

**Life and Death of a Community:
The *Congrégation de Notre-Dame of Troyes*,
1628-1762**

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The religious community of the monastery of the *Congrégation de Notre-Dame* of Troyes should hold a special meaning for the Canadian Catholic historian. It was the institution where Marguerite Bourgeoys first worked as a teacher. The methods she learned there, we may presume, were the methods that she applied in Montreal, and taught to the members of her congregation.¹ It is not too far-fetched to imagine a sort of educational family tree, rooted in Troyes and stretching its branches in Canada. Unfortunately the ancestor was less vital than its descendants. In 1762 it was suppressed for its Jansenist leanings, and disappeared, almost without a trace. Anyone wishing to reconstruct its history must search patiently, and be content with gleanings.

A description dating from 1700, provides the setting:

In the city of Troyes there is a large house of religious of the Congregation instituted by the saintly priest Fourier, curé of Mattaincourt: cloistered nuns who bring together a large number of secular women ... to follow a life of piety, and teach school, and give religious instruction in various places, going everywhere two by two, as is the practice in missions.²

¹ Soeur Sainte-Gertrude-de-la-Croix, CND “L’oeuvre pédagogique de Marguerite Bourgeoys.” Université Laval, 1951: unpublished thesis.

² Charles de Glandelet, *Le Vray Esprit de l’Institut des Soeur seculieres de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame* (Montreal: CND, 1976), pp. 18-19.

Marguerite Bourgeoys, before she came to Canada, was a member of this group, working under the direction of one of the nuns, Louise de Chomedy. This means that she knew of the efforts which were being made by Louise's brother, Paul de Chomedy de Maisonneuve, to establish a colony in Montreal. In 1652 she was introduced to Maisonneuve, and invited to go to Montreal. And so she parted company with Troyes. There is a great deal more known about her doings during the next half-century than there is about the community which she left behind.

The monastic building still stands, though it is now the local gendarmerie. What it tells us, both by its spaciousness and by its position within the city, is that this community was once highly privileged. Seventeenth-century Troyes was not large. Its walls enclosed an area approximately a mile long and half a mile wide. Its population could not have been much more than 10,000.³ Yet space was always at a premium. People jostled against each other in narrow, crowded streets and alleys. Those who could not find room spread out into the faubourgs beyond the walls – areas that were more spacious, but less desirable. Yet the monastery of the *Congrégation* stood in extensive grounds, right at the centre of the walled city.

What strikes the modern eye is the high proportion of inner city space which in the Old Regime belonged to churches and religious orders. Historians, even Church historians, agree that this huge ecclesiastical presence was a serious physical problem for cities. The people of the time knew it too. Municipal officials were loud in their complaints. Monasteries, they argued, absorbed private houses and forced out families. Their cloistered buildings and gardens blocked streets. Their exemption from most taxes meant that the tax burden was proportionately increased for the remainder of the population.⁴

Troyes provides a good example of ecclesiastical overpopulation. Within the walls there were, at mid-seventeenth century, one cathedral (with its adjacent bishop's palace), two collegial churches, ten parish churches, three abbeys, three priories, one *commanderie*, three masculine and four feminine convents.⁵ In some cases, churches and religious houses were only

³ By the early eighteenth century it was thought to have about 3500 households. This would translate into approximately 14,100 people. *Paroisses et communes de France (Aube)* (1977): Troyes.

⁴ A. Babeau, *La ville sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1880), pp.464-65.

⁵ To this must be added several sizeable communities in the faubourgs. See Alphonse Roserot, *Dictionnaire historique de la Champagne méridionale des origines à 1790* (Angers, 1948), vol.IV, article Troyes (institutions ecclésiastiques).

a stone's throw apart. All this in a city where Calvinism had once been strong, and where Catholicism had been re-established only by the sword of the Holy League.⁶

This points to a basic fact about religious communities: they were part of the Counter Reformation's response to the threat of Protestantism. And as such, they came into an atmosphere that can scarcely be called neutral. In Troyes, the "conventual invasion," as it has been called, met with an entrenched opposition. The religious wars might have destroyed the infrastructure of the reformed church, but they had not stamped out its memory, especially among the well-to-do and influential families who had been its most enthusiastic members. This helps to explain a persistent surly opposition to the new militant Catholicism. The city fathers' attitude towards proposals for new religious foundations ranged from reserve to open hostility, and they did what they could to hinder them.

