

# **A Point of Departure for Further Scholarship: The Milieu of Women in the France of De La Salle**

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SELECTIONS FROM THE FRAY



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**M**ary Catherine Fox, AFSC, Ph.D., served as the founding dean of the School of Business at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. Fox retired from the university in 2018, at the rank of Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies, following a 28-year career there. She holds a bachelors degree in theatre, a master of science in telecommunications from then Saint Mary's College and a Ph.D. in higher education from the University of Minnesota.

Fox has served the Brothers of the Christian Schools as the initial chairman of the mission council for the Midwest District, a chapter consultant and delegate for the District as well a delegate to Midwest, Regional and international assemblies. She has keynoted Midwest District congresses, the International Lasallian Research Symposium, the CIL on Lasallian Women and speaks nationally and internationally for various Lasallian ministries and formation programs. Her earlier focus on the provenance, practice and promise inherent in the Lasallian tenet: together and by association, led to her current research on women in our Lasallian history.

A recipient of the Distinguished Lasallian Educator Award, Fox most cherishes the honor of receiving Letters of Affiliation from the Brothers of the Christian Schools in 2014 and being the first woman, together with the late Roxanne Eubank, Ed.D., to receive the Brother John Johnston Award from the Lasallian Region of North America in 2021.

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*Prerequisite to change is new knowledge  
and awakened consciousness.*

(Scott, 1987, p. 9)

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## Acknowledgments and Introduction

### Acknowledgments

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## Genesis

Br. Paul Grass, FSC, and Roxanne Eubank, Ed.D.—both now deceased—and I had a long, fascinating conversation about Roxanne’s and my interest in women in our Lasallian history. Having long been hoping to engage someone in research along these lines, Br. Paul suggested Elizabeth Rapley, whose book *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth Century France* (1990) completely captured me and subsequently served as both my point of departure and frequent point of return. These are the seeds for this project, together with the further work of female Lasallian scholars and friends, Roxanne Eubank, Ed.D., and Heather Ruple Gilson.

In 2023, at the request of Heather Ruple Gilson, Co-Secretary of Association, I presented at the Centro Internazionale Lasalliano (CIL), Lasalle Generalate, Rome. While mentioning in my presentation the women in the life and story of our Founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle, I found myself seeking context for women’s lives in seventeenth-century France. My curiosity was piqued. I returned to several questions again and again: What was life like for women in De La Salle’s time? Would knowing more about women’s lives then offer new observations on our Lasallian history? Is it possible that we Lasallian women of the early twenty-first century might enter into something like a dialogue with women in De La Salle’s time?

The history of our Founder and Institute is well-documented. What might our Lasallian narrative gain from a look at women’s lives immediately prior to and at the beginnings of our educational mission? Nuns in seventeenth-century France taught girls; by the time De La Salle entered the scene, they had been doing so for decades. De La Salle brilliantly adapted what worked for girls while innovating educational practices tailored to the needs of boys. In doing so, he introduced pedagogical techniques used to this day.

In recent years, my own presentations on Lasallian women and the interest these generated led me to conceive this project. As interest grows in women’s place in our Lasallian story, our ministries, and our governance, the need for further research and scholarship continues. The objective of this project, then, is both to ignite further research into the role of women in our mission and ministries and provide a resource for future Lasallian scholars. What follows is the result of that desire, humbly presented in gratitude for all that the Lasallian mission has brought to my life, my work, and my heart.

## Form

The nature of this work is exploratory and follows a wide path down different areas of women's lives in seventeenth century France. Included are areas I have grouped thematically: birth, education, work, marriage, Church, widowhood, and spiritual direction. Of course, in reality, areas blur and blend. Each theme holds a window into the lives of women in this period. I readily admit to selecting elements to include and neglect in this work—not, I hasten to add, from any learned judgment or personal prejudice. Nor were these chosen capriciously but rather desiring, at the conclusion of this work as at the start, to present a gathering of authors and works that hold the potential to paint a broad-brush backdrop and narrative addition to our Lasallian history. In doing so, I hope to ignite further research. As I read and studied, I landed on areas that held particular observations, wisdom, or insight for the lives of what I would term regular women of the time. Thus royalty and the high aristocracy are not specifically addressed here.

My style herein is intentionally reflective of what women of this period did, as I came to understand them. Women used their experience within the restricted constructs of their time, employing or creating means to accomplish the work they felt called to do, thus creating something entirely new, most vividly in their work in education and the Church. Thus I've dispensed with the rigorous constructs of APA and Chicago style. Each section begins with a brief introduction followed by a review of relevant, if not comprehensive, sources and research on the theme. Each section concludes with questions, suggestions, and possibilities, by no means exclusive, for further pursuit.

The accompanying annotated bibliography of gathered sources greatly inspired me. It is rich with possibilities for further research on women in St. John Baptist de La Salle's time. The sources selected hold the potential to unlock further aspects of women's lives and experiences that exist in parallel to, if not altogether integrated in, our founding story.

I conceived of this work as striking a match. My hope is that this match will spark interest in further illuminating the shadows surrounding women's lives in the time of our Founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle.

## Limitations

This work does not generally take into consideration the social status of female nobles and aristocrats, except in cases where contrasting their lives with others provides a useful counterpoint and keener understanding. Given my desire to provide a general narrative on the life of women as a class unto themselves in seventeenth-century France, a specific focus on social class lies outside the scope of this work.

I am not a historian; nor do I state this as an excuse for any shortcomings in addressing the literature gathered herein. Any and all errors are my own. As an interdisciplinarian, I am naturally curious and drawn to points of interest that intersect what we can know with what, alas, we can only speculate upon.

The strands of historical elements gathered here are presented in hope of opening ways of understanding women's place in the world of De La Salle. Perhaps in doing so we will gain some insight, however limited, into his own placement in a world unfamiliar with us in practice but recounted to us over these centuries outside the context of women's reality. For we know that,

History ... comprises selected experience, elevated into significant events by virtue of inclusion in historical narratives. And these choices were made according to the values and purposes of the historians. (Scott, 1987, p. 4)

In our case, quite naturally, by Brothers for Brothers. But as Rapley reminds us, "If you do not see to your own history, someone else will see to it for you" (Rapley, 2001, p. 4). To that end, it seems the best place to begin is with women in the Founder's time.

## Introduction

In the 1980s, the intentional shepherding of Brother John Johnston, FSC, then Superior General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, led to significant growth of, and interest in, the Lasallian charism. Those attracted to the Lasallian charism, but not living the consecrated life of a Brother included: teachers, administrators, social workers, volunteers, and others working in Lasallian ministries the world over. The Brothers of the Christian Schools responded to this interest in the Lasallian charism by translating and publishing De La Salle's writings, ensuring a wider distribution and understanding of the nature of the Lasallian charism. A proliferation of formation programs also arose introducing those now known as *Lasallians* to the history, charism, and mission of which they were now a constituent part.

The published histories of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, a Roman Catholic order of consecrated men, focus on the male context and nature of their Institute. As interest in all things Lasallian expanded beyond the Brothers themselves, women also sought to understand their place in the Lasallian story. With women partners currently over 50 percent of those actively working in Lasallian ministries worldwide ([https://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ENG\\_documento-estadisticas-2024.pdf](https://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ENG_documento-estadisticas-2024.pdf)), more attention has been directed to the women in the life of St. John Baptist de La Salle.

Consideration of the female place in the Lasallian story is recent, and thus far limited to those we can name, aside from the necessary housekeepers and cooks over the years. The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools was created to serve the education of boys. They were then known, and indeed are yet referred to by some, as “Brothers’ schools.” Only Brothers were employed as teachers, and later in the twentieth century, lay men when necessary. The Brothers’ General Chapter of 1946, in keeping with the male religious congregations’ culture of the time, called for secular teachers to be employed only reluctantly, and always “by progressive reduction of the lay element and by the Superiors refusing to open any new school which might mean an increase of the lay personnel in a District” (General Chapter notes, 37.3, 67). European Brothers were subjected to required military service. Therefore, during World War II, there had been a clear need to employ male lay teachers.

With regard to women, “the difficulties of the times explain without quite justifying ... the employment of female teachers in our primary classes” (37.2), but “it is important to proceed to a religious reorganization of our schools ... by the immediate removal of the feminine element employed in certain places in consequence of the war” (37.2). Indeed, as late as the 39th General Chapter (1966-1967), it was noted, “Feminine staff; where recourse has to be had to a female element, have efforts been made to limit its ingress” (39.3). These are not pejorative statements but expressions entirely consistent with the culture of Catholic religious orders in the mid-twentieth century (Circular 318: Results of the General Chapter of 1946).

Certainly,

The omission of women from history books, then can be explained without recourse to a conspiracy theory of history. Men never sat in council and decided to keep women down by eliminating their lives from the chronicles of history ... When women did something men considered important—inspired or defeated a powerful army, poisoned or fatally stabbed an eminent leader—their deeds were duly noted. (Scott, 1987, p. 5)

Or in our case, when women funded our Founder’s schools or encouraged him in his work. This is why we know the names and brief biographies, albeit some hagiographic, of women during De La Salle’s lifetime.

Recent research, presentations, and articles have introduced the Lasallian world to the women in De La Salle’s biological family and to those who supported his efforts to establish the Christian Schools (Eubank, pp. 38-40, 2019). While not the subject of this study, a relatively recent body of work has introduced us more intentionally to these women, among whom are the following:

- **Perette Lespagnol:** De La Salle's maternal grandmother and godmother, a devout and generous woman said to have been a strong and positive religious influence on De La Salle.
- **Nicolle Moet de Brouillet:** De La Salle's mother, who gave birth to eleven children, seven of which survived.
- **Mary de La Salle:** De La Salle's eldest sister, who, at the age of eighteen, went to live with her grandmother and helped care for her siblings after her parents died.
- **Rose Marie de La Salle:** De La Salle's youngest sister, who entered the Canonesses of St. Augustine at the age of sixteen, just before her parents' deaths. She died at the age of twenty-five from a poorly mixed, thus toxic, medication.
- **Madame Maillefer, Benefactor:** A widow and benefactor of De La Salle's contemporary, Blessed Nicholas Barre, his Sisters of the Infant Jesus, and their schools for girls, Madame Maillefer desired to fund a similar school for boys in Reims and sought out Adrian Nyel to that end.
- **Mother Françoise DuVal, Sisters of the Infant Jesus:** She introduced Adrien Nyel to De La Salle when both simultaneously arrived at the convent, Nyel looking for assistance in his endeavor and De La Salle attending to the sacramental needs of the sisters following Blessed Nicolas Roland's death. Eubank emphasizes her role as a "catalyst in the Founding of the first school for boys in Reims" (Eubank, 2017, p. 39).
- **Catherine Des Croieres, Benefactor:** An influential, wealthy, and pious widow who wanted to establish a school for poor boys. Impressed with De La Salle, she agreed to support the establishment of the boys' school, but only if De La Salle led the project.
- **Sister Louise Hours, Mystic:** De La Salle arrived at her small retreat chapel at Parmenie, France, seeking a retreat so as to reflect and rest. She is credited with persuading De La Salle to agree to the Brothers' request that he return to lead them. Hours (2022, p. 467) writes that they maintained a correspondence for the rest of De La Salle's life. He raises their partnership to the level of Sts. Frances de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal, or Sts. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac.
- **Mothers of the Early Students:** "Little is known about these" (Eubank, 2017, p. 38-40). It is hoped that this study may shed some light, however veiled in history, on their lives.

Certainly, the women in De La Salle's family provided both his earliest point of reference and his first model of faith. Yet, like all of us, he was also shaped by the

broader cultural context of his time. What influence might the status of women in seventeenth-century France, his encounters with nuns and teaching congregations, and his conversations with Fathers Roland and Barre have had on his choices and convictions? Alas, we can only speculate, but in doing so we can begin to enter the world in which he lived to set a context to enlarge our understanding.

From any point of observation, women's lives in seventeenth-century France open onto many avenues and pathways to divergent ends. In every historical moment, the century before holds movements and events that carry the seeds of what is to come, and this period is no exception. The Reformation and continuing Counter-Reformation were profound movements of extraordinary effect on individual lives and the life of the Church. Circling this rich history leads to labyrinth-like points of complexity and departure. Not wanting to skim over these intricate, if not downright tangled webs, while still wanting to surface authors and areas in the literature that may hold particular interest in understanding our story as Lasallian women, presented, remains and continues to pose a challenge. Scott comments in her foreword to *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present* (1987) that women from different social strata (nobles, peasants, etc.), while not inhabiting the same world, had no real reason to consider a world other than the one that was their lot. Thus they "would also erect ... barriers even in thought" (Scott, 1987, p. xvi). Being Protestant or Catholic exacerbated these barriers. This assertion struck me. For isn't this also true of Lasallian women today, whose lived experience in Africa or the Philippines differs markedly from that of their counterparts in the Americas and elsewhere? The reader, therefore, can determine what may be useful and what may be ignored.

Seventeenth-century France was a society of extremes. Setting aside female royals and nobles, the focus of this work is on women more generally: a broad introductory exploration of elements that coalesce to bring women's experience in seventeenth century France, if not into keen focus, at least into our narrative vision. This study aspires to introduce Lasallians to the time of De La Salle through a feminine lens. In doing so, I attempt to craft my research into a background narrative that adds color and context to our founding story. This approach has resonated with Lasallian audiences in my presentations and generates interest as a missing backstory and narrative within our shared history.

Bringing this study and review of relevant literature to any sense of completion proved difficult. My search surfaced more work to be read and studied, more rabbit holes to explore, more questions raised than answers found, and more hypotheses developed than conclusions reached. And that, indeed, is a delightful outcome for the future. Yet, an end was necessary lest I overlook the pithy French proverb whose apt caution offered much solace throughout this quest:

A distinctive proverb about losing the substance of one's work by continual fussing with it ("De l'arbre d'un pressoir le manche d'un cernoir"—a very rough English equivalent might be "you've sanded your mast to a matchstick"). (Zemon-Davis, 1975, p. 238)

## A Glance at Seventeenth-Century France

At first blush, any attempt to generalize the state of women in seventeenth-century France is at best naive and at worst folly. Aside from the obvious stratification of society, the differences between royal, aristocratic, urban, and rural populations are evident in virtually every aspect of life. However, to capitulate to these vagaries and abandon the research due to complexity would be to ignore the sparks of illumination that might be glimpsed from the history that we can know. Lasallians are exposed to, and familiar with, our founding story, including the names of the women who appear therein. What we lack is a fuller context, one that includes what we can know about the lives of women and their influence, or lack thereof, in the time of our Founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle. The *Grand Siecle* (Great Century) witnessed equally great change for women, if not recorded with irrefutable evidence, at least captured with élan by perceptive historians of the era.

The Church, king, and court were ostensibly aligned following the French civil wars from 1648-1653 known as the Fronde. "France was rising from its ashes, to become the great powerhouse of Catholicism in the seventeenth century" (Rapley, 2011, p. 171). The great differences in urban and rural areas, the strict social strata, and the whims of food and fortune combined to make existence tenuous. The poor were perceived as the cause of society's problems and thus marginalized. Illiteracy hovered at 78 percent in the general population but 86 percent among women (Goubert, 1969, quoted in Chento, 2016, p. 4).

While early in the century superstition and sorcery were prevalent, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation ignited massive religious change. The arrival of the Spanish Carmelites in France in 1604 quickly attracted great numbers of aspirants. Many new orders would quickly arise. Indeed, "it was a contagion, nothing less" (Rapley, 2011, p. 173).

The seventeenth-century French School of Spirituality, a reflection of the Church renewal following the Council of Trent, held great significance and influence on the faithful. Defined as a *theocentric* spirituality (Deville, 1990, p. 20), notable women such as Madame Barbe Acarie and St. Louise de Marillac were adherents. Later in the century, De La Salle was also greatly influenced by, and to a great degree a product of, this spirituality credited to Cardinal Berulle. In De La Salle's spirituality, in the Christian Schools, and in gathering his community of Brothers, he amalgamated elements of spiritualities of female religious orders of his time, crafting something entirely new. We

see these elements and influences most clearly in his writings: *The Conduct of Schools* and *Meditations for the Time of Retreat*.

