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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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Issue Date: 2020-03-31

5. To overcome distrust. Three religious initiatives by Genoese women

We have seen that many Church leaders, the nuns living in different Genoese convents, and even some of the secular authorities were aware of the fact that distrusting female religious and male visitors was not a very effective basis for changing the state of a convent. Therefore, rather than hoping for the reform of an existing convent, people sometimes tried to start a new one that would be worthy of their donations or even of their life. The example of Giambattista di Nicolo Senarega gave some insight into this dynamic. Not only men from the socio-political or ecclesiastical elite, but also women could start a new, trustworthy convent. The possibilities for women to take initiative in the religious realm are at the centre of this chapter.

Starting a new form of religious life called for considerable trust from those who could support the project or even dedicate their life to it. The persons who took the initiative, in our case religiously inclined women, were to be free to act upon their ideas: in order to give them the support they needed, people had to be convinced that they were able to carry out their plans and would be permitted to do so. We have seen, however, that women of the Genoese elite were typically granted very little freedom. Fixed views existed of what women, including women from the aristocracy, were allowed to do. At the same time, we know from the situation in Lombardy, for instance, that it was exactly these elite women who frequently took the initiative to start a new form of religious life, even outside the categories of marriage and the cloistered convent.¹ Apparently, there were instances where these women were given enough freedom to do so. This chapter looks at such cases of relative freedom to further explore the relation between freedom and trust.

¹ Querciolo Mazzonis, 'The Council of Trent and Women's Active Congregations in Italy', in François and Soen, *The Council of Trent*, 193–94.

It used to be a dominant paradigm in historiography that the only prospect for women in the Catholic parts of early modern Europe was either to marry or to enter a convent of cloistered nuns, and indeed this was frequently the case.² Historians held that the Council of Trent had successfully forced religious women devoted to active service to retreat behind the convent walls. Recent research, however, shows that local experiences of female religious life differed significantly from the normative ideals that one can find in ecclesiastical decrees. A substantial number of religious women continued to live outside the institutions of the convent and marriage, just as they had done in the centuries before, pursuing what Gabriella Zarri has called the “third status”. This included not only those who belonged to the third order of one of the religious orders (tertiaries), but also beguines, *beatas*, *bizzoche*, *pinzochere*, and others.³ The Tridentine Church shaped the lives of these third status women, but they also shaped the Church in their turn.⁴ In studies of female religiosity outside the convent, historians now make room for the negotiation and collaboration that was a part of the female religious experience.⁵ Querciolo Mazzonis, for instance, has studied the role of Church leaders in promoting or even initiating different forms of active religious life for women, incorporating these new groups in their own

² See for a good overview of the state of the art on this subject: Alison Weber, ‘Introduction’, in *Devout Laywomen*, 1–28.

³ Gabriella Zarri, ‘The Third Status’, in *Time, Space, and Women’s Lives in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Menchi, vol. 57, *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), 181–99. Weber, ‘Introduction’, 1–2, 16. For an overview of religious initiatives for women outside the convent see: Alessia Liroso, ‘Case sante e semireligiose in Italia tra XVI e XVIII secolo’, *Chiesa e Storia. Rivista dell’Associazione Italiana dei Professori di Storia della Chiesa* 6–7 (2017 2017): 57–75; Mazzonis, ‘The Council’, 191.

⁴ Querciolo Mazzonis, ‘The Company of St. Ursula in Counter-Reformation Italy’, in Weber, *Devout Laywomen*, 59. Cf. also: Susan E. Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2006), 141–42.

⁵ Interestingly, the same possibilities of reciprocity and exchange also existed *within* certain convents, particularly those belonging to reformed or new female orders. Historians have started to see the convent walls as permeable membranes and the convent as part of a wider spiritual economy: Alison Parks, ‘Locating Holiness’, 52. In fact, early modern women might have had more opportunities for personal development in the religious sphere than anywhere else. Cf. Marina Romanello, ‘La donna tra Cinque e Seicento: un ruolo in evoluzione tra Chiesa e società. Alla radice degli istituti femminili di vita apostolica’, in Paolucci, *Congregazioni laicali femminili*, 18.

reform project.⁶ The same goes for women who aspired to a life behind convent walls: Alison Weber has rightly characterised the dynamic between women with particular religious aspirations and the Church as the “interplay between institutional imperatives and individual agency”. Rather than being the “prototypical subject of church-state discipline”, some women negotiated their position in the religious sphere and thus created room for self-determination and accommodation of new forms of religious life.⁷

The early history of the Ursulines exemplifies how women in the age of the Catholic Reformation could shape and negotiate their own religiosity. In 1535, Angela Merici started a company of religious women, the Ursulines, who freely committed to an apostolic life without professing any religious vows. Though historians long thought that, after Trent, the Ursulines were subject to progressive claustration, Mazzonis has shown that most groups continued to live in the way that they themselves chose, preferring either a contemplative or an active life.⁸ When they met opposition to their preferences, it was often the secular elite and not the ecclesiastical authorities who opposed semi-religious alternatives for women: several post-Tridentine bishops actually saw the advantages of the apostolic *forma vitae* for the reform of their dioceses and society at large.⁹ Among those supportive bishops, many had participated in the Council. With the same vigour with which they acted upon the Council’s decrees and in the spirit of *Circa Pastoralibus* (Pius V’s bull that obliged tertiaries and other devout lay women to profess and accept enclosure¹⁰) they

⁶ Mazzonis, ‘The Council’, 191–92. For a good overview of forms of religious life outside the convent and who supported these groups see the table in: *ibid.*, 196–7.

⁷ Weber, ‘Introduction’, 16. Elsewhere she calls this new take on women’s possibilities: the “attenuated disciplinary model” (p. 3). Different contributions in the same book show examples of this dynamic: Mazzonis, ‘The Company of St. Ursula’, 59; Maria Laura Giordano, ‘Historicizing the Beatas. The Figures behind Reformation and Counter-Reformation Conflicts’, in Weber, *Devout Laywomen*, 91.

⁸ Mazzonis, ‘The Company’, 50.

⁹ Mazzonis, ‘Women’s Semi-Religious Life’, 6. Also it is clear from the description of the Florentine institutions founded by Eleonora Ramirez di Montalvo that an active religious life was seen as more acceptable for girls from a non-elite background than for elite women. Haraguchi, ‘Convent Alternatives’, 258.

¹⁰ This obligation did not apply to those semi-religious women who lived at home, or to small informal communities. Lirosi, ‘Case sante’, 57; Mazzonis, ‘The Council’, 198.

supported the Ursulines and similar new groups of women who lived a semi-religious life because they considered them allies for reform.¹¹ In fact, the position of the Church hierarchy on active life for female religious was not monolithic, but subject to internal debate.¹²

The French Daughters of Charity are another famous example of a new initiative for women who aspired to an active religious life and successfully managed to avoid clausura. This congregation was founded in the 1620s by Vincent De Paul and Louise De Marillac, both, in Susan Dinan's words, "moral exemplars of Catholic orthodoxy". According to Dinan, these two founders "conspired deliberately to deceive a host of local and Roman church authorities in order to establish an active, public, and religious role for women". They succeeded in their goal "by aggressively managing their self-representation in order to avoid being formally labeled as a religious order, and thus preserved their independence".¹³ Dinan's explanation for the success of the Daughters of Charity in escaping enclosure, in my opinion, presumes the hierarchy to be more naïve than it was. It does not take into account the diverse opinions on the subject of active religious women among high ecclesiastics.¹⁴ Moreover, De Paul and De Marillac were hardly original in carefully avoiding certain designations in order to avoid forced enclosure. Many similar groups of organised lay women shunned particular labels with the same purpose. They often did so with the help of their local bishops, who themselves were at times the initiators of such projects of semi-religious life and frequently wrote the rules they followed.¹⁵ We might, therefore, better understand the success of the Daughters of Charity and other similar groups if we consider how their founders were able to stretch the

¹¹ Mazzonis, 'The Company', 52. In theory, groups of active sisters ceased to exist, but practice was different. New female initiatives, both inside and outside the convent walls, survived or flourished when they fitted in with the interests of the local ecclesiastical authorities. See also: Liroi, 'Case sante', 58–59.

¹² Mazzonis, 'Women's Semi-Religious Life', 7; Mazzonis, 'The Company', 53.

¹³ Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*, 3. Cf. also: Susan E. Dinan, 'Overcoming Gender Limitations: The Daughters of Charity and Early Modern Catholicism', in Comerford and Pabel, *Early Modern Catholicism*, 103.

¹⁴ Mazzonis, 'The Council', 191, 198.

¹⁵ Liroi, 'Case sante', 72.

possibilities of the acceptable by *eliciting trust* in something new, rather than framing this as a deception. The societal convenience of the work they offered, which, as Dinan describes, “became indispensable to the French state”, and their ability to uphold a certain moral standard outside the convent, were aspects that inspired this trust.¹⁶

Many Church authorities saw the implementation of a stricter *clausura* on the one hand, and fostering the active life of, for example, the Ursulines on the other, as two separate and compatible matters.¹⁷ Moreover, as of 1616, female congregations with an active apostolate were again officially tolerated by Rome (and many had never ceased to exist). The obligations of enclosure and solemn vows were abolished. Yet the difficulties that contemplative and active groups had to face and to overcome by eliciting trust and support from different parties clearly differed. New initiatives that fell within the established category of the secluded convent were, as we will see, as much subject to distrust as those that did not. They had to find people who put their trust in the project, just as cloistered sisters had to: not by deceiving, but by showing that the new initiative was capable of honourably contributing to whatever common interest existed between possible patrons and the new group.

This chapter will show that a trust perspective can bring the analysis of women’s possibilities in the religious realm a step further. The process of negotiation that historians have recently underlined as vital for the success of new initiatives is better understood by making explicit the different steps in the process with which trust was won for something otherwise distrusted. In chronological order, the chapter will present the emergence of the Turchine (1604), a very successful new contemplative order that aspired to strict enclosure; the Medee, a small-scale active congregation of female religious who were involved in the teaching of girls (they

¹⁶ Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*, 3–4.

¹⁷ The Council of Trent and the bull *Circa Pastoralibus* had created two fixed vocational categories for women - that of marriage or *clausura* – but the leaders of the post-Tridentine Church did not necessarily constrain all devout women into these categories: instead many reforming bishops and new religious orders created possibilities for them outside the convent. Contemporaries did not even always perceive a sharp dichotomy between active and contemplative life. Cf. Querciolo Mazzonis, ‘Donne devote nell’Italia post-tridentina: il caso delle compagnie di sant’Orsola’, *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 68, no. 2 (2014): 383.

started in 1594, but were officially recognised in 1625); and the Brignoline, a group of mainly lower-class religious women who found their main occupation in caring for the urban poor and sick (1632). I chose these three cases because all three of them are unique initiatives that were founded by Genoese women. Forms of female religious life initiated around the same time by men or in association with an already existing order, like the Discalced Carmelites, are not considered here because they say less about how women were able to elicit trust for their religious choices.¹⁸ My analysis would have been greatly helped by the study of an unsuccessful attempt to start a new female group, but I did not encounter such a case in the sources (and maybe not surprisingly so, since even successful female institutions have left little early documentation). Since all three of the initiatives mentioned had to be built up from scratch, they shed light on the negotiation process that was needed for such initiatives to succeed.

The spirituality behind both the Turchine and the Medee developed during the last two decennia of the sixteenth century, in pace with the increasing importance in the city of the Jesuits who frequently were among the promoters of new forms of female religious life. Since Genoa was one of the few cities in Northern Italy which the Ursulines had not reached by the late sixteenth century, it may have been more open to the Medee, who had a similar focus on the education of women. The end of the sixteenth century was also the time when Genoa welcomed another important new religious order: the Discalced Carmelites (both the male and female branches), who were the great competitors of the Turchine. Just as it did for the Discalced Carmelites, the city formed a springboard for this new contemplative order towards a major expansion throughout Europe (but mostly in France). Genoa was also a city with a substantial financial elite who usually donated part of their profits to charity:

¹⁸ See for an overview of the religious initiatives outside the convent: Fontana, 'La vita religiosa'. I did not examine the *Conservatorio Interiano*, though this was initiated in the same period, namely in 1609: this initiative was taken by Paolo Batta Interiano. Male initiatives were also at the basis of the *Conservatorio dei Santi Bernadino e Alessio*, erected by the guild of haberdashery sellers and beltmakers in 1623. Among new foundations of cloistered life in seventeenth-century Genoa, that of the Turchine is the only one initiated by a woman that was not associated with an existing order. *Ibid.*, 215–17.

without the financial support from this elite, the *Brignoline* would not have been able to succeed. The foundation of the Brignoline was furthermore facilitated by the major political and economic crises that struck Genoa in the 1620s: the fact that all solidarity was welcome during these years created a favourable climate for semi-religious women who wanted to live a life of active charity.¹⁹

Following our definition of trust, the chapter will deal systematically with five questions regarding each of these religious institutions: first, who were the women who became the *object* of trust, that is, the founders of these female religious groups? As we will see, the widowhood and elevated social position of each female founder played an important role in the success of their initiatives. Secondly, was their vision for religious life considered suitable for women or did it instead require much trust because it went beyond societal standards? Thirdly, what allowed these women the *freedom* to act upon their vision? By looking at the context we can find out whether their initiatives answered a special need that helped to broaden the range of the acceptable. Thus, we can establish if what I will call the trust threshold was particularly high for a particular initiative. By trust threshold I mean the variable point in the relationship between the founders and those around them at which distrust could transform into trust. Fourthly, who were the people who put their trust in the founder and supported the new initiative? Were these ecclesiastical or secular parties?²⁰ Related to this fourth question, I will analyse what elicited the trust of people who gave their support to a new initiative. What were the instances that won them over? At the end of the chapter, the case of four women who tried to imitate the Medee in Savona further explains the relationship between freedom and trust.

The main sources that help to answer our questions are the seventeenth-century biographies of two of the female founders of these congregations.²¹ Though

¹⁹ See page 52.

²⁰ Historiography already tells us that support often came from lay, noble female benefactors and that new initiatives were frequently controlled by deputies from the nobility and individual churchmen. The question remains why these actors were necessary and why they sometimes cooperated and gave their trust. Cf. Terraccia, 'Case sante', 317.

²¹ Medea, the founder of the *Medee*, has no biography dedicated to her, but appears in the biographies of the founder of the *Turbine*.

obviously hagiographical in nature, these biographies do allow us to distinguish factors that helped elicit trust from different parties: they bring to light what worked and what did not *in the context* of the mentality of that time.²² Because the contemporary biographers wanted to show how exceptional the success of these women was, they also extensively describe the distrust that each of the founders had to overcome. Still, we have to be aware of the rhetoric that permeates these biographies. Just like the *vitae* of prospective saints that Anne Jacobson Schutte has studied, they all contain several standard elements: “precocious piety, first exhibited in earliest childhood; the subsequent life course; struggles with opponents, ill-disposed family members and others; final illness, death, funeral, and burial; manifold virtues and marvelous accomplishments in life; graces conferred from on high; postmortem prodigies”.²³ Rather than focusing on these standard elements, my analysis will concentrate on the practical difficulties that the three women faced and the concrete strategies that they adopted to circumvent these obstacles. It is not the motives of the three founders that are central to this chapter (since those are difficult to discern in hagiographical accounts), but the strategies they used to win trust for their respective initiatives. For this purpose, I supplement the biographical sources with the rules of the respective institutions, the documents of their official recognition and sources of administrative nature.

