

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Economic Reform of Female Monasticism in the Papal States of Clement VIII: Ideas, Actions, and Impacts

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## Abstract

In the Papal States of the end of the sixteenth century, most female monasteries were mendicant. In doing so, nuns violated many rules of the XXVth session of the Council of Trent: they obviously did not respect enclosure, but also were unable to survive only thanks to their real estate properties, as stated by the chapters 2, 3, and 16 of the *De Regularibus et Monialibus* decree. This financial situation of convents was addressed for the first time by Clement VIII (1592–1605), who led a broad economic reform all over his territory. How was the economic reform of convents led by Clement VIII applied in the local realities of the Papal States, what were its impacts on nuns, and how did they react to these changes? Based on the letters received by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in Rome during the Pontificate of Clement VIII, this article addresses the materiality and the local peculiarities of the economic reform of female convents in the dioceses of the Papal States, highlighting the strategies used by nuns to fight against change, negotiate accommodation, or adapt their daily lives to the new Roman requirements. Much less known and studied than the Tridentine enclosure, the economic reform desired by the same Council of Trent is an equally important change whose impacts durably transformed the daily life and identity of nuns.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church; Council of Trent; Religious Women; Papal States; Counter-Reformation

In December 1599, the nuns of Santa Maria delle Povere in Perugia wrote to Rome in order to report a strange refusal from their bishop, Napoleone Comitoli (1591–1621). While experiencing financial difficulties three years earlier, they had obtained permission to accept new recruits and to use the dowries to meet their most urgent needs: wheat, wine, olive oil, etc. They selected two girls who then prepaid their dowries in order to secure their spots. Once they reached the appropriate age, the bishop abruptly refused to allow them to take the veil, stating that: “having received the command of Your Most Illustrious Lord, he has to forbid that any mendicant convent accept girls.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Vatican Apostolic Archive [hereafter cited as AAV], Congregation of Bishops and Regulars (CVR), *Positiones* (POS), 1600, Lett. M-P. Perugia, Convent of Santa Maria delle Povere, December 17, 1599: “Il

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Here, the bishop of Perugia applied a Roman directive that aimed to suppress the mendicancy of religious orders. This was the first step in a broad economic reform led by Clement VIII across all Italy but with an exceptional attention to his territorial possessions: from then on, the monastic practice of mendicancy should disappear. For the *delle Povere* nuns, the situation was catastrophic: they would have to repay the dowries, which had been spent long ago. And without being able to beg, famine would be on their doorstep.

The numerous letters coming from Santa Maria delle Povere of Perugia, bearing witness to these restrictions, were not an isolated incident. In fact, they illustrate part of a movement that went beyond their convent, affecting all the convents of Perugia and rapidly spreading to the neighboring cities. In the Papal States, the nuns of Perugia were the first to experience the effects of the Tridentine reform as applied by Clement VIII: a large-scale reform and a financial clean-up of the female monastic communities. The aim was to make every convent economically autonomous, no longer relying on occasional alms for their daily survival, but rather on stable and perennial land and real estate property rents. Clement VIII was thus applying a reform that had been designed more than three decades earlier, by the Council of Trent. How was the economic reform of convents, led by Clement VIII, applied in the local realities? What were its impacts on nuns, and how did they react to these changes? How did the reform, applied in the women's convents, relate to the overall vision and reforming mission of the pontificate of Clement VIII? This article looks closely at the reform process and the application of Tridentine decrees in the early Counter-Reformation, and links these changes in the convents' economic situation to the broader moral and spiritual revolution that animated the church at the dawn of the seventeenth century.

The nuns of Perugia felt the effects of the Tridentine reform only in the last years of the sixteenth century. The three decades that separated them from the end of the Council were lived without major upheavals. In fact, it was only under Clement VIII that the decree *De Regularibus et Monialibus*, adopted in 1563, during the twenty-fifth and last session of the Council of Trent, became first an imperative and then a norm in the dioceses of the Papal States. The Tridentine decree was an answer to the accusations made by Martin Luther and his followers toward the regular clergy and their dissolute life, accusing them of parasitizing social and religious spaces as well as the economy of the sixteenth century. Women's convents, and especially those under the direction of male monastic orders, had become an inexhaustible source of scandal. The decree regarding regular orders provided a series of dispositions aiming to impose and enforce monastic discipline, and gave the Bishops the role of delegates of the Holy See, with the power to act on the religious communities of their dioceses.<sup>2</sup> Many of its chapters aimed to reform daily life in female convents, and some chapters aimed to protect nuns: for example, the Council of Trent condemned the practice of forced vocations by fixing the age of the religious profession to sixteen years old.<sup>3</sup> The fifth chapter of the decree imposed the strict enclosure of convents: after having pronounced their vows, nuns were not permitted to leave.<sup>4</sup> The

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*quale dice, haver havuto ordine dalle Signorie Vostre Illustrissime e prohibitione, che nessuno Monasterio mendicante accettar zitelle.*" Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup>Adriano Prosperi, *Il Concilio di Trento: Una introduzione storica* (Turin, Italy: Einaudi, 2001), 80.

<sup>3</sup>Giovanna Paolin, *Lo spazio del silenzio: monacazioni forzate, clausura e proposte di vita religiosa femminile nell'età moderna* (Monreale Valcellina, Italy: Centro Studi Storici Menocchio, 1996), 48, 51.

<sup>4</sup>*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. Theodore Alois Buckley (London: George Routledge and Co., 1851), 218.

enclosure of convents was not an invention of Trent: Boniface VIII's 1298 decree *Periculoso* had already established it.<sup>5</sup> The Council of Trent reused it in the assumed goal of creating a new female monastic environment. The windows should be smaller, the walls taller, and the presence of strangers reduced to a minimum.<sup>6</sup>

The Tridentine novelties did not, however, come about instantly and uniformly throughout the Catholic territories after the Council in 1563. The decree was recalled and reinforced by Pius V, who, with *Circa Pastoralis* in 1566, affirmed that no woman could take solemn vows or be considered a nun if she had not previously accepted the enclosure. At the same time, communities who refused to adopt the enclosure would be destined for extinction, since no new recruits could be accepted. Pius V recalled the decree in 1570,<sup>7</sup> but it was not until 1572, with Pope Gregory XIII and his bull *Deo sacris virginibus*, that the enclosure began to materialize through legal imposition in the major cities of Italy.<sup>8</sup> Materially, the first attempts to apply the Tridentine reforms of Pius V and Gregory XIII were made by sending apostolic visitors between 1571 and 1585 to examine every convent. The ecclesiastics in charge of these visits proposed architectural changes according to the necessity of enclosure, revised the accounts, and fixed the number of nuns that each institution could accommodate. However, these provisions were not always welcomed and applied immediately, as the succession of visitations and decrees shows.<sup>9</sup>

This enclosure of convents is the Tridentine disposition that has been most discussed in the historiography of recent decades, as it was perceived as repressive, and whose consequences could have been disastrous.<sup>10</sup> For example, Christopher Black

<sup>5</sup>About the enclosure of convents by Boniface VIII, see Sylvie Duval, "Comme des anges sur terre": *Les Moniales Dominicaines et les débuts de la réforme observante, 1385–1461* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2015).

<sup>6</sup>Regarding the living conditions of women in convents, see Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 128.

<sup>7</sup>Andrea Maurutto, introduction to his critical edition of Paolo Botti, *Vita della venerabile Maria Alberghetti, Fondatrice delle Dimesse di Padova* (Padua, Italy: Il Poligrafo, 2015), 22, 27.

<sup>8</sup>Francesca Medioli, "La clausura delle monache nell'amministrazione della congregazione romana sopra i regolari," in *Il monachesimo femminile in Italia dall'alto Medioevo al secolo XVII*, ed. Gabriella Zarri (Cariano, Italy: Il Segno dei Gabrielli editori, 1997), 259–260.

<sup>9</sup>Raymond Creytsens, "La riforma dei monasteri femminili dopo i decreti tridentini," in *Concilio di Trento e la Riforma Tridentina* (Rome: Herder, 1965), 45–84.

<sup>10</sup>It is a topic discussed largely in all works about women's monastic life during the early modern period. See, among others, Francesca Medioli, *Per una storia della clausura in Antico Regime: La congregazione cardinalizia dei Vescovi e dei Regolari e la sua amministrazione nella seconda metà del Seicento* (PhD Diss., Università degli studi di Bologna, 1996); Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice. Enclosed Lives and Broken Vows in the Renaissance Convent* (London: Penguin Books, 2002); Evangelisti, *Nuns*; Alessia Lirosi, *I monasteri femminili a Roma tra XVI e XVII secolo* (Rome: Viella, 2012). On forced monachization, see Anne Jacobson Schutte, *By Force and Fear: Taking and Breaking Monastic Vows in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Anne Jacobson Schutte, "Between Venice and Rome the Dilemma of Involuntary Nuns," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 415–439; Anne Jacobson Schutte, "La Congregazione del Concilio e lo scioglimento dei voti religiosi: I rapporti tra fratelli e sorelle," *Rivista storica italiana* 118 (2006): 51–79. It is also possible to see the interpenetration between the "inside" and the "outside" through the works on the cultural life of convents: Craig Monson, *Nuns Behaving Badly: Tales of Music, Magic, Art, and Arson in the Convents of Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Kate Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Elissa Weaver, *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

summarized an entire body of historiography that focused on Tridentine enclosure as a pivotal moment, introducing the history of nuns and convents in the early modern period by arguing that they deserve a “broader consideration because Tridentine attempts to enforce strict enclosure constitute a major revolutionary attempt, with wide social implications.”<sup>11</sup> The voluminous historiography about the Tridentine enclosure has above all demonstrated its continued porosity, despite the constant efforts and reminders of the authorities—both ecclesiastical and secular—to ensure it was respected.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, enclosure was not a uniform reality, as the Tridentine decrees and the literature for confessors or nuns would lead us to believe. Its application was conditioned by social, cultural, and economic factors. Some religious orders, for example Dominican and Augustinian, were more willing to embrace the reform, while others, such as the Benedictine, were more resistant, calling on their families—nobles—in order to activate their networks in opposition to novelties.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the enclosure was not equally applied everywhere. In Venice, it was present as early as 1572, while it continued to be largely problematic in the Papal States at the end of the sixteenth century.

