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Trust in the Catholic Reformation. Genoa, 1594-1664

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Citation

Peeters, T. D. H. M. (2020, March 31). *Trust in the Catholic Reformation. Genoa, 1594-1664*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/97601>

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Title: Trust in the Catholic Reformation. Genoa, 1594-1664

Issue Date: 2020-03-31

4. When distrust thrives. The Magistrato delle Monache and the female convents

We have seen how reformers tried to bring about changes in the ecclesiastical landscape by means of trust strategies as well as the obstacles and paradoxes that this approach brought with it. In other areas of religious life, however, the ecclesiastical and secular authorities sought to change unwanted situations by means of distrust. This was the reality of female convent life in Genoa. The religious women who lived inside the city's many cloistered convents had hardly any possibility of constructing trust relationships, especially with the outside world. This chapter focuses on why an approach of distrust dominated this particular area of the Genoese Church and what such an approach looked like in practice.

Seventeenth-century Genoa had many nunneries. Their number had been growing ever since the foundation of the oldest convent of Benedictine nuns, that of Sant'Andrea della Porta, in 1109.¹ During the sixteenth century only a few were added, while the next century saw the foundation of no fewer than ten convents on top of the 21 already existing ones.² During the seventeenth century, the state of these female convents in Genoa was seen as a responsibility of the Church hierarchy but also of secular superiors (called *protettori*) and the state.³ For this reason, it was not in the archbishop's palace but at a meeting of the Genoese senate, on 28 August

¹ Claudio Paolucci, 'Presenza religiosa femminile a Genova tra XII e XVIII secolo: note di storia e di bibliografia', *Studia Ligustica. Collana di studi on line per l'approfondimento delle tematiche interdisciplinari riguardanti la storia, le arti e la bibliografia della Liguria* 1. Ordini religiosi in Liguria (October 2011): 8.

² Ibid., 8. Four of these new establishments belonged to new female religious orders founded in Genoa, the *Turchine* and the *Brignoline*, and their foundation shows the possibility of a more 'trusting' approach towards new female initiatives. See chapter 5.

³ The ecclesiastical elite expected the secular arm to eradicate all 'danger' regarding female convents: the Council fathers had indeed held the state responsible to help bishops to restore enclosure, and thus to avoid any unnecessary communication with the outside world. They had exhorted all "Christian princes to furnish this aid, and enjoins, under pain of excommunication [...] that it be rendered by all civil magistrates." CT 240, Session 25, Chapter V.

1642, that an anonymous accusation regarding a nunnery was read. Brother Bartolomeo Archi, prior at the convent of La Consolazione, had been reportedly visiting “a noble nun of San Leonardo” for several years:

because he has been warned not to become too confidential, he refrains from going there too often or too visibly, but [...] not one day goes by in which he does not solicit her with small notes, and with presents that very much exceed his status and condition.⁴

The accuser made it clear from the outset of the letter that “because other admonitions were made in vain” he or she needed to appeal to the senators “who are the only ones who with their authority and prudence can remedy an inconvenience that has very bad consequences.”⁵ That such a letter, in which the religious were accused of scandalous behaviour, was addressed to the secular authorities fits into a long history of these authorities’ involvement with Genoa’s female convents. As early as the second half of the fifteenth century, attempts had been made to reform the Genoese convents and start new ones that would offer what contemporaries saw as a respectable life to women who chose the “first state” (the other option being marriage). This reform included the enclosure of those convents that over time had abandoned their original rules and whose inhabitants had started to engage in activities beyond the walls of the convent. The policy was advocated primarily by the secular elite against the will of the women themselves.⁶ This elite preferred the cloistered alternative for their daughters and continued to

⁴ “[...] sino due, e tre uolte la settimana, et poiche è stato auisato a non confidar troppo si ua alquanto trattenendo di non andarli cosi spesso ne cosi alla scoperta, uero è però che mantiene talmente uiua la pratica che non passa giorno che con biglietti, e presenti molto eccedenti il grado, e conditione sua non la uadi sollicitando.” ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, Petition to the senate accusing friar Bartolomeo Archi, 28-08-1642.

⁵ “Non giouando altre amonitioni si ricorre per debito di coscienza a VV.SS. Serenissime quali sole possono ouiare con l’authorità, e prudenza loro ad un inconueniente di molta mala conseguenza.” Ibid.

⁶ Paolo Fontana, ‘La vita religiosa “sine regula” nella Repubblica di Genova dall’Antico Regime all’Ottocento. Conservatori, eremiti, terziarie, case di penitenti’, *Chiesa e Storia. Rivista dell’Associazione Italiana dei Professori di Storia della Chiesa* 6–7 (2017): 198. See also: Valeria Polonio, “Un affare di Stato. La riforma per le monache a Genova nel XV secolo”, in G.B. Trolese (ed.), “Monastica et humanistica”. Scritti in onore di Gregorio Penco O.S.B., Cesena 2003 (Italia benedettina XXIII), II, p. 323-352.

send them to these convents throughout the early modern period, even though the cloistered life was evidently not suited for all.⁷

The cooperation between the government and the Church with regard to female convents was expressed in the *Magistrato delle Monache*. Founded in 1551 at the initiative of the secular authorities but with the consent of Pope Julius III, the Magistrato was a permanent institution consisting of the archbishop or his vicar and three or four citizens chosen by the senate (several earlier commissions had existed from the middle of fifteenth century onwards but these were always temporary).⁸ The Magistrato was to occupy itself with virtually everything that regarded the female convents within the walls of Genoa. Its *deputati* were chosen for three years and appointed one or more paid *referendarios* who worked for the Magistrato on a daily basis.⁹ The task of these *referendarios* was to gather information on Genoa's nunneries

⁷ A good example of this imposed reform from active to enclosed life is that of San Tommaso, one of the oldest female convents in Genoa that had housed Benedictine nuns from at least 1134 onwards. In the fifteenth century, both the secular and ecclesiastical authorities attempted to impose strict enclosure, but the nuns had resisted this measure successfully. However, those Genoese convents that did not conform to the prescriptions regarding enclosure as found in their own rule, were not allowed to accept any new novices. When, as a consequence, in 1501, only five of the sisters of San Tommaso remained, this small group merged with the nuns of Santa Maria in Passione, a new convent grown out of a community of unmarried women that had existed for two centuries and that had voluntarily accepted enclosure less than forty years before. Connecting an almost dying but still active community to another convent and thus changing its rules in order to reform what was left of it happened often (at least to three other Genoese convents). Paolo Fontana rightly notes that it was not a natural decline that forced these convents to take this direction but a conscious policy from above. Other nunneries did not lose their independence but nevertheless changed their rule in an attempt to reform. Thus, it happened that only two out of the fourteen convents founded before the mid-fifteenth century continued following the same rule during the wave of reforms around 1500. After this period of transformation, the Genoese female convents grew substantially. Fontana, 'La vita religiosa', 197-98; Gavazza and Magnani, *Monasteri femminili*, 137.

⁸ During the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century the government at times had given a special body temporal authority to tackle issues regarding nunneries. In 1529 and in 1538 the Senate had entreated papal authority to intervene in the Genoese female convents, which at both points of time was followed by temporary commissions that dealt with issues regarding these convents, especially with enclosure. Fontana, 'La vita religiosa', 197-98. Michele Rosi, 'Le monache nella vita genovese dal secolo XV al XVII', *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria*, Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 27 (1895): 36, see for the papal decree: 195-7.

⁹ We do not know the selection procedure for this office although it seems that every deputy of the Magistrato chose his own *referendario* whom he paid personally. The sources often mention "il referendario di Signor..." followed by a name. That the referendaries were paid is deduced from:

and report to the Magistrato's members. The delegates met on a regular basis, at times joined by the archbishop or his vicar. They discussed all information coming from their own informants or from letters written by the nuns themselves or others, and took decisions accordingly. One of the focal points of its activity was to reduce all possible illicit contact between the convents and the outside world. Secular and ecclesiastical authorities cooperated in the Magistrato even though tensions did not fail to surface.¹⁰ The Magistrato continued to exist in the eighteenth century, but documentation for that period is much scarcer than for the seventeenth century. This fact might indicate either that, by then, less control over female convents was deemed necessary and priorities had changed, or that the activity of the institution was less documented.¹¹

Sources

The city's government involvement in the attempt to change the situation of its nunneries was not in any way particular to Genoa.¹² What is unique is the type of sources Genoese archives offer: the Magistrato produced all kinds of records concerning its dealings with female convents that give insight into its daily business. Even more remarkable is how little attention these sources have received. Except for the nineteenth-century historian Michele Rosi, it seems that no historian so far has ever looked into them thoroughly.¹³ Although Rosi has given a very useful overview of the history of the Magistrato delle Monache in his article of 1895, his work exposes

ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, note asking for overdue payment, [1639]; and ASG, AS, Monialium, 1382, no. 17.

¹⁰ The secular authorities, for instance, notified Cardinal Durazzo if a priest was illicitly visiting a nunnery: since clerics were part of his jurisdiction, the state was not allowed to prosecute and punish them. After being informed, Durazzo usually asked the 'secular arm' to arrest the priest in question. If the visitor was a friar, his own superior would be notified and asked to discipline the transgressor. See for an example of cooperation in which Cardinal Durazzo was also involved: ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 81 and no. 85, 02-08-1664. See the list of admonitions from 1631 until ca. 11-11-1651 in ASG, AS, Monialium, 1383, in which several instances of contact with Durazzo and monastic superiors are mentioned. Cf.: Fontana, 'La vita religiosa', 198–99.

¹¹ It could, of course, also be that the documentation of this period did not survive. *Ibid.*, 199.

¹² Richard C Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), 35; Black, *Church, Religion and Society*, 150–52.

¹³ It is notable, for example, that in recent work on early modern Genoese female convents the sources of the Magistrato are not included: Gavazza and Magnani, *Monasteri femminili*.

a very judgmental attitude – typical for nineteenth-century historians writing on the Baroque era – towards what he saw as instrumental and superficial religiosity and its presumed consequences. Consideration for what is not mentioned, e.g. the many nunneries that hardly ever occur in the Magistrato's records, is lacking in Rosi's analysis. Questions regarding the reasons behind the disciplinary problems in the convents and the government's attitudes towards them were not central to his work.¹⁴ Also, the voices of the sisters themselves can hardly be heard. What interests me in studying the sources of the Magistrato is not so much the well-known existence of the substantial problems that were caused, in part, by forced monachisation. Rather I would explore what these particular sources reveal about the solutions that contemporaries, including women, deemed best, and which solutions were actually adopted.

The silences in the Magistrato's administration are also worthy of consideration. An analysis of a list of all admonitions that were made to men and women who illicitly visited female convents from 28 March 1635 to 11 November 1651 provides a total of 511 entries in eleven years. This means an average of around two or three warnings every month to people who were banned from making any more visits to the convents. People were often warned more than once, which implies that fewer than 511 men and women received an official warning. Still, it is important to remember that many more people were observed in the parlours and vicinity of convents but were not given an official warning, whereas others were admonished while their names were left unrecorded.¹⁵ Apparently, the task of monitoring all these (legitimate and illegitimate) visitors was enough to keep one man busy on a daily basis. Though some women were mentioned explicitly on the list of warnings that I analysed, most of those who received an official warning were men. Considering that only a small proportion of the people who were admonished were

¹⁴ Rosi, for instance, assumes that the measures taken by the Magistrato must have been effective without providing sufficient evidence. Rosi, 'Le monache', 44.

¹⁵ A good example can be found in: ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report by the *referendario*, 04-03-1649: "Il segretario facci l'ammonitione a [...] Cesare Franchi senza notarla, ammonisca e noti l'amonitione per gl'infrascritti Cioè Carlo Cauagnaro Gio' Battista Riola".

also punished by banishment or incarceration, one may conclude that the number of punished transgressions in the realm of female convents was rather small.

It is furthermore important to keep in mind that a larger number of Genoese nunneries was *not* mentioned explicitly on the list of people who had been warned than those that did appear on it: for instance, the recently founded convents of the Turchine and the Discalced Carmelites are not represented. It might very well be that the problems of illicit contact concentrated around a precise group of convents – the “dangerous ones”, as one *referendario* called them – with a higher concentration of women who were forced to enter convent life (see figures 2 and 3 at the end of this chapter).¹⁶ These qualifications aside, the sources from the Magistrato’s archives unveil a reality in which distrust was paramount in the relationship between religious women and their surroundings.

Distrust

Recent historians have written much about female monasticism in the early modern period.¹⁷ They have stressed that not only did women have agency within their respective spheres of the family or the convent, but also that the convent walls were not as impermeable as one might suspect. Cloistered women pursued spiritual apostolates and friendships outside the nunnery, and through their outside contacts could change their own situation and sometimes even act upon the outside world. Currently, there is a growing interest in forms of female religious life that have been less visible in the shadow of the institutions of marriage and the convent, but that nonetheless offered decisive alternatives (we will examine some of these in the next

¹⁶ ASG, AS, Monialium, 1383, report of the *referendario*, 29-02-1644 “sono stato la presente settimana in volta alli monasteri e particolarmente a quelli del borgo di la e più pericolosi e non vi è cosa di momento da ricordare”.

¹⁷ As a corollary of the 1960s culture, historians adopted the ‘separate sphere paradigm’ claiming that the Counter-Reformation was a purely repressive period in which women were locked away. This narrative was soon criticised (in the 1970s) by historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis, who stressed that within certain domains women enjoyed limited forms of liberty, and that there were possibilities of self-actualisation in the enclosed convents. Alison Weber offers a clear historiographical overview in: Alison Parks Weber, ‘Locating Holiness in Early Modern Spain: Convents, Caves, and Houses’, in *Structures and Subjectivities: Attending to Early Modern Women*, ed. Adele F. Seeff and Joan Hartman (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 50–52.

chapter). Scholars of early modern female religiosity now suggest that in those Italian cities where the aristocracy dominated ecclesiastical affairs, less was possible in the sphere of religious life outside the convent because it was mostly this elite, rather than the Church reformers, that had a rigid and mistrusting image of the position and nature of women.¹⁸ Yet we should not see an all too rigid opposition between the ecclesiastical and the secular elites: in Genoa, for example, it was at certain times the political elite, and at others the archbishop (himself an exponent of this elite) who supported women's initiatives for religious action outside the convent. These two hierarchies cooperated in the Magistrato, even though not without some internal struggles.