The most famous, and long-running, of all battles of wills between the municipality and a religious order was what came to be known as "The Siege of Troyes by the Jesuits."⁷ From 1603 onwards the Society made repeated efforts to establish a college in the city. It seems a small enough matter; but we have to understand the strategic importance of the college, in this as in other towns of seventeenth-century France. In earlier times the college had been a local affair, run by the municipality. It was now becoming a central institution of the Counter Reformation, educating the young men of the region, but also providing a base from which to direct the local elites and to proselytize the people.⁸ Everybody knew that the order that ran the college would have a dominant position in the life of the city.

The Jesuits had the backing of the Crown, the bishop, a sizeable section of the city's wealthier citizens, and most of the common people, whose sympathies had always been with the League. But the city council set its face against them all. Battle followed upon battle in the council chambers; insults were bandied about, and even threats of excommunication; messengers were sent post-haste to the court at Fontainebleau, to promote one or other side of the argument. In the end, after years of wrangling, the city council won. In 1624 the Jesuits were ordered by the Crown to withdraw from Troyes.⁹

⁶ Gustave Carré, *Histoire populaire de Troyes* (Troyes: Editions du Bastion, 1983), part V, chapter 3.

⁷ Pierre Jean Grosley, *Les sieges de Troyes par les Jésuites* (Paris, 1826).

⁸ L. Châtellier, *L'Europe des divots* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987).

⁹ For a full account of the "sieges" see Gustave Carré, *L'enseignement secondaire à Troyes du moyen age à la Révolution* (Paris, 1888), pp.53-85.

The decisive moment in the battle came in 1621, when a prominent citizen, Franyois Pithou, died, leaving a large house with its adjacent land to the city “to be made into a college for the instruction of youth,” but only on condition that the Jesuits “not be received in any way.”¹⁰

This was an offer that nobody could refuse. The city very swiftly moved its college into the new premises, and entrusted it to the Oratorians.

Since so much turned on this fateful legacy, it is worth noting that Pithou was a one-time Calvinist who had suffered persecution and exile before finally converting to Catholicism.¹¹ Whether his conversion was genuine or not, it certainly did not include any compromise with the Jesuits. His opinion of them has been preserved for us in a lengthy tract which he wrote in 1611.¹² In trenchant language that obviously predated the existence of libel laws, he described them as heirs of the Holy League, overturners of the public order, inciters of violence, instruments of the Pope, and servants of “the grandeur of Spain.”¹³ In his testament, the last public act of his life, we catch all the resonances of past angers, of the bitterness and bloodshed of the religious wars. In dying he was able to get even with the old enemy. The college went, not to the Jesuits, but to the Oratorians.

It is reasonable to suspect that the Oratorians’ greatest virtue, in the minds of the city fathers of Troyes, was that they were not Jesuits. But there was more to the Oratorians than that. They were already nurturing the gloomy theology which we call Augustinianism, which before long would develop into Jansenism. The act which closed the book on past religious conflict also opened it to future discord. Troyes was to become a stronghold of Jansenism in France, and at the centre of the stronghold would stand the Oratorian college.

We shall come back to Jansenism later. What we note here is simply that by excluding the Jesuits and importing the Oratorians, the city of Troyes was unwittingly setting the scene for future religious strife. There is another point to be made. The episode is a good example of one of the most troubling characteristics of the religious orders during the Old Regime: the overwhelming passion known as *esprit de corps*. The Jesuits in their frustration lashed out at their opponents, calling them “atheists, libertines, half-Catholics, heretics, schismatics” and so on.¹⁴ The name-calling was not that unusual. The lowest circles of hell might be reserved for

¹⁰ Pithou’s testament is printed in *ibid.*, pp. 318-20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹² Printed in Grosley, *Les Sieges de Troyes*, pp. 1-62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.28.

