about women hermits, such as the story of Pelagia discussed above, there is no solid evidence that women actually participated in this movement. The monks who wrote them may have actually fabricated the stories we have of such women.\textsuperscript{16} Instead it appears that the type of monasticism early nuns practiced was much more cenobitic, or community oriented, in nature.

The story of the first desert father, St. Antony, includes a reference to a sister, for whom he founded a women's religious community. Though he himself was compelled to live a solitary life out in the desert, Antony apparently did not believe it to be the sort of life fit for his sister. Consequently, before he departed for the desert, Antony established a religious community for his sister to reside in instead of taking her with him into the desert.\textsuperscript{17} Evidence such as this suggests that women were not actually allowed to participate in the eremetic movement. This exclusion of women would continue during the formation of other monastic orders.

\textsuperscript{17} McNamara, 13-14.
The Cistercian monastic order that was founded in the twelfth century was initially very much opposed to including women in the new movement. In fact, an early Cistercian statute explicitly forbade Cistercian abbots from blessing nuns, which has been interpreted to mean that order was not to accept women. This statute appears to have stemmed from a hesitation to take responsibility for women.

The Cistercian father Bernard of Clairvaux founded the movement in an effort to return monasticism to a stricter interpretation of the Benedictine rule. The new order stressed the importance of heavy labor for the monks’ livelihood, work considered inappropriate for women. The order also thoroughly distrusted women and passed several statutes requiring Cistercian monks to avoid contact with women as much as possible. To accept nuns into the order would therefore require a great change in the way the order operated.

In 1213, approximately a century after the movement began, the Cistercians finally began to incorporate nunneries into the order. By 1220, however, they passed a statute banning the incorporation of any new nunneries. The new prohibition was passed because of the various problems the order was having maintaining the recently acquired nunneries. One problem they had was enforcing strict enclosure in the nunneries. Strict enclosure of the nuns was one rule that the Cistercian order demanded of all its new nunneries. Nonetheless, many of the nunneries were not observing the rule, prompting the Cistercians to pass another statute that decreed any nunneries that refused to accept enclosure would not be recognized as part of the Cistercian order. Another problem associated with the nunneries was the enormous volume of work they brought with them. Special auditors had to be appointed to hear cases involving the nuns, confessors had to be found to minister to
the women, and abbots had to be sent to oversee the new houses. All in all the Cistercians were having a difficult time managing the nuns and enforcing the rule of enclosure, and they therefore decided to wash their hands of the problem.

In the end, the Cistercians were finally forced to start accepting nuns into the order again in 1230. The reason for their acquiescence appears to have been due to outside pressure instead of a change of heart. Statutes passed in 1230 allowing the admittance of new nunneries state that it was done at the request of the pope. Over the next several years most of the nunneries incorporated were accepted at the behest of nobles, bishops, or the pope. Thus the Cistercian resistance to women was overcome by the persuasion of powerful patrons, not a change in attitude.18 Women did not always find influential supporters to secure their acceptance in new monastic movements, however.

A totally new type of monasticism developed in the early thirteenth century from which women were again rejected. This was the mendicant movement, which was a movement focused on poverty and preaching. The most notable difference between this movement and those that came before it was that the monks lived in cities begging for alms and preaching to the people rather than living in a monastery away from society. The two major orders of this movement were the Franciscans, under the leadership of Francis of Assisi, and the Dominicans, under the leadership of Dominic the Spaniard.19 While these orders did accept women followers, their nuns were not allowed to engage in the activities that were so important to the order, begging and preaching.

Clare of Assisi was the most important female follower of Francis. She, like Francis, had been born into a wealthy family during a period of struggle between the

nobles and merchants of Assisi. The conflict between the two groups was over the wealth and privilege of the nobility, part of which the merchants wanted them to give up in the newly organized commune of Assisi. This struggle over wealth had a tremendous impact on Clare, and as she grew older she became attracted to the ideals of poverty and contemplation preached by Francis. Therefore, after a brief stay in a Benedictine monastery Clare and her sister joined Francis in repairing the church of San Damiano, which was to become her home.²⁰

When Francis placed Clare and others in San Damiano in 1212, he gave them a rule to follow very similar to his own, despite the fact that that his rule, which had been approved by Pope Innocent III in 1210, was not meant to include women. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that all new orders were to adopt a rule already approved by the Church, so Clare petitioned Innocent III for the Privilege of Poverty, which he granted. This privilege allowed the order to live without any possessions, which freed the nuns of the requirement of owning a monastery, and enabled them to follow the rule of Francis.

