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Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, *The Streets as a Cloister: History of the Daughters of Charity, 17th and 18th Centuries*, translated by Marie Poole and Margaret Barrett. (New York: New City Press, 2020). Notes, appendix, bibliography, and index. 665 pp. \$79.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-56548-027-8.

Review by Mary M. Rowan, Brooklyn College, City University of New York.

The book under review by Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, who holds the Dennis H. Holtschneider Chair at DePaul University of Chicago, responds to an urgent need for a general history of the Daughters of Charity. The Daughters of Charity were lay religious women who worked in the hospices and hospitals of the ancient regime, forming the nucleus of the nursing profession. They infiltrated the lowest levels of society, to treat and comfort the sick, and to assuage fears of the dying. Some also rescued foundlings and sheltered orphans who swelled the ranks of the poor. Others instructed young girls in makeshift village schools and town slums. Curiously, in view of the importance of their numbers (up to 20,000 women working as nurses, teachers, and proto-modern social workers before 1800), until now there have been only limited studies of this wide-ranging group of women.[1] Many studies are available of the various enclosed religious communities for women, like the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, which attracted widows and ladies of the high bourgeoisie, and established orders like the Benedictines of the Ladies Abbey of Caen, a Royal Monastery directly linked to the Court.[2] However important their contributions to history and literature, the members of these cloistered orders were never as numerous or as close to the people as the daughters of village peasants and merchants who formed the widespread and well-staffed ranks of the Daughters of Charity.

A product of deep research into both secular and religious archives, *The Streets as Cloister* is an English translation of Brejon's *Histoire des Filles de la Charité, XVIIe-XVIIIe Siècle, La rue pour cloître*, originally published in 2011.[3] Vincent de Paul, the founder himself, furnished the book's title, drawn from his conference of August 24, 1659, which emphasized the liberty as well as the lower-class status of desirable recruits. These "sturdy village girls" were only to answer the divine call to enter the houses and hospices of the poor and to comfort the people displaced by the frequent wars, especially the Thirty Years War and the two Frondes, both of which imposed conscription and heavy taxes on an overburdened peasantry.

The Daughters stood out as lay religious women, wearing a distinctive white-winged linen headdress and a long grey tunic of rough material, which led to their familiar designation as "the Grey Sisters." Unlike nuns, however, the Daughters did not take permanent vows or withdraw from the world into a cloistered religious order. In short, they were not considered nuns by their

contemporaries, but were more similar to members of societies of Apostolic Life. These devout groups were patterned on the confraternities, assemblies of pious people gathered to address social needs. Vincent foresaw that to accomplish their often-rude tasks the Daughters would require little: “for cloister the streets of the city, for enclosure obedience, with an obligation to go nowhere but the houses of the sick or to places necessary for their service, [...] for grille the fear of God, for veil holy modesty” (p.23).

Current scholarship on seventeenth-century France tends to deconstruct the gilded image of the *grand siècle* centered on the reign of Louis XIV and the notion of a unique French Spirituality. This includes questioning traditional scholarship, which promoted the myth of religious unity during this “century of Saints” and neglected the undercurrents of Protestant and libertine thought that existed behind the unified façade. *The Streets as a Cloister*, anchored firmly in traditional philosophy and orthodox interpretations, is therefore not part of these current trends. Herein, Vincent de Paul is a Tridentine parish priest, while Louise de Marillac is a *Dévote*. The book’s two opening chapters recount the biographies of the sainted founders, offering new material on the role of women in poor relief.