Protestants and such like, but the religious orders had no problems in consigning each other to deep purgatory, at least.

In the year 1628, the *chanoinesses de Saint-Augustin* of the *Congrégation de Notre-Dame* carried out their plan to establish a house in Troyes. They belonged to a new congregation based in Lorraine, dedicated to the instruction of girls.¹⁵ They had been in France for only a few years, but they were expanding at a remarkable rate. This particular colony came from the north-east, from Châlons-sur-Marne. Some daughters of prominent local families had entered the Châlons house, in the expectation of returning to Troyes to found a community.¹⁶ Quite clearly they had a body of local support.

At the same time another colony of nuns was making its way up from the south-east, also with the intention of founding a teaching monastery in Troyes. These were Ursulines. They were heading not only for the same city, but for the same piece of property. Both communities hoped to acquire the old college, so recently vacated thanks to Pithou's legacy. They arrived in the same year.

The modest status of religious women should not blind us to the fact that they, too, were in fierce competition with each other. In various cities of eastern France throughout this decade the two congregations and their respective supporters jockeyed for pride of place. Bishops, municipal officers, members of the royal court, all worked to promote their protégées and exclude the other side. In Troyes, the Ursulines seemed to have the advantage. Since 1611 they had had royal authorization to establish a community here, and in 1628 Louis XIII renewed the authorization, asking the citizens of Troyes to facilitate the foundation.¹⁷ Upon their arrival they offered 40,000 livres for the empty college building. But the local officials dragged their feet, and did everything they could to obstruct them in their efforts to establish themselves. It was 1629 before the Ursulines managed to buy a property, and at that it was not the coveted vacant college in the centre of the city, but an hostelry located at one end, close to the walls. In a final act of non-cooperation, the city refused to deliver them the keys until ordered to do so by the

¹⁵ For more on the congregation, see Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), chap. 3.

¹⁶ L.Carrez, *Histoire du premier monastère de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame établi à Châlons-sur-Marne* (Châlons, 1906), p.253.

¹⁷ Marie de Chantal Gueudré, *Histoire de l'Ordre des Ursulines en France* (Paris: Editions Saint-Paul, 1957), vol.1, p.131; Roserot, *Dictionnaire historique*, p.1561.

king, in 1630.¹⁸ In the meantime the old college was sold to the nuns of the *Congrégation*, for the handsome sum of 50,000 livres.¹⁹

Did the city act in bad faith towards the Ursulines? It appears so. In that case, Troyes was not alone in its cavalier behaviour. There is evidence in other cities of active conspiracies to keep them out.²⁰ The reason may have been that the Ursulines were perceived as members of the Jesuit siege train, so to speak. Certainly at this time their order was being promoted by the Jesuits.²¹ The nuns of the *Congrégation* appeared to be free of such political baggage. Whatever the reason, influential citizens of the city had opted for the *Congrégation*, and king and bishop combined were unable to deflect them.

The nuns of the *Congrégation* carried off the prize, but at a tremendous cost to themselves. The college had cost them 50,000 livres, plus a further 7000 livres which we can only call a “sweetener,” for the right to enter the city. They did not have nearly enough money to pay for this. Two years later we find them faced with debts of 25,000 livres, and with creditors threatening to take them to court.²² Their financial distress reflected badly on their house: supporters, postulants and students all deserted them, and they could not even afford to pay a chaplain to say their masses. All this, as their founder, Pierre Fourier, commented, because of their furious determination to find a place in the city of Troyes no matter what the price.²³ To crown their distress, plague hit the city, forcing them to leave their monastery for a time. By late 1632, however, the situation was improving: they were back in their house, the monastery of Châlons had guaranteed their debts, and they had eleven novices and twenty boarders.²⁴

By mid-century the city of Troyes was endowed with two large feminine teaching monasteries, where most cities of comparable size only had one. Both communities numbered

¹⁸ Archives Départementales (hereafter AD) Aube G 1297, fol. 125 (April 17 and 19, 1638); AD Aube D 131, 132. Also see Roserot, *Dictionnaire historique*, pp. 1561-62.

