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Querciolo Mazzonis

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Women’s semi-religious life in Rome (15th-17th century)

Querciolo Mazzonis
Università degli Studi di Teramo

Abstract. The aim of this essay is to provide an overview of women’s religious life outside the convent in Rome, from a wide chronological perspective, roughly between the early fifteenth and the end of the seventeenth century, focusing in particular on the period of the Council of Trent. It is a work in progress, in which I have tried to reconstruct a history of semi-religious women, considering their forms of life, spirituality, as well as the opportunities and limits offered by their relationship with the church. It is an attempt both to provide a synthesis of existing studies that had focused on specific aspects and to highlight, in a tentative manner, factors which are relevant to this history.

Roman women participated in religious life in significant numbers especially from the beginning of the fifteenth century, in parallel with the religious, demographic and commercial expansion of Rome. Before examining religious life beyond convent walls, I would like to quickly provide some basic data regarding nuns, as monasticism represented the ordinary religious choice for women – at least for those who could afford it.¹ Like in other Italian cities, Roman nuns were particularly numerous between the late fifteenth and the late seventeenth centuries: during the fourteenth century there were about 470 nuns, while in 1650 they counted about 2800 (roughly the same as the friars), about 6% of the female population (when Rome counted 126.000 inhabitants). The majority of nuns were either Dominicans, Poor Clares, Franciscans, or Carmelitans. In the early seventeenth century the areas of Rome with the higher number of convents were Monti (17) and Trastevere (12).

In order to live a devout life outside the convent walls women could join confraternities, especially from the sixteenth century on, when these lay associations became extremely popular. Before 1430 Rome had only 5 confraternities, before the turn of the century there were 27, and during the sixteenth century 100 new confraternities were

founded, involving roughly 25% of the population. As Anna Esposito has affirmed, women did participate in confraternal expansion, but not in great numbers and not in the same capacity as men: their number remained rather low (i.e., in the Compagnia della Grazia there were 11 women out of 170 members), they were excluded from some pious activities (such as bringing the eucharist to ill members in the confraternity of the SS. Sacramento), and, above all, from administrative positions. It is true that from the second half of the fifteenth century women’s responsibilities increased, as they visited other female members of the fraternity and sometimes could administer hospital wards reserved for women.

Women, above all, became the focus of attention of confraternities, as these started to provide dowries for girls and founded conservatories for women. In 1520 the Company of Divine Love established a monastery for converted prostitutes and in 1542-43 Ignatius of Loyola founded two confraternities, one which gathered repentant prostitutes and abandoned women – the Compagnia della Grazia – and another for prostitutes’ daughters – the Vergini Miserabili di S. Caterina della Rosa. These institutions offered women a temporary shelter, which ended either with the entry into a convent or with marriage. The women were placed under the Augustinian rule and Jesuit priests while the fraternities provided the necessary dowry. However, Loyola’s interest for prostitutes was not simply charitable. As stated in the rule of the Compagnia della Grazia, women living outside marriage were considered to be sinners. The attempt to convert them into wives and nuns was part of contemporary efforts to get rid of marginal groups (such as the poor) that did not fit within socially acceptable identities. During the following two centuries several institutes were founded with similar aims and characteristics, both in Rome and in the rest of Italy.

The most significant form of devout life for women outside monasticism was that of “bizzocaggio.” The bizoche were devout women who lived a spiritual life in informal

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6 The Confraternity of the SS. Annunziata alla Minerva elected two prioresses and fourteen “consiliariae.” The latter visited sick women in order to persuade them to leave something to the fraternity and checked if any married female members had died childless in order to recover their dowry (Esposito, “Men and Women,” 94-95).
8 On these two confraternities, see Lance Gabriel Lazar, Working in the Vineyard of the Lord: Jesuit Confraternities in Early Modern Italy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); and Alessandra Camerano, “Assistenza richiesta ed assistenza imposta: il conservatorio di S. Caterina della Rosa di Roma,” Quaderni Storici, 82 (1993), 227-61.
10 Bizoche, also known as “beguines” or “pinzochere,” existed in many parts of Italy and of Europe. There is a vast bibliography on this subject: for a synthetic overview, see Caroline W. Bynum, “Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages,” in Christian Spirituality II, High Middle Ages and Reformation, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, vol. 17, edited by Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 375–
communities, called “case sante,” or on their own or in small groups at home.\textsuperscript{11} Often they were tertiaries of one of the main mendicant orders, sometimes they followed a rule, but normally they did not take solemn vows, were not enclosed and had no formal attachment to a religious order. The bizoche could be widows, single or married, rich or poor, probably often middle class and foreigners. They did not have to bring a dowry, but they could keep private possessions and sustained themselves through begging and working (selling religious objects, educating girls, sewing, etc.). Their success with the Roman population is testified by the legacies left for them. The ecclesiastical hierarchies and the religious orders had an ambiguous attitude towards them: religious orders alternately tried to control them and promote them, while some popes, like Eugenius IV, Nicholas V, and Leo X were supportive.\textsuperscript{12}

