

Religious Nuns in Medieval Europe

Women of Action

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The 19th century British poet Wordsworth referred to a country scene as being "Quiet as a nun." He, like many others, pictured religious nuns as pious, black-cowled figures, praying with down-turned eyes. In the mid-20th century, this quiet image was challenged by Roman Catholic nuns in the United States who dressed in modern clothes, joined protest marches in the streets, and lobbied for more rights within the Catholic Church hierarchy. To answer those critical of modern nuns for changing the image of quiet piety, churchwomen could say that they were following an even earlier tradition of activism. The history of nuns in medieval Europe was one filled with activity—and sometimes controversy.

One of the first controversies involved the role of Christian women in the Church. In his teachings, Jesus made no distinctions between male and female souls. Although his disciples were male, he encouraged women like Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalen to spread his teachings. Later, Saint Paul had discouraged Christian women from speaking in church, but relied on women like Lydia to spread the gospel. In his letters he also encouraged her to be an active disciple.

Various sects within Christianity, such as the Gnostic, stressed the female aspect of God and allowed women to act as priests.¹ In the early Christian Church, there was a respected role of preacher/teacher that was not exclusively male or female. For example, an early Christian fresco (wall painting) in Rome shows women serving the bread and wine to commemorate the mass.² Other mosaics show women bishops of the early Church and remains of Roman dedications that suggest women's priestly roles.³ However, at the Council of Laodicea in c. 363 CE (one of many councils called to decide



Page from a manuscript of *La Sainte Abbay*—The British Library, London.

Abbess Carrying Crosier

¹ Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels* (NY: Random House. 1979), p. 60.

² Joan Morris, *The Lady Was A Bishop* (NY: Macmillan Co., 1973), p. 5.

³ Lecture by: Dr. Dorothy Irban, Professor of Theology, The College of Saint Catherine, St. Paul, MN.

official church doctrine) church leaders declared that women could not be priests.⁴ After the Council of Laodicea, only male priests had the right to say mass, preach, and hear confession. Female nuns, in theory at least, could not perform these rituals and duties. What would be the role of women in the Church? Saint Paul seems to have suggested a religious order of nuns made up of older widows; other church officials preferred orders formed of nuns of all ages. Could these women marry? Could male priests marry? These were hotly debated issues. The early Christian church stressed a vow of virginity as a heroic measure against sin and as a way to focus one's life exclusively upon a religious life. By the 4th century, marriages of nuns were condemned as "more sinful than adultery."⁵ The Church also discouraged the marriage of priests but this was not enforced until after the First General Council of the Lateran in 1123. On the other hand, by the 5th century the role of a nun was that of a religious woman who took a vow of chastity and whose duties might include serving in hospitals, giving to the poor, and praying for others but not administering the rites of the Church.

Though any woman might become a nun in theory, the general practice in the medieval period in Europe was that nuns came from the upper class. Since convents or monasteries⁶ were supposed to be self-supporting, nuns brought dowries of money or land to help maintain the convent. Women were not legally required to bring dowries with them, but most did so. Later orders, like the Beguines and Poor Clares, included some women without dowries from the lower classes.⁷ The abbesses, or leaders of the convents, were often appointed because of their connection with the court or wealthy nobility. In the 10th century, when Matilda, daughter of King Otto I of the Holy Roman Empire, became a nun, she was made abbess of Quedlinburg with jurisdiction over several cities and the power of a bishop.⁸ At times, a widowed wife of a king or nobleman would retire to a convent to become a nun or take over the duties of abbess. After her husband's death 1347, the English noblewoman, Margaret, Countess of Ulster, became a nun bringing to the convent money from her lands for a year and a regular payment for life. Two other English noblewomen who joined convents, Katherine de Ingham and Eleanor, Lady Scrope, eventually became abbesses.⁹ These women brought to convents important social connections outside the Church and often had held responsible positions in powerful households before becoming nuns.

⁴ Henry C. Lea, *A Historical Sketch of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1884) p. 59. There is disagreement about the exact date of this council or synod; some place it between 343-381. The rules or cannon's that related to female priests are: Cannon 11 stated that "Presbytides, as they are called, or female presidents [priests, deacons, other officials] are not to be appointed in the church" and Cannon 44, "Women may not go to the altar."

⁵ Lea, p. 95-96 and p. 103-104.