So, what was it like to be a woman in seventeenth-century France? What elements have scholars explored that may lead us to some illuminating generalizations, or at the very least assist our knowledge of what it was like to be a woman at this moment in time and provide us with sources to these ends? This study attempts to approach that question exploring aspects of the major arcs of a woman's life:

- I. Birth and Early Childhood
- II. Education of Girls
- III. Marriage
- IV. Women's Work
- V. Women and the Church
- VI. Widows
- VII. Female Relationships with Spiritual Directors
- VIII. Conclusion



## I. Birth and Early Childhood

**The *raison d'être* of women's lives was to give birth to the next generation. Infant mortality was high; male offspring were preferred.**

As we see in De La Salle's own family,

Within twelve months of marriage a healthy woman could expect to bear her first child. Subsequent births would gradually space themselves out until they reached intervals of two or more years. (Gibson, 1989, p. 70)

A married woman who did not bear children in a reasonable time following her nuptials would resort to increasingly desperate measures in an attempt to do so, for "to be barren was a judgement of God" (Hufton, 1995, p. 177). However, the reverse was also true.

... while we know that barrenness was regarded as a curse, an overabundance of living children was seen by couples with inadequate resources as something less than a blessing. (Hufton, 1995, p. 183)

The higher classes experienced similar birth rates but were “less vulnerable than ... their impoverished peasant and urban counterparts to interruption by famine, disease, premature senescence and death.” Nevertheless, “Seventeenth-century France was a land that seemed literally to swarm with children” (Gibson, 1989, p. 71). Church and state encouraged high birth rates to fulfill the biblical imperative to be fruitful and multiply and to provide manpower. With abortion punishable by death and abstinence the only available means of birth control, such high birth rates were guaranteed.

Giving birth was not “unproblematic” (Hufton, 1995, p. 185) and often the source of profound anxiety. The birth of a disabled or disfigured child was commonly interpreted as a punishment from God. In earlier centuries, women facing such fears had turned instinctively to Mary, the Mother of God, and to particular saints whose intercession offered emotional and spiritual support.

However,

The seventeenth-century reformers saw their task as one of weaning people away from the habit of seeing saints as wonderworkers or protectors in their own right. (Bergin, 2009, p. 236)

This shift in devotional culture had significant consequences for women, who lost long-trusted companions in moments of danger and vulnerability. Indeed,

The Reformers rejected the special powers of the saints and downplayed, for example, Sts. Margaret and Ann, who had been faithful and succoring companions for women in childbirth and in widowhood. With the rejection of Mary as well as the saints, nuns and abbesses, God the Father was more firmly in place. (Boxer and Quataert, 1987, p. 32)

This theological reorientation left women with fewer culturally sanctioned spiritual resources, although childbirth remained perilous. And as Hufton notes,

A birth could have four possible outcomes: a living mother and child; a dead baby; a dead mother; a dead mother and child. If the first was the most numerous experience the other categories were directly known to all. (Hufton, 1995, p. 190)

Midwives generally attended women during childbirth until late in the seventeenth century when men, who could be university educated at a time when women could not, increasingly entered the medical profession resulting in,

... male midwives and later doctors of obstetrics took over the services needed at birth and the birthing chair gave way to the delivery table. Already in the seventeenth century, people were enamored with science and were impressed with the doctors' aura, training, and technical vocabulary. Wealthy families showed distinct preference for educated male midwives; they cost more and conferred status on the families that could afford them. Doctors took advantage of their monopoly over learning. (Boxer and Quataert, 1987, pp. 44-45; Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 85)

These developments, roughly concurrent, were the result of “interprofessional rivalry” as surgeons and physicians began to encroach upon what had heretofore been the exclusive province of female midwives.

Additionally,

Some scholars claim that the change in birthing position was a perverted caprice of King Louis XIV (1638-1715) ... Since Louis XIV reportedly enjoyed watching women giving birth, he became frustrated by the obscured view of birth when it occurred on a birthing stool, and promoted the new reclining position. He also insisted on male *accoucheurs* attending births ... Louis XIV's purported demand for change did coincide with the changing of the position and may well have been a contributing influence. (Dundes, 1981, p. 638)

This lurid detail is included as evidence of what little agency women had in this most significant aspect of their lives and further emphasizes the primacy of the male role in the family, marriage, fatherhood, society, and the Church.

Every level of society experienced a high rate of infant mortality. Thus, not surprisingly, rapid baptism to ensure an infant's entrance to heaven was the order of the day except for royal offspring, whose very existence required a more elaborate ceremony. Our Founder, St. John Baptist de La Salle himself, was baptized on the very day of his birth—whether due to physical vulnerability or some other reason, we can only speculate (Hours, 2022, p. 61).

To avoid the dreaded prospect of an eternity in limbo, extraordinary efforts were made to ensure some vestige of life remained in the tiny body so baptism could be conferred; this took on an added urgency in the case of stillborn infants (Bergin, 2009, pp. 254-255; Hufton, 1995, p. 192). Parallel in practice, should a woman die in childbirth, the post-birth ritual of purification, intended to “emphasize her reintegration into the religious community” (Goubert, 1970, p. 42), would be “performed over her coffin or over a female substitute so that she might not be denied the sight of God in the next world” (Gibson, 1989, p. 78).

Such practices unfolded within a wider demographic landscape marked by instability and deep anxieties surrounding birth itself. Exact population numbers in France can only be speculated upon as “national population growth during the seventeenth century was halted by frequent demographic crises—notably in 1630, 1650, 1662 and 1710” (Goubert, 1970, p. 38). Civil unrest, crop failure, and famine contributed to fluctuating birth rates. The birth of a girl in royal and aristocratic circles was met not with happiness but with “chagrin.” Women themselves joined “in the chorus of disparaging remarks which greeted the arrival of a member of their own sex” (Gibson, 1989, p. 2). Certainly women were considered the weaker and consequently inferior sex, but in a society where “titles and property were normally passed on from generation to generation through the eldest male, the absence of an heir could constitute real disaster” (Gibson, 1989, p. 2).

Lower in the social hierarchy,

The reactions of the peasantry ... remain still more inscrutable. But any pleasure experienced at the thought of an extra worker in the family was bound to be tempered by the awareness of an extra mouth to feed ... the birth of a daughter meant that sooner or later a dowry would have to be handed over to a husband or to a convent, a consideration which affected every class of society. (Gibson, 1989, p. 2)

And further, Gibson notes,

Whatever the size of the dowry, it represented the cession to outsiders of cash and property which, if invested in a son’s marriage or career, would either have remained within the bosom of the family or yielded appreciable returns in the form of wages, perquisites and social distinction. The unhappy father had, moreover, the invidious task of safeguarding his daughter’s virginity against the stratagems of designing gallants, on pain of sullyng the family name and honour. (Gibson, 1989, pp. 2-3)

Lacking any warm reception at birth, girl infants were subjected to what by modern standards can only be described as physical tortures resulting, it was hoped, in a healthy and physically appealing woman. Alas, the exact opposite was often the case and, combined with inadequate nutrition, unsanitary housing, and irregular nursing techniques could even result “in silencing cries of hunger, sometimes permanently” (Gibson, 1989, p. 4).

Concerns with hygiene and the safety of cow’s milk also led to placing infants out to wet nurses (Aries, 1962, pp. 374-375). The choice of a wet nurse was undertaken with attention and care considering the woman’s own childbearing background, her health, and even post-Reformation religious affiliation, “for Catholic parents feared the corruption caused by Protestant milk and vice versa” (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 92).

Quite a detailed description of the ideal nurse could be found in

... every gynaecological [sic] treatise of the day. The sum total of opinions was that she should be a brunette of twenty-five to thirty years and of healthy stock, with good teeth, ample but not excessive proportions, a pleasant and virtuous disposition, and clear pronunciation, the last two qualities in order that her nursling would not contract any undesirable habits or modes of speech. Sexual continence during breast-feeding, with a view to maintaining high quality milk, was a further requirement, but one which was likely to be half-heartedly obeyed and to precipitate the introduction of weaning well before the recommended stage of the appearance of teeth. (Gibson, 1989, p. 4; p. 254, n. 14)

Yet, “When children were put out to nurse, especially in big towns such as Paris and Lyon, their death-rate exceeded 50 percent; and it reached 80 percent among the abandoned children of Paris” (Goubert, 1970, p. 42). Lack of both basic hygiene as well as a shortage of milk by those making a living as wet nurses contributed to this death rate. While the “vast majority” of mothers at the time nursed their own children, wealthier women seemed to be aware of lactation as contraception. Thus, since producing heirs was a main concern, putting children out to wet nurse permitted that heir producing business to proceed unhindered (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 91).

As for early childhood, work began as early as the age of six, because

... parents ... needed every hand available ... in order to maintain the family bread supply ... turning children out into the fields or the forerunners of the factories as soon as they had sufficient intelligence and strength to be able to mind livestock and perform simple mechanical operations. Seven or eight was the age at which the exercise of reason was thought to commence. (Gibson, 1989, p. 12)

Where city and charity run orphanages existed, city councilors objected to any education “for children beyond age nine ... older children should be required to work” (Hours, 2022 p. 109). Childhood was not yet recognized as a distinct state of life, although young children of both sexes did play various games, enjoying most “those in which the body is in motion” (Aries, 1962, p. 89; Gibson, 1989, p. 10), competing and devising solemn ceremonies for crowning winners, this stage of life was far more abbreviated than would be the case in following centuries.

While a close examination of the social levels of the poor is beyond the scope of this work, it is germane to our interest here - and surely to the very genesis of our mission - to note,

There was an abundance of abandoned children ... Some were left by their single mothers on the thoroughfare, some were left by big families who could not feed any more mouths ... there were two causes of this abandonment: the obsession for daily bread among the poor ... and illegitimate births.

(Chento, <https://vincentians.com/en/the-poor-in-the-17th-century-in-france-ii/>)

In our Lasallian history, we recognize a third cause for the “abundance of abandoned children”: the need for parents, especially artisans, to work, leaving their children to their own devices.

**Suggestions for further research:**

- **Study of infancy and childhood in seventeenth-century France**
- **Midwives in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France**
- **Fate of abandoned children**



## II. Education of Girls

**F**rom the early seventeenth century, convent schools for girls existed. By the end of the century, free schools run by the many new teaching congregations proliferated. Whether in schools or being schooled at home, catechism and the skills necessary to girls' future roles as wives and mothers were paramount.

Custom dictated the removal of young boys from women's care approximately at the age of seven, ostensibly to prevent them from being

molly-coddled ... Girls seemed much better placed to enjoy maternal solicitude and attention in respect of their education. No stigma attached to their remaining in the parental home and being trained by their mother, regarded as their natural instructress. (Gibson, 1989, p. 80)

Young girls, regardless of economic status, were introduced to household chores early.

Girls of all classes were taught skills that they would use in running a household—spinning, sewing, cooking, care of domestic animals; peasant girls were also taught some types of agricultural tasks. (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 57)

Beyond that required knowledge, a mostly haphazard, catch-as-catch-can system prevailed. As Gibson holds,

If women were saved from crass ignorance it was largely due to their own initiative: that of the charitable ladies who financed and ran classes for young girls; that of the mothers and nuns who, whatever their own intellectual or pedagogical shortcomings, bore the brunt of the responsibility for educating their sex. (Gibson, 1989, p. 40)

Education of girls, while the purview of mothers, was “not particularly exacting, consisting of housewifery and morals ... how to pray and make the sign of the cross, and to inculcate some notions of social etiquette” (Gibson, 1989, pp. 21, 22). While “higher education was out of the question since the university resolutely closed its doors to women,” education for girls was

... obtainable from three principal sources: from charity schools, generally founded and maintained by pious individuals or religious bodies; from the “little schools” (*petite ecoles*), ... and from the convents. (Gibson, 1989, p. 25)

Many girls remained at home or with a neighbor or relative who served as the first educator (Aries, 1962). Girls’ and women’s access to education reflected, as one would expect, their state in society; the higher the rung, the more likely a girl was to be exposed to at least some learning.

Yet the Ursulines, founded by St. Angela Merici and devoted to the education of girls in Italy in the 1500s, had begun educating girls in Paris in 1612. And while the Council of Trent (1545-1563) insisted that women religious remain cloistered, women’s own spirituality was moving toward something new. Throughout the Counter-Reformation (1545-1648), interest increased both in female education and in women as active participants in the work of the Church. The Ursulines were well-established by mid-century and, although forced back into cloister, were permitted to continue as they had started, as teachers. And though “no council had ever insisted so explicitly, so repeatedly and so forcefully on the continuity of the present with the apostolic past as did Trent” (O’Malley, 2000, p. 122), a new era for women in the Church was percolating.

And while Aries holds that, “If schooling in the seventeenth century was not yet the monopoly of one class, it remained the monopoly of one sex. Women were excluded” (Aries, 1962, p. 332).

Rapley finds,

In numbers of schools and schoolmistresses, and in the choices of schooling offered to girls, the seventeenth century can hardly be accused of neglect. A substantial number of schools did exist, and a substantial number of girls actually did spend some time in school. (Rapley, 1987, p. 303)

For, “early modern society was getting serious about educating its girls, and there was no one around who could do it as well as these ... Ursulines” (Rapley, 2011, p. 178). Even so, girls rarely remained in school for more than two or three years.

As the century progressed and the teaching congregations increased, more parents hoped for social and employment advantage for their children through education.

Even for girls, the number of parents ready to send their daughters to school suggests that, in addition to the benefits of religious instruction, some sort of advantage, social or economic, was to be gained from the effort. (Rapley, 1987, p. 304)

The rise of girls’ education in France has its genesis as a direct response to the rise and particular appeal of Protestantism to women such that,

Among the people who had proved most receptive to the reformed religion was a group whom the colleges of Fathers could not easily reach—the women. Since women dominated the early years of their children’s lives, their influence was crucial. And whereas their sons might be removed from their influence and given a Catholic education, their daughters, as long as they remained at home, were vulnerable to the mothers’ heresy ... Thus the first impulse towards feminine education ... was anti-Protestantism. (Rapley, 2011, pp. 42-43)

This strategy of educating girls in schools at first to combat “the spread of heresy” progressed “later out of conviction” (Rapley, 1987, p. 304).

Hufton and Tallett (1987) concur, noting,

... much teaching, to a broad social spectrum, concentrated not on literacy, but on skills that could generate self-sufficiency such as spinning, sewing, lacemaking and embroidery, along with knowledge of the catechism to allow the girl in question to resist heresy. (Hufton and Tallett, 1987, p. 82)

And while Rapley agrees with the centrality of sewing and “handwork,” she also notes there was no prohibition against teaching girls to read and write (Rapley, 1987, p. 317).

Thus the basis for all female education, aside from household chores, appears to be firmly set in the need for catechizing, one of the many tenets arising from the Council of Trent in the face of abdication to Protestantism. Post-Trent the emphasis on proper catechetical education and training was strong, ultimately giving women *entrée*, if only barely, into the exclusively male province of apostolic works. Although prevented from preaching, catechetical education nonetheless led women, bit by bit, to more visible roles in the work of the Church. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, “new orders and congregations turned to education especially at the elementary and secondary levels” (Bireley, 2009, p. 233).

But before turning our attention to the explosion of women’s congregations and work in the apostolate of the church, a cursory look at the thoughts of one advocate of girls’ education in this time period is in order, not least because of the intersection of his lifespan with our Founder. Born in France the same year as De La Salle and a clear advocate for women’s education in the aristocratic and royal world in which he moved, Archbishop Francois Fenelon (1651-1715) nonetheless cautioned against women appearing too learned. Dispensing with what he saw as the unbecoming preciousness engendered in the salons of the day and evident in those emerging therefrom being labelled *precieux* (precious) (Giblin, 1941, p. 16), Fenelon emphatically states that while the education of boys, and the need thereof “is regarded as a most important affair with reference to public welfare ... Nothing is more neglected than the education of girls” (Fenelon, 1891, p. 11; Rapley, 1990, pp. 146-147). And while historians generally agree on this point, the education of boys, such as it was prior to De La Salle’s Christian Schools, lacked any definitive structure. Surely, De La Salle would have been aware of Fenelon, his later banishment and ultimate redemption.

While women were still understood as weak, Fenelon argues of the importance to strengthen them.