The importance of enclosure given by historiography rose from the distress of some choir nuns coming from wealthy families and living in rich convents.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the stories about the monastic lives of Arcangela Tarabotti of Venice or Diodata Malvasia of Bologna correspond to an exclusive and privileged reality. Both lived in large urban monasteries, which welcomed the daughters of the local aristocracy and were fed by generous dowries and regular gifts from families. The daily life they describe was punctuated by religious services, social gatherings in the parlor, reading, writing, gardening, and sometimes working in the luxury industry: for example, the nuns of Sant’Anna del Castello in Venice, where Arcangela Tarabotti lived, produced highly prized embroidery.<sup>15</sup> They lived in cells/apartments that brought together several members of the same family—sisters, aunts, nieces, were served by privatized converse nuns, and accumulated a considerable material heritage over the generations.<sup>16</sup> The nuns also

<sup>11</sup>Christopher F. Black, *Church, Religion and Society in Early Modern Italy* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), xiii. Black addresses the issue of female monasticism during the early modern period in Chapter 8 of his book.

<sup>12</sup>The most influential works about enclosure and its repercussions as a social and cultural shift are those of Gabriella Zarri, who presents it as a set of representations and practices that punctuated the experience of Italian women during the early modern period. Gabriella Zarri, *Recinti. Donne, clausura e matrimonio nella prima età moderna* (Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino, 2000). See also Gabriella Zarri, *Le sante vive: Cultura e religiosità femminile nella prima età moderna* (Turin, Italy: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990); and the collective works she edited: *Storia della direzione spirituale* (Brescia, Italy: Morcelliana, 2008); *Il monachesimo femminile in Italia dall’alto Medioevo al secolo XVII* (Cariano, Italy: Il Segno dei Gabrielli editori, 1997); *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo: studi e testi a stampa* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1996); and *Finzione e santità tra medioevo ed età moderna* (Turin, Italy: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1991).

<sup>13</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*, 115–116.

<sup>14</sup>The champion of the denunciation of the enclosure and of the practice of forced monachization is suor Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652), a key figure in the works about the convents of the Counter-Reformation. See, for example, Elissa Weaver, ed., *Arcangela Tarabotti: A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice* (Ravenna, Italy: Longo, 2006).

<sup>15</sup>Emilio Zanette, *Suor Arcangela, monaca del Seicento veneziano* (Venice: Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1961), 51.

<sup>16</sup>Paolin, *Lo spazio del silenzio*, 37. See also Silvia Evangelisti, “Rooms to Share: Convent Cells and Social Relations in Early Modern Italy,” *Past and Present* 1, Suppl. 1 (Jan. 2006): 55–71; Silvia Evangelisti,

personally managed their money and participated in the affairs of their families.<sup>17</sup> The common finances of these convents were based on their land and real estate holdings; for example, Sant'Anna del Castello owned property both in Venice and on the mainland, where some forty tenants ensured a constant income that provided for half the annual needs of the nuns. In addition to this, they received the dowries of the daughters who took the veil, and each one's individual income.<sup>18</sup>

For the richer communities, the Tridentine enclosure meant new obstacles around religious activities and relationships, and, ultimately, a redefinition of the social and economic role of convents in the city. For example, Suor Diodata Malvasia spoke on behalf of all her sisters about the distress of her community when they were no longer able to participate in public celebrations around the cult of the icon of San Luca.<sup>19</sup> For others, the enclosure created a personal challenge, like Suor Mansueta of Venice, who, in 1574, was denounced to the Inquisition for having claimed to maintain a personal relationship with the Devil, with the only purpose of being freed from her vows.<sup>20</sup> It is with this same distress that Suor Arcangela Tarabotti denounced the convent, calling it "Inferno monacale," or the infernal convent.<sup>21</sup> The Venetian archives, for example, are full of letters of supplication from the nuns and their families lamenting this enclosure.<sup>22</sup> This preponderance of the enclosure is, however, an effect of sources that overshadow the fact that the Tridentine enclosure and its inconveniences remained a privileged and urban reality.

The voices coming from the other side of women's monastic life, the convents in peripheral cities, usually the smallest and poorest, and definitely less-known by the historiography, offer evidence of another Tridentine reform: the economic one. The majority of Italian nuns did not live in the large monasteries of Venice, Florence, or Naples: they had taken their vows in small settlements built in the fortified towns and villages that made up the majority of the territory. While some of the large urban monasteries could accommodate more than 100 nuns,<sup>23</sup> guaranteeing a

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"Monastic Poverty and Material Culture in Early Modern Italian Convents," *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 1 (Mar. 2004): 1–20.

<sup>17</sup>In Murano, for example, the Alberghetti sisters, Maria and Vittoria, both *Dimesse*, fought a legal battle in 1611 to recover their mother's inheritance. Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter cited as ASVe), S. Maria della concezione di Murano (Venezia), b. 15, fasc. 2, fol. 17r, 39r, 40r, 47r–48v, 55r–61v, 66r, 68r.

<sup>18</sup>Zanette, *Suor Arcangela*, 53, 55, 57, 65. See also Black, *Church, Religion and Society*, 155; and Angelo D'Ambrosio and Mario Spedicato, *Cibo e clausura: Regimi alimentari e patrimoni monastici nel Mezzogiorno moderno: sec. 17–19* (Bari, Italy: Cacucci, 1998).

<sup>19</sup>Diodata Malvasia, *Breve discorso di quanto avviene alle reverendissime suore di San Mattia et San Luca, monasterij uniti dell'anno 1573*, manuscript kept at the Archiginnasio Library in Bologna; and *La venuta, et i progressi miracolosi della S.ma Madonna dipinta da S. Luca posta sul monte della Guardia dall'anno che ci venne 1160 sin'all'anno 1617* (Bologna: heredi di Gio. Rossi, 1617).

<sup>20</sup>ASVe, *Savi all'eresia*, b. 38, fasc. 1. See Isabel Harvey, "L'Inquisition vénitienne et le corps des religieuses: Pratiques, discours, échanges. Le cas de Suor Mansueta, 1574." *Studi Veneziani* LXXVI (2018): 199–237.

<sup>21</sup>Francesca Medioli, *L'«Inferno monacale» di Arcangela Tarabotti* (Turin, Italy: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990).

<sup>22</sup>Archives of the *Provveditori sopra i monasterij*; Paolin, *Lo spazio del silenzio*, 52

<sup>23</sup>Christopher Black reports very complete statistics about the monastic population in the main Italian cities. For example, in Florence in 1552 there were 2,826 nuns for 45 convents, so an average of 63 per establishment; in 1622 there were 4,200, but the increase probably followed the rhythm of the new foundations, which flourished in the first half of the seventeenth century. In Naples the concentration was even higher,

continuous influx of new dowries, the outlying settlements were generally much smaller. For example, in Norcia, the convent of Santa Chiara had twenty nuns in 1600,<sup>24</sup> while the convent of San Bartolomeo in Rimini had only seventeen, including both choir and converse nuns.<sup>25</sup> These small communities can be found everywhere in Italy: I counted 139 in the ten dioceses crossed by the Via Flaminia, in the Papal States.<sup>26</sup> Theoretically, they were divided into several groups: the closed convents, where the nuns came from the families of the local aristocracy; the mendicant orders that welcomed those who were less fortunate; the third orders or other non-cloistered congregations that lived their apostolate in the world, such as the Ursulines who arrived in Foligno in 1601<sup>27</sup>; or the Convertite, often filled with reformed prostitutes and women who ran away from their husbands or other difficult situations. In reality, the majority of these convents were poor and had to rely on alms for their daily survival. An effective indicator of a convent's level of wealth is the proportion of converse nuns—nuns who enter with a smaller dowry, take only simple vows, and take care of domestic chores—to the total number of nuns.<sup>28</sup> They were proportionally very numerous in the great aristocratic monasteries. For example, in San Gaudioso in Naples, there were thirty converses for forty-six professed nuns and five novices, which represented 36 percent of the convent's inhabitants.<sup>29</sup> In the richer convents in smaller cities, such as Ferrara, they were proportionally less numerous: they made up 26 percent of the nuns of San Silvestro.<sup>30</sup> In the poorer and more peripheral cities, they were even less numerous: 12 percent in the convent of Santa Caterina in Terni,<sup>31</sup> and even seem to disappear completely in some ex-centered realities, such as Sant'Angelo in Vado, where it was the choir nuns who carried out domestic tasks.<sup>32</sup>

The convents were thus strongly differentiated according to the economic and social levels of the families from which the nuns came and the cities where they were located. In this context, the nuns of the smaller, poorer convents represented an important part of the female monastic population in the Italian peninsula. For them, the economic reform hit long before, and harder, than the enclosure. Economic reform was omnipresent in the mind of Tridentine Churchmen: Chapter 2 of the decree *De Regularibus et Monialibus* recalled the vow of poverty; Chapter 3 obliged all monasteries to own property from which they draw rental income, so as to eradicate the need for mendicancy; while Chapter 16 prohibited the acceptance of novices—and their dowries!—before they were of age and able to enter the convent. In fact, the enclosure can only be established

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with 1,754 nuns in 1585 for 22 convents, resulting in an average of 80 nuns per community. Black, *Church, Religion and Society*, 150.

<sup>24</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. P-T. Norcia (Spoleto), Convent of Santa Chiara, January 17, 1600.

<sup>25</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. P-S. Rimini, Convent of San Bartolomeo, December 12, 1600.

<sup>26</sup>Calculation including all communities that wrote at least once to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars or that are mentioned in a report from the local bishop for the years 1592, 1600, 1601, and 1605.