Recently, Paolo Fontana has done much research into female religiosity in Genoa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He provides a very useful overview of all the forms of religious life for women outside the convent walls: there were ten such forms of life initiated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Fontana has also gathered archival material from all over Europe that documents the early development of the Turchine and their remarkably quick diffusion.²⁴ During

²² Often writers of these biographies attentively enumerated their sources to convince readers of the credibility of their writings, as did those of the ones I have used. Anne Jacobson Schutte, “‘Ecco La Santa!’ Printed Italian Biographies of Devout Laywomen, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries’, in *Devout Laywomen*, 117.

²³ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁴ Fontana, ‘La vita religiosa’; Paolo Fontana, *Memoria e santità: agiografia e storia nell’ordine delle annunziate celesti tra Genova e l’Europa in antico regime* (Rome: Carocci, 2008).

the early 1990s, on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the presence of the Medee in Genoa, several historians studied the early years of the Medee, providing useful overviews and interpretations of the few documents with which we are left to better understand their early development.²⁵ The last case study in this chapter concerns the founder of the Brignoline, Virginia Centurione Bracelli. Bracelli has been subject to a relatively recent canonisation process (she was beatified in 1985 and canonised in 2003), the proceedings of which contain many of the primary sources that relate to her life and the congregation that she founded, whilst providing a first interpretation.²⁶ Building on the historiography, this chapter will go a step further and explore these three cases side by side: a comparative analysis allows us to use these Genoese cases to shed light on the ways in which certain female initiatives, within and outside the convent walls, succeeded in building trust where others failed.

The Turchine

It was in the year sixty-two of the last century, that in Genoa, metropolis of Liguria, a very bright light appeared [...] that sought to bury itself under the dark shadows of holy humility, and hide itself from the eyes of men, closed up between the walls of a most secluded convent; [being] nonetheless very bright to the world, she spread her rays almost all over Europe and with the splendours of an heroic holiness she brought esteem to the house from which she was born, the fatherland in which she lived, the religious order to which she gave birth.²⁷

²⁵ Ilaria Forno, 'Note sul primo insediamento genovese delle Medee', in Paolocci, *Congregazioni laicali femminili*, 211–18; Ivana Zacchello, 'Medea: alle fonti di un'esperienza', in Paolocci, *Congregazioni laicali femminili*, 163–202; Ivana Zacchello, 'Bernardino Zanoni e le fondazioni delle Medee e delle Annunziate a Genova', in Paolocci, *I Gesuiti*, 45–55; Mario Colpo, 'P. Bernardino Zanoni, maestro di perfezione per un nuovo gruppo di claustrali', in Paolocci, *Congregazioni laicali femminili*, 203–9.

²⁶ *Januen. beatificationis et canonizationis Servae Dei Verginae Centurione Bracelli, viduae fundatricis Instituti Sororum Dominae Nostrae a Refugio in Monte Calvario vulgo 'Brignoline' († 1651): positio super introductione causae et super virtutibus ex officio exarata*, 1971.

²⁷ Coreua l'anno del secolo passato sessantesimo secondo, quando in Genoua, Città Metropoli della Liguria, spuntò vna chiarissima luce, [...] che cercasse di seppellirsi sotto le oscure tenebre della santa vmltà, e si nascondesse a gli occhi degli huomini, chiusa fra le mura d'vn ritiratissimo Monistero; nulladimeno luminosissima al Mondo diffuse i suoi raggi, quasi per tutta Europa, e con

These words of effusive praise were written in 1681, a point in time when the Turchine had already experienced remarkable success and the order had spread throughout Europe. One biographer, Giovanni Salvaterra, used them to introduce the reader to Vittoria Maria De Fornari Strata (1562-1617), the founder of the Order of the Most Holy Annunciation (also called the Turchine, after the turquoise colour of their habit).²⁸ Strata consciously chose to establish a new order of contemplative life: she had experienced active life and had taught “Christian doctrine [...] for many years [...] although this task was very much against her nature and her inclination towards a secluded life”.²⁹ In contrast to the order’s later success, Strata’s initial ideas to start a new cloistered convent encountered substantial resistance and, as we will see, required a high level of trust from different parties.³⁰

gli splendori d’vn’eroica santità illustrò la Casa, onde nacque, la Patria, in cui visse, la Religione, cui diè l’essere.” Giovanni Salvaterra, *La fondazione dell’Ordine della Santissima Annunziata, detto delle Celesti, volgarmente delle Turchine. Parte Prima: della storia dell’ordine stesso* (Genoa: Stamperia Antonio Giorgio Franchelli, 1681), 1.

²⁸ What we know about Vittoria’s life stems from an intricate series of biographies of which I will only use some that were written in the first decades of the order. Vittoria herself wrote an autobiography at the request of her confessor, the Jesuit Bernardino Zanoni. For a comprehensive analysis of the autobiography and the different biographies, their interconnectedness, the (auto) censorship exhibited and other issues related to hagiography see: Paolo Fontana, ‘Introduzione alla Memoria autobiografica della beata Maria Vittoria’, in *Due volte madre. Beata Maria Vittoria de Fornari Strata, fondatrice dell’Ordine della SS.ma Annunziata*, ed. Angela Lupi, 2nd revised and expanded edition (Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni San Paolo, 2000), 193–206; and Fontana, *Memoria e santità*, 11–34. One of Vittoria’s fellow sisters, Maria Gertruda Centurione, wrote the first (unpublished) vita commissioned by Archbishop Domenico Marini, probably in view of a later attempt to have Vittoria canonised. Based on her story, Vittoria’s autobiography, and material from a first diocesan process that prepared for canonisation, the Jesuit Ferdinando Melzi composed a new biography that was printed in Italian and French. Maria Gertruda subsequently wrote a new and more extensive biography which she partially based on Melzi’s work. Another Jesuit, Fabio Ambrogio Spinola wrote another biography a few years later, as did his later confrère Giovanni Salvaterra, whose words we cited at the beginning of the section. Though all intended with their writing to promote her canonisation, she was beatified only in 1828 and canonisation never followed.

²⁹ “la dottrina cristiana [...] per molti anni [...] benché tal esercizio fosse per altro molto ripugnante alla natura e inclinazione sua che era di star ritirata” From the biography written by sister Gertrude Centurioni that can be found in *Sacra Rituum Congregatio beatificationis et canonizationis... Mariae Victoriae de Furnariis Strata*, f. 472-73. Cited in: Zacchello, ‘Medea’, 168–69.

³⁰ Cf. Weber, ‘Introduction’, 8. Weber exemplifies how, “although post-Tridentine legislation increased pressure for enclosure, at the local level there were significant counterpressures, even when women actively sought claustration.”

Trusting Vittoria Strata

Let us first look at the social background of the initiator of this project, Vittoria Strata. Born in 1562, she was the daughter of two members of the Genoese aristocracy, Gerolamo De Fornari and Barbara Veneroso. As the seventh of nine children, her parents arranged a favourable match with Angelo Strata when she was seventeen years old.³¹ Interestingly, as Paolo Fontana notes, her being married prior to founding a new order troubled some of her later hagiographers. In line with the early modern ideas on the characteristics of female holiness that Schutte outlines, in particular “early commitment to virginity and marriage to God”, they emphasised that from her earliest youth Vittoria aspired to a life devoted to God and she married against her will, out of pure filial obedience.³² One biographer wrote how the news of having to marry “at first made her very unhappy because of the inclination that she had for religious life”.³³ A Jesuit author even described how “she could not but feel repugnance towards [this marriage], both because of her inclination to the religious state [...] and because of the unlikely success of so tight a bond, which, if it unites the bodies but does not likewise unite the hearts with a reciprocal love, brings with it a very difficult life and a copious amount of constant bitterness”.³⁴ The Jesuit added, however, that, fortunately, a “tender love” arose among the two.³⁵ Interestingly, in the autobiography that Vittoria wrote at the request of her confessor, she did not mention any concern on hearing her parents’ decision, to the contrary: “when I was seventeen years old my father gave me in marriage to this gentleman

³¹ “degno per altro di sì buona consorte”: Salvaterra, *La fondazione*, 2.

³² See for his analysis of the different hagiographical interpretations of Vittoria’s earlier state of marriage: Fontana, *Memoria e santità*, 23–27. Citation from Schutte, “Ecco La Santa!”, 113.

³³ “luy fut au commencement fort fâcheuse à cause de l’inclination qu’elle auoit pour la Religion”: Ferdinando Melzi, *La vie admirable de la B. Mere Marie Victiore, fondatrice des religieuses de l’Annonciade de Gennes; et de la Seur Marie Magdelaine, sa premiere Compagne. Composé en Italien par le R. P. Ferdinand Meltio, de la Compagnie de Jesus, et traduit par un pere de la même Compagnie* (Lyon: Claude Larjot, 1631), 11.

³⁴ “non potè da principio non sentirne disgusto, sì per l’inclinatione allo stato Religioso, [...]; come per la dubiosa riuscita che porta seco vn legame sì stretto, il quale se mentre annoda i corpi non vnisce parimente i cuori con amore scambieuoale, porta seco vn viuere stentatissimo, & vna copiosa messe di continue amarezze.” Fabio Ambrosio Spinola, *Vita della Venerabile Serva di Dio Madre Maria Vittoria, fondatrice dell’Ordine dell’Annontziata* (Genoa: Giovanni Domenico Peri, 1649), 13.

³⁵ “tenero amore Spinola”, *Ibid.*, 14.

mentioned above, much to my delight and contentment, because he was [...] a most extraordinary man and [...] the love that I felt for him was greater than one can describe”.³⁶

By the time that she was expecting her ninth child (only five of her children survived) Vittoria’s husband died. Widowed in her mid-twenties (in 1587 or 1588³⁷), she entered into a kind of existential crisis of which she wrote: “never can one find again a woman as mad about a man as I was, because no follies exist that I did not do, and when my husband had passed away, it seemed to me that all that was good to me had died. I say this with great confusion and shame, but certainly I regret it much more than anyone can ever imagine”.³⁸ Her shame at the time of writing might have concerned particularly one of her “follies”: namely her desire to follow her husband to death while about to give birth to her son, wherefore “instead of taking care of myself, I was treating myself in the worst of ways”.³⁹ It was during this crisis that Vittoria started to harbour the wish to start a new convent. The situation to which life had brought her – being a wealthy, aristocratic widow, with much of her life ahead of her – left her in the freest position that early modern Genoese society could offer elite women: it was exactly these women who were allowed some agency beyond their own household.⁴⁰

³⁶ “quando fui di dieci sette anni mio padre me dette per moglie a questo Signor detto sopra con molto mio gusto, e contento, perché non era huomo ordinario ma molto straordinarissimo e quanto per me non mi desiderava moglie di qualsivoglia principalissimo Signore o Monarca del mondo et era tanto l’amore che le portava che non si può dir di più.” Vittoria Maria Strata, ‘Memoria Autobiografica’, edited by Paolo Fontana, in Lupi, *Due Volte Madre*, 207–8.

³⁷ Fontana, *Memoria e santità*, 12.

³⁸ “mai più si trovi donna tanto impazzita di huomo, come sono stata io, a segno tale che non fu pazzia, chi io non facessi, e morto mio marito mi pareva morto tutto il mio bene, con grandissima mia confusione e vergogna dico questo, ma mi dispiace assai molto più che ogn’uno si possa mai immaginar certo”. Strata, ‘Memoria Autobiografica’, 208–9. The different biographies also refer to this period of crisis, for instance: Melzi, *La vie*, 32–33.

³⁹ “in cambio d’avermi cura mi dava alla peggio.” Strata, ‘Memoria Autobiografica’, 209.

⁴⁰ Though often, like elsewhere, the women of the Genoese elite themselves constituted some kind of economic asset for their families, in some favourable cases they were able to get involved in economic activity and were considered equal to their male peers. Savelli, ‘Genova nell’età di Van Dyck’, 20–21. Some contemporary writers suggest that Genoa was a city in which women operated with relative freedom. The apostolic visitor Bossi wrote to the government in 1582 that “sarebbe molto espediente [...] moderare la troppo large libertà delle donne.” Cited in: *Ibid.*, 19. Others indicated that in Genoa women were wandering around freely, often alone. See also: Arie

An initiative that required trust

From her new social position, Strata began considering a vocation as founder of a new order of cloistered women. In principle, founding a new cloistered convent was a legitimate possibility for women, but that did not remove the need to convince people that precisely you were the right person to do so. The two most important incentives for and legitimisations of her initiative – according to both Strata and her biographers – were divine inspiration and the instructions of her Jesuit confessor Bernardino Zanoni. According to Vittoria, one day, praying in front of an image of Mary, “more full of passion than of devotion, [...] I told her that it seemed to me that God greatly wronged me by not taking me together with my husband”.⁴¹ She then commended her children to the Virgin as her servants, to which, she wrote, it seemed as if Mary responded: “do not doubt anything because I will not only take these children, but also you yourself”.⁴² Although, according to the hagiography, the Virgin *appeared* to Vittoria, interestingly, she herself wrote that she only *heard* a voice confirming her vocation: “it seemed to me that the Most Holy Virgin said that in time she would have conceded the favour”.⁴³

The second factor – which could, as it were, reassure possible patrons that Strata was the right person to act upon her wish – was the support of Zanoni. This Jesuit, confessor of many aristocratic ladies in Genoa, was brought to Vittoria’s attention by two acquaintances of her mother in the latter’s attempt to mitigate her daughter’s crisis:

in their prudence these two women [...] sent me to confession with the most reverend Jesuit Father Bernardino, and with divine help and the help of this father I began to recognise my error, [...]

Theodorus van Deursen, *Mensen van klein vermogen: het kopergeld van de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 1991), 104–5.

⁴¹ “più piena di passione che di devozione, et ivi lamentandomi gli diceva che mi pareva che Dio mi avesse fatto torto grandissimo a non pigliarmi con mio marito”. Strata, ‘Memoria Autobiografica’, 210.

⁴² “non dubitare di cosa alcuna perché non solo mi piglio questi figlioli, ma te stessa, io ci haverò sempre pensiero di tutta questa casa”. Ibid.

⁴³ “mi parve che la Santissima Vergine dicesse che con il tempo sarebbe fatta la gratia” Ibid., 212. For an example of hagiography that describes how Mary *appeared* to Vittoria see, for instance: Salvaterra, *La fondazione*, 5.

I made a general confession, and I applied myself to mental prayer, during which, by the grace of the Lord I had some inspiration and [...] learned of the great duty that I had.⁴⁴

That her initiative, according to her biographers and Strata herself, was sanctioned both by divine authority and the support of this Jesuit, already highlights the fact that her ideas fell within acceptable categories: the trust that she elicited was substantiated in the conviction that women in general, and Strata in particular, were indeed well able to live this type of cloistered life. Her bond with the Society, which often promoted new initiatives of female religiosity, gave the necessary legitimacy to the core of her endeavours (though interestingly, not to some more “radical” aspects of her religiosity).⁴⁵ Why was it then, that only in 1604, more than a decade into her widowhood, she was able to put her plans into action?