Have they not duties to fulfill, and duties, too, that lie at the foundation of all human life? Is it not the women, who ruin or uphold families, who regulate every detail of domestic life, and who consequently decide what touches the whole human race most nearly? In this way they exert a controlling influence on the good or bad morals of nearly all the world. A discreet, diligent, pious woman is the soul of an entire large household; she provides in it alike for temporal and spiritual welfare. Even men, who have exclusive authority in public, cannot by their decisions, establish a real prosperity unless women aid them in its achievement.  
(Fenelon, 1891, pp. 12-13)

Hodgson notes that while Fenelon begins his education of girls “with so pedestrian a subject as domestic economy,” he works up to “a study of history, law and ethics” (Hodgson, 1908, pp. 188, 189). Fenelon’s stance that education for both genders “should be limited to what is relevant to their functions” and women’s “functions” being domestic, leads Rapley to conclude, “The horizons of female education were limited by a social diktat which allowed no scope for radical change” (Rapley, 1990, p.165). Indeed, his influence was such that the Carmelite Charlotte de Saint-Cyprien ceased writing and circulating her verse “out of respect for Fenelon’s warnings against curiosity and his urging to become ever more simple” (Carr, 2007, p. 4).

Fenelon advocated for teaching by example and in the vernacular. Interestingly, both would become elements of De La Salle’s educational approach. When dealing with girls, Fenelon cautions, “Restrain their minds as much as possible within ordinary bounds, and teach them that there should be, in their sex, a modesty about learning almost as delicate as that which inspires them with a horror of vice” (Fenelon, 1891, p. 65), clearly warning, yet again, against a highly educated woman. Considered by some historians a traditionalist, Fenelon’s motives and educational curriculum reflect his interest in keeping women, and thus society, pure by eliminating the study of any subjects that could be oriented “toward the civic life and public leadership roles, which he considered inappropriate for women” (Boxer and Quataert, 1987, p. 47).

His disdain for the salon as a vehicle for education is, arguably, the basis for some of this prejudice against educating women too highly. “He constructed an educational program that would not promote aristocratic women’s participation in salon life. It purposely failed to include the requisite social and intellectual tools needed to run a salon” (Boxer and Quataert, 1987, p. 47). Nevertheless, he “marks the beginning, in France at least, of a movement which resulted in giving to girls those intellectual advantages which had hitherto been denied them” (Fenelon, 1891, p. 3).

Fenelon was writing for an aristocrat friend and as an aristocrat entrenched in royal circles. Later exiled in scandal only to be redeemed late in his life, his work is useful to us only from that perspective, although we cannot help but speculate on our Founder’s knowledge of him, since both served as priests at St. Suplice in the same period.

Although calls for women’s education increased on grounds as varied as avoiding idleness, guarding morals, and engendering the qualities of a good companion, there were still adamant opponents “proclaiming a woman sufficiently learned if she could distinguish between her husband’s doublet and his shirt” (Gibson, 1989, p. 18).

Detractors and opponents of educating women cited

... the common faults of women, the old weary list which has been published so often till surely everyone should be sated, their chatter, their unreliableness, their meanness, their cunning and all the rest.  
(Hodgson, 1908, p. 190)

And this leads to general agreement that if women,

... made so bold as to manifest enthusiasm for learning, the public responded with irony, ridicule and the inevitable reminder that a woman's most fitting occupation in life was to school herself to catch and retain a husband.  
(Gibson, 1989, p. 40)

As for rural and peasant women, the seasonal nature of agricultural work and the unrelenting demands of home chores made anything beyond the most limited education unlikely indeed. Nonetheless, the movement of history toward modernity began to alter expectations. Aries observes,

The ethics of the time ordered them to give all their children ... and in the late seventeenth century even the girls ... a training for life. It was understood that this training would be provided by the school.  
(Aries, 1962, p. 413)

This development, incremental though it was, signaled the beginning of a new educational horizon for girls, one that would eventually intersect with the Christian Schools and the evolving mission of De La Salle himself.

### **Suggestions for further research:**

- **Fenelon's education subjects and methods with girls**
- **Salon influence on education**
- **Charity schools**
- **Ursuline schools' influence on De La Salle**
- **Jesuit pedagogy adaptations by female teaching orders**
- **The established teaching orders and schools for girls of Blessed Nicholas Barre (Sisters of the Infant Jesus) and Blessed Nicholas Roland (Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus)**



### III. Marriage

**I**n the patriarchal society of the seventeenth century, marriage could improve or impoverish a family's state. Women had little, if any agency. Procreation was paramount.

Following whatever served as their education, women had two acceptable, if limited, possibilities for their lives: *aut maritus aut murus*—a husband or a cloister. Both life states required the payment of a dowry. Historians (cf. Gibson, Hufton, Rapley, Wiesner-Hanks) make mention of single rural women moving to cities, securing work to support themselves, and later bringing that income to a marriage. Single women caregivers had also long existed, although these were not yet gathered in religious communities. However,

... individuals survived only as a part of a family economy to which everyone contributed labor. As Olwen Hufton shows, a few women might live in “spinster clusters” (convents and the like), pooling resources and skills, but most people of both sexes depended for food, clothing, and shelter on a household. (Boxer and Quataert, 1987, p. 38)

“Marriage was a woman’s highest calling” (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 32), with procreation being the primary purpose. Historians agree that in the early modern period marriage occurred at a later age than we might expect, “24-26 for women, 26-28 for men: the upper limits would reflect difficult times” (Hufton, 1998, p. 13; Goubert, 1970, p. 42). Additionally,

Marriage was regarded essentially as a family concern, not that of two private individuals. The choice of husband or wife had repercussions on the social standing and material welfare of the family. A household would gain not only a whole set of allies and social relations, but ultimately a series of heirs to perpetuate the family name. It stood to acquire the financial advantages that would ensure general prosperity and facilitate advancement in the social hierarchy—or a legacy of debts and mortgages that might drag it into the mire. (Gibson, 1989, p. 43)

The significance of marriage to the position and future of families cannot be overstated. “During the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries family power overwhelmed church influence in marriage arrangements” (Hanley, 1987, p. 55). Paramount to the successful enterprise was a choice that would improve or at least ensure the family’s fortunes.

There are numerous examples of children and parents who fought bitterly over the choice of a spouse ... [but] in the vast majority of marriages, the aims of the people involved and their parents, kin, and community were largely the same; the best husband was the one who could provide security, honor, and status, and the best wife one who was capable of running a household and assisting her husband in his work. (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 76)

Parents had the final approval; yet the Catholic church, at this time essential to any marriage among the faithful, “came to require at least nominal consent” of the parties involved (Hanley, 1987, p. 54). In this patriarchal society, underscored by God as father and with women considered the weaker sex, obedience was the primary expectation. Thus, women had little to say in the choice of a mate. Moreover, even in the face of both the Protestant and Catholic Reformation, “Biblical texts could be used by the reformers of both groups to urge the necessity of strong patriarchal control over the Christian family and the frailties of women” (Hufton, 1995, p. 31).

So,

The model of the Christian marriage in the truly godly society is thus conceptualized as a patriarchal power relationship in which the husband must constantly invigilate his wife's conduct and bring her to account, but he must do so in a kindly way. Tyranny is not the intent. The relationship should be one of harmony in which the male and female complement each other. He creates wealth, she saves; he seeks a living, she keeps house; he deals openly with the world, she keeps herself apart from all but a few; his virtue is enhanced by skill in discourse, hers by silence ... He is accountable in the next world to God; she is accountable in the here and now to her husband. (Hufton, 1995, p. 40)

Marriage then, “was the ‘natural’ vocation for women—for all women in Protestant areas and for most women in Catholic areas—and with popular and scholarly notions about women’s weaker nature and proper subservient role” (Wiesner-Hanks, 1987, p. 69).

Both Catholic and Protestant religions emphasized the significance of marriage, although historians agree that while Protestants encouraged the state of marriage, Catholics still held the celibate state as superior.

Catholic authors did begin to publish manuals for husbands and wives to counteract those written by Protestants and emphasized their continued view of the sacramental nature of marriage. On the other hand, virginity continued to be valued over marriage, and spouses who took mutual vows of chastity within marriage or left marriage to enter cloisters were praised. (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 230)

Such ideals shaped not only married life but perceptions of unmarried women as well. Unease with “unmarried women led authorities to view their work always as temporary, just a stopgap until the woman could attain her ‘natural,’ married state” (Wiesner-Hanks, 1987, p. 69). Unmarried women could also be regarded with suspicion “both because they were fighting their natural sex drive and because they were upsetting the divinely imposed order, which made woman subject to man” (Wiesner, 2008, p. 33). This view of unmarried woman, what Wiesner terms “masterless persons” (Wiesner, quoted in Boxer and Quataert, 1987, p. 68), could even lead to allegations of witchcraft and demonic possession. Spinsters were not those who chose the single life but rather supported their lone state through spinning (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 82). Most practically, spinsterhood resulted in lower wages for women, leading to the stark conclusion that, “freedom to live and work independently also meant freedom to starve” (Wiesner, quoted in Boxer and Quataert, 1987, p. 69).

Gibson rather cynically concludes,

The seventeenth-century marriage thus retained throughout a strictly functional aspect. Conceived as the union of titles, estates or fortunes, negotiated by third parties, presented as a *fait accompli* to virtual strangers, vetted and approved by the Church and the law ... Individuals and personalities counted for little in the process, romance still less.  
(Gibson, 1989, p. 58)

Yet there is evidence, if not pervasive or recorded with rigor, of affection and care between spouses and toward children as childhood was beginning to be understood as a distinct phase of human life (Aries, 1962, pp. 132, 133). Certainly, as Rapley notes, “the seventeenth century saw a clear trend away from the relaxed social mores of the reign of Henri IV, and the development of a distinctly housewifely ethic” (Rapley, 1990, p. 15). Fidelity, the rearing and educating of children, and the handling of domestic affairs were all expected of wives. While having no real agency of their own, historians agree that the duties expected of wives required some level of skill to complete. And while women were indeed understood as the weaker and thus inferior sex, still some amelioration was evident in actual lives.

Girls were brought up to believe that they ought to obey their husbands; and boys were brought up to believe that they had the power of correction over their wives. In actual marriage, subjection might be moderated by the common causes of economic support, to which they both contributed, of sexual need, of childrearing, or of shared religious interest.  
(Zemon Davis, 1975, p. 145)

The Council of Trent attempted to recalibrate the purposes of marriage from the strict adherence to the primacy of procreation (credited to St. Thomas Aquinas) to first noting a “desire to live together” (Bergin, 2009, p. 326). In practice, however, and in parallel to Christ’s marriage to the Church, the concurrent supremacy of the clerical and virginal state held sway, such that late in the century, “inherited negative views of the family generally remained too widespread among the French clergy for a new spirituality of marriage to flourish” (Bergin, 2009, p. 328).

In contrast, Weisner holds that “Protestant Reformers broke clearly with Catholicism in their view that marriage was a spiritually preferable state to celibacy and saw the most important function of marital sex not as procreation but rather as increasing spousal affection” (Weisner, 2008, p. 62). Certainly, Protestantism’s “elimination of clerical celibacy” led to “greater friendship and more equal partnership between Protestant spouses than was possible between Catholic spouses of the same period” (Zemon-Davis, 1975, p. 68). Notably, the Victorian concept of romantic love—and the changed perceptions of marriage it would bring—awaited a future century.

**Suggestions for further research:**

- **Marriage in different social classes in seventeenth-century France**
- **Marriage contracts, ceremonies, and celebrations**
- **Contrasting Catholic and Protestant concepts, understandings, and practices in marriage**
- **Evolving Catholic concepts of marriage in the post-Reformation period**



## IV. Women's Work

**Although home and hearth remained top priority, women were able to pursue certain types of work to secure income to bring into a marriage and, later, to supplement the family income.**

Ensuring girls learned homemaking skills, preparing them to be wives and mothers and contributing in some measure to self-support, constituted female education in this time period. Marriage and motherhood did not preclude a woman from participating in the economy and from assisting in her husband's work, be that a trade or agriculture. As early as the sixteenth century, both aristocratic women and those in families of artisans were actively involved in the management of households and the production of goods. "That a woman should earn her keep by homemaking, as had countless generations of her sex, seemed as natural in the seventeenth century as that she should wear skirts and bear children" (Gibson, 1989, p.97).

For the home,

Women regularly made butter, cheese, and bread and brewed beer as well. After food production their most urgent duty was garment making, manufacturing items of clothing for the entire household. They spun yarns and wove coarse cloth for linens as well as clothing, made soap, washed, bleached, and dyed fabric, gathered feathers to make pillows, and managed their small enterprise and its family labor force.  
(Boxer and Quataert, 1987, p. 40)

As we might expect, “Women made their presence felt, not unnaturally, in those trades closest to their ordinary domestic occupations—in the clothing, food and allied industries” (Gibson, 1989, p. 107). While prohibited from participating in civic and political life and producing any goods regulated by the male master’s guilds,

Sewing and seamstressing were seen as proper female occupations, and wealthy women established small endowments to teach poor girls to become seamstresses. Along with cloth and clothing, women also made cheap, simple items such as brushes, combs, candles, soap, thimbles, brooms, needles and pins, wooden bowls and spoons. Such products required little training and no expensive raw materials, and could be sold locally ...  
(Wiesner, 1987, p. 68)

Wiesner notes,

In addition to selling at the marketplace, women also ran small establishments throughout the city. They made beer, mead, and hard cider, and ran taverns to dispense their beverages. They operated small inns and sleeping-houses for poor people who could not pay to stay in the more expensive larger inns. They pickled and smoked meat, washed innards and prepared tripe, working in their own kitchens and selling from the market or directly from their home. Women also sold food and other items house-to-house, carrying baskets and trays ... (Wiesner, 1987, p. 73)

Needlework, spinning, lacework, and sewing appear in discussions of women’s work. Domestic servants functioned as “provision-buyer, cook, bottle-washer, bed-maker, cleaner and child-minder” (Gibson, 1989, p. 115).

Cities attracted single women with the possibility of employment as domestic servants or in cloth production; their dominance in spinning is reflected in the gradual transformation of the word ‘spinster’ during the seventeenth century from a label of occupation to one of marital status.  
(Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 82)

As we have seen, female midwives, formally trained or otherwise, also prevail in our period and constitute the “only official access for women to the medical profession” (Gibson, 1989, p. 119).

Consistent with the superstitious nature of the time, fortune-tellers and occultists were in evidence, while actresses were “adulated but despised” (Gibson, 1989, p. 131). Of particular interest to us, however,

Among artisans, women were associates in the family enterprises: they worked beside their men, minding the business, keeping the accounts, sometimes even earning independently. (Rapley, 1990, p. 13)

... Jean Maillefer, bourgeois, Reims (De La Salle’s brother-in-law, married to his sister, Marie) recalled his mother’s early career: “She was taken out of school at the age of fourteen years, to be married and to work in a shop under close supervision, and her first jobs were ... to keep the accounts and to work selling haberdashery.”

(Jadart, *Memoires de Jean Maillefer*, quoted in Rapley, 1990, p. 209, notes 24 and 26)

Our founding story emphasizes that De La Salle’s schools educated the children of artisans, not those of the higher or lowest social classes. Here we can grasp the very work of the artisans that necessitated their children being abandoned to their own devices.

Women in lower societal classes, while making less money than men in similar jobs, nonetheless found numerous avenues for employment. Prior to society “shunting aside the practical, economic contributions ... in favor of greater emphasis on her moral role” (Collins, 1989, p. 437) historians have established “... that women ran some 10 to 20 percent of all seventeenth-century French enterprises, including farms” (Collins, 1989, p. 439).

Single women found more attractive employment in towns and cities. As previously noted, single women worked at various jobs to earn enough money, once married, to add to the coffers of the new household. They were also drawn to the towns by “better employment possibilities” (Collins, 1989, p. 453). Collins finds that “Marriage contracts show clearly the important role of women as suppliers of cash resources for the new peasant household” (Collins, 1989, p. 452). The wider literature likewise notes women working as laundresses or engaged in spinning, weaving, embroidery, linens, and ribbon-making. At the lowest end of the spectrum in cities, “we find women beggars and prostitutes” (Collins, 1989, p. 460). Despite this range of activity, however, women’s work did not extend to the public sphere.

Marriage was cited as the key reason for excluding women from public offices and duties, for their duty to obey their husbands prevented them from acting as independent persons; the fact that an unmarried woman or widow might possibly get married meant that they, too, were included in this exclusion. (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 44)

And although,

Seventeenth-century French women were often poor ... they included among their numbers many linen merchants, mercers and drapers, grain brokers, guild masters, and, most prominently, wine sellers. At a lower level of the economy, we find many women *revendeuses* (resellers), laundresses, and servants. (Gibson, 1989, pp. 463-464)

Still, “The sheer numbers of poor women—servants, beggars, prostitutes—were very great; unfortunately, it is very difficult to find much evidence about them in the seventeenth century” (Gibson, 1989, pp. 460-461).