Chapter one presents Vincent de Paul’s varied ecclesiastical career, marked here as beginning when he became chaplain to the powerful Gondi family, specifically to Pierre-Emmanuel de Gondi (1581-1662) the General of the Galleys. Vincent served as chaplain to the prisoners and spiritual director to the General’s wife, Françoise-Marguerite de Silly (1584-1625), one of his important correspondents. He also tutored the family’s sons. Thus, his ties to Jean-François Paul de Gondi, Cardinal de Retz (1613-1679) reached back to their youth before the civil wars of the Fronde. This long acquaintance facilitated Vincent’s procuring approbation of his radical new order from the cardinal on January 18, 1655, followed by papal approbation on June 8, 1688. However, in 1617, Pierre de Bérulle, founder of the Oratory, not yet a cardinal, persuaded Vincent to quit his Gondi patrons to assume duties as pastor of a poor parish in Châtillon-les-Dombes (now Chalaronne), where he witnessed the scope and depth of rural poverty. He fought for the poor by setting up groups of the Ladies of Charity on the model of the confraternities of Rome. Vincent’s diplomatic talents allowed him to retain the help of the powerful: having served as chaplain to Marguerite de Valois, he later became chaplain to Anne of Austria. Nevertheless, he pursued his own goal of creating not only the Daughters of Charity, but also the secular priests of the Congregation of the Mission, known as the Lazarists. These orders worked to improve the lives of the poor in opposition to the interests of the upper classes engaged in their oppression. Chapter two provides a narrative of the life of Louise de Marillac, the illegitimate daughter of Louis de Marillac (1556-1604), a member of Parliament. When she was four years old, he placed her, under the guidance of her great-aunt, a Dominican nun, in the convent of the Royal Monastery of Poissy. There she received the training of an aristocratic young woman, learning to read and write, paint and draw, to become literate, but not learned. The stigma of illegitimacy endured to bar her entry as a postulant into her cherished Order, the Capuchins. Their refusal distressed her, and she withdrew into the depression that shadowed her youth. She recovered sufficiently to marry Antoine Le Gras (c.1577-1625) a minor official in the circle of Marie de Medici, mother of Louis XIII. After Antoine’s death in 1625, Louise depended first on the spiritual guidance of Francis de Sales, then Jean-Pierre Camus de Pontcarré, Bishop of Belley (1584-1652), and finally, Vincent de Paul. Vincent and Louise’s lifelong collaboration and friendship began with Vincent’s first letter of advice in 1626. Brejon helpfully provides excerpts from their frequent missives to document Louise’s spiritual progress as well as her ability to organize others effectively. The pair would work together and maintain their unique

correspondence until they both died, six months apart, in 1660.

Chapter three details how Louise began her mission when she gathered several young women candidates into her Paris home for instruction. To Louise, training the mind was just as important as healing the body. She emphasized the importance of literacy and taught all to read. Medical workers would need to read prescriptions from doctors and to direct orders to pharmacies. Louise deemed the arrival of Marguerite Nézet or Naseau, a cowherd who had taught herself to read, as miraculous confirmation of her mission to teach girls and to promote literacy among the deprived. The notion that women's literacy could be achieved miraculously without study or human intervention is, of course, a commonplace of convent writings. Unfortunately, Marguerite, who had begun to teach poor girls on her own, died shortly after meeting Louise, but survived in the Daughters' memory as the first martyr of the nascent order, sacrificed to vindicate its teaching mission.

Chapter four discusses the trials the founders surmounted to establish the new community, which integrated village girls with the upper-class Ladies of Charity. Vincent de Paul had based his original charitable work on the unreliable efforts of the Ladies of Charity, who quickly found the repellent tasks of early modern caregiving to be demanding and distasteful. When Vincent found that the Ladies hired servants to carry the heavy iron soup pots, he replaced these servants with poor young women whom he deemed strong and used to hardship. Such women could traditionally only be admitted to convents like the Visitation or the Benedictines as lay sisters or servants to the cloistered nuns. As Brejon shows, many of these strong young women preferred the agency accorded them in the Daughters to anonymous service in the cloister. Because they took only simple, annual vows, they were free to renew or leave the community. They would provide Vincent and Louise with clusters of young village women eager to learn to read and to be trained in available medical techniques.

Chapter five documents the political outreach necessary to obtain the approbations required to assure legal and social recognition of both the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission. The chapter provides the full text of Louis XIV's Letters Patent Approving the Company of the Daughters of Charity in November 1657, showing the successful culmination of the founders' efforts.

Chapter six shifts from hagiography to recount the Daughters' institutional growth, explaining how the authority granted to the Daughters could be exercised through their superiors and the "superioress general." This terminology set the supervisors apart from the abbesses who directed the cloistered religious orders. Posts had to be created to reorganize the motherhouse and to oversee work in the field. The chapter further outlines the appointment of directors with assistants and the duties assigned to treasurer, seminary administrator, bursar, and other supervisors.