To understand the complexity of attitudes within and outside the Church towards female religiosity and female agency in this field, it is helpful to consider the factor of trust and distrust. What does this mean in concrete terms? When aiming to reform or to solve a problem, such as the disorder in some of the female convents that the Magistrato dealt with, there are two possibilities: either one can rely on the freedom of the other and his or her willingness and ability to do what one sees as desirable (i.e. trust), or one can limit the person's freedom in order to constrain him or her with the same goal (i.e. distrust). Even though women were sometimes granted agency in the religious sphere, other interests often trumped their freedom of choice. In the latter case, change could only come about through strategies of distrust and regulation.

The question that emerges when looking at the Magistrato delle Monache's archives from this trust perspective is why the (ecclesiastical and political) Genoese elite chose an approach of distrust and regulation in order to improve a situation that was generally seen as undesirable. To answer this question, we first of all need to

¹⁸ Querciolo Mazzonis, 'Women's Semi-Religious Life in Rome (15th-17th Century)', in *Early Modern Rome 1341-1667. Proceedings of a Conference Held in Rome May 13-15, 2011* (Ferrara: Edisai, 2011), 6. Also from the description of the Florentine institutions founded by Eleonora Ramirez di Montalvo, it is clear that an active religious life was seen as more acceptable for girls from a non-elite background than for elite women. Jennifer Haraguchi, 'Convent Alternatives for Rich and Poor Girls in Seventeenth-Century Florence. The Lay Conservatories of Eleonora Ramirez Di Montalvo (1602-1659)', in *Devout Laywomen in the Early Modern World*, ed. Alison Weber (Burlington: Routledge, 2016), 258.

understand the general attitude towards women and their place in the family strategies of the aristocracy. We will subsequently look at the way in which distrust was manifested by examining how the Magistrato operated. Last, the chapter explores how religious women themselves perceived such a distrustful approach. Thus, we will shed light on the origins and practical consequences of what we might call the practices of distrust that surrounded the world of female convents in Genoa. This can in turn become a starting point for understanding – in the next chapter – why, in some other cases, distrust turned into trust.

Views on the convent

[A]lmost the sum of all perfection and happiness of the houses, cities, republics, reigns and all the states of the world, consists [...] in the good government and virtuous life of women. Because these women (not to mention now the cloistered and professed nuns, who, [...] like unassailable rocks and fortresses, defend the people from divine wrath, pestilences, famine, war [and] sin [...]) being well-educated, govern their houses well, educate their children well, and with ease induce their husbands [and] family members of which societies as a whole consist, towards piety and all virtues.¹⁹

This was written by Pietro Francesco Zini, a canon in Verona, in a 1575 introduction to the *Instituzione d'ogni stato lodevole delle donne cristiane*, an influential work appertaining to the so-called conduct literature for women that was on the rise in Italy. The author of the *Instituzione* was the bishop of Verona, Agostino Valier, one of the followers of Carlo Borromeo. Valier's work consisted of three short treatises on the three types of vocations deemed acceptable for women outside the convent: the married, the unmarried, and the widowed life. He described the nature of these roles and gave rules and practical examples to arrive at a “praiseworthy state” within these different

¹⁹ Agostino Valier, *Instituzione d'ogni stato lodevole delle donne cristiane* and *Ricordi di Monsignor Agostino alle monache nella sua visitazione fatta l'anno del santissimo Giubileo 1575*, ed. Francesco Lucioli, *Critical Texts* 43 (Modern Humanities Research Association, 2015), 54.

vocations.²⁰ One can hardly deny the responsibility that women in general had in the eyes of this clergyman, and likewise of many other post-Tridentine reformers, including Bishop Valier who, citing Augustine, called them “the mothers of God’s people”.²¹

At the same time, however, Valier was convinced that women had an inherent weakness, even though “created by God, capable of eternal life and having been conceded the potential of the soul just like men”.²² Their weakness was greater than men’s, and could only be compensated by piety and humility, which he and many contemporaries believed to be greater in women.²³ Obedience also helped in overcoming this natural weakness: “It is a very secure thing for everybody to obey, [but] much more for women, who, because of the imbecility of their nature and because of a certain natural tenderness, are easily deceived.”²⁴ Interestingly, in this passage Valier refers to the obedience of a group of religious women to other women (and not to men) whose life they could use as a trustworthy example for their own

²⁰ Francesco Lucioli, ‘Introduction’, in *Agostino Valier, ‘Istituzione d’ogni stato lodevole delle donne cristiane’ and ‘Ricordi di Monsignor Agostino alle monache nella sua visitazione fatta l’anno del santissimo Giubileo 1575’*, ed. Francesco Lucioli, 43 (Modern Humanities Research Association, 2015), 1. Citation on p. 4.

²¹ “madri del popolo di Dio”. Valier, *Istituzione*, 111.

²² “le donne sono create da Dio capaci della vita eterna e gli sono concesse le potenzie dell’anima come agli uomini.” Ibid., 57.

²³ “It is true that the weakness of your gender is great,” Valier wrote to women, “[but] Divine Goodness having compassion for your comfort and to confuse many of us, was pleased to give women oftentimes more humility and devotion. That is why it happens that many more husbands and brothers convert [...] through their wives and sisters; even though it seems that it should have been the opposite, having the Lord put man at the head of the woman” “È vero che grande è la debolezza del vostro sesso, della quale avendo compassione la Divina Bontà per vostro conforto e per confusione di molti di noi, li piace donar alle donne molte volte maggior umiltà e più fervente devozione. Onde nasce che molto maggior numero di mariti o di fratelli si convertono e diventano buoni per mezzo delle [A4r] mogli e delle sorelle; se ben pare che dovrebbe esser il contrario, avendo il Signore fatto l’uomo capo della donna.” Ibid.

²⁴ “È molto sicura cosa a tutti l’obedire, molto maggiormente alle donne, le quali, per l’imbecilità della natura e per una certa naturale tenerezza loro, sono facili ad esser ingannate” Valier, *Istituzione*, 67. Women were also seen as instigators of lust: Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life*, Reprint edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 17.

and who could advise on many things “appertaining to the spirit and [...] to one’s life”.²⁵

The ideal place to circumvent this inherent weakness in a life of piety and obedience was that of the enclosed convent. Valier described the convents as paradises on earth, if only “the people who live there [were] able to live in peace and charity”.²⁶ According to the Council fathers, gathered for the 25th session of the Council of Trent, this ability to live in peace and charity was closely linked to the freedom of the girls who entered: they decreed that a girl could enter the convent life only if the bishop found her “to be pious and free”. At the same time, those who would constrain a girl “to enter a Convent; *or* prevent her, if she desires to enter” and “those who lend their counsel, aid, or countenance thereunto” were warned: excommunication *ipso facto* would follow.²⁷

The Genoese aristocracy

As firm and clear as this might sound, it made little impression on the many aristocratic families who continued to send their daughters to these nunneries, mostly for reasons of economics and family strategy. A striking example of the convenience of this choice is that provided by Renée Baernstein, who found that Anna, the one daughter in the Milanese Sfondrati family who was chosen to marry, received a dowry that amounted to around twenty times the fee that had to be paid for her sister upon entering the respectable convent of San Paolo.²⁸ For the aristocracy, the convent was thus a prestigious and relatively cheap alternative to settle surplus daughters.

²⁵ “appartenenti allo spirito et [...] alla sua vita”. Valier, *Instituzione*, 67.

²⁶ “Scrive un Santo [Geronimo] che li monasteri (se quelle persone che v’abitano sanno vivere in pace e carità) si possono domandare paradisi.” Ibid., 59.

²⁷ “The holy Synod, having in view the freedom of the profession on the part of virgins who are to be dedicated to God, ordains and decrees, that if a girl [...] desire to take the religious habit, she shall not take that habit, neither shall she, nor any other, at a later period, make her profession, until the bishop [...] has carefully examined [...] whether she has been compelled or enticed thereunto, or knows what she is doing; and if she will be found to be pious and free [...] and if also the convent be a suitable one; it shall be free for her to make her profession.” CT 248-9, Session XXV, Chapter XVII-III.

²⁸ P. Renee Baernstein, *A Convent Tale: A Century of Sisterhood in Spanish Milan* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 11.

Unsurprisingly, around one in twenty-five women in Genoa lived within the convent walls in 1597.²⁹ The ratio of girls from the elite families who entered the Genoese convents was even higher, because for the lower strata of society the dowry needed to enter the nunnery was often too expensive.³⁰ We may therefore assume that not a few of these elite girls who became nuns were indeed “encouraged” either by relatives who were nuns, or by family members outside the convent.

The virtue of obedience to one’s father was perceived as the safest way for women (and men) towards salvation. This virtue, however, could conflict with a girl’s desire, thus creating a fine line between being compelled to enter an enclosed order and deciding to do so out of obedience. In this, boys could face a similar fate as girls. Destined to become a friar by his father, the Genoese youngster Domenico Maragliano once burst into tears during a class: he lamented the beatings with which his father responded to his protests to the religious vocation. Upon this outburst, his teacher, Friar Girolamo Francesco Balestrini, told the class of noviciates: “I’ve never preached Lent in Genoa, but if I ever do, I intend to deliver a sermon against fathers and mothers who force their children to become religious, because there’s a great need for it.”³¹

Throughout the early modern period the aristocracy in Genoa, like elsewhere on the peninsula, continued to decide the faith of their daughters (as well as their sons) and send them to the convent even against their will. Marco Battaglini, the bishop of Nocera Umbra in central Italy, in his instructions to parish priests (1707) summarised the situation as follows

like one selects fishes or picks apples, [parents] do with their children what they want, ruling [...] that one be priest, one nun,

²⁹ 1278 nuns on a population of 62,396 people Giuseppe Felloni, ‘Per la storia della popolazione di Genova nei secoli XVI e XVII’, *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria, nuova serie* 38, no. 2 (1998): 1178.

³⁰ Andrea Leonardi, ‘Monache cittadine: sedi monastiche e immagine urbana della città’, in *Monasteri femminili a Genova tra XVI e XVIII secolo*, ed. Ezia Gavazza and Lauro Magnani (Genoa: DIRAS, 2011), 71. Black, *Church, Religion and Society*, 151.

³¹ Testimony of R. P. Girolamo Francesco Balestrini, OP, 17 July 1710, Cited in: Anne Jacobson Schutte, *By Force and Fear: Taking and Breaking Monastic Vows in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 162–63.

the other one friar, [...], the other daughter will marry [...] so that the biggest possible heap of money will remain [...] for the one son, who, by marrying, has to maintain the memory of your name and the reputation of the family.³²

As a consequence, the policy of the ruling elite towards those nunneries was always a balancing act between severity in order to keep them 'honourable', and moderateness, in order to keep convent life comfortable enough for women to accept their fate. Exceptions to the convents' rules were requested and sometimes granted, as in the case of the noble-born novice, Sister Felice Victoria Fiesca, whom Archbishop Giulio Vincenzo Gentile permitted to keep and spend her own money as she pleased as long as it profited her or her convent of San Leonardo.³³ At the same time, no exceptions were made to rules regarding male visitors, because it was exactly this contact that was closely connected to the honour of a nunnery in the eyes of ecclesiastics and state officials alike.

The Magistrato delle Monache

The respectability of Genoa's cloistered convents was seen as essential also for the city as such. The existence of a magistrato for the female convents shows that the political elite were convinced that their respectability had an impact on the city's honour and consequently they were something with which the city authorities should

³² "ne fanno di loro volontà la scelta, come si capano i pesci o si distinguono i pomi, decretando inappellabilmente che uno sia prete, che l'altro sia monaca, che uno sia frate, [...], che quella si mariti... [...] perché rimanga più grosso il mucchio del denaro [...] per l'altro maschio, che deve, con ammogliarsi, mantenere la memoria del vostro nome e la reputazione della famiglia". M. Battaglini, *Istruzione a parrochi per ispiegare a' popoli loro la Parola di Dio in tutte le feste de' Santi...*, Venezia 1707, pp. 248 and 252, cited in: Toscani, 'Il reclutamento', 588.

³³ ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 127.

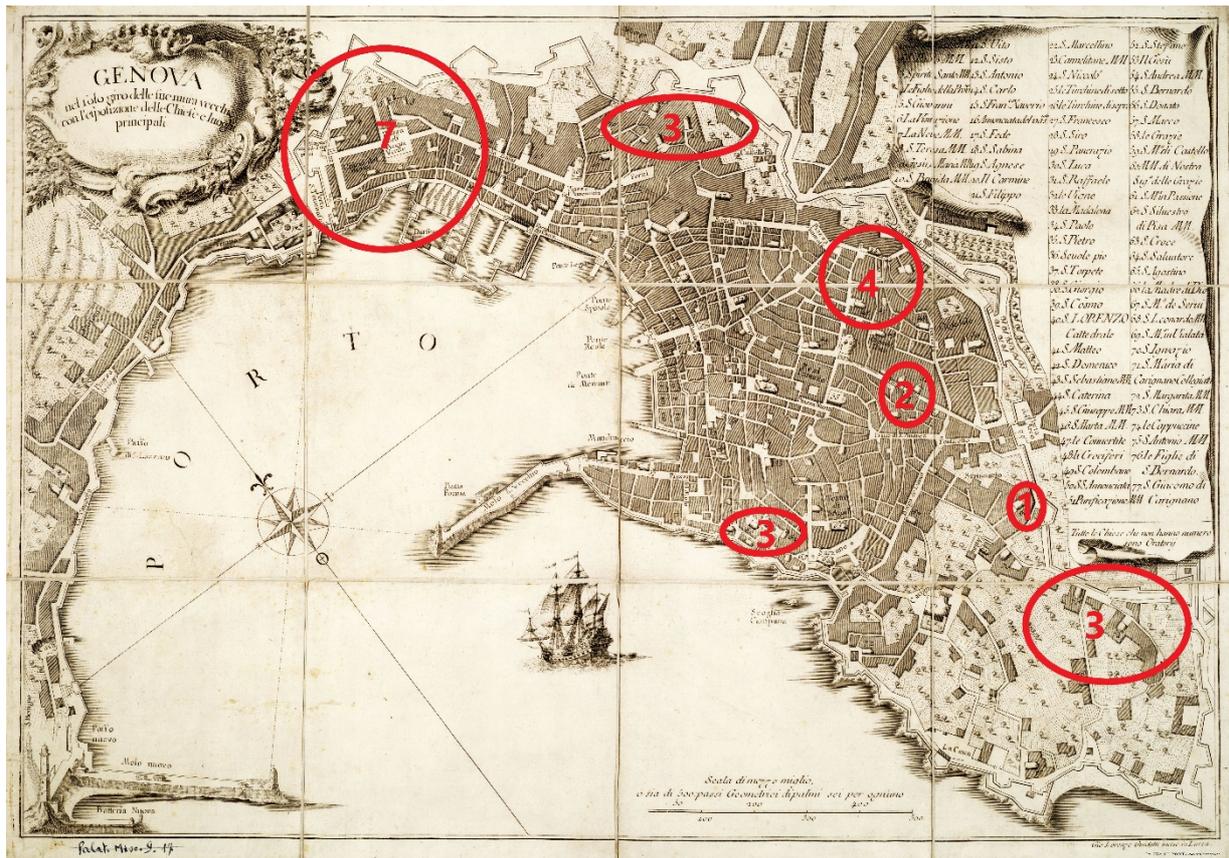


Figure 1. Location of several of the female monasteries in Genoa that, as it were, formed a protective ring around the city.

concern themselves.³⁴ Mostly placed just inside the old city walls, it was as if the nunneries formed a protective ring around the city (see figure 1).³⁵ The sisters of the Genoese Conservatorio di San Giuseppe, for instance, according to their constitutions were to daily say a prayer to the guardian angel of the city to ask for protection.³⁶ Such was the spiritual power of female convents, according to bishop Valier, that the devil tried “to enter these fortresses and conquer this [...] most important defence that the people of God has”, not in the least because they kept “the door of his mercy open which the Lord God threatens to close.”³⁷ With its

³⁴ Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, 35.