¹⁹ AD Aube G 1297, fol. 137, 17 June 1628.

²⁰ See for instance the determination of the Archbishop of Sens to keep the Ursulines, for whom he confessed “an absolute repugnance,” out of Provins, Étampes and Joigny (Bibliothèque municipale de Provins ms. 251, fol.2, Saint Pierre Fourier, *Correspondance 1598-1640* [Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1986] vol.3, p.195).

²¹ Gueudré, *Histoire des Ursulines*, vol.2, p.435.

²² Fourier, *Correspondance* vol.3, pp.249-56.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.381-86.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.530-32.

fifty nuns or more.²⁵ Both ran boarding schools; both ran day schools, with two to three hundred students in each school.²⁶ Furthermore, the *Congrégation* was now training secular teachers to go where the nuns could not, specifically the group already referred to, of which Marguerite Bourgeoys was a member. To these two teaching communities a third was added when, in 1678, the Jansenist Pierre Nicole encouraged a small group of secular women to open a school for the very poor.²⁷ These women, known as the *soeurs noires*, opened two classes, one for younger children, the other – along the lines of a sheltered workshop – for older girls. Their school was highly valued by the working women of the city, who, according to an eighteenth-century author, “had to be at their stalls all day, a good long way from home, and so sent their daughters there ... to learn the different skills that were most essential to mothers of family of their social position.”²⁸ So it seems likely that any young girl in Troyes whose parents wished her to go to school would have been able to do so, at least for a couple of years. This was the situation for approximately a century, until the climax of the Jansenist crisis, in the mid- eighteenth century.

Jansenism is a complex phenomenon, to which some 15,000 scholarly works have been dedicated.²⁹ First and foremost, it was a theology – a theology condemned in 1653 by the Papacy, so that from then on its supporters were heretics in the eyes of the Church. However, a change in the Holy See’s policy – the so- called “Clementine peace” which began in 1669 – gave Jansenism a breathing space which lasted until the end of the century. It was during these years, under the protection of many influential people, that “the Jansenist spirit really penetrated into French Catholicism.”³⁰ When, in 1713, under immense pressure from Louis XIV, the Pope finally and definitively condemned Jansenism with the Bull *Unigenitus*, the heresy was already deeply entrenched in the Church of France.

The heresy of Jansenism consisted in its pessimistic view of the nature of man, and its insistence on the all-importance of divine grace. But in fact, there was much more to Jansenism

²⁵ AD Aube D 133; Roseray, *Dictionnaire historique*, p. 1561.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 1561 (*Congrégation*); Bibliothèque de la Sorbonne ms. 769, fol. 124 (Ursulines).

²⁷ For more on the *soeurs noires*, see Bernard Chedozeau, ‘Les petites écoles de Pierre Nicole,’ in *Colloque de Marseille: Le XVIIe siècle et l’éducation*, 1^{er} trim., no.88. (1971), pp.15-22.

²⁸ Pierre Jean Grosley, *Ephémérides* (1762), p. 75.

²⁹ William H. Williams, “Jansenism Revisted,” *Catholic History Review* 63, 4 (1977): 575.

³⁰ H.Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. J.J.Buckingham (London: J.M.Dent, 1963), p.366.

than incorrect theology. It was the extreme expression of a deep-running current of feeling in French church and society which rejected the Jesuits' humanism and inclusiveness as "laxism," and opted for a much more puritanical view of man's relationship with God. Man was stained and wounded by sin; only God's grace could save him, and this grace had to be sought through prayer and penance and denial of self. This is what is called "the French school," and although it is principally identified with Bérulle and his Oratorians, it appealed to a broad sector of the French church. Many were the Catholics who knew no other spirituality.

As one historian has remarked, there was not one Jansenism, but several.³¹ Jansenism could be theological, or political, or moral. It could be a debate on the mountaintops, so to speak, involving only bishops, theologians, and religious orders. This was true of early Jansenism. It could be a vehicle for political ideas, defending the home-grown Church against foreign influence, or, in later years, demanding more equality for the lower clergy. Or it could simply be a rigorous and ascetic form of spirituality – an extreme expression of puritanism inside the Catholic Church. It was this last Jansenism which found so much favour within women's communities.