Lowering the trust threshold

Both Strata’s social position as a widow appertaining to the Genoese nobility, and what she envisioned, namely a convent of strict clausura, had the potential to elicit trust. In 1602, when in her late thirties, she had obtained a position of personal freedom: all her children but one had entered different religious orders (her last son, Angelo, who was still a teenager, professed in the Order of the Minimi in 1603). However, it can be said that the threshold for trust and support was particularly high for the type of project that Strata had in mind. First, founding a convent of contemplative life required one to act publicly and in complete transparency so as to

⁴⁴ “Queste due donne [...] con la sua prudenza mi tirorno a confessarmi dal molto reverendo padre Bernardino gesuita, et io col divino aiuto e di questo padre cominciai a consocere il mio errore, [...] feci una confessione generale e mi detti all’oratione mentale, dove per gratia del Signore hebbi qualche lume, e [...] conobbi il grandissimo obbligo che havevo”. Strata, ‘Memoria Autobiografica’, 211.

⁴⁵ In fact, the Jesuit hagiographers of Vittoria were very proud of the Jesuit contribution to her initiative. Melzi, for instance, writes in his “epistre de l’auteur”: “[...] il n’et [sic] nul dans cette Ville qui ne sache, que dès [sic] qu’elle commença de s’addonner du tout à la deuotion, elle a touiours été fille de nôtre Compagnie, dont les addresses & les instructions n’ont pas serui de peu, tant pour la faire marcher seurement, & à grand pas dans le sentier de la perfection, que pour fonder ce nouuel Ordre, & Religion, pour luy coucher ses Regles & Constitutions, & pour luy laisser tant d’autres aides spirituelles”. Melzi, *La vie*.

avoid any suspicion of indecency. Starting to simply live together in a cloister with a few zealous women could be seen as dishonourable. Before Strata could realise her religious ideals, she therefore had to arrange a suitable place for the secluded convent as well as formal recognition that expressed trust in the commitment of her companions and herself to *clausura* and other rules they wanted to follow. Moreover, Strata had to attract suitable companions in a city already crowded with female convents, including the popular Discalced Carmelites.⁴⁶ A third difficulty was to establish a solid financial basis for her convent. Rome refused Strata the licence to live from alms, and the Jesuits who supported her ideas presumed that the city government, too, would object to a new convent: “seeing their city already full of other pious places that lean exclusively on the charity of the municipality, they would not want to charge themselves with this new and unnecessary burden”.⁴⁷ Finally, Archbishop Orazio Spinola, as well, did not immediately support Strata’s project when she petitioned him in 1602. He thought she might use her money in a more effective way.⁴⁸

That these circumstances and the particular necessities of an enclosed community indeed raised the threshold for trust is suggested by Salvaterra’s description of public opinion about the initiative:

The world [...] that disapproved of this new establishment – considering it a construction without foundation – at that time spoke evil of it [...]: that it was madness to approve it, and even more so to invest one’s wealth in dowries for girls in this place where a few ladies who were inexperienced in the religious life

⁴⁶ Giulio Sommariva, ‘Monasteri carmelitani femminili a Genova’, in Gioradno and Paolucci, *Nicolò Doria*, 397.

⁴⁷ “vedendo la lor Città già carica in eccesso di tant’altri Luoghi Pij, appoggiati sulla sola carità del Comune, non harebbono voluto porsi questo nuouo, e non necessario peso”. Salvaterra, *La fondazione*, 76.

⁴⁸ The archbishop later (we do not know when exactly) changed his mind and, according to Salvaterra, allowed her “to start right away with the preparation [...], on the condition, however, that she would not proceed with anything of importance without letting him know”: the trust that the archbishop offered was clearly conditional. (“di cominciar fin d’allora a disporne i mezzi opportuni, con patto però che non scendesse ad effettuar cosa alcuna di momento senza sua saputa”). *Ibid.*, 42.

[...], went to shut themselves in, with their own whim as their only Rule.⁴⁹

Salvaterra may have exaggerated the public resistance to further exalt Vittoria's eventual success, but much trust was indeed needed for people to be willing to risk time and money on a new initiative that was to distinguish itself by something that it had yet to prove: namely, the initiators' dedication to strict enclosure and their envisioned spiritual uniqueness. Also, joining such a new convent called for considerable trust. According to Salvaterra, the Genoese skeptically asked themselves: "Where can one find such ill-advised girls, who would buy themselves into this new [convent] with a substantial dowry, and ignore the many other flourishing convents in Genoa that are venerable for their long existence, have approved habits, [and] are consecrated by saints."⁵⁰

One way for Strata to gain trust was to cooperate with other women who were inclined to a religious life. In this way, at least she would have companions who could join her in her new convent. In 1594, several ladies from the Genoese elite had formed a group (later called the Medee), who lived together as an informal religious community under the guidance of Strata's confessor, Bernardino Zanoni. Strata approached these women with the idea of involving them in her initiative, but met with resistance:

Vittoria began to think that it might be good to join them [...] and with that aim she went to pay them a visit, communicating her plan to them, and telling them [...] that she did so in order to see if God would condescend to make it easier for her to start a

⁴⁹ "Il Mondo [...] disapprouando questa nuoua fondatione, come fabbrica senza fondamento, allora diceuane tutto il male [...]: Esser pazzia, approuare, molto meno applicare i suoi haueri in Dote alle Figlie in questo luogo, in cui poche Donne inesperte di Religione, malagiate di Casa, colla sola Regola del lor capriccio, andauano a chiudersi" Ibid., 184-5. Salvaterra refers as follows to the public opinion regarding the idea of a new convent: "In tanto diuolgatasi per la Città la fama di ciò, che macchinauano le cinque Fondatrici, come di cosa già prossima ad eseguirsi, discorrendosene da ognuno a suo talento, e con più ardire da chi meno n'era informato, i più o tassandole, o mettendole in burla, ne diceuano ciò, che di peggio lo veniua alla bocca." Ibid., 74.

⁵⁰ "E doue sarebbono poi Figlie sì sconsigliate, che lasciati tant'altri Monisteri fioritissimi in Genoua, venerabili per l'antichità, approuati di costumi, imbalsimati da Sante, andassero a comprarsi a costo d'una buona dote in questo Nuouo [...]" Salvaterra, *La fondazione*, 74-5.

convent in which she would live together with them in *regulare disciplina*. But those virgins [...] did not want to accept the proposal, being content to stay alone as they were, [...] having already embraced their own way of living that was very different from the practice in this convent.⁵¹

For these religious ladies, to accept a proposal of religious life that was radically different from the active life that they had chosen for themselves was out of the question. Strata had to seek the support she needed elsewhere.

Who gave trust?

In the end, the most decisive factor was the trust of an extremely affluent Genoese couple, Vincentina and Stefano Centurione, who both desired to enter religious life. The couple chose to support Strata's initiative only when they saw that other roads towards their goal were blocked: they too would rather have trusted themselves to a religious order that already existed and had proven its merits, but they were unable to do so. Vincentina preferred the Discalced Carmelites, the religious order that had been reformed by Teresa d'Ávila some decades earlier and whose female branch had reached Genoa in 1590. Yet the order's reputation of reliability and piety had a downside: it was so popular and prestigious that its female convent in Genoa was completely full. With two small children to care for who were not allowed to join her in the Carmelite convent, Vincentina had to find another solution. It was Bernardino Zaroni who, as her confessor, pushed her in the direction of Vittoria.⁵² Strata herself

⁵¹ “Cominciò a pensar Vittoria se sarebbe forsi stato bene unirsi con quelle e vivere con esse [...] e andò per tal fine a trovarle comunicandogli il suo pensiero, e dicendogli [...] che faceva questo per vedere se fra tanto si compiaceva Dio di dargli maggior commodità di fare un monastero in cui potesse unitamente vivere con loro in regolare disciplina. Ma quelle Vergini [...] non vollero accettare il partito contentandosi di stare così sole come stavano, [...] per esser già assunte quelle Vergini al loro modo di vivere differente assai da quello che s'haveva da praticare in questo monasterio non così facilmente si sarebbero indotte a quella osservanza di comunità che bisognava [...]” Ferdinando Melzi, *vita di M. Vittoria De Fornari Strata*, in *Sacra Rituum Congregatio Januensis Beatificationis et Canonizationis venerabilis Servae Dei Mariae Victoriae de Furnari, fundatricis monialium coelestium* (Genoa, Archivio Monache Annunziate, I, ff. 29- 30) Cited in: Zacchello, ‘Medea’, 189.

⁵² Fontana, *Memoria e santità*, 13.

recounts in her autobiography how, in 1603, when she managed to find a suitable house

having made this purchase, it seemed to me that I had settled everything, but I lacked someone to help me. And by divine disposition it happened that the reverend Discalced nuns no longer wanted to receive Signora Vincentina Centurione, who had come from Naples to Genoa with two daughters to become a Discalced sister. When I heard [this], I immediately went to pay her a visit, telling her that it had been God's will that she came to Genoa in order to help me to realise this work (pretending not to know that she came to Genoa for another purpose).⁵³

When both Vincentina and Stefano agreed to her proposal, Vittoria did not waste time: "I got things going and, since lady Vincentina was much in a hurry, I rented a house [...] and had it arranged for *clausura* where we lived for four years, until our convent was ready, and we entered that [first] house on the third of June, 1604 [...]. We received the nun's habit on the fifth of August, 1604. Five of us took the habit."⁵⁴ The permission to found this new convent was obtained by Vincentina's husband, Stefano, who, on his way from Naples to Genoa, had been able to convince Pope Clement VIII to give his temporary consent that was confirmed by Pope Paul V in 1613. Once in Genoa, this same Stefano also supervised the building of a new convent that the sisters occupied in 1608. By then, his wife Vincentina had already passed away, but Stefano, who had himself become a priest in 1605, continued to serve the nuns. Being refused by the Discalced Carmelites, he joined the Barnabites in 1611. Without the financial and social capital of this couple, Vittoria's chances of initiating a cloistered convent would have been very different.

⁵³ "Fatta questa compra parvemi di havere spedito il tutto, ma mancava chi mi aiutasse, e per divina disposizione seguì che le reverende monache scalze non volevano più ricevere la Signora Vincentina Centurione, che era venuta da Napoli a Genova con due figlie per farsi monaca scalza, subito che io hebbi inteso l'andai a visitare dicendogli che era stata volontà di Dio che fosse venuta a Genova per aiutarmi a compiere quest'opera (dissimulando di sapere che fosse venuta a Genova per altro effetto)." Strata, 'Memoria Autobiografica', 215.

⁵⁴ "tirai avanti il negozio, havendo la Signora Vincentina molta fretta pigliai una casa a pigione [...] e facessi accomodare a modo di clausura dove abitassimo per 4 anni, sinché il nostro monastero fusse fatto, e s'entrò nella detta casa alli III di giugno dell'anno 1604 [...]. Si pigliò l'abito da monaca a 5 di agosto del 1604 a vestirsi erano 5": Ibid., 216. Cf. also: Fontana, *Memoria e santità*, 12–15.

Experiences that elicited trust

The hallmark of strict enclosure was that the nuns entered the *clausura* for good, and contact with the outside world was limited to the absolutely necessary. Therefore, all practical issues were to be settled beforehand. The founder of such convent needed to attract people, money and goods, without there being much possibility to prove, for instance, the convent's particularly strong commitment to *clausura* and thus elicit trust. At the same time, this reputation was paramount to draw people and resources. In Vittoria Strata's case, this paradox constituted one of the chief obstacles towards the realisation of her convent.

Strata's main supporters, Vincentina and Stefano, feared that it was impossible to start a new religious order for cloistered sisters from scratch. In the first instance, they therefore insisted that their new convent should be associated with the Discalced Carmelite order so as to secure the continuity of the new foundation. Strata wrote in her autobiography:

The torments that I endured when we were still in secular habit from all sides, especially from lady Vincentina and her husband were many. [They also came from] all the [Discalced] brothers who live in Sant'Anna, in particular from Father Ferdinando. Their intention was always that the Discalced sisters would come to establish [our convent] and we would become Discalced [Carmelites]. Not a day went by in which they did not lecture me three or four times.⁵⁵

Vittoria's own position as a rich widow, however, helped her: "I had the good fortune that the house was mine, so that, after they had thoroughly annoyed me, I told them that I wanted to stay here, even without any [other] nuns, and anyone who did not want to stay was free to leave."⁵⁶ Vittoria probably knew that free choice was essential

⁵⁵ "Li travagli che passai mentre che fossimo in abito secolare da tutti, massime dalla Signora Vincentina e suo marito sono molti, et ancora da tutti li frati che in sant'Anna si trovavano, in particolare da padre Ferdinando e questi tutti furono acciocché le monache scalze venissero loro a fondarlo e noi si facessimo scalze. Non passava mai giorno che non mi facessero [...] 3 o 4 sermoni": Strata, 'Memoria Autobiografica', 216-7.

⁵⁶ "la ventura era che la casa era mia, perciò quando mi avevano ben molestata, dicevo di voler star qui, ancorché senza monaca alcuna, e chi non voleva stare era in libertà". Ibid., 217.

in order to build trust not only with supporters from outside, but also between the sisters themselves.

The issue surfaced again when, shortly after receiving the habit (on 5 August 1604), Vincentina passed away. Considering that Vittoria was also in a bad health, Stefano now feared that their huge investments would come to nothing and “the affair would go up in smoke”, if he did not associate the newly erected convent with an existing and flourishing order.⁵⁷ Again, he insisted to Vittoria that the new convent merge with the Discalced Carmelites. Supporting this idea, the other nuns wrote in June 1605 to Stefano: “Your Lordship should reach an agreement with the Mother [Vittoria] and Sister Maria Francesca [the only one who was on Vittoria’s side], because, apart from them, we all want to become Discalced.”⁵⁸ This resistance exposes the sense of risk that women who were to give their life to a new initiative felt in the absence of a track record that inspired them with trust and confidence: not surprisingly, Vittoria’s first companions preferred the security and prestige associated with the popular Carmelite nuns.

Even so, a short time later Stefano and three of the sisters changed their minds: together with Vittoria, the three made their profession in the new order on 7 September 1605 while Stefano became chaplain of the convent. According to Strata, they had changed their minds upon seeing that she physically suffered from their doubts. It is also possible that they ceased their resistance assuming that, being in a bad health, Strata was about to pass away and then things could change. Another possibility is that the support from the archbishop whose confidence Vittoria had slowly earned gave them sufficient trust to stick to their founder’s plan: he promised that he would continue to support the convent even if it were to encounter difficulties, and he would find new nuns in the event that the founders died.⁵⁹ In any case, when their newly built convent was ready and the nuns made their solemn entrance on 28 June 1608 their number had risen to 28 sisters. While her convent continued to grow steadily, Vittoria renounced all responsibilities in 1615 and passed

⁵⁷ In Vittoria’s own words: “il negozio andarebbe in fumo”. Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Vostra Signoria accordi la Madre e Suor Maria Francesca, che del resto tutte vogliamo essere scalze.” Ibid., 219.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 218.

away two years later. Considering that the Turchine followed strict contemplative rules (written by Bernardino Zanon), the enormous success they experienced in the first decades of their existence was remarkable. When, in 1668, the first convent of the Turchine was founded in Rome, 42 other places – mostly in France – had already preceded it.⁶⁰ Vittoria Strata had succeeded in starting an initiative that elicited trust: the Turchine evidently managed to attract enough financial support and inspired many women to spend their lives in this order. Among them were direct relatives of Cardinal Durazzo: the wife of one of Cardinal Durazzo’s cousins, Maria Maddalena Brignole Sale, and her own daughter Maria Geronima (sister of Ippolito Durazzo whom we encountered in chapter 2) both joined the Turchine.⁶¹

The Medee

Authorities often viewed with suspicion the relative freedom that the “third way” offered women. Yet people were also aware of the fact that, as the Spanish theologian Diego Pérez de Valdivia wrote: “They cannot all become nuns [...] nor can all marry well, even if they wanted to; nor do all of them have a calling or talent to be nuns or wives.”⁶² This realisation sometimes allowed distrust to turn into trust. An anonymous supporter of the Ursulines wrote:

And to tell the truth, should not every father of a family nobly born, with few resources or many daughters (being unable to marry them all or even make them nuns), welcome the fact that there is a praiseworthy third status, in which those who feel themselves disposed to it can quietly stay in their own homes serving God in virginity [...]?⁶³

⁶⁰ All the early foundations of the *Turchine* are extensively discussed in: Fontana, *Memoria e santità*, 34–104.