³⁵ See for a comprehensive study of the positioning of the various convents throughout the centuries in Genoa, see: Leonardi, ‘Monache cittadine: sedi monastiche e immagine urbana della città’.

³⁶ Fontana, ‘La vita religiosa’, 208.

³⁷ “di entrare in queste fortezze e di espugnare questa sola o principal difesa che ha il popolo di Dio” “tengono ancora aperta la porta della Sua misericordia, la quale il Signor Dio minaccia di chiudere” Valier, *Ricordi*, 128.

policies, the Magistrato delle Monache therefore advanced the interests of a minority while safeguarding the city's honour and spiritual well-being.³⁸

The principal task of the Magistrato did not concern the nuns directly. The Magistrato's main occupation was not to educate them, to improve their selection process, or to warn and punish families that sent their children to the convents purely for reasons of family strategy. Instead, the Magistrato's actions were primarily focused on external issues: on monitoring, admonishing and punishing *men* who visited nunneries and thus, sometimes literally, closing the convent walls even more. The aim in most of the Magistrato's policies seems not to have been to change the attitude of misbehaving nuns, leaving them the freedom to improve, but of giving them less opportunity to act. This strategy may have been partially inspired by a mentality that saw women as inferior to men and as possible seducers (after Eve). In fact, there was no Magistrato specifically for men. Besides the different attitude towards women, the strategy might be explained by the fact that there were many more nuns in Genoa than monks (and, among the latter, only some were members of enclosed religious orders).³⁹

The way in which one *referendario* commented on one of his visits reveals much about how the Magistrato delle Monache as an institution looked at the problems they dealt with. On 4 January 1645, at around four o'clock, this *referendario* saw "two young Signori [...] who were in the company of a very young and beautiful monk of Santa Caterina [...] on the piazza inside San Tommaso, walking up and down several times looking at the terraces".⁴⁰ Somewhat later he spotted the same monk together with a friend who "was awaited by the same nun that I have seen coming or going

³⁸ Cf. Helen Hills, 'Nuns and Relics: Spiritual Authority in Post-Tridentine Naples', in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View*, ed. Cordula van Wyhe, Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 32.

³⁹ A report of 1597 for instance mentions a number of 1278 nuns and of only 589 male clergymen on a population of 62.396. Felloni, 'Per la storia della popolazione', 1178.

⁴⁰ "[...] ho visto a hore 23 in circa dui signori giouinetti fermi sotto quello di S'to Tomaso quali eran in compagnia d'vn Monaco di Santa Caterina assai giouine e di bellissimo aspetto [...] sopra la piazza di dentro di Santo Tomaso passaggiando piu volte osseruando le teresse." ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report from a *referendario*, 05-01-1645.

down the corridor at her window”.⁴¹ According to the *referendario*, “the many opportunities” that this nunnery offered for contact with the outside world, caused it to be “very dangerous”.⁴² In this line of thought, the Augustinian nuns of San Tommaso would act upon their pious nature as long as they were not exposed to temptation.⁴³ The Magistrato operated first and foremost to remove the “threat” of male visitors.⁴⁴ The approach of the institution was thus one embedded in distrust, both towards the nuns who were expected to be easily tempted and towards the *monachini*, the men who visited them, who were expected to lead them into transgression.⁴⁵ The choice for reform through strategies of distrust most of all tells us something about priorities: the urban elites, for their own convenience, did not *want* to give up the system of forced professions because it provided a solution to the problem of surplus daughters. That is why, instead, they had recourse to strategies of distrust. In what follows we will see what these strategies looked like in practice by examining the work of the Magistrato.

An approach of distrust

Approaching the old city walls from the west, the eyes of a seventeenth-century traveller would be drawn to the Romanesque bell tower of the convent of San Tommaso, built in the thirteenth century on a rocky promontory called Capo d’arena, then situated outside the city walls (and incorporated only halfway through the fourteenth century). Towering above the Porta San Tommaso that was named after

⁴¹ “[...] che giudico fusse atteso dall’istessa Monaca che ho visto nel venir o sij nell’andare che fecci nel Corridone alla propria finestra”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report from a *referendario*, 05-01-1645.

⁴² “[...] il detto Monastero per le molte commodità che hanno, è molto pericoloso”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report from a *referendario*, 05-01-1645.

⁴³ “[...] molte uolte si fa che non si farebbe, se non hauessero da far con queste sanguisuce.” An anonymous nun who accused a priest of being too familiar with her fellow nuns, wrote that “many times [the sisters] do things that they would not do, if they were not faced with such bloodsuckers” ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Anonymous letter to the senate, 14-11-1636.

⁴⁴ As one nun wrote from Santa Brigida, “to remedy all the inconvenience of the blame and disturbance that people who visit the convent too often can bring [upon it]” (“[...] rimediare a tutti l’inconuenienti di biasmo e disturbo che possano apportar le persone le quali troppo frequentino i monasteri”). ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, no. 194. Letter from Santa Brigida, 30-03-1633.

the nunnery, its bells joyfully sounded on an August day in 1649, because a new inhabitant had taken the veil and had entered the convent walls for good. It was there that on that particular summer morning a *referendario* observed certain behaviour that he thought particularly noteworthy:

[Y]esterday I stayed the whole morning until around 16 o'clock [i.e. around 11 in the morning] at the Convent of San Tommaso where they veiled a nun. I observed the whereabouts of Signor Giorgio Spinola and Signor Francescheto Cattaneo, having them near to me. They were not only looking at one or two nuns who were in the choir above, but [also] talked badly, with licentious and sensual words [...] that scandalised me. They often turned around to laugh with them, [using] gestures too. Immediately after it was finished, whilst many ladies stayed to talk with the bride [i.e. the professed nun] and the nuns in church, both of them went to the parlour, where they remained half an hour, all of which gave rise to no little suspicion. Moreover, [...] when there were few people left, there was a young man, the son of Signor Benedetto Viale, who looked at three or four *figlie*⁴⁶ and nuns who were also upstairs. [...] [H]e laughed at them and gestured with a small scarf. He could be some family member or the lover of those *figlie*, [but] the place was not suitable for such behaviour.⁴⁷

The choir that is mentioned in this report was a typical structure, promoted progressively after the Council of Trent, where the sisters could attend mass while

⁴⁶ These 'daughters' were girls who, contrarily to the professed nuns, stayed temporarily in the convent for their education.

⁴⁷ "Essendomi trattenuto heri tutta la mattina sino à hore 16 in circa al Monastero di Santo Tomaso che velorno vna monaca, osseruai l'andamenti del Signor Giorgio Spinola e Signor Francescheto Cattaneo li quali hauendoli appresso, non solo stauano osseruando una ò due monache che erano nel loro choro di sopra, ma trasparlauano con parole licentiose, e censuali, [...] del che ne rimasi scandalisato, voltandosi spesso ridendo con esse con segnalli ancora, subito definito, mentre che molte signore si trattennero à ragionare con la sposa e monache in chesa, se n'andorno tutti dui al parlatorio, doue si trattennero una mezza hora cosa che insieme mi dettero non poco spetto. Di più vi era assai à buon hora che ui era poche persone un giouinetto figlio del Signor benedetto Viale del quale osseruaua tre, ò quatro tra figlie e monache che erano similmente di sopra e rideua con loro e con una banderetta che haueua in mano li segnaua, ponno forsi essere qualche loro parente, o innamorato di dette figlie, il luoco non era conueniente a far simili dimostrazioni." ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report from a *referendario*, 31-08-1649.

separated by iron screens from other attendants.⁴⁸ In this elevated space, apparently some of the nuns paid less attention to the ceremony than to the two gentlemen whom they hastened to see in the parlour once mass was finished. The parlours were the most important places of contact with the outside world for early modern nuns. There, visitors could talk with the sisters from behind the grille and mostly under supervision of an older nun. Visits to the parlours were usually restricted to close family, and monastic rules often limited these visits to a few times per year. Nobody entered the cloister except – in those cases where the rules permitted this – certain girls who received their education with the nuns (*educande* or *figlie*) or female lay servants who lived within its walls without professing. Enclosure was thus meant to help the sisters to focus on otherworldly affairs, prayer, and complete devotion to God. All nunneries had a confessor who would spiritually assist the sisters and was allowed some access to the convent, especially when death was approaching and a sister needed the last sacraments. However, since female convents were not at all self-sufficient, contact with the outside world was constantly needed and it impaired the impermeability of the walls. Some nuns also communicated with people outside the enclosure via letters and their female servants, or through open doors and windows, even though such communication was forbidden. The *referendario*'s main task was to spy on the visitors to the female convents and relate all the suspicious contacts that he noticed in their parlours and in the other places where the nuns could meet with the world beyond the cloister.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Many monastic churches had no space behind the presbytery where a separated choir could be built. In those churches, including the San Tommaso, the nuns' choir was built opposite the high altar above the entrance and could have different sizes and forms. Giorgio Rossini, 'L'architettura monastica femminile a Genova e in Liguria. Riflessioni per uno studio', in *Monasteri femminili a Genova tra XVI e XVIII secolo*, ed. Ezia Gavazza and Lauro Magnani (Genoa: DIRAS, 2011), 75–76.

⁴⁹ The *referendarios* registered *all* possibly scandalous contact that took place around the female convents, not only contact with nuns. One report mentioned how various noblemen, among whom Filippo and Carlo Maria Doria, were “yack[ing] with little reverence” in the church of the Santa Brigida convent: “when a young girl [...] passes by they will say some words, [...] and then they laugh and things like that.” ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report from the *referendario*, 30-10 until 28-12-1647. Others “court[ed] a certain widow” who on feast days used to go to the Churches of San Francesco e l'Annunciata. A certain Carlo Spinola was spotted in the same church of San Francesco, where he observed and made signs to a married lady, “seating himself at times near a

Spying on female convents

That distrust was the basis of the Magistrato delle Monache is evident from the fact that the paid office of *referendario* was the backbone of the institution. Every day he would pass by the different convents and check on their visitors. On a February day in 1644, for instance, the *referendario* reported on how he had passed by “all the convents and particularly San Tommaso, Santa Brigida, San Bartolomeo, San Nicholosio, Pavia, San Leonardo, and three or four times a day by the Convertite”.⁵⁰ While he wrote down when he did not see “anything of importance”, his main focus of course was on suspect situations. Interestingly, the seven convents that this *referendario* visited on his tour also produced the majority of all the problematic cases mentioned in the administration of the Magistrato.⁵¹ Apparently, there were some convents that attracted more visitors than others (or where the *referendario* noticed more because he checked more frequently: it is virtually impossible to find out exactly why some convents received much more attention than others).

Men behaving suspiciously caught his particular attention, for instance the “young lad who was still wet behind the ears and was watching the *monache convertite* where he passed by several times a day”.⁵² Suspect behaviour was not enough to take immediate disciplinary measures, although the mere act of visiting a convent would be recorded in the Magistrato’s administration (in case the visitor was male). If a man was not minding his own business while in the vicinity of a nunnery, he became a target for further investigation. A first step was that the *referendario* would find out if

column in order to make signs without being seen and at others on a bench near the one where that lady sits”. Like many others, Spinola was not particularly impressed by the warning that he received from the secretary of the Magistrato: it did not stop him from returning to the female convents in the future. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report from the *referendario*, 22-02-1646 “ponendosi esso alle volte à giacere appresso ad una Colonna per segnare e non essere veduto et al volta sopra banca vicina à quella doue giace detta Signora”.

⁵⁰ hauendo più volte andato a tutti li monasteri e particularm’te à Santo Tomaso, Santa Brigida, Santo Bartolomeo, Santo Nicheroso, Pauia, Santo Leonardo, e, tre ò quattro volte il giorno alle Conuertite [...]”. ASG, AS, Monialium, 1383, report of the *referendario*, 29-02-1644.

⁵¹ At least in the sample that I have examined: almost 90 percent of all official warnings issued in the period from 28-03-1635 to 11-11-1651 that explicitly mention a convent that was prohibited terrain for the warned person feature one of these seven convents. See page 207, figure 3.