⁶ Ernest McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1954), p. 535. The names were used interchangeably for place of religious retreat and housed both male and female, for example "double monasteries" of Kildarc Abbey in Ireland. Aubrey Gwynn and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland* (London: Longman's, 1970), p. 307.

⁷ Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p.16.

⁸ Morris, p. 58.

⁹ Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, p. 39.

What motives did women have for becoming nuns? Many, perhaps most, did so because they were religious and wished to serve God in that manner. One Anglo-Saxon queen, Aethelthrit, left her royal husband and her kingdom in 673 CE to begin a convent where "men and women readily flock thither to live under the guidance of the queen."¹⁰ The lives of the saints, many who were nuns, testify to the deep religious feelings of women in the Church. Some women became nuns because it offered more freedom than another sort of life might give them.¹¹ In medieval times, married life could have considerable drawbacks. One medieval writer pictured the contrast between married life and convent life as follows:

"And how I ask, though it may seem odious, how does the wife stand who when she comes in hears her child scream, sees the cat stealing food, and the hound at the hide? Her cake is burning on the stone hearth, her calf is sucking the milk, the earthen pot is overflowing into the fire. Though it be an odious tale, it ought, maiden, to deter thee more strongly from marriage, for it does not seem easy to her who has tried it. Though, happy maiden, who hast fully removed thyself out of that servitude as a free daughter of God and as His Son's spouse, needest not suffer anything of the kind."¹²

The convent often seemed a peaceful place of learning when contrasted to the distractions of running a home. The German nun, Lioba, a dedicated intellectual, "never laid aside her books except to pray—or eat or sleep."¹³

Convents might also offer a comparatively comfortable life. Although some convents were poor, particularly in the decline of the Church in the 13th and 14th centuries,¹⁴ the better-endowed institutions had fairly high standards of living, especially for the abbess. For example, bishops visiting some of the English nunneries were disconcerted to discover nuns dressing in colorful clothes, painting their faces, wearing fur on their gowns, eating delicate foods, bringing their dogs into church and even letting their pet monkeys swing about. One abbess was told that she might have no more than two maid-servants, which suggests that her life was spent neither in silence nor hard labor.¹⁵ Life in a medieval nunnery also did not mean being hidden from the world. Though priests, bishops, and popes tried again and again to enclose or shut in nuns, nuns continued to go on pilgrimages, visit relatives or other convents, and see to the business of the land owned by the abbey or convent.¹⁶

While some women entered the convent for religious or social reasons, some others entered because they were forced. One of the problems of having daughters in medieval and Renaissance periods in Europe was that the family was expected to furnish a dowry

¹⁰ Lina Eckenstein, *Woman Under Monasticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), p.96.

¹¹ Emily Putnam, *The Lady* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), (1910), p. 69-105.

¹² Eckenstein, p. 327.

¹³ Eckenstein, p. 137.

¹⁴ Sally Thompson, "The Problem of the Cistercian Nuns in the 12th and 13th Centuries," *Medieval Women*, Derek Baker, ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), p. 251.

¹⁵ Power, p. 61.

¹⁶ Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (NY: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 93.

upon a young woman's marriage—the bigger the dowry, the more likely that a better marriage would result, one that might benefit the family. If there were several daughters in the family, one or two were sometimes sent to a convent so that the other daughter might have a larger dowry and marry upward into a more powerful family. One German duke—no doubt impoverished—sent all nine of his daughters to a convent so he would not have to worry about dowries for any of them.¹⁷ Some dowry money had to be paid to the convent, but this might only be maintenance money and not a great sum. During certain periods in medieval Italy, when marriage dowry rates became competitively high, many women were forced into convents against their will.¹⁸ By the late medieval period, these convents were criticized as "elegant clubs for surplus daughters of the nobility."¹⁹ Some physically handicapped girls and women, not considered likely prospects for the rather brutal marriage market system of the day, were sent to convents. As one said, rather bitterly, "I was not good enough for man, and so am given to God."²⁰ Illegitimate daughters also made poor marriage bargains and were sometimes sent to convents.