⁶¹ Alfonso, ‘Aspetti’, 468.

⁶² “Y no pueden ser todas monjas [...], ni todas, aunque quisieren, se pueden bien casar; ni tampoco todas tienen llamamiento o talent para monjas o para casadas.” Pérez de Valdivia, *Aviso de gente recogida*, Álvaro Huerga ed. (Madrid: FUE 1977) 156. Cited in and translated by: Weber, ‘Introduction’, 6.

⁶³ Zarri, ‘The Third Status’, 189.

Moreover, religious authorities – particularly the Jesuits – as well as secular authorities at times greatly appreciated what semi-religious women contributed to society: they were important educators and caretakers of the sick, and their devotion to virginity gave them an elevated spiritual status. However, before being able to effectively shape a particular *via media* and finding ways of legitimising it, a certain distrust had to be overcome: the different steps are clearly visible in the genesis of the *Medee*, the second group taken into consideration in this chapter.⁶⁴

Trusting Medea Patellani

The *Medee*, officially called the Sisters of Saint John the Baptist and of Saint Catharine of Siena, were a congregation founded by Medea Ghiglini Patellani in 1594. Born in 1559, she was the daughter of Domenico Ghiglini, who died when Medea was only 14 years old. At the age of seventeen she married a Genoese nobleman, Giulio Patellani. Ten years later, in 1586, her husband passed away and left her widow at a young age, just as had happened to Vittoria Maria Strata. An important difference, however, was that Medea had remained childless, which resulted in great personal freedom: together with her widowhood and fatherlessness, the fact that she had no children allowed her to invest her time and money as she pleased. Though probably less well-off than Strata, and certainly poorer than Virginia Bracelli (whom we will meet in the last part of this chapter), Medea's financial situation enabled her to pursue the ideals that she set herself.

Her starting position was also determined by her bond with the Jesuits. It is unclear when Medea became a confessant of Bernardino Zanoni, the Jesuit who, as we saw earlier, would also become the spiritual leader of Strata, but we do know that by 1587, seven years after Bernardino had arrived in Genoa, he had great trust in her and gave her the responsibility to instruct other women in spiritual matters.⁶⁵ Medea became the leader of a group of devout ladies to which Strata also belonged: “There

⁶⁴ Legitimacy for their way of life could be found in the communities of the first Christians or the life of Mary. Alison Weber, ‘Jesuit Apologias for Laywomen’s Spirituality’, in idem, *Devout Laywomen*, 339–40.

⁶⁵ See for an overview of Medea’s life: Zacchello, ‘Medea’, 163–64.

were some women, confessants of Father Bernardino, who attended more purposely to spiritual life, and used to warn each other of all the flaws they had inside and that were noticeable in exterior conversation.”⁶⁶ Under the auspices of Zanoni, this group of well-off Genoese ladies would slowly move from the well-accepted activities of penitence and prayer, towards a way of life that was less automatically seen as suitable for women, particularly elite women.

An initiative that required trust

What were the activities for which Medea and her companions, in time, had to win trust? According to a manuscript that dates from the early existence of the group, but after their formal recognition by the senate in 1625, Medea and her friends began to live together in 1594, pursuing the ideal of holding “everything in common among them” and of “teaching girls and offering board to others while intending to be diligent in their work”. That the Medee saw theirs as a new religious institution results from the fact that they tried to safeguard its continuity: “Their intention and aim was that this company would not extinguish but continue, which means that, in case of death, others would join in place of those who had passed away.”⁶⁷

Within a few years after they first started living together, the *via media* of the Medee was not only set in their minds as “very different” from life in a cloistered convent, but was also seen by others as a distinct reality, as a clear ‘third status’, that could, for instance, be included in a will.⁶⁸ A good example is a testament of Strata

⁶⁶ “Erano alcune Donne penitenti del P. Bernardino, le quali attendevano più di proposito alla vita spirituale, e solevano avvisarsi di tutto ciò che nell’esteriore conversazione osservato hauesse ciascheduna di difetto nell’altra”. Spinola, *Vita*, 36. Various stories have made it to the hagiographies on Strata about the ways in which Medea would have put her to the test. Cf. *Ibid.*, 166–67.

⁶⁷ “inspirate da Dio” “ogni cosa fosse comune fra esse” “attendendo ogn’una a stare assidua alli lavori, et insegnare a figliuole e prenderne altre a scoto” “L’intenzione e mente loro era che non si dovesse estinguere detta compagnia ma si conservasse, quindi in caso di morte di qualcheduna aggregarsi altre in luogo delle defunte”. *Virginum S. Jo. Baptistae et S. Cath. ae Senen’ Dedicataru’ Collegium sub protectione serenissimi Senatus Reip Genuensis* in Archivio Romano delle Suore Medee, cited in *Ibid.*, 169–70.

⁶⁸ One seventeenth-century account of how Vittoria Strata tried to convince Medea’s group to join her in her convent (just after the turn of the century), emphasises, how from an early stage, these ladies were “very resolved to continue the way of life they had begun”. “Andata [...] a ritoruarle, comunicò loro candidamente il suo desiderio di habitare nella stessa casa, e scoperse il disegno,

herself (dating from August 1602) that stated that under the governance of Medea Patellani a “congregation of spiritual daughters” had been founded that she wanted to see “grow at least until the number of twelve” and to which she intended to leave “twelve thousand *lire* [...] so that with that income, their [own] labour, and the alms of pious Christians they may be able to live together [and] attend to devotion and prayer for me and their other benefactors”.⁶⁹ Interestingly, in this will, Strata described a congregation that was in all things similar to what transpires from the later rules of the Medee, testifying to the fact that, without any formal recognition (which came only in 1625), Medea’s group had already started living the religious life that she had envisioned. First, only girls who were of legitimate birth and good standing could be accepted, on the condition that they had already lived a “spiritual life and frequented the sacraments for at least two years”. Women who did not live up to the standards of the congregation had to be sent away “for the peace of the others”. Another requirement was that they would continue to live together, hear mass daily and pray for one hour twice a day. Finally, the Medee were to take communion every eight days and to confess at the Jesuits. To this effect, they were to find a house near the Gesù; the main church of the Jesuits in Genoa.⁷⁰

The trust that Strata showed here in the initiative of Medea and her friends was explicitly linked to certain rules that were to be followed for their work to qualify

che haueua di stabilire insieme con loro vn nuouo Monastero; ma [...] le trouò molto aliene da simile pensiero, et assai risolute di continuare nell’intrapreso tenore di vita. [...] essendo quelle Vergini già assuefatte alla loro maniera di viuere, non poco differente da quella, che si haueua da introdurre nel Monastero, non sarebbe stato cosi ageuole piegarle all’osseruanza di comunità, che bisognaua”. Spinola, *Vita*, 61.

⁶⁹ “congregatione di figlie spirituale” “crescere almeno fino al numero di dodici oltre la servente lire dodici millia moneta di Genova [...] accio che con tale entrata le loro fatiche et elemosine de i pii cristiani possano vivere insieme, attendere alla diuotione e pregare per me et altri loro benefattori.” Testament of Maria vittoria Strata, ASG, Notai antichi 4310: notaio Grimaldo Peirano, filza n. 19, 3 August 1602. Cited in: Zacchello, ‘Medea’, 186–87.

⁷⁰ “volendo che le figlie che si accetteranno in detta Congregatione siano di legitimo matrimonio dotate, di buoni costumi e che abbino fatta vita spirituale e frequentati i sacramenti almeno per doi anni, se ve ne riuscisse alcuna discola e che turbasse la casa con suoi mali costumi, questa tale non emendandoli aiutata co’l consiglio del suo confessore si debba mandar via per quiete delle altre. [...] tutte habbino da avere in comune come fanno hora frequentare i santi Sacramenti almeno ogn’otto giorni e per ordinario confessarsi dai reverendi padri della compagnia del Gesù et a questo effetto doveranno prender casa vicina alla loro Giesu et udire ogni giorno messa e fare doe ore d’oratione il giorno”. Ibid.

as a viable and trustworthy initiative that would merit the money: “because if they fail this custom and rule, I do not want them to receive the income”.⁷¹ Moreover, the testament stated that, if they were not to live up to these conditions *or* in the event that the archbishop found that the “congregation did not fare well”, the legacy would have to be invested until an income was reached “with which a convent of thirty-three nuns could be maintained who [would] have to be called the nuns of the Annunciation”.⁷² As has already been mentioned, just two years later Strata would indeed initiate a convent of cloistered nuns called the Order of the Most Holy Annunciation, and in a later testament this convent replaced the congregation of the Medee. Reflecting a widespread opinion, Strata considered that the cloistered convent offered a spiritually more elevated life for women.

Lowering the trust threshold

Since their *via media* was not automatically accepted as suitable for women, how could Medea’s initiative still gain the trust it needed to survive? One important way of doing this was to show that it met a certain need in society. The Jesuit Giulio Negrone (1553-1625), born just a few years before Medea in the same city, tried to convince the senate that a congregation of semi-religious women would merit government support. His (undated) description of such a congregation is very similar to the actual make-up of the Medee:

The task is that a place be built where, under the governance of some noble Matron of high morality and honour, [...] girls are being educated who pay for their stay and who will be instructed in the Christian way, in [...] good manners, and all the possible virtues, so that they later, when appropriate, they can be married

⁷¹ “perchè quando mancassero da tale usanza e regola non voglio che godino l’entrata di dette lire dodicimillia”. Ibid.

⁷² “quando questa congregazione non caminasse bene a giudizio dell’illustrissimo reverendissimo Arcivescovo di Genova” “con la quale si possa mantenere un monastero di monache di numero trentatre [...] le quali [...] si dovranno chiamare le monache dell’Annonciata”. Ibid.

by their fathers or family members, or become nuns, depending on their devotion.⁷³

Conscious of the fact that people typically based their trust on experience, Negrone wrote that people knew from experience that these institutions were very beneficial for the city: “The institution that is proposed [...] has already been established in Milan, Naples and other cities many years ago. From [it] [...] great temporal and spiritual fruits are to be hoped for in this city, as experience has shown in those [cities] where a similar institution has already been embraced and favoured.”⁷⁴

Another way that Negrone tried to create room for groups like the Medee in his petition was by giving a voice to the girls who were to be educated by these devout laywomen: “daughters will much more readily go to this place than to the convents; because they will have the company of many others; because they, at times, will be able to go home which they cannot do in the convents; and furthermore, [because] they can be sure that they will not be forced to stay [...] their whole life; and finally because of the many other facilities and enjoyments that are introduced in similar places”.⁷⁵ Studying together, Negrone further argued, led to friendships that could contribute “to the union and peace of the city”, and at the same time, a similar institution could make things easier for men who wanted to choose “virtuous and modest wives”.⁷⁶

⁷³ “L’opera è che si fa un luoco, dove sotto il governo d’alcuna matrona nobile, di spirito e d’honor, si allevino figliole vergini, quali paghino il suo scotto, et ivi sieno instrutte nella via chirstiana, nelli costumi e buone creanze, et tutte le virtù possibili, acciò possino di poi esser maritate al suo tempo dalli loro padri o parenti, o vero farsi monache secondo la loro devotione” Giulio Negroni, *Regole*, in: Berio, miscellanea D. 2. i. - 2 8, f. 24, cited in: Michele Rosi, ‘Appendice. I. Le monache’, in *Il Barro di Paolo Foglietta. Commedia del secolo XVI pubblicata con note ed illustrazioni*, ed. Michele Rosi, Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria, XXV (Genoa: Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 1892), 501–3.

⁷⁴ “Si propone alle Signorie Vostre la institutione d’un’opera, quale già molti anni sono è stata instituita in Milano, Napoli et altre città, nella cui institutione e conservatione si spera nottabilissimo frutto temporale et spirituale in questa città, come l’esperienza ha mostrato in queste, dove già questa simile opera è stata abbracciata e favorita.” Ibid.

⁷⁵ “le figlie andarano molto più volentieri in questo luoco, che nelli monasterii, per la compagnia de tante, perchè potranno andare alle volte alle case loro, e poi tornarvi, il che non possono far nelli monasterii, et di più saranno sicure che non saranno furzate a star li tutta la vita loro, et finalmente per le molte commodità et trattenimenti che in simil luochi si introducono.” Ibid.

⁷⁶ per la unione et pace della città”, “moglie virtuose e modeste”. Ibid.

Finally, Negrone argued, the practical threshold to get a similar initiative started was relatively low:

To start off everything is very easy, because one merely has to find fifteen to twenty gentlemen who will put their daughters in this place, and when one finds these, ask the senate to install a *magistrato*, like that for the nuns, consisting of serious and virtuous people who will have to protect and govern the place. [...] From the pensions of these girls [...] the rent of a comfortable and suitable place can be paid, as well as the people who are needed to serve them.⁷⁷

Negrone here rightly assumed that trust in an institution like that of the Medee could be more easily won if the senate would vouch for its reliability and would institute deputies to control the semi-religious women. Sufficient trust in the Medee, a third way similar to the one proposed by Negrone, could be won because it was an initiative that only needed a small trust capital to get started (unlike the Turchine) and because their work met a need that was felt in society.

Who gave trust?