⁵² “giouane di pirma barba vagheggiare le monache conuertite doue passaggia più volte il giorno”. ASG, AS, Monialium, 1383, report of the *referendario*, 29-02-1644.

a visitor actually was a danger to the nuns. When Father Giuseppe loitered at the closed door of Santa Brigida for about two hours before sunset, the *referendario* purposely passed by to check what the priest was doing there. He was alarmed when he heard the father utter “a not so decent word”.⁵³ Similarly, the “smiling face” of a nun “who stood in the open door” of the convent of San Nicolosio was a clear hint that Geronimo Savignone, who lived nearby and was watching her, should be observed more closely; even more so because when he “realised that he had been discovered, the said door was immediately closed and he withdrew to the parlour, where he stayed a while”.⁵⁴ The Magistrato judged that “the other *referendario* should get information” about Geronimo’s intentions. Important criteria for judging whether an illicit relationship was the motive behind a person’s visit to a nunnery were the time and duration of a visit and the frequency with which he passed by. All of this was recorded in long lists that were regularly discussed with the members of the Magistrato, the *deputati*.⁵⁵

It was these *deputati* who decided whether to give an official warning to those who visited the parlours of a convent too frequently, stayed too long, or in any other way behaved suspiciously. After such an admonition, if spotted again at the same convent, a next step could be to impose a fine on the person if he returned to that particular convent. The *deputati* could even decide to put the person in prison, or banish him from the city. It is unclear what criteria were followed in these latter cases. Carlo Cavagnaro, for example, was imprisoned in the summer of 1646 after having been admonished at least once, but the ‘Flemish’ merchant Tomaso Ollena seems to have been incarcerated immediately after he was found at the parlour of San

⁵³ “una parola poco bencomporta”. ASG, AS, Monialium, 1383, report of the *referendario*, 29-02-1644.

⁵⁴ “una monica [sic] mi parse con faccia ridente che era sopra la porta aperta [...] doppo d’essersi sudetto Geronimo auisto d’essersi scoperto subito fù serrato detta porta si retirò nel parlatorio doue si fermò per qualche tempo [...]”. ASG, AS, Monialium, 1383, report of the *referendario*, 22-02-1644.

⁵⁵ See e.g. ASG, AS, Monialium, 1382, Report from a *referendario*, 19-12-1633; and ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, an interrogation by the Magistrato delle Monache, 10-12-1652. For the frequency of the visits, see, for instance: ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Report by the *referendario*, 12-07-1638. For a report in which many of the same names recur frequently: ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Report by the *referendario*, 20-03-1634.

Nicolosio some months earlier (his being a foreigner may have influenced this decision).⁵⁶

In order to track the visitors to the female convents, a *referendario* would find out their names or some description of their features. It could very well happen that, unsure of the identity of a visitor, the *referendario* would describe a *monachino* simply as the “luxuriously dressed gentleman” who sought contact with a nun of the Negrona family at San Tommaso,⁵⁷ or the “young man with red skin” who was talking in the parlour of the Convertite.⁵⁸ He would add more detailed information after further investigation, for instance that the “young man surnamed Gavi [...] is called Giambattista [and is] tall and skinny”.⁵⁹ One *referendario* corrected himself when he noticed that a “young man from Bisagno, recorded more than once under the surname Rossi, [...] seems [instead] to be surnamed Emerigo”.⁶⁰

Some people had valid motives to visit a nunnery. A list was therefore drawn up of all those who had official permission from the archbishop to enter a particular convent: this could be doctors or carpenters, bakers or painters, basically anyone who provided a service needed within the enclosure of a convent.⁶¹ Legitimate

⁵⁶ ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report by the *referendario*, 22-08-1646; and ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report by the *referendario*, February [1646?]. Some who ended up in prison maintained that they were treated unjustly. This was the case with Nicolò Allegrete, who worked at the San Tommaso gate near the convent of San Tommaso, where he collected certain gabelle (taxes). An anonymous writer who came to his defence argued that “if he were to stay in prison he would certainly lose the responsibility [i.e. over these taxes and thus his income] which would ruin his family, who fear that this has been arranged by his rivals. And knowing that he is innocent of any crime whatever, he asks that they accept [si contentino] to release him on bail.” ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, petition on behalf of Nicolò Allegrete, 09-08-1630: “se stesse prigione al certo le sarebbe leuata la cura con rouina della sua casa, la quale non manca di temere, che da suoi emuli sia tenta e sapendo egli essere innocente di qualsisia delitto, supplica perciò [...] che si contentino farlo rilasciare con sigorta”. The difficulty of the Magistrato’s tasks becomes apparent in these procedures: not only were the monachini themselves not to be trusted, accusers could also have motives that made their accusations untrustworthy.

⁵⁷ ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Report by the *referendario*, 20-03-1634: “gentilhuomo vestito di lusso”.

⁵⁸ ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report by the *referendario*, 16-10-1646: “un giouine di perlo rosso”.

⁵⁹ ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report by the *referendario*, December 1646: “un giouane di cognome Gavi, dato in notta se pratica à san Tomaso, che di nome si chiama Gio’ Battista d’alta statura magretto di corpo”.

⁶⁰ ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report by the *referendario*, 04-03-1649: “quel giouine di bisagno dato in notta più d’una volta sotto il Cognome Rossi, e pare [...] sia Cognominato Emerigo”.

⁶¹ ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 31, 16-11-1645.

visitors, which besides these people included family members as well as women who were deemed less threatening, were often not reported by the *referendarios*.⁶²

Given the centrality of a person's background in assessing whether he had valid motives to visit a convent, the *referendarios* employed different techniques to gather all kinds of information about suspect visitors: whether someone was married or not, whether he had "a sister or [...] family member" in the convent, or whether he had friends who had behaved indecently in the past.⁶³ That is why, one day, a *referendario* casually asked a friend of his, a surgeon of the hospital near the convent of the Convertite, "under some pretext" about a young man whom he suspected of having a relationship with one of the sisters. This friend revealed that the person in question, a student of his, was indeed "rather enamoured" of one of the nuns. The surgeon, however, reassured him that he would marry shortly (and supposedly be less dangerous then?).

Chasing the *monachini* in order to identify them was a regular business too. During the winter of 1644, the *referendario* reported about the Convertite convent:

⁶² "And I will not write to VV.SS. Illustrissime also those who go more than once into the said convents and those of whom I learn that they have family members among those nuns I will not write them down". "Et io non gli daggo in notte a VVSS Ill^{me} insino quelli che gli ationo più d'una volta a detti monasteri et quelli che io vaddo a intendando che hanno parenti di dette monache io non gli daggo in notte." ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, report by the *referendario*, 13-06-1630. "Lunedì fui alle conuertite mà non ui uenne eccetto che certe pouere donne". ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Report by the *referendario*, 22-05-1634. If all visitors could be marked as 'untrustworthy', the system would not be all that complex. Some visits, however, were legitimate, or at least excusable, such as Paolo's who, after being warned, answered that "only around the vigil of Christmas has he been two or three times in the Church of S. Tommaso, [and] not at the grid, nor to talk with any nun. [...] [H]e did not think that it would be prohibited to go into the said church because he went only to see a friend of his and not any nun" and that "any trace [of misbehaviour] will disappear soon because he will leave Genoa in a few days". ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report by the *referendario*, 02-01-1645: "ha risposto che solo dalla viglia di natale in appresso per due o tre volte e stato nella chiesa di S. Tomaso non alle grati ne a parlar ad alcuna monaca e che non stimaua doueua esserle prohibito il poter andar in detta chiesa quando bene vi fosse andato forse per veder un suo ogetto e non gia monaca alcuna [...] che però cessera presto ogni ombra douendo fra pochi giorni partir da Genoa". Others tried to justify themselves when asked about their visit, as did a painter who said that he went there "to teach painting to sister Anna Vittoria Gentile". ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report by the *referendario*, 19-08-1648: "dice che va per mostrar dipingere a Suor Anna Vittoria Gentile".

⁶³ "qualche sorella o [...] parente; persona pratica di detto monastero". ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report of the *referendario*, s.d. [probably between February and April 1644].

when I went by that convent I saw from far away a priest talking on the *piazza* with one of the nuns [...] on a balcony. When he saw me, he immediately jumped down from the wall near the *ospedaletto* and I followed him hastily. [...] I couldn't figure out where he went but he will be warned for the future.⁶⁴

Priests may have been particularly suspect because they were trusted more than others and had more possibilities for gaining access to the convent.

Another occasion on which the *referendario* had to use ingenious tactics to find out the identity of a suspicious gentleman was at the mass in San Tommaso in December 1644. The *referendario* reported that,

Once the mass was finished, [the suspect] stayed quite a bit and [then] went out of the gate onto the street. He sent one of his servants to the parlour, and remained until [this servant] came back. I suspected what would later happen. [So] I walked away before him almost to the beginning of the corridor at the foot of the convent, where I stopped to look at the ships of the navy. The said gentleman appeared very soon [...] [and] he too stopped near me. A young nun with beautiful looks soon appeared in the nearest rooms of the convent. He made a sign of greeting to her with his head, though not lifting it entirely, and started smiling. After dwelling some time in that place, he left [...] [though] stopping once in a while for quite some time completely focussed on observing that nun, and this continued as long as he was in sight of the convent. I then skilfully asked someone who greeted him who he was, so that he could not suspect anything. He answered me that it was the son of Signor Benedetto Bassadonne. He was a tall man with a big eagle-like nose, so that all these things gave me no little suspicion.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ “Li 11 detto [mese] passando al detto monastero vidi da lontano un prete che parlava de piassa con una di dette monache [...] al barcone subito che mi vide se ne tirò giu dalla montata dell’hospitaletto lo seguitai fretolosamente ma non mi riuscì incertare il camino che haueua fatto però si starà auertito in l’auenire”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report of the *referendario*, 11-03-[1644].

⁶⁵ “Finito la messa si fermò alquanto ed e uscito fuori della porta della strada mandò uno suo seruitore al parlatorio, e si fermò sino che ritornasse, sospettai di quel che poi successe. Essendomi inuiato inansi di lui quasi all’imprincipio del corridore sotto il detto monastero onde mi fermai osseruando le nauì della marina comparse assai presto d’o gentilhuomo doue si fermò ancor lui

In his attempt to find out the identity of such a *monachino* it is clear that distrust thrived: informants could be acquainted with the visitors and lie about their friends' identity in order to protect them.

For this reason, the *referendarios* relied as much as possible on their own observations. That in doing so they could act as real “spies”, as Sister Cecilia from San Leonardo once called them,⁶⁶ is evident from a report of 16 June 1644 about San Tommaso, in which the *referendario* wrote:

Signor Nicolò Raggio appeared, whom I had already found there another time, [and] who has a pointy face [...]. I followed him diligently as he headed for the passage on the [city] walls and went halfway up the stairs [where] he turned and looked around. In order to deflect suspicion, I thought it safer to take the lower passage, but I halted for quite some time and I saw him standing still [...]. Then I moved to the place where I thought he had to come out, [...] and, in the end, he appeared [...]. I then followed him to the quayside where I recognised him, since all these clues gave me some suspicion.⁶⁷

The result of these investigations was that Nicolò was admonished by the secretary of the Magistrato not to go near San Tommaso again. In this manner, the *referendarios* who lingered around the nunneries, checking their churches, parlours, and windows,

quasi vicino a me e poco tardò a comparere vna monica giouine di bell'aspetto alle piu vicine camere del detto monastero alla quale li fece segno di saluto col Capello ancorche totalmente non lo leuasse e si pose a ridere, e doppo d'essersi fermato per alcuno spatio di tempo in detto luoco se ne ando per detto Corridore, doue de mano a mano si fermava al quanto tutto intento a osseruare detta Monica, e segui sino che fusse in vista di detto monastero. Domandai poi a una persona che lo salutò chi era con destrezza, accio non potesse sospettare di cos'alcuna, mi rispose che era il figlio del Signor Benedetto Bassadonne ma bell'huomore essendo di statura grande con vn naso grosso aquilino, che tutte queste cose mi recorno non poco sospetto.” ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report by the *referendario*, 27-12-1644.

⁶⁶ Letter from Sister Cecilia Serra (San Leonardo) to Giacomo Lomellini, 21-09-1633: “se uogliano chiarire la mettano le sue spie”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, no. 146.

⁶⁷ ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report by the *referendario*, 15-06-1644: “comparse il Signor Nicolo Raggio, già altra volta ritrouatoglielo che ha la vista appontata [...], bellamenti lo segui, e s'incaminò verso il passaggio delle muraglie, e desalito mezzo la scala si voltò e si vide attorno, doue per leuar il sospetto hebbe per accertato passarmene da basso ma mi fermai alquanto e lo uidi fermo sotto il d'o monastero mi tranferi poi nel luoco doue stimaua douesse sortire [...] e finalmente comparse [...], lo seguitai poi sino a banchi doue hebbi cognitione della persona, non hauendo mancato quelli indizi darmi qualche sopetto”.

together with the authorities of the Magistrato, formed a network that observed, identified and punished all the male (and sometime female) individuals who could endanger the cloistered nuns of seventeenth-century Genoa.

Tempters and temptations

In the Genoese quarter of Portoria near the Porta dell'Acquasola, a seventeenth-century traveller would find the convent of Santa Maria Maddalena.⁶⁸ Generally called the convent of Le Convertite, a place that was originally meant for “converted” girls (e.g. former prostitutes), it housed many women that upon entering had probably experienced a not entirely thorough conversion.⁶⁹ It was in this nunnery that Sister Angela Caterina made her profession, whose relationship with the nearby butcher Giambattista Ciechero was such that it attracted the attention of the authorities in 1639. A report about Giambattista read that “when he was admonished to abstain from going there, people say [that] he went to talk with her from the garden of the oratory of San Stefano” and had found “a window that [was] very convenient for watching and for [...] talking”.⁷⁰ Yet, according to rumours, Sister Angela was

⁶⁸ The convent was founded in 1523 at the initiative of Ettore Vernazza. Together with several other rich Genoese men, this notary was also the founder of the nearby *Ospedaletto*, a place where the chronically ill or incurable people would be sheltered. Generally known as Le Convertite, the convent of Santa Maria Maddalena had its origins in an institution founded in 1516. The place was intended for young girls who wanted to abandon an ‘immoral life’ without being bound to a specific rule or form of enclosure. Vernazza, however, had turned it into a ‘real’ convent subject to the Augustinian rule. In one source of 1545 almost all the names of the sisters are foreign which might indicate that it continued to be a gathering place of women with a troubled past. Carpaneto da Langasco, *Pammatoe*, 77–78. Fontana, ‘La vita religiosa’, 242. Gavazza and Magnani, *Monasteri femminili*, 121. Cf. also: Mark A. Lewis, ‘Recovering the Apostolic Way of Life: The New Clerks Regular of the Sixteenth Century’, in Comerford and Pabel, *Early Modern Catholicism*, 82.