<sup>27</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Foligno, Convent of Margaritole, July 24, 1601.

<sup>28</sup>Paolin, *Lo spazio del silenzio*, 51.

<sup>29</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Naples, Convent of San Gaudioso.

<sup>30</sup>Lorenzo Paliotto, *Ferrara nel Seicento* (Ferrara, Italy: Cartografica, 2009), 309.

<sup>31</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. T-V. Terni, Convent of Santa Caterina.

<sup>32</sup>The choir nuns of San Bernardino, in Sant'Angelo in Vado, went out to ask for alms, a job usually accomplished elsewhere by the converse nuns. AAV, CVR, POS, 1605, Lett. B-F. Sant'Angelo in Vado, Convent of San Bernardino, September 10, 1605.



once the monasteries were in a position to support themselves autonomously, thanks to their patrimony, obtained through the dowries of nuns.<sup>33</sup>

Pope Clement VIII Aldobrandini was the architect of this economic reform. Balanced budgets and control over the church's finances were some of the driving forces of this pontificate. His first request was to personally consult the accounts of the Roman curia and to organize the local expenses of the church. Then, in the same vein, he looked at the finances of the entire ecclesiastical hierarchy, including the women's monasteries. At the same time, one of his main preoccupations was the Papal States, a fundamental territory, in order for him to participate in the balance of power in Europe. It was with this goal in mind that, after the death of Alfonso II d'Este in 1598, he chose to annex and travel to Ferrara in order to take personal possession of his territory and to name his nephew, Pietro Aldobrandini, as Cardinal Legate. He also set up a system of control for the secular powers of the nobility. He tried to increase the productivity of the Papal States with measures to promote agriculture and avoid food speculation. Moreover, Clement VIII dedicated himself in the Tridentine reform process, beginning with a pastoral visit of Rome the day after his election. He limited the powers of ecclesiastical superiors and regulated decisions concerning the foundations, the formation of novices, and the administration of the patrimony through a series of decrees concerning monastic orders. Therefore, restoring the fiscal health in the convents on his lands according to the Tridentine decrees was part of the Pope's broader plan: strengthen his power over the Papal States and make them an example of the Counter-Reformation. Clement VIII was activating a centralization of power to his own person, to the detriment of the consistory and peripheral administration. This centralizing movement was already initiated under Sixtus V, but was definitively imposed under Clement VIII.<sup>34</sup>

This in-depth economic reform, in the long term, would be part of the redefinition of the identity and representations of the various groups of women sharing the sacred space of the convent, especially in the smallest and poorest communities. Consequently, as convents acted as extensions of the city and played a central role in the relational and cultural life of communities, my hypothesis is that economic reform was the first step toward redefining the social role of the nuns. This involved the rewriting of their commercial and personal networks, which would allow, only in a second stage, the enforcement of enclosure. Through these transformations in the sociability of women's monasteries, the representations that the nuns had of themselves and those that society had of them were also transformed, ultimately creating a new identity for consecrated women and a new balance of power, which favored Rome and aligned with the canons of the Counter-Reformation. With this process, religiosity became more individual, turning toward the inner journey and self-commitment, justified later through the

<sup>33</sup>Giovanna Paolin stressed that convents had to accept enclosure, or they would be destined to die out. In fact, this extinction was rather a threat of economic reform, which was a prerequisite for enclosure. Paolin, *Lo spazio del silenzio*, 50.

<sup>34</sup>On Clement VIII, see Maria Teresa Fattori, *Clemente VIII e il sacro collegio. 1592–1605. Meccanismi istituzionali ed accentramento di governo* (Stuttgart, Germany: Anton Hiersemann, 2004); Maria Teresa Fattori, "Il papato di età moderna: snodi problematici e fortuna di un tema di ricerca in recenti studi," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 30 (2009): 35–50. For more details, refer to Ludovico von Pastor, *11. Storia dei papi nel periodo della riforma e restaurazione cattolica: Clemente 8. (1592–1605)* (Rome: Desclée, 1958). See also Agostino Borromeo, "Clemente VIII," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani, XXVI* (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1982), 259–282.

ideal of virginity that enclosure intended to protect.<sup>35</sup> The economic reform was thus not only a prerequisite to enclosure, but an entire and independent Tridentine reform in itself, on one hand directly answering to Luther's accusations of parasitism, and on the other, a step toward the redefinition of nuns' identity and religiosity.

It is possible to hear the voices of the nuns through the archives of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars,<sup>36</sup> a Roman congregation created by Clement VIII in 1601, after having merged the Congregation of Bishops and the Congregation of Regulars. In 1599, the nuns of Santa Maria delle Povere turned toward the Cardinal Giustiniani, who was then the head of the Congregation, in the hopes of bypassing their bishop. The Congregation of Bishops and Regulars was the Roman institution responsible for administering the issues of regular orders on a daily basis. It was the dicastery that had control over the regular orders and was responsible, together with the Congregation of the Council, for enforcing the Tridentine decrees concerning the monasteries.<sup>37</sup> It received letters not only from bishops, but also from nuns, their confessors, and their families. The archives of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars is, consequently, a very peculiar source that describes the relationship between the central power in Rome and the peripheries under its authority. The heart of the archive is divided into two main categories: the *Positiones*, which brings together letters from dioceses, while the *Registra* contains Roman decisions.

This article explores the letters sent by the peripheries to Rome allow us to explore local issues and experience people's words. The analysis is based on a sample composed of 2,036 letters from a dozen dioceses of the Papal States, Bologna, and the city of Naples, between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century. The dioceses of the Papal States are those along the Via Flaminia and its extension, the Emilia, until Ferrara.<sup>38</sup> The space crossed by this road, which was the central communication route of the Papal States connecting a majority of peripheral cities, offers a geographically and politically coherent corpus, from which it is possible to understand how information circulated. Therefore, it also makes clear how the administration operated between the center and the peripheries. Moreover, these letters allow a transversal perspective in order to reconstruct goals

<sup>35</sup>Paolin, *Lo spazio del silenzio*, 47.

<sup>36</sup>See mons. Sergio Pagano about the archives, "I fondi concernenti i 'Regolari' dell'Archivio Segreto Vaticano," *Archiva Ecclesiae* 41 (1999): 153; Gaetano Moroni, "Congregazione de' Vescovi e Regolari," in *Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica* (Venice, Italy: Tipografia Emiliana, 1842), 278–285; Antonio Menniti Ippolito, "Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari e la Chiesa in Italia," *Dizionario Storico Tematico "La Chiesa in Italia"* 1 – Dalle origini all'unità nazionale, <http://www.storiadellachiesa.it/glossary/congregazione-dei-vescovi-e-regolari-e-la-chiesa-in-italia/> (accessed June 24, 2022); Giovanni Romeo, *La Congregazione dei vescovi e dei regolari e i visitatori apostolici nell'Italia post-tridentina: Un primo bilancio* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 2003). For the action of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars on secular and male regular clergy, see Michele Mancino and Giovanni Romeo, *Clero criminale: L'onore della chiesa e i delitti degli ecclesiastici nell'Italia della Controriforma* (Rome: Laterza, 2013); Vincenzo Criscuolo, "I Cappuccini e la Congregazione romana dei Vescovi e Regolari," 10 vols., *Monumenta Historica Ordinis Minorum Capuccinorum* (Rome: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1989–2004). For female convents, see Medioli, "La clausura delle monache . . ."; Irene Palombo, "Prudenza e persuasione. La Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari e i monasteri femminili in una diocesi di periferia (Sora, XVII–XIX sec.)," *Giornale di Storia* 9 (2012) <https://www.giornaledistoria.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/SaggioPalomboDEF2.pdf> (accessed June 24, 2022).

<sup>37</sup>Lirosi, *I monasteri femminili*, 133.

<sup>38</sup>For a map of the Papal States space and the dioceses studied in this article, and to know more about the broader "Via Flaminia" project, visit <https://even.hypotheses.org/isabel-harvey/via-flaminia-maps>.



and strategies used by the Pope's subjects when they came in contact with Rome, and see the global movement and impact of the Tridentine reform in the territory of the Papal States. The sample from Naples allows a comparison and broader contextualization between an urban area and some peripheral realities. All convents are considered in the sample, regardless of whether they belong to a particular order or category.

### I. The Problem of Mendicancy: Council of Trent and the Reform

Clement VIII initiated the financial reform of convents at a time of great need: the economic situation and climatic disasters of the last decade of the sixteenth century had left many women's institutions close to bankruptcy, if not facing outright starvation.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the pontifical intervention on the finances of the regular orders was the only option. The Tridentine moral reform could not have taken place in the context of a survival economy. This was especially true because there was a risk that the local populations would perceive monastic disorder as a sign of weakness on the part of the Roman power, which, precisely during these same years, sought to impose itself over the local jurisdictions.

The decree *De Regularibus et Monialibus* reminded women's convents that their main source of income should be provided by the annuities of their lands and real estates. All convents owned land or real estate that provided income: this was a prerequisite for the approval of a new foundation. With the passing of years and acceptances, this patrimony should be enriched by the dowries brought by those taking the veil. The community being constantly enriched, it would eventually grow and expand. But in the last decades of the sixteenth century, this patrimony was generally not sufficient. On May 1, 1592, the Bishop of Perugia summed up the situation of the women's monasteries of his diocese as follows: "Having consumed all those alms, which they had received for the whole year through the ordinary distribution, they remain without any allocation or credit to be able to maintain themselves."<sup>40</sup> This difficult spring in Perugia was not a unique situation. In reality, these lamentations kept recurring. For example, in February 1601, the Bishop of Foligno, Marcantonio Bizzoni (1586–1606), explained to the Congregation that the misery was such that two nuns from the convent of Margaritole "tried to end their lives badly, one with the rope, the other wanting to throw herself into a cistern."<sup>41</sup> These messages of periodic distress point to the general economic slump, in which the convents of the largest cities of the Papal States were stuck.