The nuns who opened the *Congrégation's* school in Troyes were already part of this tradition. Their monasteries in Lorraine were, from the earliest years, part of the current of what has been called "pre-Jansenism."³² As the Jansenist movement grew and defined itself, its privileged field of action was a vast quadrangle east of Paris, running through France into Lorraine, and north into the Low Countries.³³ The houses of the *Congrégation* in eastern France, including Troyes, stood full in the path of circulating Jansenist ideas and literature. All of them, at one time or another, were identified as Jansenist.

These Jansenist sympathies and traditions could not have endured, however, if they had been consistently opposed by the local bishops. Women's monasteries were all subject to their bishops, in the sense that it was the bishops who appointed their confessors and canonical superiors, supervised the election of their superiors and the admission of their novices, and in general watched over the "regularity" of their communities. The bishop's word was law – at least, it was law in everything which did not conflict with the monastery's own rule and constitutions. Thus over the long term, bishops were able to set the tone of the institutions under

³¹ René Taveneaux, *La vie quotidienne des Jansénistes aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Hachette, 1973), p.13.

³² René Taveneaux, *Le Jansénisme en Lorraine* (Paris: Vrin, 1960), p.111.

³³ Taveneaux, *La vie quotidienne des Jansénistes*, p. 243.

their jurisdiction. This was the case in the various dioceses of eastern France which were ruled for many years by Jansenist-leaning bishops.

Jansenism had come early to Troyes, through its Oratorian college. By the end of the century a large section of its clergy was already Jansenist in sympathy, and the Crown did not improve matters by using the diocese as a place of exile for Jansenist “trouble-makers” from other parts of France.³⁴ However, as long as the bishop remained orthodox the Jansenism in his diocese remained fairly muted. Then in 1718 a new bishop was appointed: Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, nephew to the great Bossuet, a man of integrity and virtue, but also an open Jansenist. The change in the diocese was instantaneous: sixteen priests, including eight Oratorians, at once retracted their adhesion to the papal Bull *Unigenitus*. Within a few years most of the clergy had moved to the Jansenist camp. By 1738 the Crown was noting with alarm that “all the diocese is tainted, including the monasteries.”³⁵

Up until this time, the women’s communities of Troyes appear to have lived in peace, sheltered from controversy by the protection of their bishop. They must have known what could happen to intransigent houses. In 1709 Port-Royal-des-Champs, the most famous of Jansenist monasteries, was suppressed, its nuns dispersed, its dead exhumed, its walls razed to the ground. But Port-Royal had been in open conflict with the authorities, whereas their own position, assured by their bishop, appeared solid and safe. Bossuet, in a pastoral letter addressed directly to them, urged them to remember that “we are not making innovations; we are conserving, we are re-establishing, we are reclaiming our ancient usages.”³⁶ The sense of his instructions was the same as those given by the Jansenist bishop of the neighbouring diocese of Châons to the nuns under his jurisdiction: “You must respect in my person the authority of Jesus Christ. It is He whom you will hear in hearing me ... If anyone announces a gospel different from that which I preach to you, even if it be an angel from heaven, say to him anathema, and do not listen to

³⁴ Joseph Roserot de Melin, *Le diocèse de Troyes des origines à nos jours* (Troyes, 1957), p.165.

³⁵ Carré, *Histoire populaire*, pp.373-74. After the death of Louis XIV there had been a lull in the persecution of Jansenism. It was under Cardinal Fleury, Chief Minister of France from 1726 to 1743, that the Crown returned to the attack.

³⁶ AD Aube G 32: *Instruction pastorale de Mgr l’Evesque de Troyes, pour servir de reponse au Second Mandement de M.l’Archevesque de Sens, au sujet du nouveau Missel de Troyes* (1738), p.61.

him.”³⁷ Sacred tradition and episcopal authority: these were the two guarantees of the communities’ good conscience, and there seemed to be no conflict between them.