Ultimately, Zemon-Davis concludes that

... women suffered for their powerlessness ... as changes in marriage laws restricted the freedoms of wives even further, as female guilds dwindled, as the female role in middle-level commerce and farm direction contracted, and as the differential between male and female wages increased. (Zemon-Davis, p. 94)

At the same time, Collins notes that while there was indeed “... greater limitation of female guilds ... and the decline in female wages,” women were still visible in “economic action” (Collins, 1989, p. 437).

Peasant wives were true partners to their husbands in all farming activities. Aside from the agricultural work from which they eked out a living, Goubert repeatedly stressed “the incessant search for other forms of income, for piece-work” to hold body and soul together (Goubert, 1956, p. 68).

This search, which was absolutely essential in order to feed their families, to pay the *taille* and to survive at all, took the form of hunting for vacant leases, for wool to spin, for lace to manufacture, for wood to chop, carve, or sell, for any small job on the larger estates. (Goubert, 1956, p. 69)

And in the worst of times, “everything fell off at the same time—crops, work in the fields, and work in industry” (Goubert, 1956, p. 69) leaving the only option: to beg.

Is it reasonable to believe that in all these elements of women and their work we might begin to assemble a composite of some of the mothers of the first students of our Christian Schools?

**Suggestions for further research:**

- **Products of artisans in seventeenth-century France**
- **Women and guilds**
- **Markets for sale of women-produced products**
- **Taxes**



## V. Women and the Church

**The seventeenth century saw cataclysmic changes for women in living their faith. The growth of new religious congregations ended the dualistic choice of *aut maritus aut murus* (marriage or the cloister). As a result, horizons expanded for women serving the Church in the world.**

Historians and scholars are in complete agreement as to the significance of, and changes to, women's lives over the course of the seventeenth century (cf. Bergin, Bilinkoff, Deville, Diefendorf, O'Malley, Rapley, Wiesner-Hanks). Nowhere is women's changing reality, and indeed visibility, more evident than in the positions women carved for themselves, held and achieved in relationship to their faith and the Church. While the great significance of the French School of Spirituality, Madames Acarie, Guyon, and others are outside the scope of this project, attention is drawn to the diversity in women's understanding and practice of spirituality. This diversity, evident in the salons and in myriad other manifestations of women's spirituality, ultimately resulted in an explosion of new women's congregations, with twenty-seven established between 1626 and 1732 (Bergin, 2009, p. 142).

With the typical life choices of women being reduced to *aut maritus aut murus* (marriage or cloister) the education of girls leaned in these directions, preparing girls for one life or the other. Yet no less than Archbishop Fenelon himself warned parents against pushing a girl toward the life of a nun (Fenelon, 1891, pp. 86-87). We may speculate that this may have been his way of counteracting what Rapley emphasizes as “The active role of pious families in developing young vocations” (Rapley, 1994, p. 622). Quoting her own translation of Viguerie’s *Vocation*, Rapley observes that “children, sometimes very young children, were placed in an environment or in a situation in which they had little choice but to embrace the ecclesiastical [or religious] state” (Viguerie, *Vocation*, p. 32, quoted in Rapley, 1994, p. 622, n. 32).

Yet in her study of death notices of nuns in this time period, Rapley finds evidence of just the opposite. In the lives of young women committed to the vocation of a nun, stories of rebellion feature prominently. One “cut off her hair to avoid being taken to a ball ... [Another] waited until some workers were being admitted into the monastery and slipped in beside them ... [and another] took the opportunity while her mother was out to come running” (Rapley, 1994, p. 625). It is not possible to state definitively whether the source of such rebellion was: to flee parental control, the prospect of marriage or the response to a keen sense of one's vocation.

#### Girls from higher levels of society

... 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. (Diefendorf, 2004, p. 18)

Woshinsky agrees, noting that “some women still managed to negotiate the conventual system in ways beneficial to them—ways which had more to do with survival than spirituality” (Woshinsky, 2007, pp. 168, 169).

The times and culture which accepted women as weaker and inferior to men still held dominion with, “powerful social forces that stood in the way of change, especially where women were concerned” (Rapley, 1990, p. 40). Such assumptions combined with “the diffusion of medical and religious discourses emphasizing women’s susceptibility to delusions and demonic influence” in such a way as to “undermined women’s charismatic authority” (Rapley, 1994, p. 622, note 32).

Women, lay and religious, were also subjected to sexual and spatial discipline, that is, they were excluded from activity in public either through monastic enclosure or the imposition of social norms that defined women’s public presence as wanton. (Weber, 2016, p. 3)

Strict ascetic practices were common among the devout and practiced by De La Salle as well. Some women did adhere to these strict practices, which were “consistently gendered as male ... yet open to women” (Diefendorf, 2009, p. 44). Diefendorf argues that this path was inspired by true conviction and served as an alternative for women who, although excluded from the priesthood and administering the sacraments, nonetheless could place themselves on equal footing with men in penitence. Rather than evincing female weakness, engaging in such strict penitence imbued women with a certain personal power in terms of discerning God’s will for them (Diefendorf, 2009, p. 44). Tristano’s substantive argument positions Madame Maillefer’s role as the “foundress of the Brothers of the Christian Schools” (Tristano, 2023, p. 140). Tristano’s argument echoes Diefendorf’s analysis in recalling Maillefer’s intense penitential practices following her radical conversion from a life of vanity.

In the rural areas outside the cloistered convents, female spiritual practices of: mysticism, mortification, personal piety, and penitence held the seeds for linking acts of service performed by secular women, such as caring for the sick and elderly, to religion. Additionally, “women sometimes used the language of motherhood to support their larger role, declaring that God had given them a responsibility to their communities as well as their families” (Wiesner-Hanks, 2024, p. 43).

Dedicated unmarried women and widows, both those known as *dévotés* and *filles seculare* as well as interested others, gathered together to live lives of piety and service outside of the strict *clausura* of convents, if not yet in the structured religious congregations that would emerge. These women were inspired to perform works generally held to be religious, wanting to work freely, not behind cloistered walls. Occupying a liminal space somewhere between cloistered nuns, penitents, mystics, and third-order devoted laywomen, were women seeking to live out the gospel in new ways. Attempts to live in this border between secular and religious life had arisen in the sixteenth century, but the seventeenth century saw this female energy and devotion channeled into a new way of living out one’s vocation. These “informally organized groups of women ran schools, opened shelters for widows and orphans, tended the sick, and provided other services without submitting to the formalities of religious vows” (Diefendorf, 2011, p. 37). Thus, “by renouncing the title and appearances of religious life but following many of its practices, ... the first active uncloistered congregations ... knew full well that they were nuns in all but name” (Rapley, 1990, p. 7).

This female intensity to serve, springing from personal faith, was sometimes met with accusations of sorcery and demonic possession. Rapley cautions, “... the point to remember is that many of the first generation of nuns were zealots, and as zealots they simultaneously aroused both admiration and alienation in the society around them” (Rapley, 2001, p. 16).

While women functioning in the world seem to have been confronted by a stark either/or dynamic, over time myriad female vocations and ways of living out one's faith unfolded and evolved (Diefendorf, 2009, pp. 31-59). Weber argues that while *aut maritus aut murus* were held to be the only choices open to women, the last thirty years of scholarship have revealed "that significant numbers of women continued to choose an unofficial third vocation—living out their lives in the spaces between marriage and the convent" (Weber, 2016, p. 1). This desire, movement and life choice, can, in part, be understood as the genesis of active religious congregations. Many of the emerging, new, and small congregations did not require dowries, thus expanding the classes of women who could join them. The focus on nursing, teaching, and living outside of *clausura* altered the Church and society and presaged further changes in women's religious life in later centuries. Increasing awareness and visibility of the poor, also contributed as an "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" (Diefendorf, 2004, p. 13). So just as our founding story holds that it was De La Salle's walk through the streets on his way to the cathedral in Reims that made the state of children and poverty visible to him, so too did it affect and concern women.

Throughout the century, this movement by women into humanitarian service to one's neighbor—the sick, the elderly—was joined with an intense desire to place this service in a religious context, not in defiance of Church rules and tradition, but rather in what was understood as an obligation to Christian service. This was the beginning of women's successful movement into the active work of the Church in the public sphere. Third-order laywomen extant in this time were also a clear antecedent of the active orders, for

Enclosure had never, however, been demanded of female tertiaries, who took only simple vows, lived at home or in open communities, and did nursing or charitable work in their towns. (Diefendorf, 2009, p. 33)

And

... if some ecclesiastics saw third status women as threats to social order and divine hierarchies, others recognized the value of laywomen as potential vessels of the Spirit, model parishioners, and partners in Catholic reform. (Weber, 2016, p. 16)

The new orders that arose created what might be considered a permeable border between lay and religious life.

They adopted the 'intermediate state,' part religious, part secular, which was already being practised [sic] in some masculine congregations, but which has previously been forbidden to women. Their freedom to work outside the cloister represented a serious challenge to traditional thinking but the services which they offered to society went far toward allaying old prejudices. (Rapley, 1990, p. 7)

History confirms in this time that,

Women looked elsewhere for a fulfilling practical life outside marriage. The trend in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was toward the establishment of congregations (religious societies without permanent vows) rather than orders. Most of them were very small and their influence was circumscribed within certain localities. An exception in size, extent, and influence were the *Filles de la Charite* (Sisters of Charity), founded by St. Vincent de Paul and a widow, St. Louise de Marillac. (Hufton and Tallett, 1987, p. 78)

St. Vincent de Paul, a visionary who in the course of his own preaching observed these women, came to champion their commitment to Christian service in the world. So committed was he to the work he,

... was insistent that he had not founded a religious order. 'Your convent will be the house of the sick ... your cell a hired room, your chapel the parish church, your cloister the city streets or the hospital wards, your enclosure obedience, your grill the fear of God, your veil modesty.' ... Known as *soeurs* (sisters) rather than *religieuses* (nuns), they swore only simple vows, which were renewed annually. (Hufton and Tallett, 1987, p. 78)

Like Sts. Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal, the partnership of Sts. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac sought to answer the call to engage in corporal works of mercy outside the cloister. But they

... were soon obliged by ecclesiastical pressure to bind themselves to enclosure, ... for the idea of the non-enclosure of nuns was as yet too far advanced for the mind of seventeenth-century Europe. (Guilday, 1914, p. 175)

Later we will see that St. Nicholas Barre and Blessed Nicolas Roland, who are so intimately connected to our founding story, also accepted this middle way in the congregations they founded: religious lives lived in the world. Indeed, these visionaries helped ignite the actualization of the work pious women were longing to undertake.

The Council of Trent's edicts upheld that for women, the only option to pursue a life of religious service was as a nun, and therefore, in *clausura*, cloisters, where a role in teaching was accepted. However,

The boundary that Trent attempted to erect between the active secular life and the contemplative religious life was never fully achieved. Church authorities were often unable or unwilling to impose the decrees on the diocesan level, and the Catholic states of Europe did not uniformly accept or enforce the decrees. (Dinan, 2006, p. 22)

Thus, despite Trent's renewed call for *clausura*, new means of living one's religious convictions beyond the cloister continued to arise, evincing "a preference for charitable service ... to supplant penitential asceticism as the dominant spiritual mode" (Diefendorf, 2004, p. 8). Even in the face of Trent's dictate on cloister, Diefendorf notes:

However much the Catholic Church wanted to be a centrally directed and centralizing institution, the implementation of its decrees depended on the will and spirit of local ecclesiastical and secular authorities. The time, pace and thoroughness of Catholic reforms differed greatly from place to place on account of their disparate political situations and the character of the individuals who assumed leadership roles. (Diefendorf, 2011, p. 34)

Thus, we see that

Steadily, after living for centuries in the shadows, and despite the best efforts of the fathers of Trent to keep them there, women began their movement into the work of the apostolate. And they did so largely within the framework of religious life. (Rapley, 2011, p. 324)

The movement from cloistered convents of nuns to women actively participating in the apostolates of the Church in the world as sisters or dedicated lay women proceeded, but not at the expense of eliminating the former in favor of the latter. Ultimately, both cloister and active service were recognized as necessary. New ways of living one's desire to serve arose, and as society and the Church realized both the social and religious benefits accrued from such service, the orders or congregations providing them became established and accepted. The multi-layered history of these new congregations is rich with advancement and retreat, multifaceted, with supporters and detractors of both sexes, as "advocates and opponents of Catholic renewal did not divide along simple gender lines" (Diefendorf, 2004, p. 9). From the beginning of the century to its end, these new ways of serving—often initiated and instituted by women themselves—transformed self, Church, and society.

With the stirrings of these new modes of religious life bubbling, why then was there a great influx of women into traditional, cloistered, religious orders early in the seventeenth century? *Clausura* served to secure and preserve chastity, as

The cloister was a defence [sic] against ill repute and a haven of respectability for unmarried daughters of “good” family ...  
(Rapley, 2001, p. 117)

Once a woman took solemn vows in a cloistered community, she proclaimed, “Here is my rest for all time,’ acquiring a ‘civil death’ covered with a funeral pall while the office of the dead was recited” (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 226). Clearly, “her commitment to her monastery was complete, and permanent” (Rapley, 1990, p. 175). With this commitment she was no longer considered a legal heir in any sense, for “the day a girl entered religion was the day she exited family life, the inheritance, and the marriage market” (Rapley, 2001, p. 262). However, daughters who joined one of the new emerging orders, sans cloister, or with mitigated *clausura*, “could theoretically leave at any time and make a claim on family inheritance” (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 226). Thus *clausura* had its defenders as it protected both virtue and fortunes.

Surviving writings of nuns in this period also attest to the value of *clausura* in aiding and growing one’s individual relationship with Christ. We are reminded to “better appreciate both the important roles that contemplative houses continued to play” (Diefendorf, 2009, p. 41) parallel to the establishment of the new orders. Yet, myriad new congregations continued to arise, presenting women with a new option for religious life. Rapley, in rather dramatic fashion, states,

This burst of feminine energy was neither foreseen nor welcomed. The congregations of the seventeenth century grew out of a sort of anarchy of religious activism. To a significant degree, the act of their creation was performed by the women themselves. (Rapley, 1990, p. 21)

Bergin cautions that

... conflicts over the active versus contemplative life which ensued should not be interpreted as a collision between repressive misogyny and a kind of proto-feminism, since the battle lines were not drawn up in such a conveniently clear manner. (Bergin, 2009, p. 140)

Implementation of the Council of Trent’s reforms, however inconsistently, and perhaps capriciously (Diefendorf, 2011, pp. 34-35; Bergin, 2009, p. 4), by diocese or individual bishop’s desires and timeline nonetheless ignited the need for catechetical instruction to counteract Protestantism. The Church’s emphasis on a strong catechetical focus to stem the faithful defecting to the Protestant religion required a renewed and intense effort (Bireley, 2009, pp. 219-239).

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. (Diefendorf, 2004, p. 8)

The Counter- or Catholic-Reformation created a fervor for a trinity of re-Catholicization, a zeal to eliminate heresy, and a call for clergy reform. Both Protestantism and the newly characterized Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation brought some level of liberation to women.

Thus, "In the front lines of the Counter-Reformation there was, for a brief moment in time, an opening for good catechists, no matter what their sex" (Rapley, 1990, p. 52; and Rapley, 2001, p. 14). This window admitting women to the Church's apostolate opened just a crack. Women in both country and urban settings were a part of this energy and proved useful to its objective. The *dévotés*, "an informal group of devout Catholics driven to change the world while shunning worldliness" (Tristano, 2023, p. 142), made some small inroads into filling this need for more pervasive catechetical education, but not for long and not without strong headwinds of opposition. The intense need for catechetical education in the Church resulted in a contradiction many believe persists to this day for, "although men were ... [the Church's] legitimate leaders and defenders, Catholicism was in such great peril from Protestantism that it needed the help of all Christians, even women" (Weber, 2016, p. 10).

This confluence of the Church's catechetical needs, society's social needs, and women's call and desire to actively serve set off an explosion of Catholic women religious orders.