The attention to sociological detail broadens in the study of vocations in chapter seven, which presents not only the geographical origins of applicants, but also their class backgrounds, shown by their fathers' professions. Other graphs record the amount of the dowries postulants brought, as well as the value of their personal effects. Brejon further presents patterns of recruitment and training to show the complex motives of urban and rural girls drawn to membership in the Daughters of Charity.

Chapter eight examines spiritual matters, like the elaboration of Vincentian devotion, contrasting it with the French school of Christology codified by Pierre de Bérulle (1575-16579), founder of the Oratory. Louise de Marillac contributed her version of Marial devotion to the whole. Brejon supplements this discussion with lists of the books possessed by the Daughters in ordinary houses as well as in Paris and other large centers at the end of the eighteenth century.

Chapter nine, “Growth in the Realm,” examines the social aspects of the growing influence of the Daughters, measuring their expansion into hospitals, schools, and other institutions in villages, small towns and urban areas.

Chapter ten explains the fate of monetary donations across the era, detailing the real estate deals necessary to the formation of the Motherhouse in Paris. Here, Brejon presents data on the financial burdens of income and expenses and even the menus. These concrete examples add invaluable details about daily life in early modern Paris. In addition to graphs and maps, ten pages of colored portraits of superiors and patrons illustrate the work.

The concluding chapter eleven explores the data from hospitals and schools. The hospitals were divided into beds devoted to care of the sick, while other parts of the institution sequestered beggars and vagrants. Notarized contracts signed by the superiors trace how the Daughters were assigned to care of the sick poor as pharmacists and nurses. They did not agree to work in the other parts of the hospital, however. Surprisingly, they also avoided assisting at childbirth or maternity care. Of course, those suffering from venereal disease and women of ill repute were beyond their concern. This chapter draws on the Book of Departures, personnel registers of the women’s travels by coach as they crossed the country to carry out their duties. Turning to schools, Brejon explains how the women taught reading of pious books and later writing in parish schools, factories, the workrooms of hospices, and foundling homes. The Daughters also trained orphaned children in trades so that they could make their own livings. The teaching methods of the Jesuits, the Christian Brothers, and nuns like Jacqueline Pascal at Port Royal had no influence on the Daughters’ instructions in basic reading. However, they participated in the frequent letter-writing craze of the eighteenth century and were reproved for it. After the suppression of the monasteries in 1793, eight of the Daughters were martyred by the Revolutionary Council when they refused to sign the oath of support. However, their services were so necessary to all sides that many continued working until they were officially restored in 1802.

Skillfully translated by Sisters Marie Poole and Margaret Barrett DC, *The Streets as a Cloister* contributes new dimensions to the study of poor relief in pre-Revolutionary France. It also adds information to the field of women’s history, especially in the domains of female literacy and the evolution of the medical profession. It would be a most welcome addition to university and general libraries.

## NOTES

[1] See, for example: Élisabeth Dufourcq, *Les aventurières de Dieu: trois siècles d'histoire missionnaire française*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Perrin, 2009); Élisabeth Charpy, ed., *La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines, Documents* (Paris: Compagnie des Filles de la Charité, 1989); Susan E. Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Dominique Julia,

“L’expansion de la congrégation de la Mission de la Mort de Vincent de Paul à la Révolution française,” in *Vincent de Paul: actes du colloque international d’études vincentiennes* (Rome, 1983), pp. 362-419. The many other studies of the Daughters examine local or regional groups, for example, the diocese of Auxerre and date to the early twentieth or late nineteenth centuries.

[2] For works on The Visitation, see, for example: Jeanne-Françoise Fremyot de Chantal, *Correspondance, Tome 1, 1605-1621*, ed. Patricia Burns (Paris: Cerf, Centre d’études Franco-Italien, 1986). All of the carefully edited volumes of Jeanne de Chantal’s correspondence furnish details of the foundation and flourishing of the order under her direction with Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva. See also Marie-Ange Duvignacq-Glessgen, *L’ordre de la Visitation à Paris aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Cerf, 1994).

[3] Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, *Histoire des Filles de la Charité, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle, La rue pour cloître* (Paris: Fayard, 2011).

Mary M. Rowan  
Brooklyn College, City University of New York  
[maryrowan2@gmail.com](mailto:maryrowan2@gmail.com)

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