⁶⁹ For a similar development in Lombardy, see: Francesca Terraccia, ‘Gruppi di donne tra casa e monastero nella Lombardia d’Antico Regime’, *Chiesa e Storia. Rivista dell’Associazione Italiana dei Professori di Storia della Chiesa* 6–7 (2017): 299–300. Cf. also Fontana, ‘La vita religiosa’, 247.

⁷⁰ ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, ‘Relazione del referendario’, 15-12-1639: “quando è stato amonito, che s’astenessi d’andarui (come si dice) andaua à parlargli dall’orto dell’oratorio di San Stefano” “una finestra, che non manca d’esser commoda per vedere, e poter parlare.” In an attempt to continue his conversations with Angela, Giambattista even went a step further: it seems that he had familiarity with the city guards – the report continues – so that [...] both during the day and during the night no guards have been seen around there, and it would be good if the guards be ordered to take turns for that place, at least during the night. (“Vi parlaua anche di notte, come si sentì una sera, che d’iui à pochi giorni fù carcerato, e per poter star più sicuro pare hauessi familiarità con sbirri, che perciò per quante diligenze si son fatte, e procurate di fare tanto di giorno, come di

not the only one among the Convertite who tried to maintain such close contacts with the outside world; many nuns “throw their names and messages by way of small letters from the terraces to this effect”.⁷¹ The report finished with the suggestion that this butcher should be punished or at least fined were he ever to return to the convent or to continue sending presents and letters to his friend inside. It is clear however that the problem would not have been solved with this measure alone. If the nuns at Le Convertite really threw notes with their names from the windows, it was in order to reach out to a world that should have been far from their thoughts. Instead, this was hardly the case for at least three of them who, just a few years later, fled the enclosed convent in an attempt to seek another life.

Contact at a distance could be as harmful as face-to-face meetings. For this reason, the eyes of the Magistrato also turned to suspect correspondences. Some nuns exchanged letters with people, at times even their lovers, outside the convent walls, others went so far as to exchange a wide variety of gifts. To this end they used servants like Giambattista Gavi about whom the rumors went that “under the pretext of serving [the convent of Santa Brigida] he brings messages back and forth”.⁷² Often, these intermediaries were targets for the Magistrato since they were possible sources of valuable information about otherwise hidden relationships.⁷³ An anonymous letter writer advised the members of the Magistrato in April 1648, that if they wanted to know more about the presumed contacts between a nun from the Lomellina family and the superior of the Coronata convent, father Viganego, they

notte in d'e parti, non si son mai veduti ministri di sorte alc'a, e sarebbe forsi à proposito, che fossi comandato alli barricelli, che douessero fare vicenda per detto luoco, almeno di notte [...]”) ASG, AS, Monialium, 1382, ‘Relazione del referendario’, 15-12-1639.

⁷¹ “gettando le monache à questo affetto giù dalle terrazze per mezzo di scritti gli loro nomi, et auisi [...]”). ASG, AS, Monialium, 1382, ‘Relazione del referendario’, 15-12-1639.

⁷² “che sotto questo nome di seruire [il monastero di S. Brigida] porti, e riporti ambasciate, etiandio per mezzo de biglietti”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report by the *referendario*, December 1646.

⁷³ See for instance, ASG, AS Monialium 1384, Petition to the senate accusing Friar Bartelomeo Archi, 28-08-1642: “Se uogliono maggiormente charire [sic] il fatto si puo far pigliare all'improuiso con li biglietti, o presenti in mano il portatore quale per l'ordinario suole traghettare uerso l'houra del mezzogiorno, e questo adesso è un certo giouine chiamato Giovanni Battista figlio di Marieta quale serue le monache di Santa Maria delle gratie d'anni 19 in circa alquanto nero, di faccia tonda con capellatura rissa, e nera, quale non è molto ritorno di una naue, et essendo astretto senza altro douerà dire, e palesar il tutto.”

should “call Gerolamo Capriato, son of Giovanni the servant of the said fathers, who is the one who carries the messages and gifts back and forth”. The anonymous writer added that “if the said things will not be remedied then slowly the said blessed nun will lose her devotion”.⁷⁴ Interestingly, the fear expressed here is that the contact with this Father Viganego would tempt the nun to evil, not the other way around.

At other times, gifts were exchanged directly in the parlours of the convents or through the grille in the church. On a February day in 1638, Giacinto Spinola and Gerolamo Doria were inside the church of Santa Brigida signaling to the nuns who were in the choir upstairs and “in as far as one could understand from the gestures, they wanted [the nuns] to send them some gifts [...], as happened”.⁷⁵ These presents could vary from some chicken that nuns sent to their loved one, to a more spectacular surprise that one priest apparently prepared for one of the sisters in Santa Brigida:

Father Francesco di Monglia who lives in the Carroggio dell’Oro, [...] this carnival had the musician Tagliavacca perform a *mattinata* for one of those nuns at midnight, [...] [and] I learned afterwards that this nun has sent a note to thank this priest.⁷⁶

Music was popular among some groups of Genoese nuns, even though or maybe precisely because its public use was to be strictly limited to feast days in the exterior churches of the Genoese convents.⁷⁷ On a February day in 1644, the *referendario* reported someone who “seemed to be a priest” and who watched the nuns making

⁷⁴ “faccino chiamar Gierolamo Capriata figlio di Gioanni manente di detti Padri che è quel che porta auanti, e indietro li biglietti e regali” “se à dette cose non uien prouisto à poco à poco si perderà la diuotione di questa benedetta madre.” ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, anonymous letter accusing Father Viganego, 28-04-1648.

⁷⁵ “per quanto da segni si potesse penetrare voleano che le mandassero qualche regalo al curlo, come poi seguì”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Report by the *referendario*, 08-03-1638.

⁷⁶ “ue ne sono due uno de quali si chiama P. Francesco di Monglia, che habita nel Carroggio del’oro, il quale questo carneuale fece fare una mattinata ad una di dette monache per il musico Tagliauacche ch’era mezza notte, [...], si è poi inteso che detta monaca per mezzo di biglietto hà mandato à ringratiar detto Prete”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Report by the *referendario*, 08-03-1638.

⁷⁷ ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 95, archiepiscopal decree of 07-01-1667. Cf. Colleen Baade, ‘Music and Misgiving: Attitudes Towards Nuns’ Music in Early Modern Spain’, in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View*, ed. Cordula van Wyhe, Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700 (Aldershot etc.: Ashgate, 2008), 81–95.

music at the open door of the San Nicoloso convent.⁷⁸ And during the summer of 1636, songs were reportedly heard all day long at the grates of Santa Brigida, and even at night musicians came “to sing in the street under the balconies of our convent”.⁷⁹ The upset nun who wrote this accusation claimed that “the songs they sing at the grates are no better than those that they sing outside. It is the worst that they know”.⁸⁰ Of course she again suggested the Magistrato to investigate the intermediaries if they did not trust her, because “they can hear the truth about everything from the musicians”.⁸¹ At San Leonardo, a convent filled with offspring of the most prestigious Genoese families (especially the Fieschi family), the nuns were courted with even more grandeur: “there were 27 musicians [...] and their maestro was Giovanni Stefano Scotto, but I could not get to know who had ordered [the concert]”.⁸² An event like this, that reminded the nuns directly of the blessings of the worldly life of the Genoese aristocracy, was, for obvious reasons, a temptation that the Magistrato tried to counter; as were the other contacts with a way of life that the nuns should have turned away from.

Internal disagreements

Disagreements *within* the female convents also repeatedly ended up being discussed at the Magistrato’s meetings. Convents were directed by an abbess, also called prioress in some orders (in others, prioress was the title of the second-in-command). The abbess or prioress was chosen by her own peers in the nunnery, often following a rather democratic procedure.⁸³ The basis of governance of a convent was therefore

⁷⁸ ASG, AS, Monialium, 1383, report of the *referendario*, 29-02-1644. “et à quel di Santo Nicheroso la loro porta era aperta che sonauano alcune monache [...] in vista di chi passaua con uno mi parse prete che era à canto alla stessa porta”.

⁷⁹ “alle notte uengono à candare in strada sotto le terrazze del nostro monastero”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, anonymous letter about Santa Brigida, received 28-06-1636.

⁸⁰ “le canzoni che cantano alle grati non sono meglio di quelle che cantano di fuori. E’ [il] peggio che sanno”. Ibid.

⁸¹ “dalli musici potranno intendere la verità di tutto”. Ibid.

⁸² “Ne fù fatta un’altra à San Leonardo dou’erano venti sette musici che ogn’un di loro hebbe un scuto d’argento et il loro m’ro fù Giovanni Steffano Scotto non si è però potuto sapere, chi l’habbi fatta fare”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Report by the *referendario*, 20-04-1638.

⁸³ The procedure of voting differed according to the various monastic rules. Becoming an abbess was the way by which nuns rose above a collective identity and acquired decisional power. See for

the trust of the majority nuns in one of their peers. However, there were often internal conflicts relating to this prestigious office. The position was usually reserved for nuns who had passed the age of forty: for a set period, the abbess would have authority over the other nuns.⁸⁴ Yet an abbess was not all-powerful. Depending on their genesis, the all-female institutions were also submitted to a range of secular and ecclesiastical authorities. Moreover, the abbess could be influenced or even subdued by the faction of nuns who had fostered her election, by her own family or by the family of other nuns.

How closely related the political elite were to the inhabitants of the female convents and thus involved with the decision-making within some of the most prestigious nunneries emerges from a letter that was written by an anonymous author and discussed in the senate on 22 January 1636:

To satisfy my conscience I think that I am obliged to let *Vostre Signorie Serenissime* know that in the convent of Sant'Andrea there is almost a revolution going on and this [happens] because of the election of the mother [superior] that is about to be held, since the mothers [i.e. the nuns] are divided; one half in one faction, and the other in another. Yet this would give little trouble were it to end here, but the ruin is that Signor Nicolò Salvago incites one of the two parts in order to please the faction where he has one of his sisters, who, together with the Balbi [nuns], wants to choose a mother superior so that they can do – in their own way and, so to say, freely – things that give much scandal to the convent as the Illustrissimo Signor Alessandro Spinola and some other senators are very well aware.⁸⁵

the specifics on the elections of abbesses: Kate Lowe, 'Elections of Abbesses and Notions of Identity in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Italy, with Special Reference to Venice', *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2001): 389–429. Kate Lowe also writes about the meaning of portraits for the individual identity of the sisters: interestingly, also in the convent of S. Brigida in Genoa the sisters had themselves portrayed, and apparently this drew the attention of the Magistrato delle Monache, as it was mentioned in a list of warnings.

⁸⁴ A papal decision of 1583 limited the period that an abbess could hold office to three years.

⁸⁵ The letter even adds "And in order that the nun who they prefer succeeds, [...] Salvago [...] has done things that *Vostre Signorie Serenissime* should in no way tolerate [...]. Moreover, the *Signori Serenissimi* should make sure that the secular ladies Balbi and Salvago [...] leave the said convent because soon such scandals will happen that plead revenge to God". ASG, AS, Monialium 1382,

Nicolò Salvago, future governor of Corsica and member of a prestigious Genoese family, had supposedly been trying to help his sister and the nuns of the Balbi family in advancing their cause to have a nun elected to lead the nunnery who would allow them to do as they pleased.⁸⁶ Whether this was the case or not, it is interesting that the writer appealed specifically to Senator Alessandro Spinola, the future doge (1654-1656) as well as other senators for a solution to these internal struggles: probably, they too had members of their respective *casate* in Sant'Andrea, a convent that housed the daughters of practically all the important Genoese families (including five daughters of the Spinola clan⁸⁷), and thus had a personal stake in this convent's

Anonymous letter to the senate about the discord in the Convent of Sant'Andrea regarding the election of the abbess, 22-01-1636: “Per sodisfare alla coscienza mi paio debitore di dar parte à VV.SS. Serenissime come nel monastero di Santo Andrea ui è quasi una riuoluzione e questo per l'elezione della madre che hanno da fare essendo le madri ripartite la metta in una facione, e l'altra in un'altra. Ma questo poco darebbe fastidio se si fermase qui ma la rouina è che il Signor Nicolo Saluago fomenta una delle parti e questo per dar gusto alla fazione doue tine [sic] una sua sorella la qualle con le Balbi uogliono fare una madre per potere à loro modo e per dire liberamente fare delle cose che dijno molto scandallo al monastero come resta a pieno informato l'Illustrissimo signor Alessandro Spinola, e qualche altro senatore e perche riesca la madre che uogliono il detto saluago ha braccato malamente il padre abbate, et altri padri e per dirla fato di quelle cose ch in modo alcuno VVSS non deuono tolerare, e se ordineranno che ne sij pigliato informatione troueranno delle cose che necessariamente bisognera che le prouedino di piu Signori Serenissimi faccino che le Balbi, e Saluaghe seculari piglino partito e che uadino fuori di detto monastero perche in breue si uedera di quelli scandalli che domanderanno vendeta [sic] à Dio.”

⁸⁶ For information about the Salvago family, see: G. C. Doria, “Salvago e Salvago Raggi”, in *Enciclopedia storico-nobiliare italiana*, a cura di V. Spreti, vol. 6 (Milano, Editore Enciclopedia Storico-Nobiliare Italiana, 1932; anastatica: Bologna, A. Forni, 1981), pp. 67-70. Consulted at: <http://uraniagustica.altervista.org/salvago/secondarie/doria.htm>, on: 09-05-2019.