Many of the female congregations which grew rapidly from the 1630s and 1640s onwards were keen to tackle popular religious ignorance via education; some of them originated in tiny groups of women, widows or unmarried, who had previously banded together to teach local girls, but who at a certain point wished to move beyond purely informal arrangements. (Bergin, 2009, p. 309)

Parallel to the somewhat desultory implementation of Trent,

These orders, a few of many, had a number of common traits. First, they sought to give practical expression to the social philosophy of the Counter-Reformation, which rearticulated the obligation of the Christian individual toward the poor and needy. (Hufton and Tallet, 1987, p. 77)

Ironically, or perhaps not, while utilizing females as catechists, Catholic males nevertheless tried,

... to discredit the Protestant cause by associating it with the weak will and feeble intellect of the female. Protestant polemicists returned the compliment by characterizing Catholic women as at best ignorant and superstitious and at worst whorish and frenzied. Most modern historians of the Reformation go them one better: they scarcely mention women at all. (Zemon-Davis, 1975, p. 65)

As the arrival of Protestantism afforded women more agency in worship, Catholic orders afforded women more agency in work, if not in movement. While yet subject to their husbands and the societal strictures of the time, the desire to live religion in action held the power of change for: women themselves, women's education, and the Catholic Church.

One cannot help but be struck by the fact that in many ways this period of advance and retreat by Catholic women is not far removed from the experience of our own time. Nor did this movement away from, or in addition to, cloistered congregations proceed in linear fashion. While often deferring to the traditional roles available to them, as well as bowing to Trent's definitive stance on *clausura*, evidence abounds—in the multiplying new congregations alone—of the obvious gains in women's lived reality, for “the dynamic thrust of the female vocation was toward a religious life with a more clearly defined practical role” (Hufton and Tallett, 1987, p. 77). “The fact was that attraction for the religious life did not lead everybody to the cloister. Some people were just made for action” (Rapley, 2011, p. 176).

These,

secular daughters ... lived in community, without cloister or solemn vows, without veil or wimple. They were women who lived their consecration at the heart of intense activity, in apostolic works of charity, in hospitals and schools. (Deville, 1994, p. 217)

By the mid seventeenth-century, this huge influx of women into active religious service was becoming so essential to society's function that the Church came to accept this middle pathway. All the new congregations remained under the firm control of bishops, but that was showing cracks as well. In practice the bishop's control was already weakening, as active women's congregations moved beyond the traditional frameworks of enclosure and monastic obedience.

The many orders of religious nuns in France have a strong, striking, counterpart in England's Venerable Mary Ward (1585-1645). Her fierce devotion to the vocation she understood to be hers also displays a commitment to girls' education. Though our

focus here is on seventeenth-century France, it bears noting that in the aftermath of Henry VIII's suppression and persecution of the Catholic Church in England, Ward was wrestling numerous ecclesiastical and societal obstacles in responding to what she knew to be her call: to function as a religious in the world rather than a cloister. Having left England in 1606 to pursue her vocation, she was holding forth for "public day schools taught by nuns" (Guilday, 1914, p. 179), something not only entirely new, but a revolutionary departure from previous means of educating girls.

For four years every effort was made to make her adopt the Rule of any one of the four other congregations begun for the education of young girls—the Ursulines, the Daughters of Our Lady, the Order of Notre Dame, or that of the Oblates of the Torre di Specchi in Rome; but she steadfastly refused to do so. (Guilday, 1914, p. 178)

Ward found the Jesuits most akin to her calling but wanted no subservience or subordination to them. Not interested in any kind of third-order religious status, and finding harassment and suppression at every turn, nonetheless, "with a simplicity ... that brooked no turning backwards, and with the courage of a lioness, she went ahead" (Guilday, 1914, p. 182). After three hundred years, Ward is now on the road to sainthood. Despite persecution and imprisonment, her order, the Sisters of Loretto, survives to this day.

At the time of De La Salle's birth in 1651, the fervor and perseverance of women desiring to be more active in religious works resulted in "a massive complex of charitable institutions ... built upon their support and service" (Rapley, 1990, p. 6). This was no small feat given traditional and long-held beliefs in the work appropriate to each sex. But the very nature of the work, while innovative in secular society, was unthreatening in terms of practice since it largely reflected work traditionally left to women: education, and care of the poor, sick, and elderly. Thus, some argue, society's needs gradually led to these new groups evolving into religious congregations essential to society's function. However, more recent scholarship persuasively argues the opposite: that in actuality, it was women's spirituality, indeed calling, that overflowed from their faith to their actions rather than society's increasing need for care of the sick and poor being the driving force that brought women to this work. As opposed to the common historical narrative then, the *raison d'être* leading to women's involvement in the work and community life, Rapley—and increasingly other historians (Dinan, Diefendorf)—hold the opposite findings: that women were themselves the active protagonists as,

An examination of the sequence of events leads to the conclusion that the complex of social services which developed in the seventeenth century, and especially feminine education, was the creation rather than the creator of religious congregations. The religious energy of the women came first, and the need to channel that energy into meaningful action came second. (Rapley, 1990, p. 8)

This passion for ministry is clearly present in contemporary Lasallian women. Today more than 50 percent of Lasallian Partners are women. How fascinating might it be to consider parallel motivations or calls in the Lasallian women of today?

The intertwining of women educators educating girls and the cataclysmic societal changes this would eventually bring calls for treatment well beyond the scope of this introductory study. However, names familiar to Lasallians make the case for educating girls, albeit as a rather covert means of achieving salvation of souls which, aside from survival in this world, occupies a singular focus in seventeenth-century French life.

[The concern was] to win the parents through these little ones, to enter the hearts of the mothers through their daughters, and of mistresses through their servants, and even to convert the men through their wives. (Quoted in Rapley, 1990, p. 122, attributed to Nicolas Barre, *Lettres Spirituelles* [Toulouse: Douladoure 1876], p. 345)

Prominent in our Lasallian history, and holding such significant places in De La Salle's own story, the priests, St. Nicholas Barre (1621-1686) and Blessed Nicolas Roland (1642-1678), founded communities of women dedicated to the education of girls. Barre became involved with young women teachers, providing guidance to them, beginning in 1662. In 1666 he gathered them into an apostolic community, the Institute of the Holy Infant Jesus. For his part, Roland became involved in the teaching of girls in 1673, founding the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. In De La Salle's time, girls' education was more prevalent and established than boys, which was fragmented and poorly regulated. Prior to De La Salle, the education of boys was essentially a failure, which some attribute to

... the shortage of men ready to do the work. On the other hand, women were available, and in abundance. The concentration on girls' schools was less a matter of choice than an acceptance of the practical possibilities. (Rapley, 1990, p. 123)

Certainly, the necessity for boys' labor to help support the family would also seem to have some role in this failure.

We know that following Roland's death, De La Salle provided the sacraments for the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus community. De La Salle's wisdom in noting what worked in the female congregations no doubt contributed to his success with the Christian Schools and the communities of Brothers that conducted them. Particularly striking is Rapley's finding that, where congregations' community life thrived, so did their professionalism and success in teaching.

Where community life was strong, its members were more likely to maintain their standards. A second guarantee of sorts came from the lack of alternatives. Most of the priests who taught in the charity schools were young men without livings, marking time until something better turned up. The women did not suffer from such distractions. Limited as they were in their options, they treated elementary school-teaching with a respect which no male congregation could match until the founding of the Christian Brothers in the late seventeenth century. (Rapley, 1987, p. 310)

Undoubtedly, De La Salle's success resulted from his combining the necessary elements: gathering a community of teachers living together, securing funding and committing his own home and fortune to that same community, and making a commitment to the education of boys. As Rapley cites in her own notes,

Jean-Baptiste de La Salle drew heavily upon the experience of the sisters, as well as other communities, in the creation of his Christian Brothers. Two historians of the Christian Brothers acknowledge his debt to the sisters. See Aroz, *Nicolas Roland*, n. 137 and Poutet, *Origines*, 1: "Pauvre avec les pauvres de Reims (Rapley, 1990, p. 234, n. 141)

For women, Rapley discusses the "preferred solution" of a community for the early Ursulines and notes, "Community life was as practical for reasons of security and support as it was compatible with the religious practices to which most of the women wished to commit themselves." For, "just as their outward service was important to secure acceptance in society, their private life was important for their own survival" (Rapley, 1990, p. 167).

Rapley's work underscores De La Salle's clear and critical understanding of the needs of the time. His choices indicate a grasp of what was working in the education of girls—and what to avoid—that could be applied to his work in the education of boys. Additionally, these precursors add to our understanding of the context in which De La Salle worked and functioned as well as the foundation of the opposition he faced. In my reading of Rapley and other histories, I note clear connections. Each of these elements merits a more keen and thorough study as it relates to our Lasallian reality (Cf. Rapley, 1990):

- Teaching without salary as a means of resisting outside interference (Ursulines and charity schools)
- Major opposition to charity schools (Church and Crown)
- Opposition of hierarchy and control by the diocese or bishop (Barre)
- Superior General answerable only to the Pope (de Marillac and Ward)
- Mobility and freedom to leave (Ward and Barre)
- Uncloistered (de Sales et al.)
- Perceived need to educate young boys, but failure (Barre)
- Shortage of male teachers (Roland)
- Children of the working poor, not destitute poor (Barre)
- Community life (Ursulines and Barre)
- Besieged with criticism and efforts to guard status quo (All)
- Basis for simultaneous instruction (Ursulines)
- Visiting schools (*filles seculare*)

In noting the great change and significance of the charity schools, Rapley states,

... none was more important than that which carried Roland's friend and executor, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, into his life's work. In 1679 charity schools for boys, modelled upon the sisters' schools, were opened in Reims, and in 1688 the Institute of Brothers of Christian Schools took shape. At last, schoolteaching by itself without the benefit of the priesthood, became a fit religious vocation for men. But it should be remembered that they followed a path which women had already trodden. (Rapley, 1990, p. 140)

Women's desire to actively serve God in *clausura*, in the world, and in the albeit rudimentary education of their daughters, reveals some characteristics not unfamiliar to Lasallian women today: perseverance, dedication, and service to our Lasallian charism. Surely the genesis for contemporary Lasallian women can also be found precisely along this spectrum, what Diefendorf calls "a continuum" (Diefendorf, 2009, p. 39) of ministry both in inspiration and practice as well as in the liminal spaces between vowed religious life and lay life. It is in this energy, this movement, these women and their drive to ministry in a society that so desperately needed them, that we find our female ancestors in the Lasallian mission. Just as these ancestors crafted new ways to follow the God they knew was calling them, so then are we marking new ground in our Lasallian mission for the women who will follow us.

### **Suggestions for further research:**

- **Female mysticism in early seventeenth-century France: what traces of female mysticism do we find in Lasallian spirituality?**
- **Women who joined tertiary orders before the Council of Trent**
- *Dévotes and filles seculares*
- **Informal groups of women who did charitable work**
- **Study of women's and nuns' own writings about their lives in this period**
- **Comparative study of Rules women's orders with that of De La Salle' Rule in this period**
- **Practices from the various orders of nuns teaching at the time, that De La Salle absorbed or employed in his Christian Schools**
- **Comparative study of Rules of women's orders with that of De La Salle's Rule**
- **What are the motivations and the call of contemporary Lasallian women?**
- **As Lasallian women, where do we see ourselves herein?**
- **In what ways are we precursors to the Lasallian women who will follow us?**



## VI. Widows

**O**ur Lasallian history recounts the philanthropy and support De La Salle received from widows. Widows enjoyed more control over their lives and finances than they did as wives. Widows' benefaction was an important component in the establishment, support, and work of many new religious congregations. Religious mores of the day underscored a widow's obligations to God in her widowhood.

Widowhood was a common life state for those in the early modern period, as "people [were] being widowed at all ages and might easily be widowed several times during their lives" (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 94). Poor widows had few resources, often requiring them to focus solely on survival. For widows who had relied upon their husband's income, the widowed state could be precarious at best. Fauve-Chamoux notes that a widow in such a state then "followed a matrilineal path: either she lived with the children or she returned to her natal house" (Fauve-Chamoux, 2002, p. 115).

While “female poverty was an ongoing problem in France during the seventeenth century ... many widows were not poor. Women, especially widows, were often independent controllers of substantial economic resources” (Collins, 1989, p. 439). “Widows who had inherited money or property from ... their husbands or who received their dowry back at his death were often relatively free to invest it or dispose of it as they wished” (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 94). “Urban women, especially widows, also seem to have owned substantial amounts of landed property” (Collins, 1989, p. 456).

We can then begin to approach an understanding of the economic position in which a fortunate woman could find herself. Coupled with the independence and control, if not complete autonomy, her widowed state provided her, she was free to do with her wealth as she liked (Diefendorf, 2004, p. 18). Historians also note that young women who wished to pursue a religious vocation may have been pressured to marry to better their families’ positions and fortunes. Widowhood afforded these women the chance to pursue previously sublimated religious drives.

Thus,

widowhood did not precipitate a severe economic crisis for women who were left relatively well-off. If these widows did not remarry, it was not because they found it difficult to do so. Sometimes they found it economically unnecessary. (Fauve-Chamoux, 2002, p. 101)

Diefendorf agrees, “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” (Diefendorf, 2004, p. 18).

While many widows did remarry, especially younger widows, “older widows rarely did so” (Collins, 1989, p. 440), largely due to the independence and wealth that potentially accrued to their single state. The widow’s control of these resources “usually lasted until her death” (Collins, 1989, pp. 443, 451).

In general, widowers were far more likely to remarry than widows; French statistics indicate that 50 percent of widowers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries remarried, whereas only 20 percent of widows did so. For very poor widows or those with many children, this low rate of remarriage stemmed from the fact that they were less attractive on the marriage market than single women, but for middle-and upper-class women, it was often the result of their choice ... Studies indicate that women who could afford to resisted all pressure to remarry and so retained their independence. (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, p. 95)

Thus, unless survival and economic need were the driving factors, “many widows did not wish to remarry” (Segalen, 1981, pp. 67-80, quoted in Fauve-Chamoux, 2010, pp. 292-293), presumably enjoying heretofore out-of-reach options. Although perhaps a bit startling to us, “the most critical role of the woman often came as a widow: head of the ongoing family enterprise” (Collins, 1989, p. 443). Collins estimates that in the late seventeenth century, “it seems likely that roughly one widow in five was well off, but that half of them were destitute” (Collin, 1989, p. 450).

Lasallian history notes the names of two wealthy widows, Mme. Maillefer and Mme. de Croyers, who provided financial support for our Founder’s work in opening schools for boys. De La Salle himself seemed to see Maillefer as “an instrument of Divine Providence” (Tristano, 2023, p. 162). While the context of being wealthy and pious widows as Madames Maillefer and de Croyers were may assist our understanding of their prominent role in funding the beginnings of the Christian Schools, it does little to explain their motives. The Catholic culture of the time provides some motive for the benefaction widows chose to provide.

Tristano notes, “There is no better guide to devout seventeenth-century French widowhood than St. Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*” (Tristano, 2023, p. 152), as “everyone read” this book (Deville, 1990, p. 19). First published in 1608, de Sales presented a strong case for widowhood as a holy state that could even be confirmed through a vow (de Sales, 1608, p. 71). Historians note de Sales’ work as the primary guide to the behavior and dress of widows (Hufton, 1995, p. 225) as well as confirming that, “from all creeds, chastity was exalted as the most important attribute of the virtuous woman whether maid, wife or widow” (de Sales, 1608, p. 40), leading Tristano to conclude, “Widowhood perfects virtue” (Tristano, 2023, p. 153). Lest we think de Sales demeans remarriage, in his final remarks on the subject he adds, “The true widow ought never to blame or censure those who pass to a second or even to a third or a fourth marriage” (de Sales, 1608, p. 175). Nonetheless, de Sales endows the widowed state with enhanced potential for holiness, much as the Church held celibacy as a superior life state.

The model of a holy and useful widowhood was both known and valued in the society of early modern France. There is ample evidence of widows’ interest in, involvement with, and, where possible, philanthropic support of the many new Catholic congregations in the seventeenth century. As can be seen in the widowed lives of Sts. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641) and Louise de Marillac (1591-1660), the drive toward religion and good works was notable and of benefit to Church and society.