This changed, however, in 1218 when Hugolino di Segni, the Archbishop of Ostia, obtained a bull from Pope Honorius III that gave him permission to secure estates for the maintenance of women religious. In 1219 Hugolino used this bull to impose the Benedictine rule and enclose Clare's order. Clare protested the imposition of this rule based on the privilege granted her by Innocent III. The rule was enforced until 1228 when Hugolino, then Gregory IX, finally granted Clare her privilege but restricted it to only Clare and the other sisters of San Damiano. Her order was again restricted under Pope

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²⁰ Knowles, 115-116.
Innocent IV, who wanted to impose uniform regulations on all female Franciscan orders. Clare once again protested the restrictions, but this time she responded by writing a rule of her own. In 1253, Clare received final approval of her rule, but she had been forced to accept many Benedictine principles, including enclosure. Enclosure seriously limited women’s ability to live according to the principles of the mendicant movement, once again restricting them from actively participating in the Church.

Women were not totally excluded from the Church, and they actually held some important positions early in the Church’s history. Women frequently founded churches and served as spiritual counselors. They were also allowed to be deaconesses within the Church. The Council of Nicea, the First Ecumenical Council that was held in 325 recognized that women could be deaconesses and stated that they were ordained members of the clergy. The Council of Chalcedon, the Fourth Ecumenical Council held in 451 further specified the conditions under which women could be ordained as deaconesses. Canon 15 states that a woman cannot be ordained as a deaconess until she is forty years old and has been carefully examined by the Church. If she marries after being ordained as deaconess she is to be anathematized by the Church. Though deaconesses were ordained as clerics, they were never allowed to perform all of the duties that deacons did. Still, in many cases deaconesses had more authority within their church than did the subdeacons.

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22 Ranft, 18.
24 Ibid., 107-109.
Another very influential position women held in the early Catholic Church was that of abbess. Abbesses held a surprising amount of power throughout the Middle Ages because they presided over monasteries, institutions that welded a great amount of influence as landowners. At the beginning of the monastic movement, abbesses were the leaders and organizers of women’s religious communities. With the introduction of double monasteries in the fourth century, monasteries that housed both men and women in separate quarters, the role of abbesses became even more important as they took over the rule of both houses. Thus women were actually ruling over both women and men throughout the early Middle Ages.\(^{25}\) Abbesses were not to hold this distinction for long, however, as the Second Council of Nicea, the Seventh Ecumenical Council held in 787, issued Canon 20 which forbade the building of new double monasteries. The canon states that “this [practice] has become an offense and a scandal to many,” and henceforth “men shall go into a monastery for men and women into a monastery for women.” While the double monasteries in existence were not closed by the canon, these monasteries entered a period of decline, bringing with it a decline in the power of abbesses.\(^{26}\) Thus even those important church positions initially open to women were continuously limited throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. It therefore appears that women’s place within the Church was largely relegated to the monasteries.

Discussions concerning the enclosure of nuns in monasteries can even be found in early church writings, and the purpose of the rule seems to be two-fold. On the one hand, the walls of the monastery provided the nuns with protection from invaders who presented a serious threat to the women inside. Nuns outside monasteries were often victims of

\(^{25}\) Ranft, 113-114.
\(^{26}\) Schroeder, 153-154.
brutality, suffering rape, kidnapping, enslavement, and forced marriage. The monastery itself was therefore a physical form of protection for the nuns that allowed them to live free from the fear of outside interference.\textsuperscript{27} It is this fear that prompted Jerome to entreat Eustochium to stay away from the non-religious.\textsuperscript{28} On the other, the Church simply did not believe women were capable of maintaining an ascetic lifestyle on their own because of their Eve-like nature.

Very early in the history of Christianity, morality became equated with asceticism and sexual purity. This was due in large part to a Biblical passage in Matthew in which Jesus says, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they are born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”\textsuperscript{29} Early church fathers interpreted this passage to mean that virginity was one key to salvation. This was a very difficult path to follow, however, and soon church fathers began to see women as the cause of their sin because of the sexual temptation they created. Women were further vilified by their relationship to Eve, who was the cause of all sin, and in turn men’s woes. Some church fathers began to see women as temptresses out to undermine men’s virtue, and they warned men that they would be better off ignoring women altogether. This is another reason for the exclusion of women from the eremetic movement. Men feared that if women went with them into the desert they would be reminded of the sexual urges that they were trying to forget.\textsuperscript{30}


\textsuperscript{28} Jerome, 103.