⁸⁷ Though I have not sorted out from which family branches they came.

internal affairs.⁸⁸ In this sense, the world of the Genoese *palazzzi* was hardly separate from the life inside the enclosed convents.⁸⁹

The convent of San Nicolosio offers another example of sisters who appealed to the Magistrato when they saw no other way of countering the power of one nun or one faction within the nunnery that, according to them, threatened the spiritual and material well-being of the rest.⁹⁰ They protested in 1660 against the plans of *suor* Maria Caterina Lomellina who wanted to enlarge her own rooms in such a way as to block all the light from their windows, according to the protesters.⁹¹ Six years later, the “entirety of we other sisters” of San Nicolosio again wrote to the Magistrato to complain about some plans, this time of their mother superior, to unite a part of an adjacent villa that the nuns used for recreation to her own rooms. The other nuns wanted the Magistrato to “order that the said part of the villa [...] remain at [their] common use as has been the case until now”.⁹² It was only in these cases of internal struggles that those nuns who felt powerless resorted to the Magistrato. Five years

⁸⁸ ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, no. 141. A similar dynamic features in an anonymous accusation of 1635 which reported how the visits of Bernardo Sineclin Garces to the convent of San Tommaso caused great scandal “particularly to the closest family of the nuns who are often forced (when they go there) to leave [...] because the screens are occupied”. The accuser justified his or her delation by associating the honour of the convent with “the conservation of the *Serenissima Repubblica* and the public good”, but clearly family honour was also involved. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Anonymous petition to the Senate, against Bernardo Sineclin Garces, 12-01-1635: “Io desidero come suo humile seruo la conseruation di questa Ser^{ma} Republica et il publico bene e perciò li ne do Auiso”. “Che caggiona un scandalo straordinario e particolarmente nelli parenti più propinqui delle Monache, li quali ben spesso son forzati (quando vanno collà) à ritornarsene in dietro per non hauer tanto loco dà poter’ parlar alle loro parenti, per esser le gradi occupate.” See for another example: ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Anonymous accusation against Father Elia Giovo and Father Teresio Cassano, 06-08-1638.

⁸⁹ In fact, in his letter of 1581 to the Genoese, the apostolic visitor Monsignor Bossi encouraged the Genoese nobility to transform the convents according to the Borromean instructions with the same fervour as they used for their own *palazzzi*. Rossini, ‘L’architettura’, 75–76.

⁹⁰ Cf. Claire Walker, ‘Securing Souls or Telling Tales? The Politics of Cloistered Life in an English Convent’, in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View*, ed. Cordula van Wyhe, Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700 (Aldershot etc.: Ashgate, 2008), 227.

⁹¹ ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 66, letter from ‘the nuns of San Nicholoso’ to the Magistrato delle Monache, 16-04-1660.

⁹² “università di noi altre monache” “ordinare che non si possa detta parte di villa unirsi a dette stanze ma restare a beneficio commune come si è praticato siue adesso” ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 92, letter from ‘the nuns of San Nicholoso’ to the Magistrato delle Monache, 19-05-1666.

later, nuns from the same convent came with a very different complaint that was discussed at the Magistrato's meeting in the archiepiscopal palace: a laywoman who lived in San Nicolosio in order to serve the choir nuns, had invited two family members to join her. Her family apparently was "on the verge of killing people", if the nuns continued in their refusal to accept these two other laywomen, because one was an "ill woman of more than eighty years old, and the other [was] in poor health". The nuns therefore asked for a decree that would prohibit them to "receive family members and co-villagers of the laywomen who are within the enclosure".⁹³ The archbishop and Magistrato agreed to implement this rule for the subsequent ten years.

It was common practice for such a decree imposed on a nunnery from outside to serve to settle internal issues. In 1676, the vicar general intervened in a conflict within the Santa Brigida convent that had taken a peculiar turn: because of a "disagreement [...] over the organ of their church and the pipes of that same organ", some nuns had literally stolen several organ pipes.⁹⁴ The vicar ordered that, on pain of excommunication, all those who took one or more pipes, had to put them back in a room whose keys would remain with the abbess, "until the motive is known and until the *ordinarius* has given licence to the contrary".⁹⁵ Unfortunately we do not know if this measure helped temper the emotions. The decree does show, however, that instances in which the nuns called for arbitration from authorities outside their own community were a way to increase their own agency within the convent.

This happened at Le Convertite too, where Sister Felice Maddalena managed to take over control in such way that the mother superior "keeps her mouth shut and her eyes closed". Her adversaries complained that:

she has been the ruin of many things and many people [...]. Some months ago, she was imprisoned on the orders of the Magistrato

⁹³ "in procinto di fare dell'huomicidij" "essendoui una inferma d'ottanta e piu anni, et alter poco habili di sanità" "riceuere le parenti e paesane delle conuerse le quali sono dentro la clausura". ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, Letter from Cardinal Ginetti (on behalf of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars) to Cardinal Durazzo, 08-11-1652.

⁹⁴ "differenza [...] per l'organo della loro chiesa e delle canne dell'istesso organo". ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 116, decree by vicar Carolo Noceto of 01-09-1676.

⁹⁵ "sino alla raggion conosciuta e sinche dall'ordinario sia concessa licenza in contrario". Ibid.

and no longer has permission to go to the parlour and to vote, since, because of her, two youngsters wanted to kill each other. She has been able to do a lot notwithstanding the above, she has been going to the grille and has talked there without the permission of the mother superior, and she makes sure that within the whole convent nobody dares to speak up because [...] she mistreats all of them. She said that she wants to have Marietta who serves [at the convent] killed, because she does not do her will. And she wants to have her murdered in any way and talks about these things the whole day so that we, poor sisters, do not dare to speak up anymore.⁹⁶

Again, we do not know the reactions to this letter, but we might presume that whatever action was taken, it did not profoundly change the mind of Felice Maddalena: the fact that she was among the three nuns who tried to escape from the convent in 1643 hints at another aspect of the Magistrato: its focus on distrust – on avoiding scandal and temptation, on punishments against tempters or even against the nuns themselves – could never do more than postpone a new occurrence of those scandals that it aimed to counter.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ “è stata la rouina di tante cose e di tante persone uole ancora essere la rouina di qualcheduno. Mesi sono è stata carcerata e priuata che non si possa auanzare alle grati e da dare uoto di ordine del magistrato, che per caosa sua si uolsero amazzare due giouani, ella ha saputo tanto fare non ostante quanto sopra, è andata alle gratie e trattato senza licenza della madre passata e fa stare tutto il Monastero che niuno ardisce parlare perche [...] maltrata tutte. Hà detto di uoler far ammazzare Marietta quella chi serue perche non fa la sua uolontà, e la uole fare in ogni modo ammazzare, e tutto il giorno si laua la bocca di questo che noi altre pouere Monache [...] non ardiamo piu parlare”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 63, letter from the nuns of Le Convertite, s.d. [before 1643]. The nuns also wrote that, the day before, this *femme fatale* had called for Nicola Palodi, her lover who a few months before had been incarcerated for having pointed a pistol at one of his competitors. He was soon released “out of friendship”, and even when he was caught again, he found a way either to excuse himself for going to the nunnery even though he was banned from it, or to bribe the *bargello* (bailiff) “who, for money, told what the said Nicola Palodi wanted” instead of relating Palodi’s secret visits. (“che per denari ha detto quello che ha uoluto il detto Nicola Parodi”).

⁹⁷ ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, Inquiry around the flight of three sisters from Le Convertite, 26-02-1643.

Practices of distrust

Distrust was omnipresent in this system of anonymous accusations, suspect justifications, secret visits, internal struggles and spying *referendarios*. Checking on the veracity of the many anonymous accusations was a complicated affair that, according to an anonymous writer, allegedly from the convent of Santa Brigida, should be handled in secret as much as possible. In 1633, she revealed how Giovanni Giacomo Penza, the scribe of one of the superiors of the convent, visited the nuns of Santa Brigida remarkably often. Convinced that the Magistrato would not treat people differently “whomever they serve”, she urged them to check this information secretly because at times, according to her, when the Magistrato “want[s] to punish [...], or admonish as is appropriate, [the person in question] is warned by some youngster and prepares for an excuse, or disappears”.⁹⁸ In reaction to this letter the Magistrato merely ordered that the information should be verified and that checks should be made on whether Penza really frequented the convent. Some months later, this same nun wrote again saying that nothing had improved. She added another accusation: Penza would have “revealed everything that our very illustrious magistrate⁹⁹ [...] secretly talks about, so that all is known before it is discussed”. He did this, according to the letter writer, “in order to help the young [sister] with whom he talks”.¹⁰⁰ Distrust thrived in such a situation: the anonymous reports were mistrusted by the Magistrato, the accuser distrusted the efficiency of the Magistrato to punish wrongdoers, and at the same time she suspected that one of her fellow nuns knew important information regarding internal convent affairs, because her lover, the secretary of one of the superiors of the nunnery, leaked it to her. Whether or not the Magistrato trusted the report of a nun who was possibly jealous because of the advantageous position of one of her peers, they nonetheless gave Penza a warning not to go to Santa Brigida again.

⁹⁸ “uolendo loro Signori molto illustrissimi alcuna uolta castigare, ò ammonire secondo merita qualcheduno, ne uiene esso col mezzo di qualche giouine ad esser auisato e si prepara alla scusa, o li aparsa”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, no. 194. Letter from Santa Brigida, 30-03-1633.

⁹⁹ I presume these are the *protettori* of the convent, not the Magistrato delle Monache.

¹⁰⁰ “riuelaua tutto quello che alle uolte si tratta di secreto dal molto illustro Magistrato nostro, si che il tutto si sa prima che sij trattato, e ciò per far seruitio alla giouane con cui tratta”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, no. 126, anonymous letter from Santa Brigida, 11-06-1633.

As several examples have shown us thus far, anonymous letters were an important source of information for the Magistrato delle Monache. Yet as revealing as they might be, the possible untrustworthiness of the information was also apparent to the members of the Magistrato. They always tried to identify the author of a letter, as happened with the one received on 14 March 1636, and allegedly written by the abbess of Santa Marta. When asked about this issue by the secretary, she told him “she had not written any letter”.¹⁰¹ Even if the letter writer had probably committed identity fraud, the case was not immediately dismissed: the abbess was informed of the accusation that some brothers of Santa Caterina allegedly visited her convent “so that she pay attention that nothing happens that might provide an occasion for scandal”.¹⁰²

Even if letters came directly from the abbesses of the Genoese convents, this did not automatically imply that they were trusted. In December 1650, the abbess of San Nicolosio, Sister Angela Felice, defended one of the servants of the convent, a girl named Pellegrina who had been imprisoned and banned from the nunnery two years earlier even though, according to the abbess, she had never done “anything prejudicial to our house”.¹⁰³ The Magistrato, distrusting the abbess’ request to release Pellegrina from this ban and allow her to serve the convent, asked a certain Domenico dei Franchi (maybe one of its *protettori*?) what he thought about the request. His opinion on the matter, namely that it was better to “keep that woman far from the convent”, was deemed more trustworthy than that of the abbess of San Nicolosio.¹⁰⁴

A close look at the proceedings of the Magistrato suggests that trust was given typically to those closest to its own members, in the first place to the *referendarios*. Interestingly, those nuns who took up their pen to write to the Magistrato were often well aware of this dynamic. Let us take, for instance, an anonymous letter that arrived

¹⁰¹ “non hauer scritta lettera alcuna”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, Notes on the letter supposedly from Santa Marta, received on 06-03-1636.

¹⁰² “acciò auuertisca che non segue cosa che possa dar occasione di scandalo”. Ibid.

¹⁰³ “in minimo mancamento alla nostra Casa”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Letter from Angela Felice Terrile abbess of San Nicolosio [to the Magistrato delle Monache], 02-12-1650.

¹⁰⁴ “tener lontana detta donna dal monastero”. Ibid.

during the same month of December 1650 from the convent of Sant'Andrea. The letter writer asked that the Magistrato free the Sant'Andrea of “rumours caused by the all too frequent visits of two priests, who continue to come every day and unfailingly [also] every night, under the pretext of bringing children to [see] their family members, as you can learn yourself without giving faith to my words”.¹⁰⁵ As a body that worked within a climate of distrust, this was exactly what the *deputati* of the Magistrato did: they ordered that “one of the *referendarios*” verify the story so that they could take adequate measures.

The results of a strategy of distrust

“I was edified”, a *referendario* noted after attending a procession for the feast of Saint Thomas in February 1644, “by the nuns [of San Tomaso] because one no longer sees them at their windows”.¹⁰⁶ There is almost a sense of surprise in the *referendario*'s words. The same feeling transpires in a report written some months later. The threat of being caught apparently made some impression on one of the visitors of Le Convertite because the *referendario* wrote:

I have seen him several times [...] looking at the windows of the *monache convertite* where I passed by two or three times a day. Now I do not see him anymore so maybe he has been warned.¹⁰⁷

The fact that such positive results of the activities of the Magistrato delle Monache are very rare in the archives of their institution should be attributed partially to the nature of these archives, which was to record problems and not successes. We therefore know of many more instances in which the Magistrato's policy did not succeed, as for example in the case of Domenighina Garibalda. This woman had

¹⁰⁵ “mormoratione, cagionato dalla troppo frequenza di due preti, quali sotto pretest di condurre figlioli à sue parenti, continuano giornalmente a uenire, et infallibilmente ogni sera come senza dar fede a mie parole se ne possono far sauii”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, anonymous letter from a sister of Sant'Andrea, december 1650.

¹⁰⁶ ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report of the *referendario*, s.d. [probably between February and April 1644].

¹⁰⁷ “Il barberotto dell'hospitaletto che li giorni passati ho visto più volte sopra li canti osseruando le finestre delle Monache conuertite doue passo do tre volte il giorno adesso non più gli è lo vedo che sarà forsi stato auertito”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report from a *referendario*, 31-08-1649.

been sentenced to prison for secretly carrying messages from and to the convent of the Convertite. Apparently little impressed by these measures, she resumed her illegal activities after her release from prison so that in 1645 the Magistrato again proposed to the senate to put her behind bars.¹⁰⁸ A similar reaction to the Magistrato's policies can be seen one year later, in February 1646. While the *referendario* was making his round, he heard Stefano Salvago, who was on a piazza that looked out on a convent, brag about the fact that he was banned from that same convent. His boasting implies that he was not in the least afraid of the authorities.¹⁰⁹

Similar disregard for the authorities was visible among the *monachini* who had important friends who could safeguard them from punishment. That is, at least, what the nuns of Santa Brigida assumed to be the case in 1644: they secretly reported (asking the recipients not to reveal “that the news comes from here, [since] only hate will follow”¹¹⁰) on how some high ecclesiastic presumably continued to visit their nunnery even though they had complained about him to Cardinal Durazzo: the reason for the cardinal's inaction was, according to the nuns, the fact that this priest was “friends with the vicar”.¹¹¹ The cardinal was indeed responsible for the behaviour of the (secular) priests in his diocese and was commonly informed by the magistracy if one of his clergy transgressed. Durazzo also promised to handle Father Conrado, the chaplain of San Leonardo who, according to the *referendario*, talked excessively with the nuns.¹¹² That five years later, in 1648, the same father Conrado continued to be mentioned in the *referendario's* reports might indicate that the cardinal's measures made little impression on this priest.¹¹³ There seem to have been various priests who,

¹⁰⁸ ASG, AS, Monialium, 1383, report by the *referendario*, 23-08-1645.