In reality, the patrimony was far from sufficient to feed all the nuns and allow the proper running of convents. This problem had been apparent for decades, as evidenced by the various measures created to provide annual "alms" to the convents, such as the one mentioned by the Bishop of Perugia, which cut them off from the operating funds

<sup>39</sup>The exceptional climatic situation has been described in detail by the Confraternity of San Michele of Fano, explaining the recent cold winters: ASV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Fano, Confraternity of San Michele, August 13 and September 4, 1600. See also Paliotto, *Ferrara nel Seicento*, 28; and Giuseppe Manini Ferranti, *Compendio della storia sacra e politica di Ferrara* (Ferrara, Italy: Pe' Soci Bianchi e Negri Stamperia del Seminario, 1808), 119.

<sup>40</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1592, Lett. M-P. Perugia, May 1st, 1592: "*Havendo consumati tutti quell'elemosine, che per ordinaria distribuzione gli toccavano per tutto l'anno, restano senza alcuno assegnamento, e credito da potersi mantenere.*"

<sup>41</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Foligno, February 25, 1601: "*Tentarono finir malamente la vita, una con la corda, l'altra con il volersi buttare in una Cisterna.*"

of the other ecclesiastical institutions of the cities. Nuns also created a system that allowed them to compensate for low incomes, but this quickly resulted in a vicious circle. They were accustomed to accepting their recruits several years before they were old enough to take their vows at sixteen years old. The convent received the dowry at the time of the agreement, which was often used immediately to buy food, instead of being invested in a property that could bring a stable income for the future without damaging the initial capital. This was the case at San Bernardo, in Ferrara, where “the abbess and the nuns ask . . . to order the . . . Bishop to allow that said dowries would be employed *as usual*, in paying off debts, and in stocking some reserves of necessary things to live for the following year, which was, until now, very lacking. If we don’t provide them with this permission, . . . they will surely die of hunger.”<sup>42</sup>

In fact, nuns often found themselves facing important food debt: they bought food on credit from the grocer, but were unable to pay when they had to. The Bishop then had to intervene and, sometimes, exasperated grocers turned to Rome hoping to get their due. This was the case, for example, with Bartolomeo Ferruci, from Foligno, who “now finding themselves creditors of some sum of money of the said Nuns [those of the convent of the Margaritole]; as it appears in his books,” asked the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars to intervene, “being what is right.”<sup>43</sup> Only the entry of new dowries was effective in dealing with this kind of debt. The practice of spending dowries to extinguish debts or to get consumable goods was formally prohibited by the 16th chapter of the Tridentine decree. Because, even if this new money temporarily fixed the convent’s financial situation, the nuns later found themselves in the position of having to accept a girl without sufficient means to feed her. And to feed her, they would have to use new dowries again, perpetuating debt and a sense of urgency from one generation to the next.

To overcome this problem, convents had a second solution. It was permitted to accept supernumerary girls: the number of nuns was fixed by papal decree, but it was possible to accept more if they paid a double dowry. This provision could help to permanently relieve debts, as half of the dowry was used to repay it while the other half could be invested in stable properties. But it became so widely used that monasteries often counted double, or even triple, residents. Consequently, overpopulation was chronic, like in Perugia. Already by 1574, a decree by Gregory XIII had fixed the number of nuns that the eight poorest convents could contain, in total, at 250, according to their patrimony. At that time, there were 503 nuns. The objective was to reduce this number, but emergencies always demanded more dowries. By 1592, they were 507.<sup>44</sup> Perugia was, at the end of the sixteenth century, in a context of severe monastic overpopulation. This situation, helped with punctual aids from the church and a constant flow of new recruits and new dowries, could be manageable in normal times. But during the last decades of the sixteenth century, all of central Italy experienced a period of scarcity. In this context, the overall incomes of convents were insufficient to feed everyone.

<sup>42</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Ferrara, Convent of San Bernardo, February 12, 1600: “*L’Abadessa e le Monache di esso supplicano . . . d’ordinare al . . . Vescovo che permetta che detti dotti s’impieghino secondo il solito, in estinzioni di debiti, et in far qualche provisione di cose necessarie da viver per l’anno seguente, il quale mostrano fin qui assai sterile, se al raccolto non si provvedono, . . . al sicuro moriranno di fame.*”

<sup>43</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Foligno, Convent of the Margaritole: “*Hora ritrovandosi creditori delle dette Monache d’alcune somma di danari; si come apparisce nelli suoi libri . . . essendo cosa conforme alla giustizia.*”

<sup>44</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1592, Lett. M-P. Perugia, May 6, 1592.

To complete this economic system based on the anticipation of incoming dowries, nuns had also developed other sources of financing. The most visible was mendicancy. At the dawn of the seventeenth century, practically all the convents in the Papal States were mendicant monasteries: in groups of two to four, nuns—often converse nuns—went out periodically to ask for alms from the inhabitants of the surrounding area. Some of them traveled long distances, reaching the countryside and leaving for several days or even weeks. But most of them limited themselves to a more daily and ritual approach: they visited the noble residences and wealthy merchants of the cities, families with whom the convents had maintained a patronage relationship for generations and who, according to a pre-established calendar, periodically provided considerable alms to them. Mendicancy was used, for example, by the nuns of the convent of San Bernardino in Sant'Angelo in Vado, who asked Rome to let them accept new recruits who would be explicitly devoted to the search for alms.<sup>45</sup> Other income came from hospitality: lay women, in search of spirituality, rented apartments in convents, or widows would seek refuge in exchange for their property.<sup>46</sup> This openness toward the city would be redefined by the Tridentine reform and, particularly, through the application of enclosure.

However, toward the end of the sixteenth century, even with the help of these additional incomes, the financial situation of most women's monastic communities was critical: the small convents of the Papal States were increasingly entangled in debt and overpopulation. The situation was definitely aggravated by the disastrous harvests that reduced the profitability of their patrimony. It is possible to see the issues through the letters asking Rome for permission to use dowries to buy food: the majority mentioned climatic disasters. In Ferrara, for example, the nuns of Santa Caterina di Siena wrote that they were "miserable because of the general floods that suffered this Duchy,"<sup>47</sup> while those of Santa Maria delle Grazie explained that "they were in extreme need of bread, and wine, for the little harvest they got for many years now; and particularly this year [in 1601] because of the floods."<sup>48</sup> An immediate effect of this series of harsh winters was an acceleration of the acceptance of supernumerary nuns, as their dowries quickly relieved the void left by poor harvests. This money was used to buy basic necessities at a high price due to heightened inflation.

The economic problems of the convents were therefore not new, even if they were aggravated by the food crisis. The secular and ecclesiastical authorities of the cities were aware of the situation and tried to absorb the deficits the best they could over the years by setting up emergency solutions when the situation was most critical. For example, in 1574 in Perugia, confraternities were forced to give some help to the eight poorest convents of the city. The idea was to provide sporadic help to the nuns, for a few years, until their number reduced. But a generation later, in 1600, the situation

<sup>45</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Nullius, Convent of San Bernardino.

<sup>46</sup> About the practices of hospitality, see Isabel Harvey, "Visiting Convents: Hospitality Practices of Nunneries in the Papal States (1592–1605)," *Early Modern Cultures of Hospitality*, eds. David Goldstein and Marco Piana (Toronto: Essays and Studies series of the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2021), 94–114.

<sup>47</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Ferrara, Convent of Santa Caterina di Siena: "*Fatto miserabile per le inondazioni generali, che patisse quel ducato.*"

<sup>48</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Ferrara, Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie: "*Ritrovandosi in estremo bisogno di pano, e vino, per il poco raccolto che hanno fatto da molti anni in quà; et particolarmente quest'anno [in 1601] per l'acque.*"

had only gotten worse.<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere, in Foligno, the Bishop sought to force the nuns' families to provide for the needs of their daughters and sisters during the famine of 1601.<sup>50</sup> These creative measures had been invented in the face of these extreme economic issues. But, they added an additional tax burden on the families and the cities, which were also struggling against climatic and economic fluctuations.

The last years of the sixteenth century were a difficult economic period for the small women's monastic communities of the Papal States. However, even if both the convents and the local ecclesiastical administrations were open to change—as evidenced by an intense recourse to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, an obedience to the new norms that aimed to centralize the decision-making powers regarding the administration of the regular and secular clergy in Rome through an increasing use of derogation licenses—the reform was, until that point, simply one of the instances of power. There were no real traces of the Tridentine reform in the women's convents yet: begging was still part of daily life, despite both the financial and enclosure rules.

At the end of the sixteenth century, in Bologna, the largest city in the Papal States, with the exception of Rome, the situation was less dramatic, even though the food crisis hit the city just as hard. The economic stability and the communities' sufficient patrimony allowed them to better face this difficult period. Unlike the nuns of the small convents elsewhere in the Papal States, who seemed to be in despair, the nuns in Bologna asked Rome to allow them to sell their possessions in order to pay off their debts. This solution was also adopted in 1592 by the nuns of Santa Trinità, “to provide for a part of their urgent need, they have deliberated and consent, with the approval of their superiors and administrators, to sell two pieces of land,”<sup>51</sup> and by those of Santa Maria Maddalena, who were “forced by the great necessity caused by these past years of food shortage.”<sup>52</sup> Their patrimony was important enough to get them through the decade and still have things to sell in 1600, like the nuns of San Bernardino, who did not “know what other to do if not to sell or in pawn . . . stable goods also if they are few.”<sup>53</sup> The economic situation was therefore critical, mainly in the small convents of the peripheral towns, where mendicity was a fundamental source of income.