\textsuperscript{29} Matthew 19: 11-12.

Their kinship to Eve was also the reason women religious were forced to stay in monasteries. Not only could women not be trusted with men, they could not be trusted with themselves. Their Eve-like nature made women too easily tempted by the secular world to indulge in inappropriate behavior. It was therefore best for them to remain separated from the world in an environment more conducive to spiritual pursuits. It is for this reason that women were not allowed to participate fully in the mendicant movement; they would be too close to the world. This mentality restricted religious outlets available to women in the Church during the Middle Ages, and would continue to do so through the period of the Renaissance.

III. The Renaissance

A. The Society of Renaissance Italy

Many social factors compounded during the Renaissance that inadvertently pushed many women into church service for reasons other than a spiritual calling. Some of these factors were natural consequences of the conditions of age, but others were caused by customs adopted by society. One of the most significant factors was the increase in importance and expense of dowries during the period of the Renaissance.

The increasing importance of dowries during the Renaissance contributed significantly to the view of women as inferiors. This is because the custom of sending dowries into marriage with daughters was a departure from the custom of the earlier period. During the Middle Ages, the custom of giving a brideprice, or *morgengabe*, for a wife came to Europe during the migration of the Germans. As the Germans conquered and settled Europe they replaced the custom of dowries practiced by the ancient Greeks and
Romans with their own. Originally there appears to have been three gifts given to contract a marriage, none of which went to the groom himself. The brideprice was the payment given by the groom to the bride’s kinsmen for their relinquishing control of her *mundium*, or legal guardianship. The morning gift, or *morgengabe*, was given by the groom to his bride, the morning after the consummation of the marriage as payment for the bride’s virginity. The father’s gift, or *faderfio*, was simply a small gift, such as a trousseau, given by the father to his daughter at the time she left her natal home to marry. As time passed the *morgengabe* and the bride price became synonymous in German law and the custom of paying the bride’s kinsmen gave way to the custom of gifting the bride herself.\(^{31}\)

According to the Lombard law, the law governing Italy during the Middle Ages, this brideprice was typically a quarter of the groom’s total property and included everything he owned and everything he would acquire in the future, including inheritance. Thus through this custom women owned a substantial amount of property.

This custom improved the status of women in Europe in various ways. First, the importance of the mundium in Germanic society made a daughter an asset to her family because of the influence and money it brought them through her marriage. Also, the *mundium* actually provided women with a great deal of legal protection, despite her apparent lack of control over her own affairs. This can be seen in the Lombard law that protected a woman’s right to her *morgengabe* by requiring a husband who wanted to sell land that included their wife’s *quarta* to call two or three relatives of the wife to witness her consent of the sale. Should her relatives not be convinced of her consent, the sale was

not valid. Finally, it gave women control over a great deal of land and wealth, which gave them authority in their marriage and power to will the property to whomever they would.

This custom would not last into the Renaissance, however. Cases from the period indicate that women or their families could, in fact, dispute whether a piece of land was rightfully sold long after the transaction had been completed. This seems to have eventually led to a decrease in the amount of land that was sold in Italy, as it became extremely difficult to ascertain who actually owned what portions of an estate as estates continually expanded and contracted in size. Buyers were therefore always unsure as to whether the land they bought would one day be revoked by a dispute between the former owners.\textsuperscript{32} The emerging capitalist economy of Renaissance Italy obviously could not tolerate such an inconvenient and unprofitable custom. Therefore, the custom of \textit{morgengabe} gave way to that of dowry.

It appears that in Roman and Byzantine populations of Italy dowries were a prevalent means of marriage settlement throughout the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{33} This may be why the custom regained importance throughout Italy during the Renaissance as \textit{morgengabe} became unpopular. Slowly society began to expect the woman’s family to provide the money with which newlyweds would start their family. Under this custom, however, daughters were seen as a liability to the patrimony because they took wealth away from the family. A safeguard was therefore put in place that protected the patrimony but further degraded women’s position in society.