But times were changing. The Jansenist bishops were disappearing. Bossuet was one of only a few left in possession of their sees. Their replacements were of a very different temper. In 1730 a new Archbishop of Sens was consecrated: Languet, a well-known anti-Jansenist. Bossuet and his colleague, the Jansenist Bishop Caylus of Auxerre, were soon in open conflict with their metropolitan. “An evil has broken out in the province,” wrote Caylus to his faithful, “And it seems to be coming from the centre.”³⁸ Languet, at whom this compliment was directed, appealed past both bishops to the clergy of their dioceses. In Troyes Bossuet had recently authorized a new diocesan missal which was distinctly Jansenist in its rubrics. Languet now threatened any priest in Troyes using the new missal with immediate suspension *ipso facto*. With the Crown supporting the Archbishop, Bossuet was forced to withdraw his missal.³⁹

By now Bossuet was an old man, in delicate health. In 1742 he announced his resignation. After a quarter of a century during which Jansenism had been protected and encouraged, and a much longer time during which it had been tolerated, Troyes was now open to reform. The new bishop, appointed at once, was Mathias Poncet de la Rivière, known already for his militant anti-Jansenism. His first act was to order the clergy to accept the Bull *Unigenitus*. Fifty priests refused, and were placed under interdict. A few months later the entire Oratorian community was forbidden to exercise the duties of the priesthood.⁴⁰ The minor seminary was closed and the practice of holding diocesan synods brought to an end. The clergy still resisted. Within a year the religious life of the diocese was in chaos.

How would the nuns of the diocese react to these developments? Tragically, all the women’s monasteries of Troyes — Carmelite, Visitandine, Ursuline, Benedictine, *Congrégation* — became the ground for a power-struggle between the new bishop and the Jansenists. They were soon being showered with Jansenist literature, advice on how to defy their bishop, how to answer his questions, how to resist his ordinances — and also, how to conceal the names of their secret advisers. The bishop thundered that this was cowardly advice from people who took care to

³⁷ AD Marne Chp.15.588: *Lettre de Monseigneur l’illustrissime et révérendissime Evêque comte de Chaalons Pair de France aux religieuses de son Diocese, au sujet de la Constitution de N.S.P. le Pape, Unigenitus Dei Filius*, p.2.

³⁸ H.Bouvier, *Histoire de l’Eglise de Sens* (Amiens, 1911), vol.2, p.318.

³⁹ A.Prévost, *Saint Vincent de Paul et ses institutions en Champagne méridionale* (Bar-sur-Seine, 1928), pp.132-3.

⁴⁰ Carré, *L’enseignement secondaire d Troyes*, p.109.

remain hidden while preparing the women for martyrdom. And that martyrdom, he warned, would not be long in coming.⁴¹

The nuns were being ordered to choose between the present episcopal authority and what they believed to be sacred tradition, consecrated by past episcopal authority. They did not hesitate. The priests that Poncet appointed to take the place of their old confessors came up against stubborn resistance. The Carmelites went for a year without confession, the *Congrégation* continued to confess to the priest whom they had received from Bossuet, the Ursulines refused to accept their new confessor, arguing that to do so would be to commit “a mortal sin, in acting against our own conscience.”⁴² The bishop rejected their argument. “The Church expects from you a submission so complete that it leaves you no liberty to examine her judgments, still less to read or listen to anything which can attack them or contradict them.”⁴³

Gradually, the pressure was increased. The *soeurs noires* were disbanded. Then the Benedictines were suppressed, then the Carmelites. In 1743 the superior and the assistant of the Ursulines were suspended, and the community was forbidden to receive novices.⁴⁴ In 1744 the nuns of the *Congrégation* were forbidden to teach school.⁴⁵ The *subdélégué*, in an effort to isolate the ringleaders, moved five of their sisters to the Ursulines, and brought back nine recalcitrant Ursulines to their house. All were forbidden to communicate with their families.⁴⁶

Still the nuns resisted. The bishop visited them personally, and was treated with scant respect. The sisters were forthright to the point of rudeness. Yet there was an important point made in their argument. Thus, from a religious of the Visitation: “You are very different, Monseigneur, from our former bishops ... who were always satisfied with the purity of our faith. Our faith is still the same, our sentiments have not changed. They themselves put into our hands the books which you now forbid us.”⁴⁷ From an Ursuline: “Our constitutions were not made yesterday, and they forbid us to obey where there will be a manifest sin.” “What, I am asking you to commit sin?” asked the bishop. “We do not say that that is your intention, but in our present

⁴¹ AD Aube G 32: Mathias Poncet de la Rivière, *Lettre pastorale aux communautés religieuses de son Diocèse* (1749), pp. 5-6, 25, 27.