Already during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there were several groups of bizoche, mostly of Franciscan affiliation, but this phenomenon reached its peak in the fifteenth century. At that time, according to Pennings, there were around 60 communities.\textsuperscript{13} Some of them gathered a conspicuous number of women (up to 30) and the total number of Bizoche was on the same scale of that of nuns. The rioni with the highest number of communities were Monti (10), Colonna (8), Pigna (7), Trastevere (7), and Campitelli (6). The most famous community was the Oblates of Tor de Specchi, founded by Francesca Romana in 1433.\textsuperscript{14}

Spiritually, they emphasized the importance of charity and poverty, running hospices for the poor, sick and pilgrims and helping women during childbirth. They attended mass, listened to sermons, went on pilgrimage to the sanctuaries in Rome or even as far as Jerusalem. The choice of uncluttered life made by these women, however, was not necessarily founded on the aspiration for a charitable life, but it was above all an attempt to live religious experiences in the midst of civic life and independently from ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Although the bizoche needed ecclesiastical authorization of their “casa santa”


\textsuperscript{13} Pennings, “Semi Religious Women,” 118. For a list of communities see 141-144.

and a confessor, they could often nominate their own superiors, choose the confessor, and decide how long to stay out. Furthermore, they deemed the institutional aspect of religion not very important, as many “case sante” hosted tertiaries belonging to different religious orders. In the world they preached informally, acted as peacemakers, and provided supernatural help, both for the living and for the dead. Their active and contemplative life were often connected: work in hospitals was undertaken in parallel with intercessory prayer, and penitential and visionary experiences performed in a solitary cell had an active dimension because they saved souls in the community. Some of the Bizoche were well known mystics, such as Francesca Romana (1384-1440), Ludovica degli Albertoni (1473-1533) and Felice da Barbarano (1527-53).

The change for the Bizzoche came in 1566, with the bull of Pius V Circa Pastoralis. The bull ordered that tertiaries and all non-cloistered female communities had to take solemn vows and adopt clausura. Communities that did not implement this change were forbidden from accepting new members and were destined to die out. Small houses had to merge, and the communities had to be reorganized according to the religious order of the tertiaries.

The papal bull caused a severe blow to the communities of bizzoche. Many communities merged and were transformed into convents of the second order. Such change, however, did not take place without resistance and it is not completely clear how thorough it was. Indeed, the bizzoche opposed the reform, trying to show that they were not nuns with solemn vows and that therefore enclosure did not apply to them. The bizzoche’s resistance and desperation was reported in the avvisi of the time: “Havendo presentito certe Monache del terzo ordine che Monsignor Carniglia voleva riformarle hanno voluto attossicarsi.” The avvisi sympathized with the bizzoche and the nuns who had to undertake a far too strict regulation: “Il Carniglia ha fatto un editto, ch’in nissun monastero le

15 The statutes of Francesca Romana’s community (laid down by her companions few years after Francesca’s death) stated that women could not stay out before dawn and after midnight, that they should go in pairs and be careful. The statutes are published in Giovanni Lunardi, “L’istituzione di Tor de’ Specchi,” in Un santa tutta romana. Saggi e ricerche nel VI Centenario della nascita di Francesca Bussa dei Ponziani (1384-1984), ed. Giorgio Picasso (Siena: Edizioni L’Ulivo, 1984), 87-93.

16 Ludovica degli Albertoni was a Franciscan tertiary of noble origins, venerated both during and after her life. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, at the time of her beatification process in mid seventeenth century, sculpted a statue representing Ludovica experiencing religious ecstasy. Felice da Barbarano was a middle class penitent whose confessor was the famous ex-Barnabite and Oratorian, Bonsignore Cacciaguerra. After her death, Cacciaguerra composed her life and a didactic treatise in the form of a dialogue with her: Dialogo Spirituale con Felice, Vergine di Barbarano, sua penitente; di cui anche scrive dopo di esso la virtuosissima Vita... In Padova, Appresso Giuseppe Comino, 1740.

