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Marguerite Vacher, *Nuns Without Cloister: Sisters of St. Joseph in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2010. xli + 425 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7618-4342-9.

Review by Susan E. Dinan, William Patterson University.

“... We are like nuns outside the cloister.” This 1683 quotation from Mother Jeanne Marguerite Burdier begins Marguerite Vacher’s book, *Nuns without Cloister: Sisters of St. Joseph in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. While unenclosed communities of women religious existed in the Middle Ages and were prominent again by the nineteenth century, the development of non-cloistered communities of women in the post-Tridentine era of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was considered by some church officials to be problematic. Many historians examine religious communities in this era, and Vaucher contributes to a growing body of material looking at the roles women occupied in early modern Catholicism.

Originally published in 1991 as *Des “régulières” dans le siècle: Les soeurs de Saint-Joseph du Père Médaille aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, this important work is now available to an audience that reads English, but not French. Vacher received her Doctorat d’Histoire moderne from the Université Lumière Lyon 2, and she is a member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, the community chronicled in the book. In her introduction, she states that she writes this book for her fellow sisters, so they may better understand their history. Vaucher does not seek to position herself in a historiographic debate; rather she seeks to tell the story of the evolution of her community, a story that no one has told before. However, her story is part of a larger narrative and she acknowledges this.

Vaucher recounts the foundation of the community and what its founder Jean-Pierre Médaille referred to as the “little design,” while she places the community within the broader movement of active women into the church. She writes,

When the Little Design came to light in the middle of the seventeenth century, it was by no means the first attempt at consecrated apostolic life open to the world. Previous efforts in that direction had been beset by many juridical and social impediments that had to be recognized, integrated, or circumvented. By the time the Sisters of Saint Joseph took root, apostolic freedom, although bold in its forms, was not so new or provocative as it had been fifty years earlier in the days of Francis de Sales. The Sisters of Saint Joseph benefited in a certain way from the earlier attempts, whether successes or failures (p. 119).

The Sisters of Saint Joseph had their origins around Le Puy, in southeastern France, in the years before 1650, and did not expand beyond this region until the nineteenth century. Fire destroyed the municipal archives of the city of Le Puy in 1939, and Vaucher conducted her research in diocesan archives in southeastern France. She also accessed information about Father Médaille in Jesuit archives in Rome and Toulouse. Her book relies upon many of the

community's written texts from its early years. Her task was certainly a formidable one as she tried to piece together the community's early history from few extant records. Vaucher examines the community's founders, who are an obscure lot, and it is very helpful that she and her translator bring them to wider attention. Father Medaille organized a group of "pious widows and single women" who signed the first constitution. Of the seven women who initiated the founding constitution, only one could sign her name to it and one came from a fairly prominent local family. Most of the sisters came from modest families about whom little is known.

Nuns without Cloister is part of a broader body of writing that shows the complex consequences of the Council of Trent. Between 1545-1563, the Council issued dictates that were strict and seemed inflexible. In reality, there was room to maneuver around some of the accords, but people and groups had to be careful in how they circumvented the Council's rules. In 1563, the Council stated that all women religious had to live in cloisters and that religious and secular authorities should work together to dismantle any unenclosed communities. Indeed, communities were closed and nuns who had enjoyed a degree of geographical freedom were enclosed within convent walls, but the early seventeenth century also saw the flowering of many new active communities for women that transcended the cloister.

The seventeenth century was a time of war, epidemic, and famine, and municipal and religious authorities recognized the importance of having groups that served the suffering poor. Local governments, bishops, and priests were not keen to stop those helping the needy as other resources for their support often did not exist. According to Vaucher,

The development of the little houses of St Joseph could not have taken place without the support of the bishops, because, lacking their permission, they could not be established in a diocese. In the beginning, this authorization at times amounted to non-interference.... The most immediate and day-to-day support for the country houses could only come from the pastor of the parish (p. 94).