\textsuperscript{33} Hughes, 273.
In order to protect the family estate, society began to entail property away from all but the first one or two sons.\textsuperscript{34} Women were no longer eligible to buy or inherit land for any reason, and dowries presented to grooms were not to consist of land grants. This was justified by the idea that a dowry was a daughter’s share of the inheritance. By describing it in this way a father could remove all claims his daughter might make on his property.\textsuperscript{35} Thus society could ensure that land would no longer pass through women by any means, thereby eliminating the complication of \textit{morgengabe} and limiting the threat to the patrimony.

Entail did not completely dispel the threat created by dowries, however, and the price of dowries escalated significantly throughout the Renaissance, further compounding the problem dowries created. The reason for this escalation appears to be the result of a combination of factors. First of all, men in Italian society were not allowed to marry until they inherited land. As men often had to wait until the death of their father to receive their inheritance, the average age of marriage was rather high. This fact, combined with a low average age of death, reduced the number of eligible bachelors significantly. Thus families competed for a relatively small number of grooms, driving the price of dowries up substantially.\textsuperscript{36} In addition, a double standard existed in the marriage laws of the nobility that allowed noble men to marry women outside their social class, while noble women were pressured not to do so. Part of the reason for this may lie in the fact that women suffered a loss in social status by marrying someone in a lower class, while men were less

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 48.
likely to suffer this stigma.\textsuperscript{37} Nonetheless, this allowed for the upward mobility of women if they could compensate for their low social status with a high dowry.\textsuperscript{38} The hope that their daughters would be able to buy their way into a higher social class pushed the price of dowries up even more. Because of the tremendous expense of dowries, multiple daughters posed a very serious threat to the patrimony, especially for the upper classes, for whom the pressure to marry within their social class was even greater.

To alleviate the problem of multiple daughters, noble parents began placing their excess daughters into nunneries. In fact, the societal customs were such that many fathers were actually sending their daughters into monasteries, very often against their wishes, instead of allowing them to marry into a lower social class. By the late sixteenth century more than half of the women in monasteries had been forced into religious service by their families.\textsuperscript{39} A dowry was still customarily sent with a young girl entering the nunnery for her support, but the cost of these dowries was much lower than that required for marriage.\textsuperscript{40} Consequently, by the late sixteenth century noble women were more likely to enter a convent than to marry within their class.\textsuperscript{41}

The number of daughters dowered by a family depended upon the wealth of the family and the cost of the dowry. Often most of the assets of the family were pooled into a dowry for only one daughter so that she could marry within her own social class. The rest of the daughters were left without the means with which to enter into a suitable marriage and thus were usually sent to monasteries. The only other choice left to women was the life of a spinster, but spinsters were less respected by society and were believed to be more

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 226.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 24.
prone to extramarital affairs that would shame the family.\textsuperscript{42} Hence, there were practically no spinsters in Italian society outside of convents.\textsuperscript{43}

Another reason for the rarity of spinsters in Italy was the inability of women to live independently of men. This is because women's roles were defined by their relationship to men.\textsuperscript{44} Women could not work in the guilds without a husband or father to act as their guardian, and female servants were considered to be members of the households of their employers. In general, women only worked as long as it took to earn a dowry for marriage.\textsuperscript{45} Truly independent women were therefore almost nonexistent in Renaissance Italy, and thus the only two viable life choices for women was marriage or religion. As a result, many monasteries during the period were filled with women who had entered the monastery for social instead of spiritual reasons.

Many other societal factors also contributed to the influx of women into monasteries. A number of different realities for women compounded to push women into monasteries in order to avoid marriage. Some of these were related to the social disparities between men and women that work to undermine the status of women within marriage.

As stated earlier, dowries lowered the view of women throughout society because through dowries women drained the wealth of their families. They also lowered women's status within marriage by revoking their control over their marriage gift. The custom of \textit{morgengabe} had given women some amount of power within marriage by giving them authority in matters concerning her property. Men could not sell their wives' \textit{morgengabe}.