The *devots* of the generation of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul ... were also relying very heavily on the financial resources of the kind of wealthy *devot* women, often widows, who became Ladies of Charity. (Bergin, 2009, p. 383)

Many of the new orders, such as the Visitation and Daughters of Charity, ... sought to give practical expression to the social philosophy of the Counter-Reformation, which rearticulated the obligation of the Christian individual toward the poor and needy ... They owed much to the efforts of extremely wealthy and pious widows who brought financial means, influence, and dedication, which provided the dynamic for establishments and expansion. (Hufton and Tallett, 1987, p. 77)

The Church did not fund these new congregations, for the philanthropic support of widows for religious congregations or good works was not unusual in this period.

What is clear is that the Church did not pay for the many new religious communities founded during the Catholic reformation. Individual donors did, and many of these donors were women. (Diefendorf, 2009, p. 51)

Groups of women, performing the corporal works of mercy and providing service sans vows or association with a religious congregation were sometimes “organized by devout widows with private means” (Diefendorf 2009, p. 37). We can speculate that widows, free from the care of a husband, and having means, opportunity, and the Church’s encouragement, could pursue religious or philanthropic objectives previously sublimated in the cares and rigors of daily family life.

Money was not the only asset widows brought to the emerging new religious communities. These new communities benefited from “wealthy widows with experience in managing both money and people” (Diefendorf, 2004, p. 250). Their wisdom in the ways of the world that they had left behind also caused these widows to be “most celebrated for their spiritual counsel” (Diefendorf, 2004, p. 250). Combining a fortunate economic position with a level of freedom, these widows could “pursue their religious goals” (Dunn, *Piety and Patronage in Seicento Rome*, p. 644, quoted in Diefendorf, 2011, p. 50).

For additional income, convents would sometimes “take in paying boarders, usually girls needing instruction or widows looking for a respectable retreat” (Diefendorf, 2004, p. 25). Some of these widows “might prove generous in their gratitude” (Diefendorf, 2008, p. 166). Close exposure to a particular convent’s state and mission might also engender a desire to support specific good works.

And for its part,

... throughout the seventeenth century the Church was becoming progressively more interested both in the widow's energies and in the funds she might command. (Hufton, 1995, p. 225)

While we can never grasp a complete understanding of the motives of the widows who supported De La Salle's schools, in the culture of the times themselves we can certainly see that when means, interest, and the desire to do good aligned, the choice of a particular endeavor as one's focus clearly may have resulted to the benefit of the Christian Schools.

**Suggestions for further research:**

- **Women who funded new congregations**
- **Convents as places of retreat for single women and widows**



## VII. Female Relationships with Spiritual Directors

**W**omen's relationships with their confessors or spiritual directors were of primary importance. While there were female spiritual directors, relationships between male directors and female confessors offer us a new insight.

An element of women's spirituality in the seventeenth century that particularly surprised me was the paramount importance of the relationship between women and their confessors or spiritual directors.

For generations, confessors, and other clerical promoters fashioned the life stories of exemplary female penitents, texts that were produced in great number, translated, and disseminated throughout early-modern Europe ... as models of virtuous behavior ... perhaps more compelling to many readers were the vivid depictions of friendships shared by priests and penitents. (Bilinkoff, 2005, p. 76)

Far beyond the Church's requirement to confess at least once a year,

Women who were religiously scrupulous, whether nuns or laywomen, confessed often and developed intense emotional relationships with their confessor. By the seventeenth century, church authorities recognized that this emotional intimacy might lead to physical intimacy, especially as confession was to entail a detailed examination of one's conscience and a minute accounting of sins, including sexual sins. Thus, they paid close attention to the relationship between women and their confessors and sometimes excluded nuns and women under forty from a priest's first license to hear confessions. These relationships led sometimes to charges of rape, seduction, or solicitation on the part of women.  
(Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, pp. 229-230)

Some of these relationships between confessors and penitents were outliers well beyond intended boundaries, such as those of Madame Guyon (1648-1717), where "Instead of being the steadying influence ... that each needed to calm his or her exalted nature, they acted on each other in the opposite sense" (Davis, 1965, pp. 88-89).

More common were relationships of "soul mates" (Bilinkoff, 2005, p. 78). So just as his guidance provided model behavior and dress for widows, St. Francis de Sales also "did more than any other major figure of his time to underline the importance of having recourse to a competent spiritual director" (Bergin, 2009, p. 321). Indeed,

[de Sales'] great works ... both derived from directing women, the first a laywoman (Mme. de Charmoisy), the second a nun-cum-widow (Jeanne de Chantal) with whom he founded the Order of the Visitation.  
(Bergin, 2009, p. 320)

In these relationships, historians find evidence of deep and enduring friendships, sans sexual congress, that are the most intimate a woman could experience with a man outside of marriage (Cf. Bilinkoff, Goldsmith, Rapley, Ranft, Wiesner-Hanks).

Indeed, given that marriages were, for the most part, arranged for economic and procreative purposes, a celibate but otherwise intimate friendship may have struck many as a more attractive option. (Bilinkoff, 2005, p. 76)

Women sought, indeed discerned, confessors suited to them. When finding the right partner, they experienced "a sense of relief and gratitude ... Confessors frequently stressed these moments as well" (Bilinkoff, 2005, p. 84). The relationship benefited both parties with confessors sometimes seeking women whose spirituality enhanced their own. "Thus both confessors and penitents identified the discovery of a soul mate as turning points in their lives" (Bilinkoff, 2005, p. 85). Spiritual directors were also known to encourage their women confessors to write about their spiritual experiences.

Taken together, these friendships, and this body of scholarship, open new ways of understanding the enduring significance of De La Salle's relationship with Sr. Louise of Parmenie. Our founding story recounts De La Salle's retreat to Parmenie at an especially difficult time for him. His biographers note Sr. Louise's counsel as key to the Founder's return to lead the Brothers, at their request. In his extensive biography, Hours holds that

... there was something between Jean-Baptiste and Louise that is difficult for the historian to pin down: a reciprocal understanding and trusting exchange, a meeting of minds that evokes other spiritual "couples" of their century ... Their exchange extended beyond their time together. Jean-Baptiste apparently continued to write to her for advice. (Hours, 2002, p. 467)

Beyond the place that Sr. Louise has traditionally held in our founding story, could that "something" Hours found difficult to identify be a confessor-spiritual director relationship between Sr. Louise and De La Salle? Might this elusive quality also echo the "deep spiritual friendship" that St. Francis de Sales, as spiritual director for St. Jeanne de Chantal shared with his directee? For these held, "the sense that each was a gift from God to the other" (Bilinkoff, 2005, p. 83).

#### **Suggestions for further research:**

- **Women's life writing: diaries, autobiographies, journals**
- **Rapley's work on nuns' obituaries raises the question about women's obituaries in general and what they might reveal about women's lives of the time**
- **Closer and comparative study of scholars' work in the area of relationships between confessors and spiritual directors**
- **Fenelon and Mme. Guyon**
- **Closer study of the "spiritual couples" Hours' notes (Hours, 2002, p. 467) could reveal nuanced insights into the relationship between Sr. Louise and De La Salle**



## VIII. Conclusion

**D**rawing conclusions from the content of this study risks claiming or imposing arrogant, arbitrary, and perhaps fallacious elements. This would stand in direct opposition to the very purpose of my work. Rather, in closing I wish to emphasize that the amount of contemporary works written by female historians delving into the lives of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women—who were creating new ways to manifest their spiritual drives and inspirations—remains one of the most delightful surprises of my research. The perseverance shown by women in this regard encouraged me, and I trust will also encourage Lasallian women across the globe.

At the CIL on Lasallian Women in the spring of 2023, Sister Leslye Sandigo, FMA, addressed the assembly on the topic of leadership. To assist our perspective, she spoke of the need “to get lost from time to time, in new people, in other places, in new journeys.” Diving into the lives of French women in the seventeenth century has allowed me to do just that. In doing so, it is my hope that this work serves as a spark for more scholarship that will enhance our understanding of, and devotion to, our Lasallian mission and narrative through a female lens.

“It is essential to continue well, because to begin is nothing.”

(St. Vincent de Paul, Conference to the Daughters of Charity, August 16, 1640, quoted in Rapley, 1995, p. 136)

# Annotated Bibliography

Created and Compiled by Mary Catherine Fox, AFSC, Ph.D.



**Aries, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Translated by Robert Baldick. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962.**

Aries presents an engaging and sweeping history of the historical development of childhood as a life phase and the changes this caused in families and society. Tracing the nature of children, their dress, pastimes, and education from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, this source is that rare combination of generality and specificity that provides an informative and lively read. Aries gives significant credit to De La Salle for his initiatives and lasting educational legacy.

**Azcárate, Santiago, C.M. “The Poor in 17th Century France.” *Third Asian Vincentian Institute*. Paris: Motherhouse, 2006. <https://vincentians.com/en/?s=poor+in+17th+century+france>.**

Azcárate traces the changing nature of understanding the poor from a blight and danger to a source of blessing. Through the establishment of the general hospitals, which served as enclosures of the poor and separated them from society, to an awakening understanding of serving the poor as service offered to Christ, this essay presents the context from which, and in which, St. Vincent de Paul’s work emerged.

**Beckerman, Barbara. Review of *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France*, by Elizabeth Rapley. *The Antioch Review* 50, no. 3 (1992): 592. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4612583>. Accessed May 10, 2024.**

Beckerman’s review highlights the significance of Rapley’s finding that it was the force of public opinion, not institutional resistance, that created obstacles to women serving the Church in society.

**Bergin, Joseph. *Church, Society and Religious Change in France 1580-1730*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009. <http://ncronline.org/print/blogs/distinctly-catholic/17th-century-french-catholicism>.**

Sweeping in its scope, accessible in its approach and content, Bergin provides an authoritative and comprehensive backdrop to the period critical to our understanding of spiritual, ecclesiastical, and societal influences on DeLaSalle. Extensively researched, Bergin connects the dots of parallel movements and political developments with the Church’s evolution through and beyond the Reformation. As a neophyte to French history, this book served as a serious but enjoyable introduction. Chapter 6, “A Silent Revolution: Women as Regulars,” is especially useful in diving into the massive changes in female congregations, religious life, governance, obstacles, and societal expectations.

See also the entry for Michael Sean Winters.

**Bilinkoff, Jodi. *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450-1750*. Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2005.**

Bilinkoff's extremely enlightening and detailed study focuses on spiritual direction and the deep friendships that formed, were nurtured, and endured between confessors and penitents in this period. The reader is captured by the author's style, depth, and command of sources. Of particular interest are chapters 1, "Spiritual Direction," and 4, "Soul Mates." Bernard Hours, in *Jean-Baptiste De La Salle: A Mystic in Action*, asserts that Sr. Louise Hours and De La Salle remained in contact through correspondence following the latter's time at Parmenie; I found Bilinkoff's work most useful in explaining and describing relationships of this type.

**Bilinkoff, Jodi. "Soul Mates: Spiritual Friendship and Life-Writing in Early Modern Spain (and Beyond)." In *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Cordula Van Wyhe, 143-153. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008.**

This essay is a shortened version of chapter 4 of Bilinkoff, *Soul Mates: Spiritual Friendship and Life-Writing in Early Modern Spain (and Beyond)*.

**Birberick, Anne L., and Russell Ganim, eds., and Thomas M. Carr, Jr., guest ed. *The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices*. Studies in Early Modern France 11. Charlottesville, VA: Rookwood Press, Inc., 2007.**

This fascinating collection of ten essays draws attention to "convent writing" in the seventeenth century. Focus is on what the editor names as "the standard genres of convent writing," thus giving us a window into the lives, and deaths, of convents, the women within them, and their interaction with the external world. The loyalties of nuns to God and their communities are brought into clear relief through the challenges presented to them as they remained "active at the frontier of what their era allowed their sex" (p. 6). The autobiographical writings of nuns regarding their spiritual lives and experiences are excluded, and the author notes that there remains much more to be researched.

**Bireley, R., S.J. "Early-Modern Catholicism as a Response to the Changing World of the Long Sixteenth Century." *The Catholic Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (April 2009): 219-239. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27745523>.**

Covering the movement of the Church into early modernity, "roughly 1450 to 1700," Bireley notes demographic and economic changes that ushered in a new age and a changed Church. His discussion of the emergence of women's congregations and their work in education is particularly enlightening.

**Boxer, Marilyn J., and Jean H. Quataert, eds. *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present*. Foreword by Joan C. Scott. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.**

Taking on no less a task than restoring women to history, this book was written as a contribution and foundation collection for women's studies at a time when such programs were being established and beginning to flourish in universities. The authors wish to bring women into history by focusing on their lives and influences. Ambitious in its historical sweep, the varied essays by different authors on women's work, marriage, communities, and presence in economies provide a unique introduction to feminism. This is a fascinating exploration of its time that includes rich references and suggestions for further reading.

The following essays are especially valuable:

Scott, Joan W. Foreword, xv-xvii.

Boxer, Marilyn J., and Jean H. Quataert, "Introduction: Restoring Women to History," 3-18.

Boxer, Marilyn J., and Jean H. Quataert, "Overview," 19-52.

Hanley, Sarah, "Family and State in Early Modern France: The Marriage Pact," 53-63.

Wiesner, Merry E., "Women's Work in the Changing City Economy, 1500-1650," 64-74.

Hufton, Olwen, and Frank Tallett, "Communities of Women, the Religious Life, and Public Service in Eighteenth Century France," 75-85.

**Camus Jean Pierre. *The Spirit of St. Francis De Sales by His Friend Jean Pierre Camus*. Translated by J. S. Potosi, WI: St. Athanasius Press. 2014.**

This hagiographic volume presents De Sales' thoughts, in some cases embellished, in titled sections that permit one to locate particular themes with ease. Nonetheless, it in no way replaces De Sales' own, *An Introduction to the Devout Life*.

**Chento, Javier F. "The Poor in the 17th Century in France (II)." 2016. <https://vincentians.com/en/the-poor-in-the-17th-century-in-france-ii/>**

This article on the Vincentians website offers an introduction to the different categories of poverty in our period. These definitions and descriptions provide useful background in understanding the poor children De La Salle was focused upon educating in his schools, as distinct from those children that were not the focus of his efforts.

**Clark, Alice. *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. London: Forgotten Books, 2012. First published 1919 by George Routledge & Sons (London) 1919.**

Written in archaic English and focusing mainly on England, I found this study to be a frustrating read. Christopher Hill's review of this book in *History Workshop* 15 proved most helpful. See the entry for same, below.

**Collins, James B. "The Economic Role of Women in Seventeenth-Century France." *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 2 (fall 1989): 436-470.**

An especially useful source, complete with tables, in grasping both urban and rural women's economic activities and the legal limitations of land ownership. Collins traces female's increasing desire for independence in this regard in the face of limitations imposed by males. He includes information on the economic status of single women, married women, and widows. The redefinition of women's role to the moral sphere and the restriction of their legal rights assured "continued male dominance of public society."

**Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975.**

The author's eight essays offer a view of France prior to and into our period. A consummate historian, Davis draws from many sources to delve into varying facets of society. Chapter 3, "City, Women and Religious Change" (pp. 65-95), covers the "powerlessness" both Catholic and Protestant women experienced in the sixteenth century.

**Davis, Natalie Zemon. "Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon." *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 47-80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177579>.**

Although focused on the sixteenth century in Lyon, this most interesting article provides a window on the types and variety of work women were engaged in and thus holds implications for the seventeenth century as well. Most fascinating was learning more about the actual work performed by those labelled "artisans," as this enhances our understanding of the families De La Salle's schools served and, most particularly, the mothers of his students.

**Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1995.**

While perhaps an outlier in terms of this study, this inimitable work of the great Zemon Davis places three ostensibly different women in the context of their time: Glikl Bas Judah Leib, Marie De L'Incarnation (Barbe Acarie), and Maria Sibylla Merian. Each was a creator. "All three experienced the hierarchical structures that placed an added weight on women. All were summoned, if only for a time, by sudden spiritual openings that promised a better future" (p. 203). A master historian, Davis offers a deep dive into the actual lives of three women of the time.

**De Paul, Vincent, and Louise de Marillac. *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences, and Writings*. Edited by Frances Ryan, D.C., and John Rybolt, C.M. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995.**

This collaborative volume from The Classics of Western Spirituality collection serves as an excellent introduction to its subjects. Pages xiii through 64 are particularly relevant.