17 We find trace of these transformations in the printed sheets distributed in the streets of Rome (the avvisi): “In Roma si vanno resserando tutti li monasteri aperti di Pizzone, et altre sorti di monache et quelle, che sono in poco numero si uniscono;” “Si trovano in Roma molti monasteri aperti di Pizzochere delle ordini di S. Francesco, Dominico, et Augustino, che andavano vagando per Roma procurandosi il viver, è venuto in fantasia al Papa per più cause di rissararle tutte in detti XI monasteri di S. Francesco, ne ha fatto sei, il medesimo di San Dominico, et Augustino” (published in Alberto Monticone, “L’applicazione a Roma del Concilio di Trento. Le visite del 1564-1566,” Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia, 7 (1953), 42).


19 See note 17.

20 Bernardino Carniglia was in charge of the reform of Roman convents on behalf of the pope.

monache possino tenere, ne cani, ne gatti, ne palombi maschi, ne galli, accio non incitino lussuria alle castità loro.”

Furthermore, scattered information reveal that the bull did not mean the end of female secular religious life. We know, for example, that some communities, such as that of Francesca Romana, resisted strict enclosure. Throughout the seventeenth century we find trace of bizeche in the parish registers (from 1637), which listed between 60 and 100 of them every year. Some “monache di casa” were spiritually guided by Loyola and the Jesuits, attended the Oratory of Filippo Neri and were present at his canonization process. And one famous visionary, Caterina Paluzzi (1575-1645), lived in Rome during the first two decades of the seventeenth century as a Dominican tertiary in her house with some companions – and she even enjoyed the protection of cardinals such as Sfondrati and Federico Borromeo.

Overall, it is possible that the women who continued to pursue their devotion in the world lived more in private homes either alone or in small groups and were more aristocratic in composition. As the essays of Carolyn Valone showed, these women expressed their piety especially in financing churches, convents, hospitals, conservatories and educational houses for women, and often in connection with the Jesuits and the Oratorians. Some of the institutes for the education of girls were the Oblate Filippine (founded by a follower of Filippo Neri, Rutilio Brandi, in 1629); the Oblate di Santa Maria dei Sette Dolori (founded by Camilla Virginia Farnese in 1640); the Oblate agostiniane del Bambin Gesù (founded by Anna Moroni in 1650), and Zitelle Viperesche (founded by Livia Viperesche in 1668). Some of these institutes were run by devout women who lived without clausura and solemn vows. From this perspective, particularly important were the schools of the Maestre Pie, established at the end of the eighteenth century by Rosa Venerini (1652-1728) and Lucia Filippini (1672-1732). The “Maestre” lived in their own houses, had no vows, wore a common habit, and traveled daily to the schools where they taught Christian Doctrine, the Spiritual Exercises, and other skills to the girls who were destined to be either wives or nuns. The schools were appealing to the lower middle classes because the pupils did not pay a dowry. The Maestre Pie anticipated the organizational model of the secular religious congregations which expanded in the nineteenth century as well as the figure of the missionary nun of the twentieth century.

Thus, despite the restrictions imposed by Pius V’s bull, many women managed to continue their secular devotion. The case of Rome was by no means unique, as in the last

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22 *Avviso* published on 19-12-1570 (Monticone, “L’applicazione,” 34).
decades of the sixteenth century not a few bishops founded or supported new female congregations with simple vows in their cities: the Ursulines in northern and central Italy, the Dimesse in the Veneto area, the female Theatines in Naples, and others. The Holy See did not consider these foundations as properly religious but it normally tolerated them and in some cases even approved them (like the Ursulines). The reason for the proliferation of these female congregations was that the attempts to impose enclosure on women were controversial within the Church itself. This was true already during the Council of Trent, which witnessed the conflict of opposing factions on the matter and which produced an ambiguous decree that left the bicoche’s communities untouched. As Francesca Medioli observed, Pius V’s bull too was opposed by many bishops and heads of religious orders, who remained convinced that, as established by Trent, it was up to them to decide about clausura.\textsuperscript{30} Indeed, in 1616 the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars took a step further as it published a document which declared that “communities of tertiaries, with or without bishops’ explicit consent, and even without clausura... are not obliged, and must not be obliged, to accept clausura or solemn vows, despite any contrary order.”\textsuperscript{31} The document thus also reveals that there were still open convents of tertiaries. The controversy ended with the official abolition of Pius’ bull in 1749 by Benedict XIV.\textsuperscript{32}

So, why were there no female secular congregations with simple vows in Rome, such as the Ursulines? This was not simply the consequence of the presence of the pope in Rome, as popes could have different attitudes on the matter and even authorize these congregations in other cities – as in the case of Gregory XIII, who approved the Ursulines in 1582. It is possible that one reason lies in the fact that while in some parts of Italy bishops were more in control of religious matters and had the authority to establish more innovative forms of religious life for women, in Rome religious power was contested among aristocratic families that sought to establish control of ecclesiastical institutions and offices.\textsuperscript{33} In addition, women’s devout secular life was probably considered inappropriate by an aristocracy that approached religion with a particular concern over familial honor. The outcome was formal conservative rigor accompanied by informal flexibility.