## II. Reform Implementation: Time, Space, and Policies

During the decade that followed 1590, nuns activated their networks and relationships in order to obtain alms in sufficient quantities to balance the losses due to bad harvests. And so, they frequently asked for a license to go out to beg. This request was so routine that, in a letter, the Bishop of Nocera, Marcello Crescenzi (1591–1630), asked for this permit for all the monasteries in the town. He asked for “grace, that in the said City and diocese, some Monasteries of poor nuns, . . . may receive the license allowing them to send a couple of nuns to seek alms according to what would seem necessary to

<sup>49</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. M-P. Perugia, January 26, 1600.

<sup>50</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Foligno, February 3, 1601.

<sup>51</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1592, Lett. A-B. Bologna, Convent of the Trinità, December 22, 1592 (*Per prevedere a parte del loro urgentissimo bisogno hanno deliberato con il consenso, e maturo consiglio delle Signori soi assori e administrators di vendere due pezze di terra*).

<sup>52</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1592, Lett. A-B. Bologna, Convent of Santa Maria Maddalena, December 22, 1592 (*Astretti da grandissima necessità per li penuriosi anni passati*).

<sup>53</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. A-B. Bologna, Convent of San Bernardino, January 26, 1600 (*Sapendo che altro fare se non vedere di vendere o in pagnare . . . beni stabili qualche si bene sono pochi*).

them.”<sup>54</sup> This was a common situation in all the Papal States at the end of the sixteenth century, showing how the delicate economic balance remained very fragile. In fact, little was needed to damage this system, which is what happened in September 1600: the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars received an anonymous letter from Gubbio that denounced “the converse nuns of these professed nuns are used to leaving the cloister as they wish, [so as] to beg.”<sup>55</sup> Gubbio’s denunciation seems to call into question the presence of nuns outside the cloister; it seems to be an issue with the Tridentine enclosure. But the real problem was the act of begging: it was denouncing the economic impact of the nuns’ presence in public places. This anonymous complaint illustrates the beginning of the large-scale undertaking, led by Pope Clement VIII, of the economic reform of convents. Nuns became an unwanted presence in the streets.

One of Clement VIII’s main objectives was to impose the power of Rome over the material and earthly affairs of the Papal States. He assigned the economic reform of convents to two groups of clergymen: the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in Rome and the local bishops. Clement VIII, like his predecessors Gregory XIII and Sixtus V, was very attentive in his choice of bishops: he had to count on them both for the application of the Tridentine reforms and the centralization of power in Rome. For their part, the bishops consolidated their own power: they centralized the affairs of the convents, called the confraternities to account, and interfered in the internal affairs of monastic orders. This was the case, for example, in Perugia, where Bishop Comitoli refused to recognize the licenses granted to the convent of Santa Maria by his predecessor, Antonio Maria Galli (1586–1591).<sup>56</sup> This importance of the role of bishops established the effective hierarchical structure that characterized the pontifical administration of the Counter-Reformation: the Pope, Clement VIII, surrounded by new congregations, which he had created himself, assisted by the bishops, who, chosen by Rome, showed more loyalty to the Pontiff than to the local communities they had the duty to administer.

In the Papal States, with the exception of its biggest cities, Rome and Bologna,<sup>57</sup> the economic reform developed and circulated along its main route of communication, the Via Flaminia. It began with its most important—and most central—city on the Via Flaminia, Perugia, as witnessed by the sisters of the convent of Santa Maria delle Povere. They were the first to be denied the right to give their habit to new recruits, on the pretext that they were mendicants. The nuns did not understand why Rome denied them access to their emergency economic pillars: alms and dowries. In fact, the reform strategy was simple: aimed at reducing the number of nuns and abolishing the supernumeraries, they were to refuse any new acceptance as long as the convent had to rely on mendicancy to survive. Returning to the Constitutions’ fixed number should have helped rebalance their finances. This was what the Bishop of Terni, Giovanni Antonio Onorati (1591–1606), proposed to the convent of the Annunziata in 1601: “Now, Monsignor the Bishop, during his last visit suggested that he wants to reduce

<sup>54</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1592, Lett. M-P. Nocera, Convent of Sigillo, November 4, 1592: “*Gratia, ch’essendo in detta Città et diocesi alcuni Monasterij di Monache poveri, . . . possa concedere licentia, che li sia lecito mandare un paio di Monache per cercare l’elemosina secondo li parerà necessario.*”

<sup>55</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. C-G. Gubbio, June 9, 1600: “*Li conversi d’essi professi sono solite uscire della clausura a loro bene placito per questuare.*”

<sup>56</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1592, Lett. M-P. Perugia, Convent of Santa Maria.

<sup>57</sup> In Bologna, for example, the economic reform, as well as the enclosure, were relatively well established in 1586, as confirmed by Cardinal Paleotti. ASV, CVR, POS, 1592, Lett. A-B. Bologna, July 19, 1586.

and decrease the number below twenty, under the pretext that the ordinary and extraordinary income of the convent is not enough to maintain twenty-five ordinary nuns.”<sup>58</sup> This reform was designed for the long term: the nuns of the targeted convents would continue to go out to seek alms until the number had reduced organically. Once the balance between mouths to feed and incomes were restored, nuns would stop begging and would be able to respect enclosure. Economic reform was therefore a prerequisite for moral reform. In theory, this model seems to work. In less than a generation, the situation should have returned to normal. Other measures aiming to organize the healthy financial life of the convents accompanied the economic reform. For example, the nuns who were elected as treasurer of their convent would be required to know how to read and write.<sup>59</sup> However, between the dowries that had to be returned and the food crisis, at the time of the application of these new rules, it was the panic to provide for their subsistence that took precedence in the concrete daily life of convents.

Soon, the crisis spread to the other mendicant monasteries in Perugia. In January 1600, the veil was denied to a girl in San Paolo under the same pretext.<sup>60</sup> Similar cases followed in April in Sant’Antonio<sup>61</sup> and in August at the Beata Colomba.<sup>62</sup> The economic reform was applied across all convents in Perugia as early as the autumn of 1600. The rules that caused such a commotion in Perugia, however, did not affect the neighboring diocese of Nocera in 1600. The sisters of Sant’Anna of Sigillo requested a license to exit the cloister walls in 1601 in search of alms, “since, as they are licensed for the present holy year [so 1600], they still find themselves in need of anticipating the license.”<sup>63</sup> It is likely that they felt the climate shifting and becoming more restrictive. Indeed, they were wise to seek to secure their freedom of movement for the coming year, because things changed drastically in 1601. Several convents wrote to Rome asking to order their bishop to allow girls to take the veil, which he had refused “under the pretext that this convent—here San Girolamo—like the others of this so-called land is maintained by begging.”<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the situation was even more confused in Casteldurante, a small town outside any diocesan episcopal jurisdiction and controlled by the local abbot who was directly responsible to Rome. When, in 1601, the abbot received the Roman directive regarding the economic reform, he considered himself the only master in his land and was determined to stand up to Rome.<sup>65</sup> But the Congregation did not intend to abandon the battle, and the abbot was already trying

<sup>58</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. S-V. Terni, Convent of the Annunziata: “*Hora Monsignore Vescovo nella visita presente si lascia intendere, che vuole ridurre et diminuire il numero sotto de 20, sotto pretesto, che l’entrate ordinaria et straordinaria del monastero non bastano à mantenere 25 monache ordinarie.*”

<sup>59</sup> *Decreti generali datti dalla congregazione della sacra visita, d’ordine espresso di N. S. da osservarsi dalle monache di Roma nelle loro chiese, monasterij, oltre le proprie, particolari costituzioni di ciascun luogo* (Rome: Nella stamperia della Rev. Camera Apostolica, 1625), 15.

<sup>60</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. M-P. Perugia, Convent of San Paolo, January 17, 1601.

<sup>61</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. M-P. Perugia, Convent of Sant’Antonio di Padova, April 11 and June 16, 1600.

<sup>62</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. M-P. Perugia, Convent of the Beata Colomba, Between August 21 and October 2, 1600.

<sup>63</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Nocera, Convent of Sant’Anna di Sigillo: “*Si come hanno la licentia per tutto il presente anno santo tuttavia sono necessitate d’anticipare la licentia.*”

<sup>64</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Nocera, Convent of San Girolamo of Sassoferrato: “*Sotto pretesto, che quel monasterio come gli altri di detta terra vada questando.*”

<sup>65</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Nullius. June 6, 1601.



to introduce some reform a year later.<sup>66</sup> It is thus possible to observe the circulation of economic reform within the territory of the Papal States. First came Rome, and then it extended to Perugia and Ferrara, two important cities. Next came the Adriatic cities: Fano, Pesaro, and Rimini. Finally, the reform slowly spread to Nocera, Fossombrone, and Orte following the Via Flaminia. And only at the very end did it reach the most isolated cities: Casteldurante, Cagli, and Gubbio.

The economic reform was already in full effect in most of the dioceses of the Papal States by 1601, and the bishops were trying to bring a bit of order to the nuns' expenses. This was what the Bishop of Ferrara, Giovanni Fontana (1589–1611), explained in June 1601: in his city, three convents were mendicant, and for two of them, the road to financial equilibrium was still long. The third one, however, the Convent of the Mortara, was “reduced to the prescribed number [of nuns]; but the permission to send some of them by the city to look for alms has not yet been revoked.” There was still a long way to go in his diocese, but the Bishop wanted to reassure the Congregation: “so far, dowries have not been used” to buy food “in any of these monasteries.”<sup>67</sup>

Nuns sought to negotiate special permissions, each arguing that their situations were unique. They could not believe that such insensitivity was coming on the part of the local ecclesiastical authorities. They, therefore, turned to Rome, convinced that these measures were nothing but a misunderstanding on the part of the Bishop: suddenly overzealous, they thought, he would be called to order by the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars. The Convertite of Rimini, for example, asked for permission to go out to collect alms, arguing that they were unable to “maintain sixty-three nuns because they find themselves with an income that is enough only for three months, with a six-ounce piece of bread in the evening and in the morning.”<sup>68</sup> For the other nine months of the year, they would have had to rely on alms. Some convents sought the support of powerful people, such as San Bernardino in Sant'Angelo in Vado, who provided a letter of recommendation from Cardinal Farnese and another from the administrator of their convent, Girolimo Fagnano, certifying that they “are poor, and they do not obtain many benefits from their goods, either real estate or other things.”<sup>69</sup> The strategy used by these nuns was exceptionalism: they sought, through references on their financial situation and with significant hierarchical support, to obtain a derogation from the new norms.