Not all women who were sent against their will to nunneries went easily. Some tried secret marriages; others threatened suicide or used other means to protest. When her Aunt Christiana tried to get Maud, later Good Queen Maud of England, to wear a veil in anticipation of her becoming a nun, Maud rebelled: "I did indeed wear [it] in her presence, but as soon as I was able to escape out of her sight, I tore it off and threw it on the ground and trampled on it..."²¹ Employing the nunneries as a storehouse of excess women as well as a refuge for pious women damaged convent life by creating a disharmony of aims for women who became nuns. Those forced into the convent life wished for more worldliness. The religious women wished a life of piety.

By the late 17th century some mothers had doubts about allowing their daughters to go to convents, fearing that there had been a falling away from previous standards. Madam de Sevigne wrote to her daughter about her granddaughter's possible admission to a convent. "Ah, my child, keep her with you. She will never get a good education in a convent, neither in religion (of which the nuns know very little) nor in anything else....At home she could read good books...for her taste lies that way; you could discuss them with her. I am sure that would be much better than a convent."²²

Once a woman became a nun, whether by choice or force, what were her duties? Basically she had two sets of duties—one as a participant in religious services and another as an assigned role within the convent community. Religious duties might differ depending upon which order of nuns a woman joined. Some nuns, like the Beguines, lived in small houses within cities and had simple morning and evening prayer services. Other nuns were more enclosed and lived a life of constant prayer.

¹⁷ Marcelle Bernstein, *The Nuns* (NY: Bantam Press, 1976), p. 47.

¹⁸ John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1909), p. 245.

¹⁹ Margaret Trouncer, *The Reluctant Abbess: Angelique Arnauld of Port Royal* (NY: Sheed and Ward, 1957), p. 34.

²⁰ Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, p. 31.

²¹ Derek Baker, "A Nursery of Saints," *Medieval Women*, p. 123-124.

²² Quoted in Brink, p 108.

Between prayers, nuns were expected to keep busy with housekeeping duties. The kinds of chores a nun did depended on assigned tasks within the abbey or convent. In addition to nuns, the abbey also housed many non-nuns who also worked at convent tasks. Lands around the abbey donated for its support, had to be farmed; sheep on the land had to be raised and slaughtered for food. Even law cases had to be carried on to protect the abbey's rights. Sometimes quarrels broke out over the collection of church tithes (taxes) as when an Italian priest accused the local Cistercian nuns of stealing "two oxen and one steer, three sows and four hogs, besides a quantity of hay, chestnuts, wheat and nuts."²³ These abbeys were often like small villages or towns and as such the center of local economic activity. Because of their importance, nuns who administered them often held a variety of duties.

The following suggests a number of roles in a powerful abbey:²⁴

Abdess

- Administered the abbey.
- In case of a double monastery, this meant directing the monks as well as nuns.
- Acted as spiritual leader, sometimes acting as confessor and might preach.
- Called out troops if the ruler required it.
- Collected taxes and tithes (payments to the church).
- Maintained the buildings.
- Initiated legal cases.
- Selected chaplains and priests for the nuns' order from local churches.
- Encouraged scholarship.
- Supervised children in the convent schools.
- Educated missionaries.

Fratress

- Kept the frater or refectory (dining area) clean.
- Repaired chairs and tables.
- Purchased the cloths and dishes.
- Supervised table settings and meals.
- Saw that the lavatory was clean.

Cellaress

- Was in charge of food supply for the nuns and servants.
- Ordered ale, grain for bread, pickled meat and bought fish.
- Usually supervised the convent farm.

Infirmnaress

²³ Catherine Boyd, *A Cistercian Nunnery in Medieval Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), p. 66.

²⁴ Morris. p. 16.

- Was in charge of the sick—bathed them, changed their beds, and gave them medicine.

Treasuress

- Received all money paid to the abbey.
- Paid all the bills.
- Kept account records.
- Planned yearly budget.

Kitchenness

- Supervised fixing of the meals.

Sacrist

- Cared for the church sanctuary.
- Polished silverplate.
- Kept vestments (robes uses in services).
- Directed the creation and maintenance of altar cloths.
- Supervised the making of candles for the sanctuary.

Chantress

- Managed church services.
- Trained nuns for singing.
- Acted as librarian.

Chambress

- Was in charge of the every day clothing of the nuns and servants.
- Saw to the repair and making of clothes.

Mistress of Novices

- Was schoolmistress to the novices (student nuns).
- Oversaw the proper behavior of members of the order.

Almoness

- Dispersed alms, charity, to poor.²⁵

A glimpse at the extent to which these women had to plan and organize may be seen in the following quotation from a 14th century abbess. She related the budgeting of different lands for different purposes.