¹⁰⁹ ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report by the *referendario*, February [1646?].

¹¹⁰ “non dica che l'auiso uengi di qui, ciò non segue disgusto”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, anonymous letter presumably from nuns of Santa Brigida, 23-02-1644.

¹¹¹ “amico del vichario” Ibid.

¹¹² ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report by the *referendario*, 17-08-1643. An earlier report mentions that the Magistrato had already given him a warning: ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, report by the *referendario*, 01-10-1638.

¹¹³ See the reports of February and March 1648 in ASG, AS, Monialium 1383. See also: ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report by the *referendario*, 22-08-1646.

like this Conrado, cared little about orders from above. One among them was Bartolomeo Muzzo who, according to an anonymous report,

disregarding those who can punish him, freely stays for such a long time in that place [i.e. San Tommaso] that he dares to say, or rather, he boasts about the fact that he is not afraid of his superiors because he gets along well with them.¹¹⁴

Punishing tempters therefore did not always have the desired outcome. Instead, some of the most troublesome men and women were reluctant to change their behaviour even under the pressure of the authorities' measures.

To avoid temptation, the Magistrato also came with more rigorous methods, namely to make physical changes to the convents and their environment. In 1646 the convent of Santa Chiara was popular among many “young noblemen” because, as the *referendario* reported, “the walls are low [and] the parlour is in a secluded place”. With this information, the secretary went to Archbishop Durazzo who promised to pay a visit to the convent and committed to resolve the issue.¹¹⁵ The *referendario* proposed something similar for San Tommaso, when a new passage was made along the seaside on the city walls with a good view of the convent. Even more rigorous changes were proposed by the Magistrato itself: the *deputati* asked the archbishop whether the windows of the convent of San Tommaso could be walled up altogether “so that they [the nuns] cannot look at the sea, where they can see things when young men go to swim there”. Shutting off the windows (a strategy of distrust) was deemed a more secure policy than hoping for the nuns not to use them illicitly.

It was distrust toward (suspect) convents that defined the proceedings of both the state and the Church, cooperating in the Magistrato. Their strategy was one of distrusting all interaction between the enclosure and the outside world, and of monitoring all unavoidable contact. The set of rules that archbishop Giambattista

¹¹⁴ “sprezando cui il può castigare, se ne sta tanto in esso luogo [San Tommaso] liberamente, che ardisce dire, anzi si vanta che non hà paura de suoi superiori essendo con essi loro d’acordo”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, no. 187, anonymous letter accusing Bartolomeo Muzzo, received on 31-08-1634.

¹¹⁵ “le muraglia sono basse, il parlatorio resta in luogo nascosto”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, Report by the *referendario*, December 1646.

Spinola imposed upon the convent of Le Convertite in 1673 testifies to this strategy: the rules included that “at the sounding of the Ave Maria the parlors, wheel and door of the *clausura* all be closed and none of them can be reopened until the next day except in case of great necessity”.¹¹⁶ The directions also involved prohibitions of talking with outsiders through the windows, entering the nunnery without permission from the archbishop, and talking at the gate of the convent. That such instructions were still needed more than one century after the Council of Trent and the foundation of the Magistrato delle Monache, hints at the weakness of this strategy.

Agency and trust

Before drawing simplistic conclusions, it is worthwhile exploring how contemporaries, including the nuns, viewed the strategies of distrust that were used, and their effects. In this way, we can further understand, as Renée Baernstein proposed, how to “steer a middle way” in considering the position of nuns in early modern Italy “between an overpowering structuralism and the romantic lure of free agency”.¹¹⁷

A report by one *referendario* of January 1645 points out what he, as an executor of the Magistrato’s policies, saw as the root of what went wrong in some female convents:

I have been to many convents in the last days and I was told, because I carefully informed myself, [that] the people [...] in their parlours were family of the nuns. It might be a more secure thing if they did not visit, and if they did not let them [the nuns] know about all the weddings [...] that take place in the city, because they

¹¹⁶ “al tocco dell’Aue Maria si serrino li Parlatorij, le Rote, e la Porta della Clausura, omminamente, e che nissuno di essi si riapra sino all’altro giorno se non in caso di somma necessità”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 111, rules for the convent of *Le Convertite*, 08-08-1673.

¹¹⁷ Baernstein, *A Convent Tale*, 20.

cannot but bring prejudice to their souls, especially to those who were not called by God, but brought there for secular reasons.¹¹⁸

Interestingly, this ‘man on the ground’, who was involved daily with problems surrounding the female convents, understood very well that the root of the issue was not first of all the mere possibility of contact with the outside world, but the fact that the women who entered often had not done so because of a calling, but for “secular reasons”. According to this *referendario*, what he saw as an inherent weakness of women (namely that they would be prone to gossiping), increased because some nuns had not chosen to enter out of their own free will. The approach in this case, however – and in this, I think, it is exemplary – was not to tackle the problem at its perceived roots (professed nuns, of course, were not allowed to return ‘to the world’), but to deal with those who led these untrustworthy women into temptation.

The same view – that it was the lack of freedom to choose which life to live that caused most trouble - can be found among the highest echelons of the Church, in a letter of the secretary of the Papal Congregation of Bishops and Regulars (that, among other issues, dealt with female convents). He wrote on one occasion in 1654 to the archbishop of Milan that approving a convent that principally served aristocratic parents who wanted to provide a comfortable life for their daughters would only give much trouble:

Experience proves that in those convents that are obliged to give the habit to a certain kind of people, where the decisions are in the hands of lay, [the sisters] are not able to live according to the observant rules. Those are prisons for women rather than convents for nuns.

He furthermore warned the archbishop that “a convent based on a less strict rule which [came] with family ties and factions of many nuns that come from the same

¹¹⁸ “Sono poi stato li giorni passati più volte à molti Monasteri e le persone che erano alli loro parlatorij mi fu rifferto che bellamente mi informai erano parenti delle monache, saria forse più accertato non le frequentassero, e non li facessero sapere tutti li spatij [?] sponsalitij si prendono e seguono nella Città che non li ponno apportare solo pregiuditio all’anime loro, emassime à quelle non sono state chiamate da Idio, ma portouele per raggion di stato”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, report by a *referendario*, 31-08-1649.

family, and in which – in order not to pay a dowry [for marriage] girls will be forced by their relative to enter against their own will” would only cause problems exactly because of this lack of freedom.¹¹⁹

The conviction that only freedom – and therefore the possibility of trust – would allow the sisters to live up to an ideal was also widespread among the cloistered nuns themselves. In 1576, the famous female reformer of the Carmelite order, Teresa d’Ávila, tellingly wrote to her closest collaborator, Jeronimo Gracian: “You will realise now how troublesome the regulations are... This is what my nuns are afraid of, that tiresome superiors will lay heavy and excessive burdens on them. That will lead us nowhere. It is strange that they think they have not made a visit properly if they do not add new regulations.”¹²⁰ In this letter Teresa took a clear stance against the policies of ecclesiastical authorities that tried to exert their power (and possibly change the situation inside a nunnery) by creating ever more rules. That same year Teresa wrote the document “On Making the Visitation” in which she again remarked:

[The visitor] should not make any decrees unless the matter is serious and, as I say, he has *inquired fully of the prioress herself and the other nuns* about the correction he wants to make, and about *why and how* it should be done. For the nuns could become so weighed

¹¹⁹ “prouandosi per esperienza, che i monasterij, che sono astretti à dar l’habito à certo genere di persone, et à nominatione de’ laici, non possono uiuere in osseruanza regolare, e sono più tosto serragli di donne, che conuenti di Religiose.” “un monastero di largo instituto, con le parentele, e fattioni di tante monache di una stessa casa, e che per non pagar’ dote saranno astrette dà loro Parenti ad entrarui contro loro uoglia.” Letter from Girolamo Farnese to Alfonso Litta, Rome 28-02-1654. Archivio Storico Diocesano Milanese (ASDM), Archivio Spirituale (AS), sezione XII Ordini religiosi e congregazioni. Casa di S. Maria dei Sette Dolori (monastero Carcano) Vol. 92/1, 1650-4, *Pro RR. Monialibus Ven Monasterii beatae Virginia Septem Dolorum Mediolani*, p. 65. Also cited in Fontana, *Memoria e Santità*, 122, footnote 174. Another member of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, Cardinal Giovanni Battista De Luca wrote in 1675 that “one needs a considerable degree of leniency, since we must feel pity for these women imprisoned for life and deprived of all the satisfactions which lay women of comparable rank enjoy.” Giovanni Battista De Luca, *Il vescovo pratico*. Cited in: Black, *Church, Religion and Society*, 153–54.

¹²⁰ Cited in: Alison Weber, ‘Spiritual Administration: Gender and Discernment in the Carmelite Reform’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000): 133.

down with decrees that, unable to observe them, they will also give up what is more important in the rule.¹²¹

What Teresa proposed here was an approach of trust rather than distrust from the outside authorities towards the consecrated women in her convents. Rules, if needed, were to be made following the agency and advice of the prioress and the nuns themselves, and should be restricted to a necessary minimum in order to leave space for these women to follow instead what was the core of the rules that Teresa herself had written.¹²² The difference in approach was not between rules and the absence of rules, but between trust and distrust.

Returning to Genoa, we see a similar attitude among the nuns of San Nicolosio in 1633. They rebelled against the father commissioner who came to announce that “all those nuns who have windows at the side of the villa [...] have to add iron bars” to these windows, because one of them, Sister Arcangela, had used hers for an “aim that God knows and we can also imagine”.¹²³ The other nuns argued

that they do not want to be treated all in the same way because it is reasonable that this remedy is applied only where it is needed, and that the others be left in their [good] reputation.¹²⁴

The nuns protested against this measure because it would make all of them appear untrustworthy, whereas, they argued, only one among them had deserved such an approach. Rules from the outside were equated with distrust and a flawed reputation. The sisters therefore resisted those measures that damaged their honour.

Interestingly, in order to protect a convent’s reputation and the people’s trust, other nuns would ask for rulings from the Magistrato in order to resolve issues within

¹²¹ My italics. Cit. in *ibid.*

¹²² Thomas Aquinas had already written that “if a superior makes a heap of precepts and lays them upon his subjects, so that they are unable to fulfil them, they are excused from sin. Wherefore superiors should refrain from making a multitude of precepts”. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 105, art 1, ad. 3.

¹²³ “tutte quelle monache che hanno finestre dalla parte della villa [...] le faccio le ferate”. “il suo fine Dio lo sa e noi ancor lo possiamo pensare”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1382, no. 138, letter from Angela Maria Vascalla, *vicaria* of San Nicolosio, to Antonio Sambuceto, 10-10-1633.

¹²⁴ “che non uogliono essere trattate tutte ad una maniera perche è ragione che sia solo reparato doue è il bisogno, e che sia lasciato l’altre nella sua reputatione”. *Ibid.*

their convent. In those cases, it was their lack of authority and trust within the convent that drove some to appeal to the Magistrato¹²⁵ For this reason, an anonymous sister turned to one of the secular superiors of her convent and was determined even to write to the senate if this superior were not to take action in order to “ban the scandals that are more than evidently there, and are even more noted by the eyes of secular people”.¹²⁶ According to this anonymous letter writer, only measures from above could remedy the problem of a visitor causing a scandal.

In the same year that three nuns escaped from the convent of the Convertite, the prioress of this nunnery, the *vicaria*, and “all the old nuns who have been mother [superior]”¹²⁷ and therefore enjoyed some authority, wrote to the Magistrato:

[We desire] a reform with respect to the customs of our convent and [...] we have been trying this and that way to pursue our intent, [but] we cannot accomplish it. Therefore, [...] we ask *Le Signorie Vostre* to intercede for us before his eminence so that finally we can come to the reform of the customs that we deeply desire and we are most ready to carry out what [our] superiors will command us.¹²⁸

The nuns of Le Convertite did not immediately approach the Magistrato delle Monache in order to obtain the reform that they desired (we do not know what it entailed). Only after their own possibilities of agency seemed insufficient (“we have been trying this and that way to pursue our intent, [but] we cannot accomplish it”), and after not succeeding in getting the desired response from the archbishop, they turned towards the Magistrato in order that its members might intervene on their behalf with the archbishop.

¹²⁵ ASG, AS, Monialium 1383, anonymous letter [presumably from a sister] to Domenico de' Franchi, 06-02-1648.

¹²⁶ “uietar li scandali che piu che chiari ui sono, e tanto più che dalli occhi di secolari uengono annotati”. Ibid.

¹²⁷ “tutte quelle monache uecchie chi sono state madre”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 20, Letter from Agata Isola (prioress) Bianca Maria Rosana (vicar) e.a. of the *Convertite* to the Magistrato delle Monache, 18-10-1643.

¹²⁸ “Emenda in quanto alli costume del nostro monastero e con tutto cio che andiamo cercando questa e quella strada per conseguire il nostro intento non lo potemo ariuare per cio [...] prighiamo le signorie uostre uoler fare con sua eminensa officio perche finalmente ueniamo a l'emenda de costume tanto da noi desiderata e ci offeriamo pronte a eseguire quanto da superiori si sara comandato riseruandosi non uoler uiuere in comune”. Ibid.

These two different attitudes towards more rules from outside imply that to understand how the nuns themselves looked at interference by means of regulation, one needs to consider the factor of trust. When rules or policies were an expression of limited trust, they were eschewed. Contrarily, when they fostered the trustworthy reputation of a convent (or countered a bad reputation) the nuns themselves, too, would see any kind of intervention from outside as desirable and necessary.

Trustworthy alternatives?

The respectability of the Genoese convent was a value that all parties in the seventeenth century advocated: the nuns themselves, who wanted their reputation to be spotless to their obvious advantage (including the economic benefit that new inhabitants would bring), the political and social elite whose daughters formed a majority among their inhabitants, and the ecclesiastical elite, especially those men who tried to implement Tridentine reform. All were more or less conscious of the fact that institutional distrust, in the form of rules and social control, was inefficient. That might be a reason why some completely new initiatives came up, started either by that same socio-political elite, or by Church exponents, or even by elite women themselves. Founding a new convent implied the possibility of founding a trustworthy convent.