A brief examination of who put their trust in the *Medee* confirms what we know from historiography about the supporters of devout laywomen. First, the Jesuits often played an important role in the success of these semi-religious groups for women. Bernardino Zanoni was a protagonist in the success of the Medee. Zanoni was not only confessor of many Genoese nobles, but also a preacher devoted to education: he taught the catechism and composed devotional songs to foster lay piety. It is impossible to tell if starting a new institution devoted to the education of girls was Zanoni's idea. We do know however that, as confessor of Medea and her friends, "he never wanted to collaborate in their pinning themselves down to any particular

⁷⁷ "Il puoner poi tutto in essecutione è facilissimo, perchè basta trovare da quindici, o venti gentilhuomini, quali ponghino in esso luoco le loro figliole, e trovato questi, domandar al Senato che vogli costituire un Magistrato, come quello delle moanche, di persone gravi et virtuose, li quali habbino a protegger et governar detto luoco, et dalli scotti di queste figlie si potrà pagare anco il fitto d'un luoco atto a ciò et comodo, et alsi quelle persone che per servizio loro sono necessarie". Ibid.

initiative, not even the holiest one, [but] only fostered their spirit with his Evangelical counsel [...], [and] thus kept them undecided”.⁷⁸ According to Salvaterra, Zanoni kept them “undecided” because he had the foundation of a cloistered convent (the Turchine) in mind. However, it is not unlikely that Zanoni instead supported Medea’s ideal of the ‘third way’, and kept them “undecided” in order to start a new semi-religious institution. That this trust was not automatic and in fact made Zanoni vulnerable to criticism, is suggested by later orders of his Superior General:

[Zanoni] thought about another convent, and for this [purpose] he had congregated many girls in one place and there were pious men who offered to help Bernardino in that work. It did not please the superiors of the Society that he would only attend to it himself: they ordered him to refrain from it; and he complied with their wish because he was [...] devoted to obedience. From that time, never has he set foot again in that place, unless with the permission of his superior if there was a great need.⁷⁹

Although not explicitly mentioned, it is likely that the place that became forbidden ground for Zanoni actually was the house of the *Medee*. The connection with the Jesuits nonetheless remained strong. In 1616 Medea’s group was still called *confraternitatis nomini Jesu* in an official document.⁸⁰ Their name would eventually change, but the Jesuit influence would continue to be clearly visible in the official rules, written by Medea in 1622: they dictated among other things that the Medee

⁷⁸ “non volle mai cooperare, che s’applicassero ad alcuno partito, ancorchè santissimo, sol promovendo il loro spirito coi suoi consigli Evangelici, [...] tenendole così sospese”. Salvaterra, *La fondazione*, 9.

⁷⁹ “Meditabatur aliud monasterium, atque ob id in unum locum multas puellas coegerat: nec deerant pii viri, qui iuvare Bernardinum in eo opere pollicebantur. Non placuit Superioribus Societatis, ut id ipse curaret: iusserunt abstinere; atque ipse quia versus obedientiae filius desiderium suum cohibuit, et in eum locum numquam ex eo tempore pedem intulit, nisi permissu praepositi sui si quando necessitas magna fuit.” ARSI, Med. 93 f. 37 Cited in Zacchello, ‘Bernardino Zanoni e le fondazioni delle Medee e delle Annunziate a Genova’, 53–54 footnote 46. Zacchello rightly notes that these words do not explicitly mention the Medee but it is very likely that they refer to Zanoni’s connections with them.

⁸⁰ ASG, Notai Antichi 4280, Atti del notaio G. De Federici, 15 October 1616: “Confraternitatis nominis Iesu”.

were to confess at the Jesuits every Sunday and feast day, “and they [were] to be very obedient to them in everything”.⁸¹

Possibly in order to distance himself from the group or to help perpetuate their congregation, Zanoni invited three of his male confessants to support Medea and her friends: Gerolamo Del Bene, Giovanni Battista Sisto and Giorgio Frugoni. The first two functioned as protectors whereas Giorgio provided the Medee “with grain, wine, oil, wood and other things, paying the rent of their house as well, since, in those first years, they did not have the means to maintain themselves because, as the saying goes, the first step is the hardest”.⁸²

The Medee did not aspire to recognition from the archbishop. Interference from Church authority could bring problems of jurisdiction and thus constitute a threat to the self-determination of the congregation. Medea explicitly wrote in her rules: “The said congregation should not be subordinate to the *ordinarius*, because we want it to be guided by reformed people so that [its members] be confirmed in their fervour, and spirit, and grow every day in holiness and perfection.”⁸³ Her words might even indicate that she did not trust the present or any future *ordinarius* to be “reformed” enough. The Medee did eventually petition the senate for recognition, but only three decades after the institution’s foundation. This delay suggests that Medea herself did not feel the need for such recognition or that the advantages would not outweigh the risks of more control from above. In fact, only when Lucrezia Ravano succeeded Medea as superior did they turn to the senate and received formal recognition in 1625. As was customary, the senators appointed three men as protectors of the institution who were to be present on all official occasions such as professions, the chapters that were held every two years and the acceptance of new

⁸¹ “et a essi saranno obedientissime in ogni cosa”. ASG Notai Antichi 4280 Atti del notaio G. De Federici (1622). For the role of the Jesuits in the spirituality of the Medee and other such groups: Mazzonis, ‘The Council’, 204–13.

⁸² “a sue proprie spese [...] di grano, vino, oleo, legne et altre cose pagandoli anco la pigione della casa non avendo esse in quei primi anni il modo di mantenersi per essere come si suol dire tutti li principi debili” *Virginum S. Jo. Baptistae et S. Cath. ae Senen’ Dedicataru’ Collegium sub protectione serenissimi Senatus Reip Genuensis* f. 8v, Archivio Romano delle Suore Medee, cited in: Zacchello, ‘Bernardino Zanoni e le fondazioni delle Medee e delle Annunziate a Genova’, 52.

⁸³ “Detta congregazione non sia soggetta all’ordinario, perche vogliamo sia guidata da persone riformate accio si confermino in feruore, e spirito, et alla giornata cresca di santita e perfettione”. ASG Notai Antichi 4280, Atti del notaio G. De Federici (1622).

members. As we shall see in the third case study, this male authority was a prerequisite for lasting support and trust.

Experiences that elicited trust

We have seen that there was a particular trust-related difficulty that presented itself for contemplative initiatives such as Vittoria Strata's Turchine: it was impossible for them to win the trust of possible supporters by demonstrating their way of living before they even started. Things were different for an apostolic congregation like that of Medea. As the words of the Jesuit Negrone already suggested: with a minimum of trust capital from some benefactors and family, the Medee could live from their work, namely teaching girls. The rules that Medea drew up for her institution and attached to her testament of 1622 show what she herself, after 28 years, saw as practices that she wanted to see perpetuated. First, her followers were to "live everything in common", and thus "become perfect servants of the Lord, striving to live an exemplary life and to edify everyone".⁸⁴ Of course, the motive for this was the salvation of their own souls, but it also was a way to win other people's trust in their work and intentions. Furthermore, Medea saw the education of girls and the teaching of the catechism as a means to spread the faith. Other aspects of their life were very similar to that of cloistered nuns: the Medee started the day with prayer and mass and ended with two hours of prayer. They fasted every Friday, and did penitence before one another once a month. In her rules, Medea emphasised the close bond with the Jesuits, with whom the Medee were to confess regularly. Also, every protector who was appointed for the public dealings of the institution was expected not only to be "of a very mature age, a very qualified person, an experienced man and someone of good reputation and fame", but also to attend "the oratories of the fathers of the Gesù, and someone who often confesses and goes to communion".⁸⁵

⁸⁴ "viuere in commune in ogni cosa", "diuentar perfette serue del S're procurando esser di vitta essemplare con dar bon ediffi'ne a tutti". Ibid.

⁸⁵ "di etta assai mattura persona molto qualificata e sij huomo esperto e persona di buona voce e fame", "li oratorij delli PP. del Giesu, e chi si confessi e comunichi spesso". Ibid.

A last value that, if we consider Medea's rules, was central to her idea of a reliable institution was that of free choice: all women who joined should freely desire to do so and not be constrained by their parents or others. At the same time, the Medee could freely decide to send away a girl who did not live up to their standards:

it is necessary that, if any of those who joined causes scandal and is about to bring a bad reputation to the congregation [and if] being warned, she does not improve [her behaviour], then, by that very fact, [she will be] excluded from the said congregation without having the right to claim anything. The others will first vote on her and if four-fifths of the votes agree, she will be expelled.⁸⁶

That the institution thus managed to avoid a "bad reputation", is clear from the fact that the Medee continued to receive government support throughout the early modern period. Official recognition from the diocese came only in 1920. From 1942 onwards, the congregation fell under pontifical law.⁸⁷

The Brignoline

The two women whose initiatives we have analysed so far, Vittoria and Medea, had been part of the same group of religiously inclined ladies directed by Bernardino Zanoni. Their paths diverged significantly when both consciously chose to be female pioneers in two completely different religious initiatives. The third founder of a new female religious initiative on which this chapter focuses, Virginia Centurione Bracelli (1587-1651), was also related to Vittoria, but in a different way: Virginia was a niece of Stefano Centurione, the foremost patron of the Turchine, whose own wife had been among Vittoria's first companions. The Turchine seem to have occupied an important place in Virginia's life. One of Virginia's daughters would become a Turchina, as would several of her granddaughters. Moreover, Virginia's first public

⁸⁶ "occorendo che Iddio nol voglia che alcuna delle aggregate fosse di scandalo e fusse per apportare mall'odore a detta compagnia se ausata non s'emendera con ipso fato esclusa senza poter pretendere cosa alcuna di detta congregazione mettendola prima a balle e se delli quattro quinti de voti concorreranno sia esclusa". Ibid.

⁸⁷ Zacchello, 'Medea', 179.

charitable initiative was her support of the “Institute for poor rural churches” in the countryside and the Ligurian mountains founded in 1607. Interestingly, the only manual labour that was permitted among the Turchine was making altar cloths “for the poor churches of the mountains”, i.e. to contribute to this initiative.⁸⁸

Trusting Virginia Bracelli

Not only were these three elite ladies all somehow related, their economic and societal position was also very similar. Virginia was born in 1587 into one of the most prominent noble families of Genoa: she was the child of Giorgio Centurione – an active politician, who served as doge of the Republic from 1621-22 – and of Lelia, a daughter of the important Spinola family. Like Medea and Vittoria, Virginia married at a young age in 1603 and, just like them, she too was widowed after a few years, being only 20 years old (in 1607). Her husband, Gaspare Bracelli, had been a very affluent nobleman. Her status as the widow of this rich aristocrat, together with her background as a daughter of a well-to-do and influential family, provided her with relative freedom. She cherished this freedom by refusing her father’s insistence that she remarry. When, in 1614, her father left to become governor of Corsica for several years, Virginia was in a position to dispose of her financial resources. By 1621, when both of her daughters were settled (Virginia was now 34 years old), this freedom became even more substantial. Her father had arranged a marriage for Virginia’s first daughter, Lelia, when she was 13 years old. Lelia and her husband, Benedetto Baciadonne, began living with Virginia, but after a few years Baciadonne “said that he did not want to stay with beguines, and wanted to have fun while he was young and rich”.⁸⁹ That is, at least, what the son of Virginia’s *second* daughter wrote about

⁸⁸ “il laurare di tela per le pouere chiese della Montagna”. *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. 92/1. 1650-1654, *Atti della controversia tra il Monastero, i Patroni elettori della famiglia Carcano e l’arcivescovo circa il diritto di elezione delle monacande, in seguito ad una riduzione del numero delle monache*.

⁸⁹ “diceva che non voleva stare con beguine, e voleva pigliarsi spasso mentre era giovine e ricco, e passare ai giuochi, ne’ quali si rovinò”. Scipione Alberto Squarciafico, *Embrione della Vita di Virginia* (1681), 121. Original manuscript copied between 1807-1813 by Domenico Piaggio, Ms.B Genoa, Archivio Suore di Nostra Signora del Rifugio. (hereafter: *Embrione*, pagenumber) Large parts of this Ms.B can be found in: *Januen. beatificationis et canonizationis Servae Dei Verginiae Centurione Bracelli*,

his uncle. This second daughter, Isabella, married Giuseppe Squarciafico at the age of 16. They were to have no fewer than 21 children, of whom 13 became religious (eight of them joined the Turchine as would their mother, Isabella, eventually).

Here was a well-to-do widow with a relatively high degree of personal freedom, a very decided character and a charismatic personality. If we may believe one of her biographers, she did not shy away from preaching in one of Genoa's rougher neighbourhoods, San Salvatore, apparently attracting both children and adults to her catechism sessions.⁹⁰ Virginia advocated several popular religious devotions: in 1627, she urged Archbishop De Marini to stimulate the Eucharistic devotion of the *Quarantore* (40 hours), during the carnival season.⁹¹ She also reinitiated the *Compagnia degli orbi*, also called the *cappe rosse* after the red capes they wore during religious processions. The aim of this *compagnia* was to go around "with their violins, two by two, to all the different parts of the city, especially on Saturdays, to sing the litanies, after having lit some candles near the image of Mary, so that [...] on vigils and feast days of Mary, the whole city echoed with praise of her".⁹² Virginia's inclination towards religious activism, her contacts among the social and political elites of the city, her wealth and relative freedom all put her in a position that was advantageous for a woman who ultimately wanted to elicit trust for something radically new.

*viduae fundatricis Instituti Sororum Dominae Nostrae a Refugio in Monte Calvario vulgo 'Brignoline' († 1651), 273–377 (hereafter: Positio, pagenumber). When citing the *Embrione*, I refer to the text included in the *Positio*. Scipione, the author of the *Embrione* was the sixth child (of 21) of Isabella, daughter of Virginia. He wrote his manuscript around 1682. *Positio*, 275.*

⁹⁰ From the summary of one of the catechesis lessons it is clear that Bracelli indeed had an ample knowledge of the Bible, which was not strange for an aristocratic lady of that time. *Positio*, 210-2. The lesson is cited in the Squarciafico, *Embrione*, n. 111-7 and the author ends by indicating (possibly with some exaggeration) that "Con questi simili esempi faceva ben capire da tutti quello che diceva, in modo che non solo alle dottrine che insegnava concorrevano i figlioli alettati da premi, ma uomini attempati, e Religiosi di prima classe, ed aveva essa modi tanto soavi in instruirli, che per ricreazione tutti bastava che si spargeva la voce che doveva far lei la dottrina, che concorrevano tante persone, che si rendeva la Chiesa per ampia che fusse, incapace."

⁹¹ Squarciafico, *Embrione*, n. 128-129, in *Positio*, 316-7.

⁹² "alli sabati particolarmente andavan due a due in tutte le parti della città con i loro violini ad intonare, accesa qualche lampada all'immagine di Maria, le litanie [...] a segno che, in detti giorni, alle vigilie ed alle feste della Madonna si sentiva la città tutta risuonare le sue lodi", Squarciafico, *Embrione*, n. 149, in *Positio*, 320.

A last factor that favoured trust was the institutional role that Bracelli occupied, assuming a leading position in Genoa's existing charitable institutions. In these positions she managed to elicit trust which would later help her in her own project. In 1631, Virginia was chosen by the *Magistrato della Misericordia* as one of the *Otto Signore della Misericordia*. The *Magistrato della Misericordia* under which they fell, dealt with handling large legacies to the Church or to charitable institutions and was run by several Genoese noblemen and presided over by the archbishop or his vicar.⁹³ This *Magistrato della Misericordia*, in turn, was part of the *Ufficio dei Poveri*, a kind of ministry of public assistance that regulated all forms of charity toward the needy.⁹⁴ Each of the Eight Ladies was assigned one neighbourhood and expected to oversee the effectiveness of poor relief. Virginia was appointed to the San Salvatore neighbourhood, of which she wrote in November 1631: “[...] only the most miserable people live there, and [...] many fathers and mothers sleep together with their older children, others do not have a bedsheet, nor a blanket, nor a nightshirt or other things with which to shelter themselves. Therefore, I consider myself obliged to provide a remedy”.⁹⁵ That she invested her activism in an eminent institution that had been operational for many years enabled Bracelli to foster her own reputation and elicit trust.