Women, thus, found support for their secular devotion in more informal ways, and especially among the Oratorians and the Jesuits.\textsuperscript{34} These religious groups backed women for several reasons. The first was practical: aristocratic women (and their noble relatives) could – and did – finance and promote their religious projects.\textsuperscript{35} Second, a factor that convinced


\textsuperscript{32} Medioli, “La clausura,” 264.

\textsuperscript{33} On the strategic role of female religiosity for Roman aristocracy see Marina Caffiero, “Il sistema dei monasteri femminili,” and Andretta, “Il governo dell’osservanza.”

\textsuperscript{34} Although Loyola was worried about possible accusation for mixing with women, he allowed the Jesuits to guide (at least some) women spiritually: see Lazar, Working in the Vineyard, 50.

men to take an interest in women had to do with the sixteenth century religious concept of conversion. Conversion was no longer identified with a rite, a vow, or a specific religious condition, but it was centered on the gradual transformation of the inner side of the individual, and therefore it could be achieved in the world. From this perspective women were not considered different from men. The rules of several confraternities, of the Ursulines and the Dimesse, for example, prescribe the same devotional practices aimed at the conversion of the inner self, of the heart and the mind (such as the Spiritual Exercises, mental prayer, meditation, etc.). As a matter of fact, sometimes women were even considered superior to men, as it was stated in several treatises, both Catholic and Protestant, and of the Querelle des Femmes. To quote a Roman example, in the rule of the Confraternita del SS. Sacramento, it was said: “Et perché esse [le donne] sono sempre più devote, si pregano anch’ora che frequentemente visitando l’Altare del Sacramento, con presentarsi continuamente alle Messe, et Processioni, et più spesse fiate communicandosi, diano se stesse a gli huomini in esempio di buone opere.” Here Loyola made a distinction between aristocratic women, to whom he acted as spiritual advisor because he considered them capable of virtue, and lower class women, whom he connected with sensuality. Neri, by contrast, did not seem to make such a distinction, as apparently he accepted women of all classes to his Oratory.

At the same time, women were attracted by Loyola and Neri probably because these men recognized their secular devotional aspirations and because they respected and valued their inner life, intellectual capacities and will. They offered them the possibility to actively participate in the religious initiatives undertaken by the men of the Counter-Reformation. And by exercising religious patronage, women had a considerable degree of decisional power in the use of their dowries and in shaping religious projects.

Furthermore the Jesuits and especially the Oratorians were promoting innovative forms of devotional life, which in some ways were anti-institutional and quasi-charismatic – spiritual aspects still popular with women. Indeed, we should not assume that penitential and mystical aspirations were necessarily absent from seventeenth century women’s charitable activities, since their attention to the disadvantaged of society was still spiritually motivated. As Barbara Diefendorf observed about the French dévots, women “took as their model the evangelical Jesus – healer, teacher, and friend of the poor – and looked for God in those they served.” A strong ascetic dimension was present in Filippini’s schools, under the influence of the Pii Operai. Mysticism was certainly not lacking from seventeenth century Roman convents, where women such as Francesca Farnese (1593-1651) and Chiara della Passione (1610-75) were influenced by the Carmelitan spirituality reinvigorated by Maria Maddalena de Pazzi. They prepared the ground for the Quietist explosion in the Roman

37 Statuti, in Marcocchi, La Riforma Cattolica, Vol I, 244.
monasteries in the last quarter of the century, following the diffusion of Molinos’ *Guia Espiritual.*

In conclusion, the history of semi-religious women in the three centuries that go from the fifteenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century was complex and rich with opportunities. Compared to the devotional choices and independence enjoyed by the earlier bizoche, after Pius’ bull of 1566 devout Roman women had to fit more closely within the opportunities and limits offered by the ecclesiastical institutions. However, they found in some men of the Church a variety of attitudes and responses that allowed them to fulfill their secular aspirations.

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