²⁵ These categories are representative of English nunneries: See Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, p. 131-160.

"...For bread and beer—produce of land and tenants in Tilney, half church of St. Peter in Wiggenhall...Produce of land in Gyddergore...houses and rents in Lynn and in North Lynn and in Gaywood for meat and fish and herring. For clothing and shoes all the produce of our meadow in Setchy...and the remnant of the land in Setchy and West Winch is ordained for the purchase of salt...For tablecloths, towels and other things which are needed for guests and for the household... produce of our land and tenements in Thorpland... Similarly the breeding of stock, and all the profits which may be drawn from our beasts in Tilney, in Wiggenhall and in Thorpland, and in all other places (saving the stock for our larder, and draught-beasts for carts and ploughs and saving four-and-twenty cows and a bull) are assigned and ordained for the repair of new houses and new dykes, to the common profit of the house."²⁶

While their religious commitment may have been otherworldly, nuns, because of their social standing and economic power, were also factors in worldly affairs. They were often conscious of their role in this wider world outside the convent. Educated nuns often had extensive correspondence with leading intellectual figures of their day. Hildegard, Abbess of a convent at Bingen, Germany, wrote philosophical treatises and traveled widely in Europe to share her scholarship. Like other medieval scholars, her view of the world as a sphere anticipated Renaissance findings.²⁷ Another nun, Hroswitha, was known for the plays she wrote in Latin.

Nuns also could be firm about what they saw to be their rights. A dispute over who was to be abbess, for example, caused a revolt in Poitiers Abbey in the 6th century that lasted for two years. There were troops of men—and nuns—who fought on both sides of this dispute.²⁸ When the Church tried to limit the power of these abbesses or tried to place bishops or abbots over them, rebellions took place throughout Europe. For example, one abbot excommunicated a whole Cistercian nunnery. His action was futile since these nuns told him he had no right



Albrecht Dürer woodcut. From: The complete Works of Albrecht Dürer, Dr. Willi Kürth, editor.

The 10th century nun and poet, Hroswitha of Gandersheim, presents one of her books to Emperor Otto I

²⁶ Power, p. 134-135.

²⁷ Linda Saport, "Scientific Achievements of Nuns in the Middle Ages," Unpublished Paper, November 25, 1978, p. 7.

²⁸ Eckenstein, p. 66-67.

to oversee the abbey and locked the doors against him.²⁹ Sometimes an abbey would appeal its case to Rome and the Pope would allow the abbey its own rights.³⁰ Even if they admitted that the bishop had jurisdiction over them, they did not necessarily feel they had to take his advice. A bishop came to the English nunnery, Markyate, in 1300 A.D. to tell the nuns that Pope Boniface VIII had enclosed these nuns so that "on pain of excommunication no nun or sister could go outside the bounds of the monastery." The nuns took the statute of the decree, threw it at the bishop as he left and told him "they were not content in any way to observe such a statute."³¹ Threats of excommunication did not end the nuns' objections to being enclosed. During the next three centuries bishops repeatedly sent reports to the Popes at Rome that nuns were still traveling, boarding outsiders, taking pilgrimages and entertaining guests at the convent.



*Biblioteca Statale, Lucca, Italy.
Liber Divinorum Operum.*

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was called the “marvel of Germany” because of her extraordinary accomplishments. She was as a scientist and healer, composed music, and corresponded with the great thinkers of her day.

Nuns of the medieval period led lives more complex than quiet. They provided social services such as maintaining hospitals, overnight hostels, and schools. Through acts of charity the convent provided food and medicine to the peoples of the surrounding countryside. The abbess often acted in the role of a local lord, with large lands to administer and duties to the king. In taking part in the events of their own day as well as maintaining their religious commitment, medieval nuns and modern nuns share a common heritage.

²⁹ Excommunicate: deny all access to religious rites.

³⁰ Boyd, p. 116.

³¹ Quoted in Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, p. 352.

Points to Consider

1. In what ways were medieval nuns neither always quiet nor merely pious?
 2. The role of abbess differed in various eras, but what generally were some of her responsibilities?
 3. What types of women became nuns?
 4. In what specific ways might the role of nun be attractive even to a non-religious woman?
 5. What were some limitations to the role of nun in medieval times?
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