An initiative that required trust

There was also a downside to Virginia's position in society. The aristocratic urban elites were the first to look down upon women who were active outside the walls of either their home or their convent. Unsurprisingly, Bracelli's activities on the streets encountered resistance, not in the least from her own family. This dynamic is already

⁹³ See also: ASV, Congr. Concilio, Relat. Dioec. 415A Ianuensis, 22r-25v, 12-01-1616, Relatio by archbishop Orazio Spínola who details his relationship with this institution.

⁹⁴ De Marini, *Emanuele Brignole e l'Albergo dei poveri di Genova*, 34–35.

⁹⁵ “dove non abita solo le persone più miserabili, et avendo io visitate moltissime case, nelle quali resta afflizione grandissima l'entrarvi non ritrovandoli alloggiamento solo che da bestie, molti padri e madri dormono insieme con i loro figlioli già grandi, altri non hanno saccone, ne coperta, ne camicia, e robba da potersi riparare, però stante quello mi tengo debitrice di procurarli rimedio”. *Invitation from Bracelli to the inhabitants of Genoa, asking to support her in her office as Lady of Mercy*, 10-11-1631, from Squarciafico, *Embrione*, nn. 166-7, cited in: *Positio*, 90-1.

clear in one of her first initiatives from around 1626⁹⁶: the foundation of the Ladies of Mercy (Signore della Misericordia), an organisation that invited aristocratic women to serve the poor via the existing poor-relief institutions. The Ladies of Mercy were supposed to assist the Otto Signore della Misericordia (of which, as mentioned, Bracelli would become a member some years later). From Virginia's invitation to join the new group we learn about Virginia's ideals:

This work [...] is the most worthy and holy that has ever existed. A work that embraces [...] all other both corporal and spiritual works of mercy: that in Genoa no person remains who is not actually known in his true state. We exhort all women to embrace it and give alms to the poor mendicants via the Office of the Poor and the Ladies of Mercy, who (if the alms go to them) will make sure that everybody will get what they need in an orderly manner [...] and the occasion for many lies and frauds will be taken away from these poor [...]. And better education for girls will be provided for, letting them stay indoors under the supervision of these Ladies who want to do charity.⁹⁷

Virginia's charitable project clearly was particularly vast in its claims and approach.

That, because of her position and status, she was in a position to elicit support and trust for such a project is evident from one of the rules that she wrote for her organisation (presumably in 1626):

⁹⁶ Bracelli introduced her Ladies of Mercy saying that the reason to start the initiative was to thank God in particular for "having liberated our republic of many toils, in which she found herself last year": by this Bracelli probably meant the war with Savoy in 1625. "Si tratta in Genova di fare un'opera di Misericordia per ringraziare in parte sua Divina Maestà di tanti benefizi che ne ha fatti, in particolare d'aver liberato la nostra repubblica da tanti travagli, ne quali era posta l'anno passato". Squarciafico, *Embrione* n. 85; cited in: *Positio*, 80.

⁹⁷ "quest'opera [...] è la più degna, e santa che sia mai stata. Opera che abbraccia e racchiude ogni altra opera di Misericordia tanto corporale come spirituale, offerendosi molte Signore principali d'essere subordinate alle Signore otto della Misericordia acciò, che in Genova non vi resti persona che non si a veramente conosciuto lo stato suo; si esorta tutte a volerla abbracciare, e fare le elemosine a poveri mendicanti, per mezzo dell'Ufficio de poveri e delle Signore della Misericordia, le quali (se le elemosine anderanno in loro) faranno che tutti, con ordine averanno il loro bisogno una volta tanto, e si leverà l'occasione di tante bugie e frodi in quelli poveri [...], e si procurerà miglior educazione alle fanciulle, con farle stare in casa, con la sopra intendenza di queste Signore che vogliono far la carità". Squarciafico, *Embrione* n. 85; cited in: *Positio*, 80.

this Work should be publicised in the pulpits, since it is right and reasonable to highly praise it. All preachers should incite everyone to generously give alms to this blessed work that will be an eternal bulwark against our enemies, a living, true and unique cure in order to preserve our freedom and Republic.⁹⁸

Bracelli did not hesitate to also ask the senate “for a large donation for this project, given that [...] it will be an enormous relief for the whole citizenry, an incredible benefit for the souls of these poor people, [...] and a most firm pillar of their liberty”.⁹⁹ We do not know if she actually obtained financial support for this project from the senate, but it does show that she was in the position to ask for it.

While attracting many elite women to follow her lead, Bracelli took up the role of spiritual leader of these ladies as well as a mentor in practical issues. She advised her followers to visit the needy as if they were visiting the new-born Jesus, and to convince them of the convenience of their assistance. Bracelli also gave very practical advice on how to approach the urban poor: in pairs of two the ladies were to go to one assigned neighbourhood, investigate the situation of every family, provide for the most urgent needs, find jobs for the unemployed, send small children to school, and teach girls manual work.¹⁰⁰ The social services they offered were closely bound to religious aspirations of converting people to a pious lifestyle.

After the initial success of the Ladies of Mercy, their numbers dropped rapidly. Economic decline reduced the private resources that its members could invest. More importantly, however, the work of these women was seen as socially unacceptable and met with too much resistance. One member of the government’s department of poor relief expressly opposed Bracelli’s organisation, and many family members of

⁹⁸ “nei pulpiti, si faccia publicar detta Opera, come è giusto e ragionevole, in estremo lodarla, con esortar ogni predicatore, tutti, a soccorrere con larga mano, d’elemosina, questa benedetta opera, qual sarà eterno propugnacolo contro i nostri nemici, rimedio vivo, vero ed unico per conservare questa libertà e Repubblica” *Costituzioni per la Congregazione delle “Signore della Misericordia protettrici e sovvenitrici dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo*, Squarciafico, *Embrione*, nn. 90-102, cited in *Positio*, 85-90: 89.

⁹⁹ “Serenissimo Senato, per la confermazione di detti capitoli, e successivamente, [...] d’una larga lemosina per detta opera, poscia che, [...], sarà un grandissimo sgravamento a tutta la cittadinanza, giovamento indicibile alle anime di queste povere persone, e stabilimento, e colonna fermissima di questa libertà”, *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰⁰ *Costituzioni* reported in: Squarciafico, *Embrione* nn. 90-102, cited in *Positio*, 85-90.

these elite ladies apparently followed suit. Interestingly, Susan Dinan describes the exact same dynamic for the Ladies of Charity who were founded in France during the same years and who much resembled Bracelli's Ladies of Mercy in their tasks and make-up: "real issues of security and social pressure often made it awkward, if not impossible, for a Lady to have regular contact with the poor in an intimate setting" and thus to continue her work.¹⁰¹ De Marillac's solution to this problem resembles the solution that Bracelli would eventually adopt: ladies from the social elites were only asked to *manage* the operations of De Marillac's congregation as members of the board of directors and principal fundraisers. At the same time, De Marillac encouraged women of lower social ranks to join her Daughters of Charity so that they could do the practical work among the poor. This approach would eventually also bring success to Bracelli's attempts: the Brignoline – her main initiative that *did* successfully continue, also after Bracelli's death – consisted of poor girls whom she sheltered and provided with an education, and who, in turn, dedicated themselves to poor relief and the care of the sick.

Lowering the trust threshold

Yet, before we come to this successful initiative, we have to consider what factors helped to broaden the freedom of movement of Bracelli, a freedom that was not obvious in a society where elite ladies' activities on the street were viewed with suspicion. One important factor was the economic situation of Genoa in the 1620s that I already touched upon in the first chapter. The city experienced a crisis in 1622 because of faltering trade and the financial depression of Spain. Production staggered while poverty and unemployment were on the rise so that the city teemed with poor people. During the winter of 1624-25 Virginia obtained permission from her mother-in-law to house around fourteen poor girls in the latter's house. In Genoa, taking in girls in need or in undesirable situations or offering them other help was a typical means of providing charity among aristocratic ladies of the time.¹⁰² The war with Savoy in 1625 only worsened the situation: fleeing from the hostile armies, many

¹⁰¹ Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*, 40.

¹⁰² Fontana, *Memoria e santità*, 112, footnote 1.

people from the Riviera di Ponente arrived in Genoa and were forced to live on the streets, begging for food and shelter. Like many other rich families, Virginia gave shelter to several people in need, in particular women. When the armies left, most of them returned to their homes but some stayed for various reasons. Bracelli looked after them using the money that she had raised during the state of emergency. After the death of her mother-in-law that same year, Bracelli's strategy was to use both her increased liberty and the state of affairs created by the recent crisis to build on this charitable initiative. Going around in the poorest neighbourhoods she gathered girls in need and sheltered them in the *palazzo* on the via Lomellini. A second wave of refugees arrived during the plague epidemic and famine of 1629-30, when people from as far as Lombardy sought refuge in Genoa. By then, Bracelli permanently housed around forty women and began looking for a place to receive even more. We should remember that, as Nicholas Terpstra writes, "apart from episodes of famine and plague, what bedeviled and preoccupied cities most of all were the intractable realities of women's life cycle poverty". Many charitable institutions were directed especially at women and "[i]t was the help given to women that most often broke new ground".¹⁰³ The focus of Bracelli's new religious institution on women in the most problematic situations therefore answered to a need that was widely felt in early modern society.

A second important experience with which Bracelli was able to foster a reputation of reliability was her appointment to reform the Lazzaretto, in September 1632.¹⁰⁴ The Lazzaretto was part of the system of government assistance to the poor. Intended by its founder, Ettore Vernazza, to shelter people afflicted by the plague epidemic, by the 1630s – about one century after its foundation – it housed around 600 poor people.¹⁰⁵ The practical problem that the government faced was "the risk

¹⁰³ Nicholas Terpstra, *Cultures of Charity: Women, Politics, and the Reform of Poor Relief in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2–3.

¹⁰⁴ "affinché Ella possa (così volendo) impiegarsi in servizio d'essi, ordinando, disponendo consigliando ed incamminando tuttociò che stimerà ben fatto e necessario per il buon governo". Decree with which the *Magistrato dei Poveri* assigns the care of the Lazzaretto to Bracelli, 01-09-1632. Copy from 28-7-1806 in AR. extragiud. Z. cart IV, cited in: *Positio*, 101.

¹⁰⁵ *Capitoli del Lazzaretto*, 29-11-1636, p. 3, 15. Cited in: *Positio*, 95. See also: De Marini, *Emanuele Brignole e l'Albergo dei poveri di Genova*, 35, 39.

of infection in the city because of the lack of care that could be given to such a large crowd”.¹⁰⁶ In 1628, four years before her appointment, Bracelli had already voiced her ideas on the changes that she envisioned for this particular institution. First, she insisted that all basic needs should be met before one could proceed to general reform.¹⁰⁷ Only with patience, winning the trust of the residents by meeting their elementary needs and offering spiritual assistance in order to “calm the whole place down”¹⁰⁸, could effective changes be made. Bracelli even wrote: “this reform will happen, but in the process we should not want to do anything other than to please everyone”.¹⁰⁹ That Virginia managed to implement her ideas is reflected by the new decrees of the institution, published in 1633 and 1635, which echo the priorities suggested by Bracelli and resemble the rules of her own *Opera* (more on this below).¹¹⁰ Virginia’s successful contribution generated trust: the 1635 chapters of the Lazzaretto mention that, from then on, the board of the Lazzaretto should always welcome one of the Eight Ladies of Mercy, that is to say, a lady with Bracelli’s position, and that the other members should value her suggestions “as stemming from pure zeal to do good” because they could not “but be very prudent and good”.¹¹¹

Who gave trust?

Whose trust did Virginia Bracelli manage to win for her main project, the foundation of a semi-religious institution for girls? In the first instance, support mainly came

¹⁰⁶ “il rischio [...] d’infettione della Città per la poca cura che in tanta folla di poveri si è potuta avere”, *Capitoli del Lazzaretto*, 29-11-1636, p. 15. Cited in: *Positio*, 95.

¹⁰⁷ “To questa notte ho avuto molto travaglio per quelle persone che sono nella riforma con mancamento di tante cose, [...] vorrei [...] differire tanto a ponerli in riforma, che se le possa dare li suoi bisogni, intanto lasciarli fare a suo modo [...] Io desidero già che le cose vanno in questo modo, andar pigando con suavità” Letter from Virginia Bracelli to a father on the conditions of the Lazzaretto, 02-02-1628, in Squarciafico, *Embrione*, n. 180, cited in *Positio*, 98-9.

¹⁰⁸ “quietare tutto il luogo”, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ “questa riforma si farà, ma intanto non vorrei che facessimo altro che piacere a tutti”, *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Her priorities being: first meeting the essential needs and offering a house to those who would otherwise return to begging, hosting all vagabond children and teaching them a trade, and offering all residents some manual labour in order to avoid idleness.

¹¹¹ “come prodotti da puro zelo di giovare, non potranno essere che molto prudenti e buoni”, *Capitoli del Lazzaretto*, 29-11-1636, p.12. Cited in: *Positio*, 96.

from her family. Being the daughter of a Genoese doge, she obviously benefitted from her family's network and position in society. When her own house became too small for the number of girls that she wanted to host, Giovanni Francesco and Giovanna Lomellini, family members of Bracelli's deceased mother-in-law, advised and helped her to rent the empty place called the convent "of Calvary Mountain", or "of the Visitation".¹¹² Within a year the forty women that she transferred to this new place on 14 April 1631 became 170.¹¹³ The business of her son-in-law, Giuseppe Squarciafico, would become the most important source of income for the initiative that she started in this house and which she called *Opera di Santa Maria del Rifugio in Monte Calvario*. It was later commonly known as the Brignoline after Emanuele Brignole who became the most important patron and benefactor of the institution (Brignole was a wealthy nobleman and close collaborator of Cardinal Durazzo¹¹⁴). It was customary for rich families to donate part of their profit to a religious institution, but the repercussions of the financial crisis affected Squarciafico's company and thus made themselves felt in Bracelli's *Opera*. Still, it was this initial support from close family that helped her to start off her initiative. In time, the *Opera* would also receive trust in the form of donations and legates from people more remotely related to Bracelli.¹¹⁵

After a year and a half in which Bracelli managed to keep her *Opera del Rifugio* working, in September 1632 she first approached the senate for official support. She obtained a first mark of trust when the senate promised to temporarily subsidise the house of Monte Calvario with "half a mouthful of bread" a day for every inhabitant.¹¹⁶ The only condition for women to be allowed to stay in this first *Opera*

¹¹² Magaglio, 'L'assistenza', 333.

¹¹³ ASG, *Atti di G.B. Bancherio*, an. 1624, cited in: *Positio*, 106.

¹¹⁴ He was also a cousin of the senator turned Jesuit, Anton Giulio Brignole Sale, one of the most famous figures of seventeenth-century Genoa.

¹¹⁵ People who include Bracelli's project in their will are, amongst others, the stepmother of Bracelli (the third wife of her father) Ersilia Cattaneo de Marini, and Domenico de' Marini (related to Ersilia?), one cousin of Cardinal Stefano Durazzo becomes patron, Giacomo Filippo Durazzo, whilst a sister-in-law of the cardinal, Giovanna Cervetto, includes Bracelli's work in her will as does Virginia Giustiniani (wife of Giovanni Battista Durazzo) and others. See: *Positio*, 116-121.