\textsuperscript{40} Herlihy, 226.
\textsuperscript{41} Sperling, 26.
\textsuperscript{43} Herlihy, 214.
\textsuperscript{44} King, 29.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 64-72.
without their consent. Under the dowry system, however, the authority over the dowry was given to the groom, not the bride. Men could sell their wives' dowry without their consent. Technically, women owned the title to their property for the duration of their lives, but they were never able to control it, and thus their place within marriage was undermined.\(^{46}\)

Another factor that weakened the position of women within marriage was the wide age gap between brides and grooms in Italy. In Italian cities from 1427-1430, the average age of women at the time of their first marriage was just under 19 years while the average age of men was just under 28 years, and 56 percent of women were at least ten years younger than their husbands.\(^{47}\) This age gap often caused men to mix their role of husband with that of father, creating more of a parent-child relationship between husbands and wives than a relationship of equal partners. As a result, husbands tended to demand complete obedience form their wives, and this tendency became an idea supported and encouraged by society.\(^{48}\) This also led to the acceptance of wife beating as a means of punishing wives for their disobedience. Generally a man could beat his wife with impunity, although extreme brutality was condemned by public opinion. In the courts, however, abuse was often overlooked or dealt with leniently, and only in rare cases of extreme abuse was the man punished severely or the marriage dissolved.\(^{49}\)

Several other societal factors made marriage distasteful for women during the Renaissance. One was the chance of dying during childbirth. Between three and ten percent of women died either giving birth or soon after. This combined with the fear of the

\(^{46}\) King, 48-50.
\(^{47}\) Herlihy, 205.
\(^{48}\) King, 38-39.
\(^{49}\) Ibid., 43.
pain of pregnancy and labor was enough to deter some women from ever getting married. In addition, 50 to 80 percent of all children died before reaching adulthood.50 Because of this high child death rate, parents tended to distance themselves emotionally from their children. This is not because parents did not love their children, but the incredible likelihood that a child would die caused the parents not to want to become too emotionally attached to their offspring.51

One other factor that may have dissuaded women from marriage was the predicament widows with young children sometimes found themselves in. As families invested so much money in the dowry of one daughter, a young widow and her dowry could be recovered from her husband’s family and remarried to someone else. If she left her husband’s family, however, she was forced to leave her children as well, as they were the property of their father’s lineage. As she was once again subject to her family’s authority upon the death of her husband, a widow might not have a choice as to whether or not she would leave her children in order to remarry. Nonetheless, mothers were often blamed by their children for their abandonment.52 These factors taken in combination may have discredited the institution of marriage in the eyes of some women and pushed them into the Church regardless of their spiritual inclinations.

Evidence for this can be found the endowments given by many Italian women in their wills. A study done by Samuel Cohn looked at the last testaments of men and women in Italy throughout the period of the Black Plague in the fourteenth century. What he found is that after the plague hit Italy and wiped out about forty percent of its population, testaments began bequeathing less money to nunneries and other charities and more money

50 Ibid., 4-6.
51 Herlihy, 254.
to dowry funds. These funds were created in an effort to increase the chances of women marrying by allowing their families to invest money in the fund annually until they were ready to marry, at which point the investment should be large enough to provide a suitable dowry. This reason for the increase in charitable giving to these funds is attributed to the revival of the cult of remembrance and the patriarchy’s drive for immortality, which was accomplished through male heirs. A new emphasis was therefore placed on the family, and families could only be created through marriage, thus the funding of dowries.

Testaments of women, however, reveal that they were much slower to follow this trend and continued to give more money to the nunneries immediately after the Black Plague. Cohn explains this trend by postulating that women saw dowries as a social and economic threat, and therefore they continued to support nunneries as an alternative lifestyle. The most interesting aspect of the study is that women supporting the nunneries were usually either married or widowed, which lends credence to the idea that women did view convents as a haven from marriage.53

B. The Catholic Church

Several occurrences within the Catholic Church combined with the societal factors discussed above to push many women seeking a life in religion out of Church institutions. Many monasteries were filled with women who would have preferred a more secular life, while women seeking spirituality were forced to find it in unorthodox ways. One of the main reasons for this was the Church’s insistence on strict enclosure of nuns.

52 King, 59.
The rule of enclosure for monasteries developed with the cenobitic monastic movement. As stated earlier, the cloister was meant to separate and protect the occupants of monasteries from the secular world outside the walls. Technically enclosure was to be applied to all monks and nuns living in monasteries, but very early on this rule began to be applied much more strictly to nuns than to monks.