The Genoese Giambattista di Nicolo Senarega († 1609) did exactly this. With an eye on the afterlife, this rich nobleman included in his testament the foundation of a new nunnery intended for the Discalced Carmelite nuns (the reformed order started by Teresa d'Ávila in the previous century and which had arrived in Genoa in 1590). He did not content himself with donating a large sum of money for this purpose; he also wanted to precisely outline what this convent should look like and what rules it should follow. If the Discalced Carmelite nuns would like to enter the convent, their Superior General should make this known within six months after Senarega's death. Otherwise, it was to "be given to the Capuchin nuns, or another convent of nuns who follow the reformed rule of St. Francis, live together, and do not have anything of their own. He added to his testament that "they should follow

the rule that is now followed by [...] the Turchine, in matters of property”.¹²⁹ Senarega interestingly referred to the Turchine, a new religious order that had been founded in Genoa shortly before, in 1604, as an example for the convent he intended to establish: apparently, this new group, which we will encounter in the next chapter, together with the newly arrived Discalced Carmelite nuns, were seen as more trustworthy than any of the older Genoese nunneries. Eventually, Franciscan nuns entered the convent that was built with this nobleman’s money (in 1632).

Senarega furthermore ruled that “in receiving those nuns, one [...] has to be attentive to their devotion” to their “passion of spirit”, their “willingness to serve God”, and their desire to enter the nunnery “rather than to extrinsic characteristics, such as nobility [and] wealth”. When there were more candidates the woman “should be preferred who moves with more warmth of spirit, and if in this they are the same, she whose family is less affluent”.¹³⁰ Apparently, Senarega was aware of the fact that a respectable nunnery would hardly come about if it remained an institution where one left one’s surplus daughters, and would instead be much more likely if it harboured girls who had passed a strict selection by *protettori* who used the free conviction of those who entered as the prime criterion.

At times, however, the priority was not to found a convent for nuns who freely chose a life of prayer, but to find a comfortable place for one’s daughters. In Milan, a large sum of money became available when Gian Pietro Carcano, and not much later also his son, passed away.¹³¹ Carcano’s testament read that part of the usufruct

¹²⁹ “si dia alle monache capucine, ouero à un altro monasterio di monache, che osseruino la regola di S. Francesco reformata che uiuano in commune, e non habbino cosa alcuna in particolare [...] e che osseruino circa la proprietà la regola, la quale hora osseruano [...] le Turchine”. ASG, AS, Monialium 1384, no. 55, entitled: documents concerning the Della Neve convent. The excerpt from his testament must have been written after the birth of the Turchine, 05-08-1604 and before 06-10-1609, when Senarega died.

¹³⁰ “in riceuer dette monache si habbia [...] riguardo alla deuotione quelle, che dourà esser riceuuta, e che con ardor di spirito e animo di seruire à Dio domandi, e desideri l’ingresso più presto che alle qualità estrinsece cioè di nobiltà, e ricchezza, e proprequi, e concorrendo più figlie sia preferita quella, che si muouerà con più caldezza di spirito, et in parita di questa qualità quella, li cui parenti hauerann omeno facoltà”. Ibid.

¹³¹ ASDM, AS, sezione XII ordini religiosi, Santa Maria dei Sette Dolori, Vol. 92/1 *Fatto nella Causa delle RR. MM. del Ven. Monastero di S. Maria de’Sette Dolori, dette delle Celesti, di Milano con Li Nobili Signori Elettori Carcani* (1756), f. 1r-2r.

of his capital was to be invested in the building of a new convent in which girls of the Carcano family were allowed to enter without dowry. As soon as the usufruct came into effect, Archbishop Monti thought of inviting the Turchine from the diocese of his friend, Cardinal Durazzo, to start this new nunnery. In Monti's eyes, their "odour of sanctity" and trustworthiness would bring honour to the city. The Carcano family opposed the archbishop's decision because a convent that followed the strict rules of the Turchine would be unattractive to many Carcano girls, and hence, according to the Carcano family, it would not serve its goal as outlined in the testament.¹³² The Turchine, in turn, defended their own interests. They refused to adjust their way of life – and thus their reputation of trustworthiness and sanctity –, and in this they were supported by Cardinal Durazzo.¹³³ Interestingly, both the family and the nuns wanted to ensure the trustworthiness of the future Milanese institution, but by opposite means. The Carcano family members saw in the "too rigid *clausura*" of the Turchine the risk that the convent would become "too dangerous with respect to sins, because of its extreme rigour".¹³⁴ The Turchine instead wanted to secure compliance to this very strict rule precisely in order to avoid this same 'danger'.

Despite opposition from the Carcano family, Durazzo and Monti would have proceeded with their plan of introducing the Turchine in the Milanese convent had

¹³² "It is clear that if the testator had had the intention that the order should be of rigorous observance, or of extreme rigour such as that of the Annunciata in Genoa, [...] then he would have expressed that clearly in his testament as a very essential and extraordinary thing. Yet since he did not make any mention of it, he tacitly made known that he wanted an ordinary institution [...], observant but moderate, and not one of extremes" "Chiara cosa è che se il Testatore hauesse hauuto intentione che l'ordine [...] fosse di rigorosa osseruanza, ò di estremo rigore come quello della Nuntiata di Genoua, [...] l'hauerebbe precissamente espresso nel testamento come cosa essentialissima, e straordinaria, ma non hauendone fatto alcuna menzione, hà dato tacitamente a cognoscere che uoleua si elegesse un'istituto ordinario, di osseruanza si ma moderata e non che desse nell'estremo" Undated letter from the Carcano testators, entitled: *C'a Regula', et ordine' etc dedicta per D.D. Carcanos*. ASDM, AS, sezione XII Ordini religiosi e congregazioni. Casa di S. Maria dei Sette Dolori (monastero Carcano) Vol. 92/2 *Carte varie circa la fondazione del Monsatero, abbozzj di Regolamenti, osservazioni varie*.

¹³³ ASDM, AS, sezione XII, Vol. 92/1, 84, no. 7.

¹³⁴ "troppo rigida clausura" "per l'estremo rigor troppo pericoloso di peccato" Undated letter from the Carcano testators, entitled: *C'a Regula', et ordine' etc dedicta per D.D. Carcanos*. ASDM, AS, sezione XI, Vol. 92/2 *Carte varie circa la fondazione del Monsatero, abbozzj di Regolamenti, osservazioni varie*.

it not been for the sudden death of Archbishop Monti.¹³⁵ The new archbishop, Alfonso Litta, appointed in 1652, was apparently more inclined to yield to the Carcano family and to mitigate the rule of the future nunnery, but he encountered the Genoese Turchine on his way: “We have always been eager and ready for the foundation and introduction of our institution in Milan – they wrote – but we are equally determined not to violate our constitutions [...] in any way.”¹³⁶ The Superior General of the Society of Jesus, at that time the Genoese Giovanni Paolo Oliva, became involved in the matter. He promoted the Turchine and tried to convince Litta to allow them into his diocese.¹³⁷ In reply, Litta explained that all his councillors had urged him to protect the independence of the Milanese archdiocese against interference from outside: “It will never happen that I, who am most observant of the Ambrosian prerogatives, will now want to reduce myself to a state of servitude, in receiving norms, rules, prescriptions, [...] because I acknowledge only one [superior], who is the venerated supreme pontiff.”¹³⁸

Rome did indeed weigh in. Two letters from the Congregation for the Bishops and Regulars display a striking realism in the effort to convince Litta of the fact that eventually nobody was helped by founding a nunnery that merely pleased the Carcano benefactors. Starting a convent with Turchine would be convenient “for those virgins of the Carcano family who will have a vocation to serve God [...], and it will not accept those who [...] will be constrained to become nuns”.¹³⁹ Again,

¹³⁵ ASDM, AS, sezione XII, Vol. 92/1 *Fatto nella Causa*, f. 3v.

¹³⁶ “noi siamo sempre state altrettanto desiderose, e pronte per la fondatione, et introduzione del nostro Instituto in Milano, quanto siamo risolutissime di non uoler in parte alcuna uiolare le nostre constitutioni”. Letter from the Genoese Turchine, 1654, ASDM, AS, sezione XII, Vol. 92/1, no. 64. See also, *ibid.* no. 79 and 80.

¹³⁷ ASDM, AS, sezione XII, Vol. 92/1, no. 52. Letter from Litta to Giovanni Paolo Oliva, 17-01-1654. Cited in: Fontana *Memoria e Santità*, 87.

¹³⁸ “non sarà mai uero, che io osseruantissimo delle prerogatiue Ambrosiane, [...] hora uoglia ridurmi in modo di suffragimento, nel riceuere norma, regole, dettami, [...] il che porta in conseguenza di douerne render conto à chi non è mio superiore, uno solo riconoscendone io, ch’è il uenerato Sommo Pontefice”. *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ “à quelle zitelle Carcari, che hauranno uocatione di seruire à Dio [...], così non ammetterà quelle, che [...] saranno astrette di farsi monache”. Letter from Girolamo Farnese to Alfonso Litta, Rome, 28-02-1654. ASDM, AS, sezione XII Vol. 92/1, p. 65. Also cited in Fontana, *Memoria e Santità*, 122, footnote 174.

freedom of choice was linked explicitly to a good and honourable convent life. Rome also promised the archbishop that if he ceded to this plan his honour would be restored: “[the secretary] will have the Sacred Congregation write you many very honourable letters, and to Cardinal Durazzo very resentful [...] letters, [...] and he will please you in everything provided that you accept the Turchine.”¹⁴⁰ The Roman curia thus tried to resolve the issue without aggravating the animosity between the two archdioceses. This diplomatic approach apparently sufficed to convince Litta to proceed with introducing the Turchine in the new convent.

Conclusion

There were two ways of approaching the problem of disorder in the female convents. Those in power could either trust – that is, expect that the religious women under their care were able and willing to do what was seen as desirable – or they could distrust, and try to regulate and thus focus on limiting the possibility that damage was done. For there to be trust, however, the trusted person must be free to do what is expected; a condition that was evidently lacking for many Genoese nuns who had been constrained to enter the convent in the first place.

The main reason behind this distrust was the unwillingness (mostly due to reasons of family strategy) to grant these women the freedom that would allow a trust approach. Interestingly, both the distrusting Magistrato delle Monache and the distrusted sisters were well aware of the ultimate futility of this approach. The former accepted such a strategy as the only means to mitigate the effects of a system that the elite was not ready to change, whereas the latter tried to explore the possibilities of regulating their own lives despite the limitations imposed on them. It was only when the nuns felt incapable of bringing about the change they desired for their convent that they asked outsiders to intervene with rulings and punishments. Thus, when it

¹⁴⁰ “farà scriuere dalla Sacra Congregazione à lei lettere molto honoreuoli, et al Cardinale Durazzo lettere molto risentite, e precettive [...], et in ogni cosa darà gusto à V.S. Illustrissima purchè si contenti delle Turchine”. ASDM, AS, sezione XII Vol. 92, no. 97. Letter on behalf of the secretary of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. Also cited in Fontana, *Memoria e Santità*, 88.

suiting them, both the authorities and the nuns relied on strategies of distrust – rules, punishments, spying – in order to bring about change or reform.

At the heart of the matter were the priorities of those who decided on the future of a convent. Either the freedom of the girls who entered was prioritised, as in Senarega's initiative, or family strategy was regarded as more important. In Carcano's case, it was because of pressure from a reform-minded bishop like Durazzo, together with insistence from Rome and from the Jesuits, that Carcano's inheritance was eventually used to finance the founding of a Turchine convent. In the next chapter we will see how, also in the case of religious initiatives started by women, the willingness to grant religious women the freedom to act on their ideals was the most important condition for trust.

Figure 2. Admonitions from 28-03-1635 until 11-11-1651

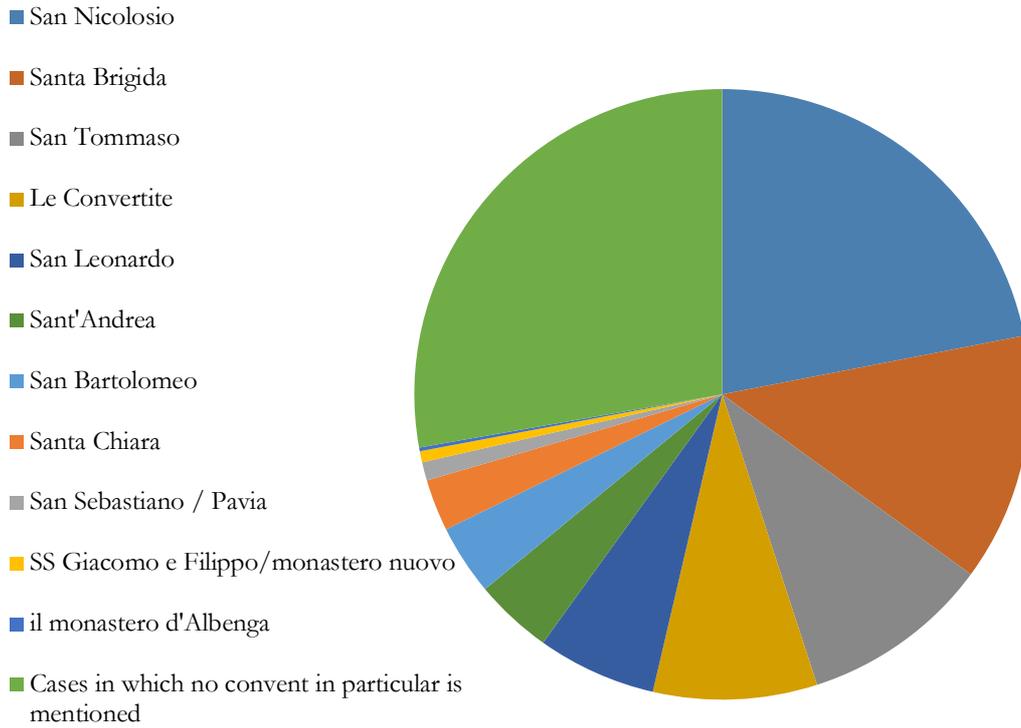


Figure 3. Admonitions from 28-03-1635 until 11-11-1651 that included restraining orders regarding a specific convent