¹¹⁶ "mezza bocca di pane".

was that they would live in obedience, do manual labour and pray.¹¹⁷ Before December 1633, Bracelli had managed to open a second house for the more religiously inclined women of her *Opera*.¹¹⁸ When, in autumn 1635, she planned to buy a third house, Bracelli needed official recognition from the senate for her organisation.¹¹⁹ In her request, Virginia emphasised its secular character:

For some time now, thanks to the exceptional providence of God, a good number of women of all backgrounds, miserable conditions and deprived of all human help, have been brought to the house, or houses, called *Santa Maria del Rifugio* [...]. They live in these houses [...] under the governance and care of a lay person with rigorous discipline and seclusion, without, however, any obligation to make vows, wear a habit, or [attend] ecclesiastical ceremonies. They provide for their own living, clothing and other necessary expenses with the work of their own hands and some help from pious people, and at the same time they are being educated in the service of the Lord, and being kept free from any scandal.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ “the institution receives [...] every poor woman, young or old [...], wretches of every sort, as long as they accept obedience in this place” “si riceve senza dilazione ogni povera, giovine, et anco vecchie, figlie, grandi e piccole, derelitte d’ogni qualità, purché si vogliano contentare di entrare nell’ub’idienza di detto luogo” Letter from Virginia Bracelli to the wife of Giovan Francesco Spinola, 10-12-1633, from Squarciafico, *Embrione*, appendice n. 2, cited in *Positio*, 111-2.

¹¹⁸ In a letter of 10-12-1633 Bracelli mentions this second house: Letter from Virginia Bracelli to the wife of Giovan Francesco Spinola, 10-12-1633, from Squarciafico, *Embrione*, Appendix n. 2, cited in *Positio*, 111-2: 112.

¹¹⁹ Cf. *Positio*, 114.

¹²⁰ “Da qualche tempo in qua per singular provvidenza di Dio resta ridotto in casa, o case nominate Santa Maria del Rifugio, un buon numero di femine d’ogni qualità, e conditione miserabili, e prive d’ogni humano sussidio [...]. Vivono in d’e case [...] sotto il governo e cura di persona laica con rigorosa disciplina e retirezza, senza però obbligo alcuno ne di voti, ne d’habiti, ne di cerimonie ecclesiastiche, e col lavoro delle proprie mani, e qualche aguto di persone pie, si vanno mantenendo di vitto e vestito et altre spese necessarie, et in un istesso tempo s’instruiscono nel servizio di Dio, e si preservano libera da ogni scandalo” Letter from Virginia Bracelli to the senate, 29-11-1635, ASG, Atti del Senato, Sala B., cited in: *Positio*, 115.

On 13 December 1635, the different houses of Bracelli indeed received recognition as one charitable institute under the name of *Opera di Santa Maria del Rifugio*, which was defined as “a public work of benefit for the Republic”.¹²¹

Experiences that elicited trust

In her 1635 letter to the senate, Bracelli mentioned that her *Opera* was “*known by experience* [to be] of great benefit” and had therefore received enough money to buy a house.¹²² Once again, it was positive experiences that fostered trust. The same was true for that part of her *Opera* that was more strictly religious. The second community that Bracelli started in 1633 was housed in a property owned by her son-in-law, Benedetto Baciadonne, in Bisagno. The ninety women that moved in there were the ones who felt more inclined to religious life:

there, they will govern themselves and pay their rent, they only need clothes [...] and they live in perfect communion, in the way of nuns; only those who think about serving the Lord for their whole life in that congregation go to this house; occupied as they are with earning their living with their own hands and continuously praising God, I deem them the most glad and happy creatures that I can think of in this life.¹²³

Though Bracelli called this second house a convent and all women were required to wear the same habit, they were lay sisters rather than nuns: the women were not obliged to make vows and could leave whenever they wanted, on the condition that they had found an appropriate alternative. Interestingly, these lower-class women did not find the elites opposed to their inclinations of semi-religious life, quite the contrary: whereas it had been impossible for Bracelli to gather elite women to do

¹²¹ The rescript (dated 13-12-1635) on the back of Virginia’s request testifies to the Senate’s recognition of Virginia’s institutions “tamquam opus publicum seu pro Reipublicae utilitate”. Cited in: Positio, 15-16.

¹²² “conosciuta per esperienza di tanto profitto”. Letter from Virginia Bracelli to the senate, 29-11-1635, ASG, Atti del Senato, Sala B., cited in: Positio, 115.

¹²³ “[li] si governano e pagano la sua pigione, solo tengono bisogno del vestire, il quale è di arbasio, e vivono tutte in perfetta Comunità, a modo di Religiose; andando in detta Casa solo quelle, che pensano servir nostro Signore, tutto il tempo di sua vita, in detta Congregazione, occupate a guadagnarsi il vitto con le proprie mani, e lodar continuamente il Signore, le stimo le più contente, e felici creature che io mi sappi immaginare in questa vita.” Ibid.

religiously inspired work among the poor because of opposition from their family and others, for poor women that would otherwise flock the streets of Genoa an honourable religious path was more than welcome. For them, the trust threshold was apparently much lower.

That this experience of semi-religious life was attractive to many girls is evident from the fact that by 1658 the same convent housed 172 “daughters”, while a third house with the same rules had been founded before 1635. The first house meanwhile continued to receive many poor girls with no particular religious inclination. The lay sisters in the second and third houses started an active apostolate outside their convents: from 1644 onwards these “women dressed like nuns” began working in Pammatone, the main hospital in Genoa, and later in the Lazzaretto (1649).¹²⁴ One author reported that during the years of the plague epidemic (1656-7) more than 50 *figlie* died while caring for the sick in the Lazzaretto.¹²⁵ Despite the decrees of Trent and other instructions that limited possibilities to live the third status, Bracelli’s religious institution for active women was able to become successful because it answered some of the city’s needs: housing and educating the daughters of poor families and staffing the urban hospitals.¹²⁶

Deception or trust?

Whereas Strata’s enclosed convent, once started, was socially accepted by everyone, and Medea’s small-scale, semi-religious initiative can hardly have attracted all that much attention, things were different for Virginia Bracelli: her *figlie*, though following certain monastic habits, lived an active apostolate working in the public health care institutions of Genoa. Also, their numbers were completely different: by

¹²⁴ “quel numero di Donne vestite da Monache, che sono nel Monastero del Monte Calvario, per l’instradamento del lavorero, che si desidera introdurre in detto Lazzaretto, che le parranno necessarie, et ad esse assignarle quella razione e trattamento che le parrà.” Decreto del “Prestantissimo Ufficio dei Poveri” che autorizza a mettere alla direzione del laboratorio femminile del Lazzaretto le religiose del Montecalvario, 22-11-1650, from the Capitoli del Lazzaretto, cited in: *Positio*, 103.

¹²⁵ Mentioned in: Antero Maria di San Bonaventura, *Li lazzaretti della città e Riviera di Genova del 1657*, Genoa 1658, pp. 62, 209, 219, 41, 251, 334, cited in; *Positio*, 103.

¹²⁶ Cf. Terraccia, ‘Case sante’, 317.

1645 already four hundred needy women were being assisted in Bracelli's institution.¹²⁷ Perhaps inevitably, it attracted much more attention and opposition than the other two initiatives. The question arises of how Bracelli made sure that this particular way of semi-religious life continued as she intended it.

First, she had to accept male protectors for her institution. All religious and charitable institutions of the city were required to have a *protettoria*, whose members were appointed by the government.¹²⁸ Derived from the urban nobility, these protectors were usually also among the most generous donors. They were the legal representatives of a charitable institution in financial and administrative matters. In 1641, the government assigned three patrons to the *Opera del Rifugio* at the request of Bracelli. These three had already been unofficial protectors for several years.¹²⁹ Probably because of this personal link, Bracelli decided to leave all power to these protectors: they became the spiritual and administrative superiors of the institution.¹³⁰ After Bracelli's death in 1651, the protectors gained complete control over the *Opera* and elected the new mother superior and her vicar (while the sisters' vote was only consultative).¹³¹ Virginia's readiness to leave her *Opera* in the hands of protectors appointed by the government may be one of the reasons that her semi-religious form of life for women could endure and grow, enjoying the trust of the laity.

The second way in which Bracelli ensured the continuation of her organisation, without ever labeling her *Opera* as an official religious institution, was by winning the trust of ecclesiastics. Though she had always been active in personally

¹²⁷ Decreto del Senato che autorizza i notai a raccomandare ai testatori l'Opera del Rifugio in Monte Calvario, 09-02-1645, ASG, Manuale Decreti Senato, 894, f. 25, cited in: *Positio*, 190.

¹²⁸ See for an example of this process: Fontana, 'La vita religiosa', 210. See for a good explanation of the "protettoria": De Marini, *Emanuele Brignole e l'Albergo dei poveri di Genova*, 44, footnote 26.

¹²⁹ Cf. *Positio*, 136-140.

¹³⁰ "3'o Rinuncio quanto possiedo in servizio di Dio, e per me non piglierò altro che quello che mi sarà ordinato dai Superiori." Bracelli's propositions as reported in Squarciafico, *Embrione*, no. 122, cited in: *Positio*, 75.

¹³¹ *Regole et Constitutioni che devono osservarsi nelle case di Nostra Signora del Refugio nel Calvario*, written somewhere between 1644 and 1650, cited in: *Positio*, 181-3: 183. It is unclear who wrote these rules, most probably written somewhere between 1644 and 1650 when Bracelli was still alive, or at most a little later. Cf. *Positio*, 179. That this was not unusual is clear from an example in: Fontana, 'La vita religiosa', 212.

educating and spiritually assisting the women who lived in her houses, she also involved several priests as chaplains to foster piety among them. The oldest rules of the institution focused on the religious life that Bracelli's women should lead: from fasting, to daily prayers, weekly confession and communion.¹³² At the same time, she decided never to let her sisters profess vows so as to avoid the enclosure that was expected of professed nuns (just as the Daughters of Charity did). This choice enabled them to continue their work in public institutions. Virginia did however urge her *figlie* to work in the hospitals *as if they were constrained by a vow* and to see their way of semi-religious life as no less than that of contemplative sisters. The rules of Bracelli's institution furthermore read: "it greatly pleases His Divine Majesty to see them at work in his service, bound only with chains of love, and they should furthermore know that, as far as the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are concerned, these should not be observed less among them than in the most observant religious orders".¹³³

Bracelli's collaboration with Emanuele Brignole, who in 1650 became a fourth protector of the *Opera del Rifugio*, furthermore contributed to safeguarding the continuation of her institution. This wealthy friend of Cardinal Durazzo also supervised the building of the new seminary and took the lead in the construction of the *Albergo dei Poveri*; a huge edifice destined to house the urban poor, while providing

¹³² Cf. *Regole et Constitutioni*, in: *Positio*, 181-3: 181. An interesting rule is number 13 which indicates that both the sisters that devoted themselves to religious life, and the women who did not make this commitment were to be treated equally: "La Madre ogni Domenica finita la ricreazione dopo il pranzo et l'inverno la sera sonata l'Ave Maria farà il Capitolo, al quale interveranno tutte le monache, et in esso... Primieramente domanderà à chi le parrà meglio del Stato genereale della Casa per intendere se s'introduce qualche abuso da levar via, et se occorre qualche cosa tanto circa il governo spirituale, quanto circa il temporale, che sia bene introdurre, et darne parte, à Signori Protettori, come anco domanderà se gli occorre niente intorno alle persone di Casa si monache, come secolari [...]. . Haveranno in comune li habiti, veli, biancarie, et altre cose quali saranno conforme alla santà povertà franciscana povere, et vili".

¹³³ "Facciano conto, e stima grande del loro istituto, come venuto dal Cielo, né pensino di esser meno accette à Dio perché non vivano in obbligo, ò di clausura, o di voti piacendo assai à Sua Divina Maesta di vederle impiegate in suo servitio, legate solo con catene d'amore, et con tutto ciò sappiano, che quanto a i voti di povertà, castità ed obediensa non meno doveranno esser in osservanza appresso di loro che nelle Religioni più osservanti". *Regole et Constitutioni*, in: *Positio*, 181-3: 181.

them with work, health care and education.¹³⁴ In 1664, Brignole called the sisters of Bracelli to work in this *Albergo*. Operating under the authority of the *Albergo*'s supervisors, they slowly started to be identified exclusively with Brignole's initiative, and were commonly called Brignoline.¹³⁵ The regulations that Brignole wrote in 1656 (together with the other patrons) highlight again the secular character of the institution. He insisted, for instance, that "they should not call themselves nuns but handmaidens of Our Lady of the Refuge on Calvary" and that their habit should be that of tertiaries.¹³⁶

Because of this strong emphasis on their secular character, the *Suore del Rifugio* remained independent of ecclesiastical authority and devoid of canonical recognition until the end of the nineteenth century. However, they did enjoy support from the Genoese archbishop, Cardinal Durazzo, and other high ecclesiastics who were involved in its development.¹³⁷ One biographer even wrote that the cardinal and Virginia treated each other confidentially, "and she was greatly esteemed by the prelate [...] who admired her as a holy person, knowing that she had developed all the virtues, especially that of obedience towards one's superiors".¹³⁸ It was not by deceiving these Church leaders, but by gaining the trust and support that was elicited by the social and spiritual benefits of this group, together with a careful self-definition of the institution, that enabled Bracelli's Brignoline to become a successful alternative

¹³⁴ Among the main (financial) supporters of the *Albergo* were Cardinal Durazzo himself, but also Emanuele's cousin Anton Giulio Brignole Sale, Girolamo Durazzo, Giuseppe Maria Durazzo, Giacomo Filippo Durazzo, Gio Francesco Granello and Father Luigi. De Marini, *Emanuele Brignole e l'Albergo dei poveri di Genova*, 55–56, 61.

¹³⁵ Fontana, 'La vita religiosa', 218.

¹³⁶ "non debbano chiamarsi Monache ma Serve di Nostra Signora del Rifuggio nel Calvario" *Decree of the patrons on the juridical nature of the Opera* 06-08-1656. Copy in: Genova, AR, fogliazzo degli anni 1644-1676, n. 46. *Positio*, 185.

¹³⁷ The informal influence and support of Cardinal Durazzo appears from a line in a decree of the protectors of 6 August 1656: "volendo finalmente [...] anche per incontrare le menti dell'Eminentissimo Nostro Arcivescovo, che quelle che con vera devozione, e staccamento dal mondo si saranno con l'esperienza di molti anni passati con edificazione in detta Opera, date totalmente a Dio, non habbino mai che pensare che debba essere di loro nel rimanente della lor vita, né dare orecchio à simili tentationi." Ibid.