In early cenobitic communities, monks were allowed to come and go between the cloister and the nearby cities to preach and trade. Women, however, were required to remain within the walls of the cloister for the entirety of their life. They were forced to rely on monks to supply them with the supplies they needed to survive because of their inability to provide for themselves. Thus from this early period nunneries were an economic burden on the monks of the order which limited the size and number of the early nunneries.54

The initial rejection of women from the Cistercian movement during the twelfth century may have also been because of the burden nunneries placed on the order. This is evidenced by the fact that once the movement began accepting nuns, it immediately felt enough strain that it stopped allowing nuns into the movement. As the Cistercians demanded strict enclosure of its nuns, it is likely that the strain they felt was related to the limitation this placed on the nuns. Because the nuns were not allowed to do practically anything for themselves, the monks had to become their caretakers, and it appears that at least initially they resented this position.55

Clare of Assisi’s battle with the Church over enclosure is another example of the way in with the rule adversely affected women’s participation in the Church. The

54 McNamara, 22.
55 Thompson, 227-232.
mendicant movements of the early thirteenth century were based on poverty and preaching. The followers of this movement were to live in the cities preaching to the masses and survive off the alms given to them by the laity. The Church's insistence that the women of the order be enclosed in a cloister defeated the fundamental ideals of the movement and limited the spiritual outlets available to women.\(^{56}\)

The principle of strict enclosure of nuns became a universal church law in 1298 with a decree issued by Pope Boniface VIII. This decree was known as *Periculoso*, and it was the first papal legislation passed that required nunneries of every order to be strictly enclosed. This law applied only to nuns, and it said that nuns were not to break the law of enclosure by ever leaving the monastery or inviting people into the monastery except when a nun became contagiously ill. Once entering the monastery women were never supposed to leave again.\(^{57}\)

Boniface addressed the issue of the economic strain strict enclosure puts convents under by saying that, except for mendicant communities, convents with inadequate resources were not to accept any new members into the order. This was not a satisfactory solution to the very large problem this law created for women religious. By making strict enclosure a church law that carried with it the threat of excommunication, the pope was enabling church officials to enforce the rule more rigorously than they ever had before. This law therefore seriously threatened the economic viability of convents in a number of ways.

Because nuns were not allowed to leave the convent and people were not allowed to visit the convent for any reason, *Periculoso* had a drastic affect on the relationship

\(^{56}\) Hart 180-181.
between nuns and their benefactors. By cutting off communication between nuns and benefactors, the law threatened convents’ most vital and reliable source of revenue. The law also limited future members to only those who could support themselves financially, thus closing the convents to many lower class women.  

The requirement of strict enclosure made the dowries the girls brought with them even more vital. The high cost of dowries for both religious and secular women combined with the pressure placed on elite women not to marry outside of their social class filled the convents of Italy with noble women. As many as three-fourths of all patrician women became nuns, making them more likely to enter a monastery than to marry. It is important to note that the convents occupied by these women usually belonged to an established order, such as the Benedictines or Cistercians, and not the newer orders sweeping through the cities during the Renaissance. The more quasi-religious communities founded in this period were much more socially mixed than those that had been founded during the Middle Ages. In the formally recognized orders, however, as many as three-fourths of the nuns in Italy were from noble families.  

Although the arrangement of society left many noble women in convents without an acceptable alternative, many still lamented their fates. As stated earlier, more than half of the women in convents had been forced into religious service by their families. Arcangela Tarabotti was a Venetian nun who wrote several treatises protesting her forced claustration. She called nunneries “female prisons” and berated the “paternal tyrannies” that coerced women into becoming nuns against their will. She charged that “men

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58 Ibid., 2-3.  
59 Sperling, 26-29.
imprisoned others so as not to bear expense and so as to be able to surround themselves with every sort of luxury…"  

She said that men lured young girls into convents before they were old enough to realize the sacrifice they were making for their lucky sisters. She also attacked the unfair partiality of parents who bestow one daughter with a lavish dowry and condemn the rest of their daughters to a "monastic hell." She pointed out at the same time that only those nuns who chose their vocation could truly achieve the goals of monastic life.  

Another nun, Caterina di messer Vieri Donatino d’Arezzo actually fled the monastery she had been placed in by her widow mother with the hope of marrying. She wrote the Chancellor of Florence, a humanist named Coluccio Salutati, about her flight and aspirations looking for sympathy and encouragement. She was disappointed when he replied that she should return to the life given to her before it was too late for her. He told her that she had been given to God by fortune and her mother, and should she marry the marriage would not be legitimate because she was the bride of Christ. Even an enlightened thinker of the period supported the unfair position women were often put in.