**De Sales, Francis. *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Translated by John K. Ryan. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950.**

This spiritual classic exerted influence well beyond its time on the subject of achieving a devout life. De Sales prescribes what is appropriate and pleasing to God in the widowed state. Emphasis on a "vow of chastity" (p. 171) following the death of one's spouse is held as the ideal, with "Jesus Christ crucified the only love in [the widow's] heart" (p. 174).

**Deville, Raymond, S.S. "The Seventeenth-Century School of French Spirituality." *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 17-29. <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol11/iss1/2>.**

A detailed yet accessible presentation of the stated subject matter, given at a symposium entitled "*L'Age d'or: The Roots of Our Tradition*." Deville provides a concise and cogent summary of the French School, including its key players. Deville states that St. Francis de Sales is the "common father" beyond the Visitation order to include the "Brothers of the Christian Schools" (p. 18).

**Deville, Raymond, S.S. *The French School of Spirituality*. Translated by Agnes Cunningham. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994.**

In this the premiere source on the topic, Deville treats Berulle, the acknowledged founder of the French School, the movement itself, and other significant personae with care, focusing on their effects on Church and society. Of particular interest are chapter 8, “John Baptist de LaSalle,” and chapter 10, “The Role of Women in the French School.” While acknowledging that Berulle was but one influence on De La Salle, Deville demonstrates Berulle’s importance for De La Salle’s spirituality by citing passages from De La Salle’s own writings. The translator’s historical notes offer assistance to a reader unfamiliar with France in the seventeenth century.

**Dibdin, Thomas Frognall. *Fenelon’s Treatise on the Education of Daughters: Translated from the French and Adapted to English Readers*. London: H. Ruff, 1805.**

A full translation of Fenelon’s treatise, first published in French in 1688. Especially interesting were the common pedagogical elements between Fenelon and De La Salle.

**Diefendorf, Barbara B. “Barbe Acarie and Her Spiritual Daughters: Women’s Spiritual Authority in Seventeenth-Century France.” In *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Cordula Van Wyhe, 155-171. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008.**

This essay “examines the informal and yet very real spiritual authority exercised by Barbe Acarie” (p. 155). Diefendorf makes the case that, aside from Acarie’s administrative and fundraising activity in bringing the Discalced Carmelites to France, she was also a great spiritual advisor and was recognized as such in her time. Treating Acarie’s more dramatic mystic raptures as part and parcel of being “caught up in the apocalyptic anguish” of the time, Diefendorf presents a full and fascinating picture of the woman, wife, mother, and ultimately nun.

**Diefendorf, Barbara B. *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.**

Rich in detail while retaining a lively of-the-moment feel, Diefendorf’s masterful study traces the arc of her title without sacrificing complexity and nuance. Noting the many religious orders established in the period of the “Catholic Reformation,” she inquires into the reasons for and evolution of women’s spirituality. The movement from mysticism, mortification, and penitence to charitable work in society as Christian action is traced with emphasis on Paris. Diefendorf’s extensive sources and biographical appendix combine to produce a work of unparalleled depth.

**Diefendorf, Barbara B. “Rethinking the Catholic Reformation: The Role of Women.”** In *Women, Religion, and the Atlantic World, 1600-1800*, edited by Daniella Kostroun and Lisa Vollendorf, 31-59. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt2ttv8q.6>.

Diefendorf clearly and persuasively argues that current scholarship reveals a much broader spectrum of women’s religious activities than previously considered. Her work both summarizes more recent findings and points out the need for more study. Citing examples from Italy, Chile, Spain, and France, the author notes that dioceses’ selected implementation of the Council of Trent’s proclamations resulted in both a “passive and active *clausura*” evident in “the context of the social, religious, and cultural values of the age” (p. 32).

**Dinan, Susan E. “Confraternities as a Venue for Female Activism during the Catholic Reformation.”** In *Confraternities and Catholic Reform in Italy, France, and Spain*, edited by John Patrick Donnelly and Michael W. Maher, 191-212. Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999.

In this essay, Dinan does a masterful job of explaining how Sts. Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac successfully created and navigated the Daughters of Charity in the space between confraternities and cloistered monasteries so as to free these women to pursue an active vocation of service in the world. Ultimately, due to the Daughters of Charity’s official recognition by the French government and Rome, the return to cloister St. Francis de Sales Visitation order experienced was averted. Dinan persuasively describes this successful navigation as the result of thoughtful evolution and articulate objectives that served to benefit individual vocation and society’s needs rather than, as some have suggested, a clever deception of church mandates.

**Dinan, Susan E. *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity*.** Burlington, VT, and Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2006.

Dinan’s book provides a detailed and richly documented history of the Daughters of Charity. This history serves as a backdrop to the kinds of opportunities available to women to serve God, the Church, and society following the Council of Trent. She cites the work of Rapley and Diefendorf, agreeing with their conclusions on women’s centrality in creating new ways to be both religious and of service outside a cloistered environment. Of particular interest is her description of the various means of funding the work undertaken by the Daughters of Charity but decided upon by the Ladies of Charity.

**Donohue-Lynch, Maryann. “The Influence of Women in the Lasallian Mission.”** *De La Salle Today, 2019: Year of Lasallian Vocations* (Jan. 3, 2019). [https://issuu.com/christianbrothersconference/docs/dlst\\_autumn\\_2018\\_-\\_issuu/s/23706519](https://issuu.com/christianbrothersconference/docs/dlst_autumn_2018_-_issuu/s/23706519).

This article identifies the women in De La Salle’s life and highlights contemporary initiatives focused on women’s involvement in, and dedication to, the work of the Lasallian mission.

**Dundes, Lauren. “The Evolution of Maternal Birthing Position.”** *American Journal of Public Health* 77, no. 5 (May 1987): 636-641.

This article traces changes in birthing practices, complete with figures, from Cleopatra’s time to the twentieth century. Dundes notes how the act of giving birth evolved, who was present at the birth, and in what capacity.

**Du Saint Esprit, Columbe. *The Life of Antoinette Micolon*.** Edited and translated by Linda Lierheimer. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004.

This text, presented in both French and English, introduces this important woman responsible for the founding of six Ursuline convents in France in the early seventeenth century. As a new and active order begun in Italy, the movement of the Ursulines to France and their work in education gives a useful point of departure for the study of our work of Lasallian education.

**Eubank, Roxanne. “Lasallian Women: Past and Present.”** In *Creativity and Courage: Living the Promise of the 39th General Chapter*. Bulletin 256, ed. R. Schieler and D. Munoz, 36-44. Rome: Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2017. [https://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Bulletin\\_256\\_eng\\_web\\_BR.pdf](https://www.lasalle.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Bulletin_256_eng_web_BR.pdf).

Eubank identifies and describes the women in De La Salle’s life who nurtured, funded, and furthered his work from his upbringing to the establishment of the Christian Schools and beyond. She reflects upon the work of Trish Carroll, who is credited with igniting interest in Lasallian women, our genesis, and our contributions. Eubank also mentions contemporary Lasallian Women’s retreats and initiatives in various global locations.

**Fauve-Chamoux, A. “Revisiting the Decline in Remarriage in Early-Modern Europe: The Case of Reims in France.”** *History of the Family* 15, no. 3 (2010): 283-297.

This statistical study provides useful data on marriage and remarriage in De La Salle’s hometown. This author has many published studies of marriage, remarriage, and family in early modern Europe.

**Fauve-Chamoux, A. “Widows and Their Living Arrangements in Pre-Industrial France.” *The History of the Family* 7, no. 1 (2002): 101-116.**

The author accesses, treats, and summarizes extensive statistical data from 1668-1802, following families through generations. In the introduction, a summary of previous work by historians in this area provides a sense of the time, background on the households of widows, and additional resources to consult. Focusing on methods of living in widowhood, no mention is made of widows’ philanthropy or religious service. Tracking the lives of actual widows makes for lively reading.

**Fenelon, Francois de Salignac de La Mothe. *The Education of Girls*. Translated by Kate Lupton. Boston: Ginn, 1891.**

Fenelon’s philosophy and practice of girls’ education, written in 1688, is carefully introduced, explained, and defended herein. Of the two translations of his work I consulted, I much preferred Lupton’s to that of Chad Helms (*Fenelon: Selected Writings* [Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006]). The subtle differences in versions by male and female translators led me to prioritize Lupton.

**Fenelon, Francois de Salignac de La Mothe. *Fenelon: Selected Writings*. Edited and translated by Chad Helms. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006.**

See the annotation on **Fenelon, *The Education of Girls***, translated by Kate Lupton.

**Fox, Mary Catherine. “Women in the Lasallian Family: Moving Forward Together as Leaven for Transformation.” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (Christian Brothers Conference, 2024): 153-160.**

This article was originally a white paper following the CIL on women (April 2023). The paper covers the themes and presentations of the CIL, the first ever solely devoted to Lasallian women.

**Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. “Women and Work.” In *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment*, edited by Samia I. Spencer. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.5501029.11>.**

This chapter presents the evolution and gender domain of labor in the eighteenth century. Noting that changes to women’s work “began as early as the 1660s” (p. 112), Fox-Genovese affirms the clear link between family responsibilities and women’s work. The documented increase in abandoned children in the cities and the reasons, purported or factual, for this situation are explored. In this lively read the author explores the need to work to support family and self through work within the home, the family’s own business, and one’s abilities, such as seamstress or lacemaker.

**Giblin, Mary C. *The Education of Women in Seventeenth-Century France*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1941.**

Giblin's Ph.D. thesis is narrowly focused, which I attribute in part to the lack of more comprehensive scholarship available at the time of her studies. Her comments on the French salons and especially the *precieux* they created were interesting, if not directly pertinent to my work. This gave me some basis for understanding Archbishop Fenelon's opposition to the salons as vehicles of education for women.

**Gibson, Wendy. *Women in Seventeenth-Century France*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Macmillan, 1989.**

Gibson provides an extraordinarily well-researched, detailed study of every aspect of women's lives in the period from 1600-1700. Although employing myriad primary sources in French, Gibson's writing style and use of French quotes in no way detracts from her work. One of a select number of sources that in my own work I returned to again and again.

**Gilson, Heather Ruple. *Lasallian Women: Leaven for the Journey of Association for Mission*. MEL 61. Generalate, Rome: Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, Office of Information and Communication, 2024.**

Ruple-Gilson's comprehensive treatment of the global placement and evolution of women involved in the Lasallian ministry is a significant and essential contribution to our story. Reviewing the Institute's own documents as well as current developments in women's presence in Lasallian work and governance expands our traditional understanding of our work and our influence, pointing to an "uncharted" yet hopeful future.

**Goldsmith, Elizabeth C. *Publishing Women's Life Stories in France, 1647-1720: From Voice to Print*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001.**

Goldsmith explores the late seventeenth-century occurrence of female memoirs or "life writing" through the study of six selected women writers, three religious and three secular. The reasons for writing included the instruction of a spiritual director, recounting one's life's journey, and the desire to share one's life story with the wider world. Goldsmith's study makes for fascinating reading and adds an interesting dimension to women's lives in this period. From the devout to the possessed, this volume provides a variety of women's experiences that add to the diversity of women's lives and writings. Especially captivating was chapter 3, "Silent Communications: The *Life* and Letters of Jeanne Guyon"; Goldsmith notes Madame Guyon's use of motherhood as nurturing spirituality.

**Goubert, Pierre.** “The French Peasantry of the Seventeenth Century: A Regional Example.” *Past & Present* 10 (Nov. 1956): 55-77. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/650145>.

Focusing solely on the French region of Beauvaisis, Goubert provides a telescopic view of the level of peasant life in the mid-to-late 1600s and early 1700s. The author provides a thorough treatment of land ownership rates as well as the occupations, taxation, and crises affecting peasant life.

**Goubert, Pierre.** “Historical Demography and the Reinterpretation of Early Modern French History: A Research Review.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 1, no. 1 (1970): 37–48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/202409>.

Using parish records, Goubert explores how demography reveals history. Although the bulk of this article addresses the eighteenth century, statistics on infant mortality and how crises always disproportionately affect the poor were helpful in grasping the reality of the time.

**Guilday, Peter.** “The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary.” In *The English Catholic Refugees on the Continent 1558-1795*, 163-214. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914.

In this chapter, Guilday introduces us to the extraordinary Blessed Mary Ward. During the persecution of Catholics, she fled England to pursue what she discerned as her calling: teaching as a religious in the world rather than in cloister. Ward found the Jesuit rule most suited to her desires, emulating the order but not seeking any affiliation with it. Ward proceeded as a foundress of what came to be known as the “English Ladies,” and in our time surviving as the Loreto Sisters. Enduring persecutions, harassment, imprisonment, and exile for following such a unique path, she nonetheless prevailed. “With a simplicity, however, that brooked no turning backwards, and with the courage of a lioness, she went ahead with her plan” (p. 182).

**Hanley, Sarah.** Review of *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France*, by Elizabeth Rapley. *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 576–576. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2167370>. Accessed 10 May 2024.

Hanley’s review highlights Rapley’s treatment of the explosion of women’s “bold desires” for religious vocations working in society, rather than cloister, as driven by social change and society’s need. Hanley joins the chorus of praise for Rapley for questioning the traditional reasoning that such changes resulted from the Reformation and Counter Reformation.

**Hill, Christopher.** Review of *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, by Alice Clark. *History Workshop*, 15 (Spring 1983): 173-176. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288469>.

Hill maintains that this ambitious work, originally published in 1919 and focused on England and women's work therein, was unique and stands as a very early feminist work. He notes, "Women were deliberately squeezed out of many spheres of economic activity" (p. 175) as men garnered more education and as they organized in ways not available to women.

**Hillman, Jennifer.** "Lay Female Devotional Lives in the Counter Reformation." *Church History and Religious Culture* 97, no. 3/4 (2017): 369-380. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26570673>. Accessed 10 May 2024.

Hillman's article focuses on the many different religious experiences of lay women following the Council of Trent as they attempted to live out their spirituality more actively and publicly. Of particular interest is her introduction of the use of lay women's diaries. These manuscript vitae "penned by lay women" offer primary source material for studying women's devotional lives. They stand in clear contrast to the hagiographic biographies commonly composed at the time; these works beg for more research.

**Hines, Susan R.** "The Lived Experience of First-Generation International Lasallian Women Leaders." *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 9, no. 3 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, 2018): 5-23.

This article establishes the experience of four women Hines categorizes as the first of their ilk in the Lasallian mission. Through personal interviews and qualitative methodology, the author extrapolates both common and unique elements of each woman's experience as evidence of a new moment in Lasallian history.

**Hodgson, Geraldine E.** *Studies in French Education from Rabelais to Rousseau*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1908.

Hodgeson's study covers particular personalities during the period but curiously makes no mention of De La Salle or the many women's teaching orders. Focus instead is on particular persons and their approach to education. The book was written as an attempt to address the subject, apparently for the first time, in English. I found this of limited interest apart from providing background information and insight into specific personalities.

**Hours, Bernard. *Jean-Baptiste de La Salle: A Mystic in Action*. Translated by Anna Fitzgerald. Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, 2022.**

Hours' work is clearly the definitive biography of De La Salle. The research and detail in this volume are unmatched. The women of the Founder's family and the female teachers and widows who accompanied, inspired, or funded his work are all named and woven into the biography with clarity and skill. To Hours, the relationship between Sr. Louise Hours and St. John Baptist de LaSalle "evokes other spiritual 'couples' of their century, such as Madame Acarie and Michel de Marillac, Berulle and Madeleine de Saint-Joseph, Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, Agnes de Langeac and Jean-Jacque Olier, and Madame Guyon and Fenlon" (p. 467). This bold insight startled me and begs for more research.

**Hufton, Olwen. *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe*. Vol. 1, 1500-1800. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.**

In undertaking this research, one of the great surprises to me was finding a host of contemporary female scholars who illuminate women's life experience in this period with lucid and richly resourced writing. Hufton's deep dive into the experience of marriage, motherhood, and widowhood open a window to a history long obscured or sublimated to more traditional, that is male, accounts. As a point of departure for anyone interested in all things related to women in this period, Hufton's work is an excellent place to begin. With an emphasis on women in Britain and in France, this study notes what was considered proper and what was practiced in daily life in early modern Europe.