Some nuns did not hesitate to go beyond the limits of acceptability in seeking a survival strategy and trying to maintain their daily normality. This was the case of several convents in Perugia who chose to falsify their accounts. The Episcopal administration of Perugia only discovered in 1605 that, in 1601, nuns had voluntarily reduced their income, so as to force the confraternities to give them subsidies: “Because in the book of the incomes of nuns' monasteries of Perugia, sent to this sacred Congregation in the year 1601, there is an important error, caused by the nuns who did not give the right

<sup>66</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Nullius, Convent of San Bernardino, April 5, 1601.

<sup>67</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Ferrara, Convents of San Vito, Santa Monica and the Mortara, June 16, 1601: “È ridotto al prescritto numero; ma non se gl'è ancora levata l'autorità di mandai questuando per la Città . . . fin qui da nessuno di detti Monasteri sono stati investieri doti alcuni.”

<sup>68</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. P-S. Rimini, Convent of Santa Maria Maddalena delle Convertite, December 12, 1600: “Sostiantare 63 Monache che si trovano con l'entrate sue ne anco per tre mesi con darli un panetto di sei oncie la sera, et la mattina.”

<sup>69</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Nullius, Convent of San Bernardino, July 5, 1601: “Sono povere, et de loro beni o, stabile o, altre cose non riscutano tanti frutti.”

numbers.”<sup>70</sup> However, this falsification had negative consequences, which were in opposition of the nuns’ original hopes: any new acceptances were completely blocked in order to reduce their numbers. The nuns had not foreseen this. They expected that the previous solutions would be used again. But the ecclesiastical authorities were rigid. By 1605, the situation was already critical: many inhabitants of Perugia, “having their houses filled with girls of marriageable age, they can neither marry them nor push them toward convents because of their poverty, so the girls remain in great danger for their virtue.”<sup>71</sup> In less than five years, the consequences of the economic reform on women’s monasteries were already being felt outside the church and started to weigh heavily on the community.

Between attempting to negotiate, seeking support and recommendations, or falsifying their books, nuns were looking for ways to survive the austerity measures imposed by Clement VIII’s economic reform. From the years 1600–1601, to varying degrees from one city to another, nuns had to face a new set of norms that transformed their daily lives: all the convents would have to rethink their means of economic survival as soon as possible in order to succeed without recourse to mendicancy. Failure to do so meant that the extinction of their community awaited them, an inevitable consequence of losing the right to accept new recruits. From the nuns’ point of view, their entire community and their own identities were in great danger: that of uniformization and a rationalization from the central Roman power.

This same fear of uniformization and control was felt throughout the Italian peninsula, but in different ways depending on the socio-economic context. If we look at what was happening in Naples at the same time, by comparison, the situation was just as effervescent. But the economic reform here was encompassed in a larger movement, the observance. The movement was led by a new Dominican monastery, the Congregation of the Sanità, founded in 1583 with the aim of bringing reform to the South.<sup>72</sup> These Dominicans were in charge of reforming the convents through an intensification of religious activities, return to commune life, enclosure, and increased control by the ecclesiastical superiors over all the nuns’ affairs, including accounts and financial transactions. The nuns had the right to accept or refuse the reform: however, as with the economic reform in the Papal States, if they refused, they could no longer accept recruits, and were thus condemned to extinction. For example, the convent of the Maddalena was in close negotiation with Rome in the years 1600–1601. For several years, the convent was under the Interdict: faced with the nuns’ refusal to reform, the abbess had been dismissed and no girls had been accepted. With the general aging of the cloister’s inhabitants and the financial void created by the absence of new dowries, the nuns finally accepted the direction of the Dominicans. They sought permission from Rome to accept sixteen new recruits, and to use their dowries to expand the convent, which would both solve enclosure problems and create more space. Negotiations began in 1599 with a letter from their vicar, Curtio Palumbo, who explained that their considerable income allowed them to “comfortably host and feed one hundred nuns.” At that time there were only 68 choir nuns, since 29 had

<sup>70</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1605, Lett. M-P. Perugia: “Perche nella notola dell’intrate de’ Monasterij di Monache di Perugia, mandata à cotesta sacra Congregazione l’anno 1601, si pretende siano errore di molta considerazione, cagionati massime dalle Monache istesse, le quali non ne diedero la giusta assegna.”

<sup>71</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1605, Lett. M-P. Perugia: “Havendo ripiene le loro case di zitelle, non possono per la povertà loro ne maritarle, ne monacarle, restando in grandissimo pericolo, et gelosia dell’honestà loro.”

<sup>72</sup>Michele Miele, *La riforma domenicana a Napoli nel periodo post-tridentino, 1585–1725* (Rome: S. Sabina, 1963).

died “from the day of the Interdict.” There were also forty converse nuns—an average wealth for Naples, with 37 percent of converse nuns—but many of them were very old. He also points out that “the Apostolic reform is observed, according to what they say, they all eat in the common table, and each nun who has a personal income for her use and particular need assigned it to the Mother Superior.”<sup>73</sup> The Dominicans supported the nuns in their request, stressing both that “the money from the dowries can be converted with the purchase of new patrimony furnishing new annual entries for the Monastery,” thus respecting the economic reform, and that “these novices are ready to observe completely the statutes of the new Reform.”<sup>74</sup> The question of the financial equilibrium in this rich Neapolitan convent was thus present in the negotiations with Rome. But economic affairs were not the heart of the problem: it was rather an element of a political crisis around a reform experienced as interference in the affairs of the nuns. The reform impulse in Naples was the same as in the Papal States: it was directed from Rome and aimed at bringing the convents to follow the Tridentine reform. In Naples, as in Venice or Bologna, the reform arrived earlier: here, exactly in 1583 with the foundation of the Congregation of the Sanità.<sup>75</sup>

### III. The Impacts of Economic Reform

The economic reform resulted in lasting damages to the relationship, trust, and reciprocity that the convents maintained with the urban fabric surrounding them through mendicity. Whereas the convent was an extension of the city, it was becoming more hermetic, and the Bishop reserved the right to veto all decisions. It is possible to identify two parallel movements that characterized this turning point in the administration of women’s regular orders at the beginning of the seventeenth century. First, as mentioned, there was the centralization of ecclesiastical administration in Rome. Second, the nuns of these small peripheral convents were forced to rethink their existence, not only economically, as we have seen, but also socially and culturally. A slow process of transformation of their identity began as they gradually adopted the characteristics of the Counter-Reformation nun: their contacts with the outside world were increasingly limited, ties to families became more distant, and the control of monasteries by ecclesiastical superiors and the Bishop increased.

The first effect of the economic reform was the sudden scarcity of available places. In the system of supernumerary nuns, girls accepted with an ordinary dowry—and therefore within the limits of the fixed number of nuns for the convent—kept this identity all their lives. Therefore, supernumeraries, those having paid the double dowry, would always be

<sup>73</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Naples, Convent of the Maddalena, December 8, 1599 (*Mantenere comodamente il numero di cento monache*) / (*dal di della proibitione*) / (*s’osserva la riforma Apostolica secondo dicono magnando tutte nella mensa commune, et ciascuna Monaca ch’have l’intrata, per l’uso, et bisogno suo particolare s’asigna alla Superiora*).

<sup>74</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Naples, Convent of the Maddalena, June 8, 1601 (*Li danari delle doti si potrian convertir in compra di tante annue entrate a beneficio del Monasterio*) / (*queste figliole monacande sono prontissime d’osservar intieramente li statuti della nova Riforma*).

<sup>75</sup>The nuns of the Maddalena’s convent are not the only ones to negotiate with Rome about the reform of the Observance: it is also the case of Santa Maria Donna Regina (AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Naples, Convent of Santa Maria Donna Regina, July 7, 1601), of San Francesco (AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Naples, Convent of San Francesco), and San Gaudioso, where the reform was not unanimous: nuns proposed to permanently divide the convent so as to have one part of the community reformed and the other not (AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. I-O. Naples, Convent of San Gaudioso, October 15, 1601). In all these cases, financial questions appear to confirm the feasibility of the nuns’ requests.

considered extraordinary. This division maintained the social identity of the monasteries: when an ordinary nun died, her place was reassigned to a girl who had already been accepted, but had been placed on a waiting list, even if many supernumerary nuns had been accepted in the meantime. In this way, families who had been attached to a convent for generations could still find a place there. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, some bishops proposed moving supernumerary nuns into ordinary positions, as in the case of Delfina Sinichetti of Norcia. She had been accepted into the convent of Santa Chiara as an ordinary nun. However, she found herself excluded because her place had been taken by a supernumerary who was already veiled.<sup>76</sup>

The second direct effect of the economic reform was an inflation of monastic dowries. The transformation of supernumerary into ordinary nuns normalized the dowries they had to pay: the double dowry of the supernumerary nuns became an ordinary dowry. The new supernumerary nuns therefore paid a current double dowry that was four times what an ordinary nun would have paid before the economic reform. This happened in Sant'Antonio, in Orte, for example, where the capacity was set at eighteen nuns. Each nun was to pay a dowry of 100 *scudi*, set by an apostolic visitor sent by Pius V (1566–1572) in 1571.<sup>77</sup> In 1600, however, there were twenty-six nuns, and all the new ones—those who had entered once the maximum capacity number had been reached—paid a dowry of 250 *scudi*. Claiming that the convent could now hold thirty nuns, they continued to accept supernumerary nuns, such as Donna Eugenia di Martio Prosperi Leoncina. The Bishop, Andrea Longo (1582–1607), would ask them for a double dowry of 500 *scudi*<sup>78</sup>—a dowry five times higher than a decade earlier. The selection of potential candidates for the veil narrowed as convents faced this decrease in the number of places and this massive inflation. Many girls with less financial adaptability and weaker family support were suddenly excluded from convents.