Many women carried on rather secular lives within the walls of their convents despite their religious vows. Visitors to some nunneries noted that prayer schedules were not followed studiously, fashionable clothing forbidden to the nuns was worn, and luxuries such as extra servants and pets had not been given up. Some cases, however, were much

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60 King, 89.
61 Sperling, 31.
62 King, 89.
63 Ibid., 87.
64 Shahar, 47.
more extreme, causing a friar to remark that the nunneries of Venice were "not convents but whorehouses and public bordellos."  

A study done by Guido Ruggiero looked at some cases of excess in the monasteries of Venice. He found that 33 convents within Venice had produced at least one case of fornication that was prosecuted by the Venetian government during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This is significant because normally cases of misconduct by members of the Church were handled by the Church itself. However, the situation had gotten bad enough that the city had to begin prosecuting private citizens involved in the crime in an effort to deter people from the act. Another interesting aspect of these cases is that they indicate that a certain amount of normal sexuality was tolerated. Apparently the Venetian city elders realized many of the women within the walls of the convent were not there willingly. Therefore, only when this sexuality got out of hand did the city step in to suppress this behavior.

One outrageous example is the case of Marco Bono from the fifteenth century. Evidently Marco became enraged when his lover, Sister Filipa Sanuto of Sant' Angelo, began having affairs with other men, and one night in a drunken rage he broke into the nunnery to confront Filipa. In doing so he aroused several of the other sisters in the monastery, all of whom were entertaining male guests at the time. The subsequent investigation found that many men of all classes frequented the convent for sexual favors.

Another case was that of Sister Valeria Valier, which came to light after Valeria, who was a noble, gave birth to a baby whose paternity was disputed. Among the possible candidates were a clothing vendor and a servant of the convent. What is interesting about this case is that Valeria had given birth in the convent six years earlier without anything

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65 King, 85.
being made of it. The reason this particular birth was a concern for the city elders was because it involved sexual contact between classes, a taboo for the patrician class of Venice.\footnote{Guido Ruggiero, \textit{The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 76-81.} This indicates that there were probably many more instances of inappropriate behavior that were never reported.

Not all convents were so lacking in spirituality, however. The convent of Corpus Domini in Venice is one example of a community of women religious who took their vows very seriously. Corpus Domini was a Dominican convent founded in 1394 by an abbess named Lucia Tiepolo who had had a vision in which Jesus had told her to go to Venice and found a convent in his name. With the help of a wealthy patron, Lucia managed to build the convent and collect a small community of women who entered the convent together on the day it was consecrated. Most of the nuns that entered the monastery were patrician, but not all were, including the woman who wrote the convent’s chronicle, Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni. This community was unlike those mentioned above, however, as the piety of the sisters was greatly renowned, bringing the community more members and patrons within a few years of its founding.\footnote{Daniel Bornstein, ed., \textit{Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: The Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395-1436} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3-5.}

The group of women living at Corpus Domini was very dedicated to the rigorous daily routine demanded by the rule of the order. They were very observant of their vows of chastity and renunciation, and they obeyed the rule of strict enclosure willingly. They were also very devoted to the unity of the community, putting this above all else. Bartolomea says the nuns performed their penances in secret so that none would seem
better than the rest, and they shared everything, including their clothes. The sisters also regularly received visions, indicating the extreme piety of the group\textsuperscript{68}.

The group of women who made up the community included lay sisters, novices and nuns, all of whom were virgins or widows. Most of the women were from noble families and well educated, but some of the women were not. Though Bartolomea stressed the fact that the unity of the group saw past the social class of the sisters, distinctions were still made based on learning and lineage. Some of the duties of the monastery required a certain level of literacy, and thus the lower class women often got the dirtier chores. The more important positions also tended to go to noble women. Lay women were also rarely mentioned in the chronicle and necrology of the convent, indicating their lesser importance\textsuperscript{69}. This is one example of how lower class women were marginalized in or completely pushed out of the formal monasteries during the period.

Very often lower class women seeking a place in the formal monasteries of the period found themselves in the position of servant rather than nun. The reason for lies in the fact that nuns had to bring a dowry with them into the monastery large enough to support them for the duration of their lives. As many lower class women could not produce the required dowry they could not become nuns in the traditional sense\textsuperscript{70}. However, many of these women did find a place in a new type of religious movement that became popular in the late Middle Ages.