**Kostroun, Daniella. "A Formula for Disobedience: Jansenism, Gender, and the Feminist Paradox." *The Journal of Modern History* 75, no. 3 (September 2003): 483-522. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/380236>.**

In great and fascinating detail, Kostroun recounts the entire case of the Port Royal nuns. Her article argues that the nature of the nuns' resistance to papal and royal authority displays use of the perceived weakness of the female gender to "uphold their right of conscience" (p. 485). Drawing upon history and contemporary feminist theory, Kostroun provides a new and deeper perspective on the nuns' obedience to a higher authority.

**McClain, Lisa. *Divided Loyalties? Pushing the Boundaries of Gender and Lay Roles in the Catholic Church, 1534–1829*. Histories of the Sacred and Secular, 1700–2000, edited by David Nash. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.**

A historian of Christianity with a special emphasis in gender studies, McClain's topical work covers the history of women's desire for more apostolic roles in the Catholic Church, during the nearly three hundred years when Catholicism was suppressed in England, with implications for the Catholic Church of Pope Francis. Necessity is indeed shown to be the mother of invention as women step up to address and provide for the spiritual needs of the now closeted English Catholics. In tracing the work and details of individual women during this time, McClain emphasizes that these were not early feminists but women devoted to their faith responding to a divine call and to their own consciences.

**McClain, Lisa. "On a Mission: Priests, Jesuits, 'Jesuitresses,' and Catholic Missionary Efforts in Tudor-Stuart England." *The Catholic Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 437-462.**

McClain presents a thorough, engaging, and well-researched study of Mary Ward, the English foundress of the then "English Ladies" (p. 437), now the Sisters of Loreto. Ward was a pioneer in women's active work in the Church outside of the cloister. By any measure, Ward's sense of her call and perseverance in pursuing it despite being reviled, imprisoned, and sanctioned, is inspirational in the extreme. Ward's ability to use society's expectations regarding women as camouflage "to reclaim England for Rome" (p. 439) demonstrate her devotion and quick wit. Prior to De La Salle, Ward worked to keep her institute from being under a bishop's rule. As a most determined woman far beyond her time, Ward reminds me of Senator McConnell's famous rebuke, "Nevertheless, she persisted."

**Murphy, Michaela. "Was There a Gender Revolution in the Seventeenth Century?" *Bright ONLINE*, no. 3 (2012). [arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/brightonline/issue-number-three/was-there-a-gender-revolution-in-the-seventeenth-century](http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/brightonline/issue-number-three/was-there-a-gender-revolution-in-the-seventeenth-century).**

This brief essay addresses the idealized depiction of women in art and literature of the time as a backdrop for musing about gender characteristics and expectations.

**Norberg, Kathryn. Review of *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France*, by Elizabeth Rapley. *The Journal of Modern History* 64, no. 4 (1992): 802-803. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2124933>.**

Norberg's review covers the book itself in detail but is critical of Rapley's failure to include the voices of the women in the time and places of Rapley's study. Rapley's later work does just that.

**O'Malley, John. W. *Trent and All That*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2000.**

The genesis for this volume is a series of lectures O'Malley delivered in 1993 at Oxford. This slim and readable book deals with the different names and movements preceding and following the Council of Trent. O'Malley unravels and rethreads the movements leading to and stemming from Trent, noting the central place these names hold as history evolves.

**Ranft, Patricia. "A Key to Counter Reformation Women's Activism: The Confessor-Spiritual Director." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 2 (1994): 7-26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002230>.**

Reaching back to the desert fathers, Ranft draws us through the history of confession, penitence, and spiritual direction, carefully crafting the distinction in forms. Exploring the combination of these elements in the Counter-Reformation period, Ranft presents explicit examples of how the confessor-spiritual relationship benefited women, society, and the Church. The result is a nuanced, thorough examination of these relationships that were so critical to women's congregations and their understanding of work and self.

**Rapley, Elizabeth. *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France*. Montreal and Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990.**

This book is the *pièce de résistance*. With a clear grasp of the Reformation, the Council of Trent, and its aftermath for both Catholics and Protestants, Rapley pulls the reader in immediately. Her work in bringing to life the evolution of women's work in the public sphere of the Church is striking and very well-sourced. She follows a path that took many twists and turns for women religious and seculars, and highlights De La Salle's enormous effect on education. Rapley provides an excellent foundation for understanding this subject.

See also the review of this book by Kathryn Norberg, cited in this bibliography.

**Rapley, Elizabeth. "Fenelon Revisited: A Review of Girls' Education in Seventeenth-Century France." *Social History* 20, no. 40 (November 1987): 299-318.**

In this detailed article, Rapley describes the types of schools and education available for girls, the pedagogical models and discipline employed, and the challenges faced by all female educators in this time. She notes, "Limited as they were in their options, [female teachers] treated elementary school-teaching with a respect which no male congregation could match until the founding of the Christian Brothers in the late seventeenth century" (p. 310).

**Rapley, Elizabeth. *The Lord as Their Portion: The Story of the Religious Orders and How They Shaped Our World*. Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, (2011).**

Rapley's engaging style here produces a broad secular and religious history of the impact of religious orders from the very start of Christian monasticism to nearly our time. She includes the geopolitical backdrop in Europe. Chapter 4, "The Seventeenth Century: The Age of Confessionalism" (pp. 161-211), addresses the scope of the seventeenth century and in doing so provides a clear history of the changing nature of religious vocations. Further discussion of the new female religious orders can be found in Rapley's book, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France*, cited in this bibliography.

**Rapley, Elizabeth. "A New Approach: The Filles Seculieres (1630-1660)." *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 16, no. 2, art. 1 (1995): 111-136. <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol16/iss2/1>.**

This article is a thorough and detailed treatment of the evolution of devoted people's voluntary service to the poor leading to the establishment of St. Vincent de Paul's Daughters of Charity. Rapley masterfully presents the challenges and workarounds that enabled devoted women in the mid-seventeenth century to practice active service in the world without *clausura*.

**Rapley, Elizabeth. *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.**

Continuing her focus on nuns' lives, Rapley's work focuses on three teaching orders of French nuns: the "Compagnie de Saint-Ursula, Compagnie de Marie Notre-Dame, and the Congregation de Notre-Dame" (p. 6), all of which, as she notes, are still in existence and teaching children the world over. The book deals with the period that historians refer to as the *old regime* (prior to the French Revolution, 1789). Rapley is particularly concerned with what can be known about these women's lives within the monasteries (cloistered convents) and the influence and interplay of external events on the life of the community. Chapter 2's extensive discussion of dowries is helpful in understanding how the monasteries (convents) sustained themselves. Rapley notes that in this period the religious communities studied were intent upon "re-Catholicizing the world" (p. 3). The history and insight Rapley brings to her writing make this a most engaging read.

**Rapley, Elizabeth. "Un Tresor Enfoui, Une Lampe Sous Un Boisseau" (A Buried Treasure, A Lamp under a Bushel): Seventeenth-Century Visitandines Describe Their Vocation." In *Studies in Early Modern France*, edited by Anne L. Birberick and Russel Ganim, guest editor Thomas M. Carr, Jr., 155-166. Charlottesville, VA: Thomas M. Rookwood Press, 2007.**

In this article, Rapley takes a deep dive into the second generation of St. Francis De Sales' Visitandines order of nuns. Rapley recounts that, while women at the time were considered weak, De Sales was able to make positive use of this perception, arguing that God uses the humble to work for his glory. The characteristics of the order are explored in depth, serving to emphasize simplicity and thereby eliminate any female intellectual aspirations. In true Rapley form, the article is captivating and persuasive.

**Rapley, Elizabeth. "Women and the Religious Vocation in Seventeenth-Century France." *French Historical Studies* 18, no. 3 (1994), 613-631. <https://doi.org/10.2307/286686>.**

Rapley studies the death notices of nuns in this period to ascertain as much as possible about why these women entered religious life. Nuns wrote death notices for each other, and a surprising number of such notices still exist. Drawing upon these sources, Rapley uncovers interesting facts and posits theories about these heretofore hidden lives. Admitting the sometimes inspirational objective of death notices, Rapley nonetheless finds that the stories recalled therein "ring true" (p. 616). The social status, dowries, and information reflecting the ages of entry and "clothing" (receiving the habit) of the women combine to present readers with new perspectives.

**Rigault, M. Georges. *History of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Vol. 1, The Religious and Educational Achievement of St. John Baptist de La Salle*. Translated by S. Edmund Dolan. Malvern, Victoria, Australia: Lasallian Educational Services, 2009.**

This exceptionally detailed history is written in a florid style that requires the reader's close attention in order to sort through what is germane to the female orders with which De La Salle was familiar and from which he borrowed practices for his Christian Schools. Particularly useful are chapters 2 (pp. 24-30), 3 (pp. 31-39), 6 (pp. 64-79), and 7 (pp. 80-95), which deal with seventeenth-century Christianity, conditions in the primary schools of seventeenth-century France, and Pere Barre, Nicholas Roland, and St. John Baptist de La Salle.

**Sanders, Ella Katherine. *Angelique of Port Royal, 1591-1661*. New York and Toronto. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1905.**

Loftily composed in the hagiographical style of the time, this detailed biography covers the Port Royal community through the life of its founder from its creation to its suppression.

**Strasser, Ulrike. “Early Modern Nuns and the Feminist Politics of Religion.” *The Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004): 529-554. <https://doi.org/10.1086/422479>.**

Strasser notes that more recent scholarship provides fertile ground for exploration of new avenues of understanding the significance of nuns in the early modern era. The author explores, explicates, and situates his work in the involvement of nuns and convents in the creation of the modern state. Strasser traces the evolution and change of religious houses from medieval times through the early modern era. Of interest is his description of “the alliance between the Daughters of Charity and the French court” as “beneficial” (p. 544).

**Thorne, Sydney. *Mary Ward: First Sister of Feminism*. South Yorkshire, England, and Havertown, PA: Pen and Sword, 2021.**

The story of Mary Ward and her nearly superhuman perseverance toward her goal of schools for girls provides background for understanding her time and its challenges. Ward lived in the time of Henry VIII’s great persecution of the Roman Catholic Church. Leaving England for the continent, seeking Church recognition, being imprisoned but never abandoning her great cause, she endured and persisted. Her congregation, the Sisters of Loreto, still exists today. The history and images in this book also contribute to our understanding of the early seventeenth century.

**Tristano, Richard M. “The Hidden Paths of Divine Providence: Jeanne Dubois Maillefer as Foundress of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2023): 140-167.**

Tristano agrees with Jean-Baptiste Blain, De La Salle’s early and noted biographer, in seeing Madame Maillefer’s role in the establishment of De La Salle’s Christian schools as that of a “parallel female founder.” Revisiting the founding story familiar to Lasallians, Tristano argues with detailed evidence that the lack of information about and credit to Maillefer’s role in subsequent biographies of the Founder does a disservice to her and to Lasallian history. Connecting Maillefer’s role to her widowed state, Tristano also discusses St. Francis de Sales’ writing on widowhood as a virtuous state.

**Tristano, Richard M. “John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers of the Christian Schools: A Contextual Approach; France 1525-1725.” *Digital Journal of Lasallian Research Opening Perspectives Collection 1* (April 2018).**

In this scholarly study, De La Salle is fully set in his time. Tristano’s masterful use of sources that span historical, cultural, theological, and Lasallian texts make this a formidable but accessible read. Noting that “it is illusory to separate in absolute terms De La Salle the priest from De La Salle the Frenchman” (p. 8), Tristano explores and explicates in detail De La Salle the man: his convictions, his theological beliefs, his societal influences, and the historical events surrounding the establishment of the Christian schools.

**Weaver, F. Ellen. “France: Erudition, Spirituality, and Women; The Jansenist Contribution.” *In Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe: Private and Public Worlds*, edited by S. Marshall, 189-203. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989.**

This essay on Jansenist women makes the case for their “spiritual feminism” in the period of the Counter Reformation (p. 191). Weaver includes the influence of the French Catholic Church on Jansenist women and their independent and intellectual lives. In the context of “a spiritual salon” (p. 189), we see the significance of Madame Acarie, Cardinal Berulle, and St. Francis de Sales.

**Weber, Alison. “‘Little Angels’: Young Girls in Discalced Carmelite Convents (1562-1582).” *In Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Cordula Van Wyhe, 211-225. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008.**

While clearly not germane to this research, this essay is a fascinating consideration of children in convents, focusing on two little girls: Isabelita and Teresita, Teresa of Avila’s own niece. Emphasizing the Tridentine requirement that individuals be the age of sixteen before entering monasteries, Weber investigates the rare cases of two little girls being raised in a convent. She explores the manner in which “the girls occupied their time: they did needlework, they played with religious images, they made up tunes and verses, and they spent time alone in hermitages” (p. 216). Teresa of Avila’s and the nuns’ clear affection for the two children highlighted in this work illuminates Aries’ work (cited above) regarding the developing understanding of childhood as a particular human state.

**Weber, Alison, ed. *Devout Laywomen in the Early Modern World*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.**

Weber's lengthy introduction (pp. 1-28) to this compilation of essays establishes the evolution of women's spirituality and religious service in its many manifestations, primarily in post-Tridentine Spain and Italy. The introduction explains the many civic, religious, and gendered elements of the broad category she names "devout laywomen." Beyond *aut maritus aut murus*, these choices cast a new and wider light on this moment in time and open new pathways for future scholarship.

**Wiesner, M. E. Review of *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France*, by Anne Rapley. *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 1 (1991): 130-131. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3710725>.**

Wiesner offers a nuanced review of Rapley's treatment of the legal and familial issues of claustration and the Council of Trent's mandate on claustration. Wiesner emphasizes Rapley's significant contribution illuminating the work of lay women.

**Wiesner-Hanks, M. *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. 3rd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.**

Wiesner's sweeping yet detailed coverage of women's experience throughout Europe serves as a premier text for the period. This master historian and author has produced an especially keen, up to date, and meticulously researched tome. Wiesner begins with concepts of women in ancient times biblically, mythologically, and legally that serve to set the foundation for all of women's history. Her study is separated into three sections entitled "Body," "Mind," and "Spirit." This format enables the reader to read broadly or focus on an area of interest. The section "The Female Life Cycle" is extremely enlightening on the different phases of women's lives in this period. However, I found it challenging to nail down the exact years she was covering in each section and sometimes was confused about the countries to which her work applied. Yet as an introduction to women in the early modern Europe period, this work is excellent.

**Wiesner-Hanks, M. *Women and the Reformations: A Global History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2024.**

In her fascinating and most recent work, Wiesner-Hanks weaves the stories of women in both the Protestant and Catholic Reformations into a new and comprehensive narrative. This includes a study of women from across the globe and the effect of their historical context on their lives and life choices. The work is organized in sections that cover women as "monarchs, mothers, migrants, martyrs, mystics and missionaries." By consciously avoiding the Protestant/Catholic duality, Wiesner-Hanks gives us an entirely new perspective on women, drawing upon the stories of women both well-known and unfamiliar.

**Wiesner-Hanks, M. “Women and the Reformations: Reflections on Recent Research.” *History Compass* 2, no. 1 (January 2004): 1-27.**

This article canvasses what at the time was “recent research,” and seems to mark the beginnings of the author’s own book on the subject, *Women and the Reformations: A Global History*, published twenty years later and annotated above. Wiesner-Hanks has an impressive ability to analyze what has been done while pointing out what yet remains to be studied.

**Winters, Michael Sean. “17th-Century French Catholicism.” *National Catholic Reporter (Distinctly Catholic blog)*, n.d. <http://ncronline.org/print/blogs/distinctly-catholic/17th-century-french-catholicism>.**

Winters is reflecting upon his reading of Bergin’s *Church, Society and Religious Change in France, 1580-1730* and in doing so invites us to engage with comparisons between politics and religion then and now. His excellent summary of the Church in this time of great change draws us into the complexities and developments of the Church in these times.

**Woshinsky, B. R. “Convent Parleys: Listening to Women’s Voices in Madame De Villedieu’s *Memoires De La Vie De Henriette-Sylvie De Moliere*.” In *Studies in Early Modern France*, vol. 2, *The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices*, edited by A. L. Birberick and R. Ganim, guest editor T. M. Carr, Jr., 167-185. Charlottesville, VA: T. M. Rookwood, 2007.**

Woshinsky mines fictional literature and memoirs for her purposes here. There are interesting elements relative to seventeenth-century convents that support Rapley’s contention that one reason women entered convents was to escape marriage, or in Woshinsky’s words, “a tyrannical husband” (p. 167). Woshinsky notes how convents served as temporary or permanent escapes for women from a variety of backgrounds and for a variety of reasons.