Just as the nuns did in the early days of economic reform, lay people's first reaction to this considerable inflation was to negotiate: higher dowries were proposed unsuccessfully, such as the 1,000 fiorini suggested by Vincenzo Salvucci for his daughter Raffaella at the Santa Maria delle Povere of Perugia.<sup>79</sup> Some fathers were ready to shoulder the costs offering not only money, but also services. For example, Ettore Fabbri, a lawyer from Perugia, offered a dowry of 640 fiorini, rather than the standard 500, to the convent of Santa Lucia, in addition to "wanting to cover the legal needs of the Convent for free forever."<sup>80</sup> Families also sought to drastically revisit their plans for the future of their daughters, bringing serious consequences. Girls who were old enough to take the veil were the first to experience the consequences of this sudden inflation. Many were forced into marriage, such as Antonio Cecco's daughter, who expected to take the veil at the Annunziata of Foligno for a dowry of 300 ducats. At the moment when she should have entered the convent, the Bishop intervened, saying, "this girl cannot enter in the convent with a dowry of less than five hundred ducats. So the poor orator, disappointed with vain promises, was obliged to have her married."<sup>81</sup> It was

<sup>76</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. P-T. Norcia (Spoleto), Convent of Santa Chiara, January 17, 1601.

<sup>77</sup> It was the Bishop of Gaeta, Pietro de Lunel (1566–1587) who visited Sant'Antonio in Orte in 1571.

<sup>78</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. M-P. Orte, Convent of Sant'Antonio, January 17, 1601.

<sup>79</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. M-P. Perugia, Convent of Santa Maria delle Povere.

<sup>80</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. M-P. Perugia, Convent of Santa Lucia. May 16, 1600: "*Di volere fare le lite del Monastero gratis per sempre.*"

<sup>81</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Foligno, Convent of the Annunziata: "*Non poter detta figliuola monacarsi con doti minori di cinque cento ducati, undi il povero oratore deluso con ditta vana promissa fù astretto à maritarla.*"

therefore the families who had to finance the economic reform of Clement VIII: all of them were obliged to rethink their inheritance strategies at a time when they, too, were affected by the bad harvests of those barren years.

The economic reform also contributed to change the identity of those in charge of service in the convents.<sup>82</sup> The converse nuns were, most often, those responsible for seeking alms outside the convent. But as mentioned in the anonymous letter from Gubbio, these converse nuns had become an undesirable presence in the streets, and were consequently forced to retreat into the cloisters. This meant that they disappeared from the city squares, slowing down or causing rupture in the networks that they maintained with the outside world. They also suffered from a loss of freedom: in sharing the small cloister spaces with the nuns, they were observed more closely. Choir nuns expected that they would respect a rule as they did and, consequently, also respect enclosure. This change had the collateral effect of a change in mentality: converse nuns would be increasingly associated with the convents where their choir nun counterparts were, during the same years, called to the observance of the enclosure. As with the choir nuns, the economic reform transformed the identity of the converse nuns. The new tasks assigned to them inside the cloisters, in addition to the inflation of dowries, attracted different candidates. As such, the figure of the Tridentine converse nun appears.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the proximity with the choir nuns and the general undertaking of reform and discipline in the convents led to a redefinition of the role of those responsible for services. From simple salaried employees, they became souls on the road of perfection, who served God through their specific apostolate, the service to the choir nuns.

Beyond monastic life, the whole economic and patrimonial organization of families and cities was disrupted. It is possible to observe this change at a higher level with the struggle between the communal administrators of Fano and their Bishop, typical of the frequent conflicts between ecclesiastic and secular authorities at the time. Toward the end of 1600, nuns of several convents of Fano had already resolved to write together to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars to denounce the new taxing system their Bishop had imposed, and to request “that they eliminate the tax, that is so exorbitant, for our episcopal seat.”<sup>84</sup> Soon, however, the whole town was involved in the conflict between the nuns and their Bishop. In January 1601, the Gonfaloniere and the Priors of the city addressed their grievances against Bishop Giulio Ottinelli (1587–1603) to Rome: “Since our City can no longer tolerate the many burdens that it has received and continues to receive from Bishop Ottinelli upon coming to this diocese, we are forced to have recourse to the sacred Congregation with strong hope in the protection of your Excellency, that will hear and console us in our just requests.”<sup>85</sup> This was followed by a series of denunciations. First was the inflation of dowries and their use for

<sup>82</sup>For the specific case of converse nuns, see Isabel Harvey, “From Servants to Converse Nuns: Tridentine Enclosure and Economic Reform of Convents in the Papal States of Clement VIII,” in *We are all servants*—*The Diversity of Service in Premodern Europe*, eds. Isabelle Cochelin and Diane Wolfthal (Toronto: Essays and Studies series of the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2022), 289–316.

<sup>83</sup>Paolin, *Lo spazio del silenzio*, 51.

<sup>84</sup>Archivio di Stato di Fano (hereafter cited as ASFa), *Corporazioni religiose soppresse*, 6, fasc. 1, 8, December 10, 1600: “*Che cessino la tassa che nostro fora episcopale molto eccessiva.*”

<sup>85</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Fano, January 11, 1601: “*Non potendo questa nostra Città più tollerare i molti aggravati, che hà ricevuto et riceve di continuo da Mons.re R.mo Ottinelli da che egli à venuto à questo Vesc.o siamo stati forzati haver ricorso alla sacra Cong.ne con ferma speranza con la protette di V.S. R.ma di essere essaudito et consolati nelle nostre giuste dimande.*”

immediate needs. In 1601, Fano seemed to be doing a little better than the cities inland. The dowries were spent on architectural improvements in order to bring the convents up to Tridentine standards. For example, the Bishop wanted to build a new storeroom at Sant'Arcangelo and to use the actual room to make a confessional. Second, the city of Fano also denounced the Bishop's attempts to reduce the number of nuns by placing supernumerary nuns in ordinary spots. Third was the Bishop's interference with the identity of the new recruits and in the modalities of their acceptance, and, fourth were the finances of the monasteries and the sequestration of their current books. Fifth was his interference in choosing employees for the convents. Finally, the city denounced the prohibition for the nuns to establish contracts with lay people themselves and to discuss, through the grates, with the workers they had hired. They denounced, in fact, the personal control of the affairs of the convents by the Bishop—similarly to what happened some years before in Naples—and what they felt as an interference of Rome in the local economy.<sup>86</sup>

The economic reform of convents therefore did not only concern nuns: its impacts shook the whole society, demonstrating the complete integration between the female monastic communities and the urban fabric surrounding them. In the early months and years of the reform, as nuns struggled for their economic survival, their families and contacts had to rethink both their links to the convents and the ways in which they would represent these women's institutions as they underwent reform. This process also transformed the nuns' public identity, as the ever-increasing interposition of the Bishop between them and the communities—as in the example of Fano—tended to bring the nuns closer to the Church of Rome and symbolically distanced them from the cities and countryside surrounding their convents.

## Conclusion

Clement VIII's economic reform was a movement of global extent that mobilized a good part of the energies at several levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is possible to see it even just by looking at the volume of letters that arrived at the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in 1600–1601, the pivotal years of the economic reform. The requests for licenses to use one or more dowries to buy food or basic necessities, or to reimburse creditors who had become impatient, are numerous: they represent 110 letters out of 882, or 12 percent of the letters received in Rome from the Papal States. To this amount we need to add the thirty-two requests for extraordinary licenses to send nuns outside the cloister to seek alms, representing 4 percent of the letters. The issues over the necessity for immediate food supplies, the use of dowries, and the collection of alms total 16 percent of all letters received by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars as a whole: not only the letters from nuns, but also from bishops, regular and secular clergy, and lay people.<sup>87</sup> Faced with the extraordinary diversity of problems submitted to Rome, the proportion reserved for the finances of convents was the largest, which provides evidence of both the economic slump of the nunneries and the desire for reform and control of the ecclesiastical authorities.

The economic reform began to be imposed in the Papal States during the Pontificate of Clement VIII. These were the years during which the Congregation of Bishops and

<sup>86</sup> AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. C-G. Fano, January 11–25, 1601.

<sup>87</sup> Statistics based on the serialization of all the letters contained in the "Positiones" of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars for the Dioceses along the Via Flaminia, and Ferrara and Bologna, during the two years 1600 and 1601. Most of the letters treat one single topic.



Regulars, assisted by a group of reforming bishops, tried to review some economic habits of the convents: acceptances were suspended, supernumerary nuns were entered in the ordinary numbers, the accounts were reviewed, and the finances of the convents were controlled. At first, nuns tried to negotiate, but were forced, in the long run, to adapt. This reform would never be perfectly applied, but its effects were lasting: the inflation of dowries stabilized over time, but did not diminish, and the relationship between the convents and the cities would remain weakened by the inquisitive gaze of the bishop. But these changes were not applied immediately and equally, and several years later the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars still had to deal with some urgent requests for accommodation. This was the case, for example, in 1605 at Pesaro, where Corpus Domini<sup>88</sup> was burdened with debts and where Santa Caterina still used the dowries to buy food.<sup>89</sup>

To conclude, the economic reform should be considered as the first and heaviest change brought by the Council of Trent to the smallest and poorest peripheral convents, which composed most of the monastic population in the Papal States. It is a turning point in the history of women's monasticism: there is a definite before and after of the economic reform. As Rome's efforts to eliminate mendicancy demonstrate, the economic reform was a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for the application of the Tridentine enclosure. It was unthinkable to force nuns to respect the enclosure as long as they had to rely on sporadic emergency aids for food. Without a stable economic situation, the nuns were forced to go out to look for alms, like Sister Geronima and Sister Lucia of Terni, "responsible, by order of Rome, to go seeking alms for the Convent, despite the vow of Enclosure."<sup>90</sup>

Nevertheless, the economic reform worked, and the nuns quickly adapted their daily lives to its requirements. Toward the end of 1604, we already find the Sisters of Santa Maria delle Povere, those who had been the first to complain in 1599, confirming their obedience in a letter from the Bishop of Perugia: "It has been resolved, with the consent of the whole Chapter, to effectively enclose them, and to observe the enclosure completely without using the dispensation allowing to send out some nuns, as they have the right, with the ordinary license of the Holy Congregation, to receive other girls to the monastic habit."<sup>91</sup> The urgency to accept new recruits quickly overcame the initial reluctance of nuns to accept the enclosure, such as in the case of the nuns from the Maddalena convent in Naples. Within five years, they were able to balance their budget and organize their livelihood without having to leave the convent. This rapidity shows the force of the mechanism deployed by the administration of Clement VIII and the seriousness with which it was applied by the bishops. The delle Povere nuns had transformed as well. They adopted a new identity, which turned their daily lives upside down: they became cloistered nuns, respecting a monastic enclosure that only the economic reform made possible.