In the thirteenth century a new religious fervor began to swept across Europe that could not be satisfied by formal institutions of the Catholic Church. People began wanting to actively participate in their religion, something they had never really done before. This

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 15-16.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 17.
was called the lay piety movement, and it produced a plethora of lay religious groups with a variety of goals. Women were very much a part of this new movement, and they immediately established many of their own groups. These women joined the lay piety movement for many different reasons, but they found in it an outlet the Church would not give them.

One of the main reasons women joined the lay movement was that the formally accepted orders of the Church were very constraining on women. Because of the Church’s insistence on enclosure, women were seriously limited in their ability to apply the ideals of their new spirituality. Even the recently established mendicant orders whose roots were in the lay piety movement placed constraints on their women followers that their monks were not expected to follow. In addition, lower class women joined the movement because they were having an exceptionally hard time finding a place within the formal monasteries. The fact that women were required to have a dowry in order to enter a convent combined with the flooding of monasteries by noble women pushed poorer women out of traditional religious service.

Another reason women joined the lay religious movement was because of the lack of spirituality in many convents. Margaret of Citta di Castello was an extremely devout women who left a convent for this very reason. By the age of seven she was wearing a hairshirt, fasting regularly, and flagellating every night. When she was old enough she entered a convent, but she left after impious nuns ridiculed her for her devotion. She later joined a lay group affiliated with the Dominican order. In this group Margaret was able to live out the rest of her life following the rules of charity, poverty, and humility without the

\[70\] King, 82.
restraints of the convent. Thus throughout the Renaissance women joined tertiary and other quasi-religious groups to find a religious lifestyle they could not find in a convent.

The women that joined the lay piety movement came from diverse backgrounds and participated in the movement in a number of different ways. Some acted as lay converts of established orders and worked for the order in whatever capacity it needed. The jobs of these tertiary groups could include running the monasteries, staffing hospitals, or tending lepers in the leprosarium. These groups tended to adhere somewhat to the ideals of the order. There were others who developed their own rules to live by. Some lived alone in small cells attached to churches or sealed in a room in their home supported by their relatives. There were also a few women who formed small groups and lived together under some sort of rule. Women such as these were known generally as Beguines in Germany and France, but similar groups also existed in Italy during this period.

The Beguines had no formal rule, and no real founder. They did acknowledge the authority of the Church hierarchy, and they took no binding vows. They simply followed the basic tenets of chastity and renunciation. They gave up wealth as part of their renunciation of worldly goods, but unlike the mendicants they lived off their labor. Their goal was simply the pursuit of a penitential life. However, the Church did not trust them and attempted to disband them.

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73 Sperling, 27-29.
74 Bornstein, 1996, 3.
75 Bolton, 145.
The Second Lateran Council of 1139 decreed that women who follow an established order and call themselves nuns were not to live in private houses. This was followed by the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council previously mentioned that forbade the founding of any new religious orders, which was aimed at stopping these new lay movements. The Second Council of Lyons in 1274 furthered the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council by abolishing all orders not approved by the pope. It also made the violation of this rule punishable by excommunication. Finally in 1311 at the Council of Vienne, the Church banned the Beguine movement and condemned its followers for their deviation from the Church. Inquisitors were also told that they were to watch these groups for any further infractions. Interestingly, their brother order, the Beghards, were not banned outright by the decree, just corrected for their infractions. Thus once again the Church specifically limited women's involvement in religious movements. Together these decrees further alienated women from their religion and left many women without a suitable alternative for a religious life. If women wanted to continue their religious work they would have to do so outside of Church law.

IV. Conclusions

During the Renaissance many factors coalesced to marginalize women who wanted to take up a religious vocation. The equation between all women and Eve early in the history of the Church caused the Church to severely limit the kinds of spirituality it would allow women to practice. It also prompted the Church to adopt the rule of strict enclosure,
which made the convents reliant on their brother orders and dowries for support, limiting the number of women that could enter the traditional orders. At the same time, social factors, such as the increase in cost and importance of dowries for marriage, pushed noble women who did not want to marry below their social class into convents. Thus the convents were filled with women who had taken monastic vows for very secular reasons and many maintained very secular lives. Lower class women, very religious women, and women who wanted to participate more actively in the Church were not able to find a place within the established Church. These women therefore took up the lay religious movements with fervor, but soon the Church limited their participation in these groups as well. The ultimate effect was the alienation of women from the Church throughout the period of the Renaissance.
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