¹³⁸ "fra deto Eminentissimo e la signora Virginia vi era confidenza; ed essa era appresso detto prelato in concetto grandissimo, e stimatissimo, ammirandola esso come persona santa, conoscendola stabilita in tutte le virtù, particolarmente nell'ubbidienza a' superiori". Squarciafico, *Embrione*, p. 233, cited in: Musso, *Il Cardinale*, 194.

to the Genoese secluded convents. If we may believe the Augustinian friar Antero Maria da San Bonaventura Micone, in 1661 the different *conservatori* of Bracelli combined, housed around a thousand women.¹³⁹

Savona's Medee and the importance of freedom

Above all, be on your guard not to want to get anything done by force; because God has given free will to everyone, and wants to force no one, but only proposes, invites and counsels.¹⁴⁰

Angela Merici, founder of the Ursulines, gave this advice to her followers in the 1530s. She envisioned that the women who joined her would freely acknowledge and accept to follow her rules. Mazzonis' statistical linguistic analysis of these rules demonstrates that the verb "to want" (*volere*) appears 62 times as opposed to three times in which she used the verb "dovere", meaning must. Angela's language of free choice, of "voluntarily making to God the sacrifice of her own heart", resonates with the words used by a group of four women who lived a century later in Savona, 50 kilometres west of Genoa.¹⁴¹ Following the example of the Medee, in 1666 these four women aspired to "devote themselves to teaching daughters, have others board with them and teach the Christian doctrine on feast days, imitating in everything the [...] Medee and other similar daughters [...] in other cities".¹⁴² The continuity and spread of the semi-religious form of life of the Medee – according to the women involved – hinged on freedom: only in freedom, could theirs become a trustworthy, honourable institution.

¹³⁹ Fontana, 'La vita religiosa', 200.

¹⁴⁰ Prologue of the *Regula della Compagnia de Santa Orsola*, cited in: Querciolo Mazzonis, *Spirituality, Gender, and the Self in Renaissance Italy: Angela Merici and the Company of St. Ursula* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 173.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁴² "impiegarsi nell'ammaestrare le figlie, tenerne altre in educatione ed insegnare alle feste la dottrina Christiana, in tutto imitando dette Maestre Medee ed altre Figlie simili già dette delle altre Città". Letter from the Medee-like religious women to the Genoese senate, Savona, 23 February 1666. All the subsequent citations are from: ASG, AS, *Iurisdictionium* 1118, mazzo 28, no. 50. The folder (no. 50) contains this letter from February, one written by the same women to the Senate in May, and an appendix to one of these two letters.

In a letter of 23 February 1666 to the *Serenissima Repubblica*, the prospective Medee of Savona complained that their local bishop strongly opposed their initiative and thus gave rise to “many rumours in the city”.¹⁴³ Unlike the Medee in Genoa, the women in Savona apparently did not manage to avoid ecclesial interference and the disapproval of the bishop was causing reputational damage. The bishop had immediately ordered the disbanding of the group under the pretext that “with private authority only” they wanted to start a new religious order, one that even resembled “that one that Urban VIII prohibited with his bull”, i.e. the congregation of Mary Ward. In an attempt to defend themselves, the women argued that, since they differed from seculars in nothing other than their “modest and scorned habit,” it was most unjust that Savona’s bishop saw them as part of his jurisdiction.¹⁴⁴

To emphasise their independence and seek government protection against the “nuisance that the most illustrious monsignor [was] causing them with his orders”,¹⁴⁵ the four women in Savona sought secular recognition for their institution. In their petition they asked the senators:

to ensure that they are again left free and are not unjustly disturbed in their holy intentions, [and that they will] protect them and their house in the future, recognising them as subjects, [...] so that these most devout daughters will thus always be defended against anything that might happen to them at the hands of those who they do not recognise as masters, and [...] live in secular habit [...], both for the convenience of their souls [...], and for the benefit of the city.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ “molte dicerie nella Città”. Letter to the Genoese senate, Savona, 23 February 1666.

¹⁴⁴ “con sola auctorità priuata” “quella da Urbano VIII con sua Bolla prohibita” “habito dimesso e disprezzato.” Appendix B (archived next to the letters of the religious women of Savona to the Senate).

¹⁴⁵ “molestie, che con suoi ordini li cagiona Monsignor Ill’mo”. Letter to the Genoese senate, Savona, 23 February 1666.

¹⁴⁶ “uogliano non solo [...] fare sijno di nuouo poste in liberta, e non sturbate indebitamente dà loro santi propositi, ma anche uogliano degnarsi di prendere di esse e d’a Casa loro ogni protettione per l’auuenire riconoscendole fra loro sudite e Figlie diuotissime restino sempre difese con questo da ogni incontro uenir li possa, da chi non riconoscono per Padrone, ed in habito secolare uiuere [...], tanto per utile dell’anime loro [...], come per beneficio d’a Città”. Ibid.

Insisting on the convenience of their institution for the city, namely that young girls would be taken care of, the women argued that their goal was “to live all together, as sisters, without being subject to rules, except the Rule of all piety and devotion”. They underlined the equality among them and their rejection of titles such as “abbess or prioress”. One of the reasons why Mary Ward’s congregation had been suppressed was because its hierarchical structure resembled that of a religious order. In order to avoid a similar fate, the group in Savona explicitly wrote that their members would “only pay the respect that is due to the oldest ones, to whose will they shall strive to answer like daughters towards their mothers, since there is no cohesive body [...] without a head”.¹⁴⁷ The group from Savona also rejected all other attributes that could create a resemblance with a real convent such as a chapter, a church, enclosure, vows, and the habit of nuns (similar to the tactics of the Daughters of Charity). They tried to convince the senate of the reliability and honourability of their institution by claiming that “many of the most distinguished Ladies and the most honourable Princesses” chose to become part of similar groups of devout laywomen, “preferring these houses over secluded convents”.¹⁴⁸ Also the concluding words of their petition to the senate were meant to elicit trust: “by working with sincerity of heart, and desiring to do nothing more in the future than what they have said and shown to desire up till now, they will always gladly know that everyone is certain of their aspirations”.¹⁴⁹ This promised stability was to overcome the distrust that poorly defined semi-religious groups usually encountered.

Besides emphasising their material independence (they aimed to live on non-compulsory dowries and the revenues of teaching), in their petition the women also underlined the radical spiritual freedom and independence from authority that they

¹⁴⁷ “uiuere tutte insieme, come sorelle, senza’altra sogettione di Regole, solo sogette alla Regola d’ogni pietà e diuotione [...], non haueranno altra distintione di Abbadezza o Priorezza (come per disprezzo si dice) ma solo porteranno quel rispetto che si deue alle più uecchie à uoleri della quale procureranno di andarsi accomodando come figlie uerso la madre non potendosi dar caso, che si troui un corpo d’unione ben regolato senza capo” Appendix B.

¹⁴⁸ “molte e molte Signore principalissime, e Principezze di gran Conto antepoendo queste case à monasteri rinchiusi” Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ “operando con la sincerità nel cuore, non più uolendo fare nell’auuenire di quel ch’hanno detto, o mostrato di uoler far hora, gusteranno sempre ch’ogn’uno resti certo della loro uolontà” Ibid.

envisioned: “they will confess with whomever they please [...] and whoever will hear their confession will have no say whatsoever in matters of governance”. Still, the four women showed a particular preference for the Jesuits although they strongly repudiated the accusation of being *Giesuitesse*, “because if they are not, one should not call them by this name”: “they want to continue [...] to confess with [the Jesuits] and frequent their Church, but they can always confess with others if they want, following their preference [and] using their freedom”.¹⁵⁰ The importance of freedom is also clear in the lines about leaving the company: “And if they do not like living together, all of them will be free to go [...] claiming back their dowry and also to marry, if they want.”¹⁵¹

Again, as in the sphere of cloistered convents, one’s take on freedom determined what one saw as trustworthy religious alternatives for women. In the eyes of the women who aspired to become the new Medee of Savona, it was their freedom that helped them to be reliable:

since they go out [on the streets], they are forced to show that they are more exemplary by reason of their robust inner holiness that obliges them to show that their spirit is more contained [...], and it distracts them from pursuing those major liberties that secluded nuns very soon seize, tempted as they are because they find themselves forever enclosed within four walls.¹⁵²

For many others, such as Savona’s bishop, however, it was this freedom that initially made the women suspicious or even untrustworthy in their eyes.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ “perche se non lo sono, ne si puon dire tali” “si confesseranno da chi loro piacerà [...] e chi le confesserà non hauerà sopra di esse soprintendenza alcuna di gouerno, onde siano quelle tenute di pendere da lui, come da loro superioree se bene queste, come gia Penitenti de Padri Giesuiti uogliono anche unite seguitare à confessarsi dall’istessi e frequentar la loro Chiesa, potranno però sempre confessarsi da altri, uolendo, secondo li piacerà, godendo della loro libertà.” Ibid.

¹⁵¹ “E quando non li piaccia uiuer insieme tutte saranno in libertà di potersene andare [...] rippigliata la sua dote, et anche maritarsi, se uorranno”. Ibid.

¹⁵² “Perché con questo uscire restano costrette di dimostrarsi più esemplari con il fondamento d’una soda santità interna, che l’obbliga di dimostrarsi più ritirate in se stesse e nella propria persona più guardinghe e le distrae dal ricercare quelle maggiori libertà che ben presto si procacciano le claustrali, tentate di ritrovarsi per sempre dentro quattro mura rinchiuse”. Ibid.

¹⁵³ Gemma Borgonovo writes of “a clear lack of trust in women” that was challenged “by the new religious [...] in a coragous way” (“una palese mancanza di fiducia nella donna per cui le nuove

Precisely because of their emphasis on freedom, the initiative of the four women in Savona almost failed to acquire sufficient trust. Their case was finally resolved in correspondence between the bishop, the Genoese senate and the local Jesuits: the latter apparently managed to convince the bishop of the trustworthiness of the initiative. With the bishop's *placet*, the group started to operate under the name of *Suore della Purificazione di Maria Santissima*, the feast day on which they had first gathered before their dismantlement (2 February). They were joined by another sister, Angela Maria Sordi, who would become the leader of the group under the auspices of the Jesuits and who wrote a first set of rules in 1683. The sisters did not profess solemn vows, they could leave whenever they wanted, and outwardly distinguished themselves only by the simple black dress they wore. An interesting parallel with the Medee was their attempt to stay low key: "They will admit to their company [...] whomever they like most and deem best, [...] up until the number that they want; the fewer the better".¹⁵⁴ Staying low key implied that the circle of people who supported them could also remain small and therefore less trust was needed.

For two of the four girls, Maria Anna and Paola Caterina Ascereto, the group's specific claim to freedom became a major obstacle: when the company was first dismantled, they were taken back to their parental home with the promise that one day they could return to join the others. Later, however, the father of these two girls changed his mind, apparently not regarding this new initiative as an acceptable form of life for his daughters. Pressures from the Savona city government only intensified his resistance and, allegedly, even his mistreatment of his own daughters. They were not allowed to join their other three companions once the bishop's approval arrived.¹⁵⁵ Freedom of choice, a condition for trust and thus for people to act in a conscious, convinced and trustworthy way, as Angela Merici clearly understood a

religiose la contestavano in modo coraggioso") Gemma Borgonovo, 'Istituto Suore della Purificazione di Maria SS. (Savona)', in Paolucci, *Congregazioni laicali femminili*, 127. Borgonovo also cited a document ("informazione data a monsignore, allegato a) that is currently missing from the folder.

¹⁵⁴ "In loro compagnia ammetteranno quelle per uiuere insieme che più loro piaceranno, e stimeranno migliori, e sino à quel numero che li parrà, che quanto meno sarà, sarà meglio" Appendix B. ASG, AS, Iurisdictionalium 1118, mazzo 28, no. 50.

¹⁵⁵ Fontana, 'La vita religiosa', 263–64.

century before, was also what could be a bridge too far for the elites in seventeenth-century Italy: distrust and control of one's daughters was an easier option.

Conclusion

In early modern Genoa, there were several women who wanted to start their own form of religious life, either because the *forma vitae* they desired was not present where they lived, as was the case for the women in Savona, or because, though present, in time it had been transformed into something that did not correspond to their ideals. Whatever their reason, in order to be granted enough agency to start something new, a high level of trust from the people who could help them was indispensable: female founders needed an unusual level of personal freedom, and an uncommon degree of room for manoeuvre. Analysing the genesis of three new forms of religious life for women has shed light on a range of possible strategies that helped to build trust.

First, a good societal position was helpful: all three founders were wealthy, upper-class, young widows. Their wealth gave them some space for personal initiative, their social background provided them with a good network, their widowhood offered them freedom of movement, and their youth gave them some time to develop their vocation and act on it. Another striking similarity between the three founders was the individual agency of all three of them in choosing and fashioning the *forma vitae* they wanted to pursue. Male confessors or patrons did not decide for them: though having the same spiritual leader, Medea and Strata both consciously chose radically different ways of religious life. Bracelli, for her part, also showed much determination in steering her own project the way she wanted. Of course, the individual agency of these women had to be complemented with support and trust from different sides. Yet neither the secular nor religious authorities decided whose protection was sought: it was the founders' own choice, born out of practical convenience, that steered the decision.¹⁵⁶

Regardless of whether it fitted the established categories, it was the public aspect of an initiative that determined the level of trust that was necessary for it to

¹⁵⁶ Contrary to what Paolo Fontana assumes: *Ibid.*, 199.

become successful. More trust was needed when the project was more public and/or on a larger scale. Strata's project of founding a new contemplative convent required a high level of trust: besides the competition, the main obstacle was the impossibility of winning the trust of possible supporters before setting off officially and publicly. Therefore, the two most important patrons of Strata's project initially preferred the convent to become associated with the Discalced Carmelites so as to avoid risks. Bracelli's group faced a similar trust problem because they too had to operate very publicly, given that Bracelli's intention was to attract as many girls as possible. Medea's women, on the contrary, kept a low profile and thus needed a lower level of trust. Only after years of proving their reliability and their work's usefulness did they go to the senate for public recognition.

The strategies that facilitated the required trust were very different for active and contemplative initiatives: the former could emphasise their usefulness for society, whereas the latter could merely try to prove that their wish to start a new convent was legitimate and willed by God. For the contemplative Turchine, it was therefore a logical step to ask the archbishop for his trust, whereas for the active Medee and Brignoline it was essential to avoid issues of jurisdiction and turn to the senate for the recognition of their institution. Moreover, the bigger the project, the more trust from different sides was needed. For the Medee, the trust of a few families and of the Jesuits sufficed. Bracelli's project, by contrast, was of such a large scale that it required support and trust from family, the urban élite, the government, and some clergy who could help her in her venture. One fact working in her favour was that the women she sought to attract were poor women from the lower classes: contrary to aristocratic women, the social demands were much lower when it came to the religious life of non-elite women.

Another important element that surfaces when studying these initiatives from a trust perspective is the phase of the project during which trust was most difficult to obtain. For the contemplative Turchine, the biggest trust issues occurred at the beginning, but once the convent was established, they grew steadily and became successful in other cities as well. Forms of active religious life for women needed a lower level of trust at the start and thus experienced fewer trust issues in the early phases of their foundations, but they had more difficulties in guaranteeing continuity.

The tactic used by the Brignoline, who had great urban visibility and at the same time wanted to continue their third status religious life, was to consciously avoid certain labels and to forge a bond with the lay authorities by accepting male patronage while safeguarding their semi-religious status.

The case of the girls who aspired to become the Medee of Savona has also shown the interconnectedness of freedom and trust: whether or not people prioritised the individual freedom of women was decisive for the level of trust that was given to them. People like the bishop of Savona seem to have distrusted their initiative. Others were convinced that trust would actually allow these devout girls the freedom that would enable and encourage them to live up to the trust that was placed in them. Freedom was essential to trust: lowering what I have called the trust threshold and creating some freedom of action was paramount for a new religious initiative for women to flourish, regardless of whether or not it fell within the established categories.