It is thus fundamental to reconsider the question of the enclosure of convents and its real application during the seventeenth century. As shown by a whole current of the

<sup>88</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1605, Lett. M-P. Pesaro, Convent of Corpus Domini.

<sup>89</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1605, Lett. M-P. Pesaro, Convent of Santa Caterina.

<sup>90</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1600, Lett. T-V. Terni, Convent of San Proculo, July 10, 1600: "*Deputate per ordine di Roma d'andar cercando elemosina per servizio del detto Monasterio non obstante il voto della Clausura.*"

<sup>91</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1605, Lett. M-P. Perugia, Convent of Santa Maria delle Povere, November 9, 1604: "*Si è risoluto con consenso di tutto il Capitolo di rinchiudersi affatto, et osservare la clausura per tutto senza valersi più della dispensa di mandar fuori alcune suore, pur che sia lor lecito con l'ordinarie licenza della S. Congregazione ricevere all'habito Monacale altre zitelle.*"

historiography on women's monastic life after the Council of Trent, prompted by the work of Gabriella Zarri, convents never really respected the norms of Tridentine enclosure, and its impermeability is more discursive than realistic. The analysis of the convents' economic situations and of their means of subsistence partly explains the permanence of this porosity in the long term and the difficulties encountered during the first applications of enclosure, especially in the small peripheral communities of the Papal States. Even if the enclosure was applied once the balance between the number of nuns and the incomes provided by the land and real estate properties had been restored, there was no guarantee that this balance would be permanent. In the seventeenth century, periods of local famine were frequent, not to mention plagues or climatic disasters, which forced people to carry out urgent works and, as a result, go into debt. This was the case, for example, of the nuns of the convent of Santa Giuliana in Perugia, who lost part of their mill in the great flood of the Tiber river. Without the mill, they lost the incomes that it generated in the form of wheat, and therefore, had to buy wheat from outside their properties to make their own bread.<sup>92</sup> These contingencies and economic emergencies were all good reasons to break the enclosure, to ask for help, or to establish new trade connections. And they were not limited to the Papal States, but rather were a constant phenomenon in all monastic realities, as demonstrated by the frequent recalls to enclosure made by several Popes throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Paul V in 1612, Clement X in 1676, and Benedict XIV in 1742 and 1747. Enclosure was a fragile institution, which depended more on the financial health of communities than on their moral sensibilities. This is in line with the conclusions of Francesca Medioli, who has shown, based on the *Registra* of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, how the institution of enclosure in the second half of the seventeenth century remains completely linked to local events.<sup>93</sup>

In the Papal States, the economic reform was made possible and accelerated by both its economic and political contexts. On the one hand, the Papal States experienced a serious food crisis during the last decade of the sixteenth century. Between the floods that ravaged the crops of the Perugian countryside, the snows that invaded the dioceses of the Marche, and the continuation of a harsh winter, the price of food rose sharply. The land holdings of the convents were less profitable and nuns had to rely on mendicancy. This was a difficult burden for a population who were also weakened by poor harvests. In order to relieve the population from the fiscal pressure exerted by religious orders, the need for an economic reform was becoming urgent. On the other hand, the political context was also favorable. Clement VIII took personal control over his territorial possessions and prioritized the progress of the Counter-Reformation. After the annexation of Ferrara in 1598, Clement VIII undertook a journey to the newly conquered city, crossing its entire territory. It was a pastoral journey during which he stopped in each of the dioceses to celebrate, listen, and govern. The economic reform of the convents was a project that he carried out in the hope that his states would

<sup>92</sup>AAV, CVR, POS, 1601, Lett. P-S. Perugia, Convent of Santa Giuliana.

<sup>93</sup>Francesca Medioli, "La clausura delle monache," 249, 261, 279. See also Francesca Medioli, "An Unequal Law: Nuns' Enforcement after the Council of Trent," in *Women in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Christine Meek (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 136–152; and Francesca Medioli, "The Dimensions of the Cloister: Enclosure, Constraint and Protection in Seventeenth-Century Italy," in *Time, Space and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Menchi (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), 165–180.

become an example of the Counter-Reformation. As mentioned earlier, the economic reform was not equally applied between dioceses: important political factors were the involvement of the local bishops, their personalities, and their individual beliefs in the Tridentine spirit. While Clement VIII carefully chose the new bishops, not all were the Pope's "creatures" at the beginning of the economic reform. Some of them, such as Giovanni Fontana in Ferrara or Napoleone Comitoli in Perugia, were zealous and were convinced that change would be good, while others, such as the abbot of Casteldurante, were more reticent toward any novelties.

Other sources confirm this inseparable link between financial stability and the enclosure. For example, the hagiographic *Vite* of women who founded convents always put forward the "miracle" of finding the funding for the foundation. In Morlupo, for example, Caterina Paluzzi, a Dominican tertiary nun, had founded a small community with four women from her family to live according to a religious rule in her own house. It was not until 1620, and thanks to the financial support of Cardinal Paolo Sfondrati, the Archbishop of Milan Federico Borromeo, and other powerful Roman families, that she founded a Dominican monastery with the enclosure.<sup>94</sup> The same pattern was repeated, in the same years, in Naples. Paola Maresca, also a Dominican tertiary sister, decided to found a convent after being widowed in 1606. Here also, the undertaking was slowed down by the search for financial means: "The greatest difficulty for the construction of the Monastery was the lack of money, because what until that time we had been able to be collected from the alms of devout people was very little: but God provided for this."<sup>95</sup> Most of the funds came from a bequest after the death of a nobleman of Naples, to which were added miraculous anonymous donations. Finally, the monastery was ready to be inhabited in December 1615.<sup>96</sup> After having been a *bizzocca*, a non-cloistered religious woman living in her own house, for almost a decade, Paola Maresca joined her sisters in the convent of Santa Caterina di Siena, but they did not receive the enclosure until a few years later, after all the financial details had been secured.<sup>97</sup> But things did not always go so well, as evidenced by the founding of a convent in northern Italy, in Guastalla, in 1643, by Lucia Ferrari. After considerable initial funding from the Malatesta family and the Duke of Guastalla, the Casa del Crocefisso expanded rapidly in its early years, but later encountered many problems. It was only when the convent was really consolidated financially that Rome finally granted the enclosure in 1673. These three cases show on the one hand that religious identities were not fixed, as all these women moved from being tertiary sisters to cloistered nuns, and how financial and economic issues are a key element to secure a foundation throughout Italy in the first half of the seventeenth century.

Finally, the economic reform of convents can be understood as part of the rupture between the convent built as a "family"—typical of the Middle Ages—and the new monastic structure dependent on the ecclesiastical hierarchy, symbolizing the centralized Church, which imposed its power over souls and territories. Gabriella Zarri

<sup>94</sup>Giovanni Antonazzi, *Caterina Paluzzi e la sua autobiografia: una mistica popolana tra san Filippo Neri e Federico Borromeo* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1980).

<sup>95</sup>Domenico Maria Marchese, *Vita della Serva di Dio Suor Paola Maresca detta di Santa Teresa* (Naples: per Geronimo Fasulo, 1669), 13 (*Era la difficoltà maggiore per la fabrica del Monastero, la mancanza del denaro, essendo assai poco, quello che fino à quel tempo si era possuto raccorre dall'elemosine di persone devote: a questo providde il Signore*).

<sup>96</sup>The creation of the convent was confirmed by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars on December 11, 1615. AAV, CVR, *Registra Regularum* (RR), December 11, 1615, Naples, Santa Caterina di Siena.

<sup>97</sup>Marchese, *Vita della Serva di Dio Suor Paola Maresca*, 14–23.

interprets the enclosure as an instrument in the new “economy of power” established by the Tridentine Church, which sought to undermine the power of regular orders and families.<sup>98</sup> This interpretation, however, applies to a greater extent to the economic reform, which aimed to give the control of the means of subsistence and the management of the property of convents to the bishops, damaging the relations of clientelism and making more difficult the possible interventions of families. A study of the convents of the small realities of the Kingdom of Naples would allow a better evaluation of this hypothesis suggested by the study of the Papal States. In Southern Italy, however, other factors that influenced the economic management of the convents and the application of the Tridentine Reform should be considered: the distance from Rome, the inefficient communication routes, the power of the local authorities, and the constant conflicts between the Church and the Spanish crown.

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This article was prepared during her postdoctoral fellowship at the Institut für Geschichtswissenschaften, Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany.

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<sup>98</sup>Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*, 142–143.

**Cite this article:** Harvey, Isabel. “The Economic Reform of Female Monasticism in the Papal States of Clement VIII: Ideas, Actions, and Impacts.” *Church History* 91, no. 4 (December 2022): 729–752. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640722002761>.