The Wars of Religion ravaged Le Puy as the city sided with anti-royalist League and the rest of diocese sided with royalists, and the region experienced considerable devastation. The Sisters of Saint Joseph were Hospitallers who assisted the poor by founding orphanages, teaching "fallen" women and vulnerable girls lace making, visiting the poor and prisoners, and distributing material aid. Their work was very important for the survival of victims of violence and poverty in and around Le Puy. Vaucher explains that the success of the Sisters of Saint Joseph in creating communities outside of cloisters was due in part to their modest backgrounds.

Making no claims to be religious or secular communities, they fell under neither the rubrics of the Council of Trent nor the articles of royal legislation. These small groups of women scattered throughout rural areas shared the way of life common to the surrounding population. Existing as independent units, the communities did not form a legal body or claim to exert any powers belonging to one. They were the poor relations of the secular communities. Subject only to the authority of the bishops, they had complete liberty to grow in number (p. 119).

Vaucher explains that the Sisters of Saint Joseph was founded upon the Ignatian spirituality known to its Jesuit founder.

From Father Medaille's perspective, which is that of Ignatius Loyola, the sisters' apostolic and charitable actions flow from the consecration of their life

to God. Apostolic life becomes the expression of mystical life. Without the external observances of monastic life, but in other ways, they desired to live the profound reality of that life (p. 73).

As Mary Ward and others discovered, living a mystical life in the world was very problematic for women. However, unlike Ward's Institute of Mary, or English Ladies, the Sisters of Saint Joseph established a number of small communities in the seventeenth century that were able to thrive. The community of the Sisters of Saint Joseph consisted of small loosely connected houses in and around Le Puy. With the protection of bishops and pastors, the Sisters were able to side step the dictates of Trent, and provide charity to those in need in their community. Vaucher speculates that the Sisters were of humble social origins and were not considered particularly significant in the eyes of the church and their actions were therefore not considered important enough to be deemed problematic. The Sisters managed to live and work in the world, living an organized religious life like that of nuns, while serving the poor in their neighborhoods. Thus, they skirted the dictates of Trent without directly challenging the church.

Vaucher's translation enters into a dynamic conversation about women religious in early modern Europe to which her work contributes. In the years since the French publication, a handful of authors has examined the growth of active communities of religious women in the post-Tridentine era. In 1993, Elizabeth Rapley published *The Devotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France*, about active communities, mostly teaching congregations, of women that evolved during the Catholic Reformation. In her wake, there have been several publications about non-cloistered women religious in the early modern era. Like the authors of most of these texts, Vaucher is not interested in arguing that her spiritual ancestors were rebels or feminists. They were dedicated members of the church, who believed they could best imitate Christ and serve the church by serving its poorest members. The Constitutions of the Congregation of Saint Joseph have a "dual objective: the sanctity of the sisters and service of the neighbor" (p. 163). Vaucher chronicles the tension inherent in expressing sanctity through service to the poor after the Council of Trent.

While Vaucher is writing for her sisters, her book adds to a broader audience's understanding of Tridentine Catholicism. Historians have examined women religious in and around Paris, namely Barbara Diefendorf in *Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris*, and other have studied more prominent communities, like Laurence Lux-Sterritt's, *Redefining Female Religious Life: French Ursulines and English Ladies in Seventeenth-Century Catholicism* which analyzes why early modern women created new congregations with active vocations. Vaucher calls attention to a previously unexamined community located in a little studied region.

For historians, Vaucher's book can be a frustrating read because it contains a great many details, but lacks a clear argumentative structure. However, the book is a gem for what it brings to the reader, including some insightful glimpses into the meaning of religious life for early modern women. Vaucher provides details about the way the Sisters lived and dressed. She underscores the meaning of dress when she writes, "Father Medaille was going to use it to offer the Sisters of Saint Joseph complete apostolic freedom. Their dress was not synonymous with enclosure. On the contrary, for women it symbolized openness to the world" (p. 237). Readers are fortunate that Vaucher has shared the world of these simple women in such a thoughtful and nuanced way.

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