⁴² A. Prévost, *Le diocèse de Troyes* (Dijon, 1923-26), vol.3, pp.148-49.

⁴³ Poncet de la Rivière, *Lettre pastorale* (1949), p.12.

⁴⁴ Prévost, *Le diocèse de Troyes*, pp. 147, 149.

⁴⁵ AD Aube G 54 p.122.

⁴⁶ Prévost, *Le diocèse de Troyes*, pp. 150, 161.

⁴⁷ Roserot de Melin, *Le diocèse de Troyes*, p.170.

disposition, we would be doing so in submitting.”⁴⁸ The women were appealing from present episcopal authority to past episcopal authority, to the authority of their rule and customs, and to the long-time practice of their community. There is no better way to illustrate this than to quote the words of another Jansenist nun, spoken at the time of the Bull *Unigenitus*: “[These are the truths] with which we have been nourished since our childhood, and which have become familiar to us through the use of them which we have made, and still make every day, in the exercise of our profession.”⁴⁹

Fidelity to the past was one of the most striking characteristics of the nuns of the eighteenth century. They were trained to it; they idealized it. The concept of *aggiornamento* had no place in their mindset. In this case the fidelity was to a system of belief and behaviour which was no longer sanctioned by the Church. They were, as the bishop himself remarked, ‘disposed by a long seduction’ to support the tenets of Jansenism.⁵⁰ He considered their behaviour inexcusable: “They make themselves into doctors, and claim all knowledge because they know enough to criticize whatever contradicts their much-prized independence.”⁵¹ A twentieth-century historian goes one better, and labels their behaviour as bizarre: “Psychiatrists know what nonsense can be engendered by a fixed idea in a brain which is no longer ... submitted to wise direction.”⁵²

But in another crisis, not far removed in time, the nuns – the same nuns, in some cases – were again faced with the demand that they deny their past. In 1790 every religious woman in France was invited individually by the government to accept a pension and to leave community life. In almost every case she replied in the negative, often with the same sort of *hauteur* which the bishop of Troyes found so shocking. The first stubbornness is seen as ridiculous, the second as glorious. Yet they both arose from the same deep instinct not to break faith with the life that had been undertaken.

The nuns of the *Congrégation* did not survive to see the Revolution. Forbidden to receive novices, they watched their numbers dwindle, from forty-seven in 1727 to fifteen in 1750. At this stage the bishop decided to deliver the *coup de grâce*.

⁴⁸ Prévost, *Le diocèse de Troyes*, p.156.

⁴⁹ Mère Hélène Arlon de Sainte-Colombe, superior of the Ursuline monastery of Beauvais, 1715, quoted in Gueudré, *Histoire des Ursulines*, vol. 2, p.494.

⁵⁰ Poncet de La Rivière, *Lettre pastorale* (1749), p.5.

⁵¹ AD Aube G 32. Poncet de la Rivière, *Lettre pastorale* (1755).

⁵² Riverot de Melin, *Le diocèse de Troyes*, p.168.

The women's monasteries of France were at this time undergoing review by a royal commission. Their problem was mainly one of poverty: too many houses had fallen on hard times, largely because of the national bankruptcy of 1720, which had deprived them of most of their savings. The commission was empowered to suppress insolvent houses and to unite their goods and their personnel to other communities.

Poncet used this pretext of poverty and shortage of personnel to get rid of the *Congrégation*. In May 1750 he obtained a royal order to proceed with the closing of the house.⁵³ Since this met with disgruntlement on the part of the citizens of Troyes, who looked upon the monastery's schools as part of their patrimony, he undertook to open a public school at his own expense, hiring two secular teachers and renting a small unheated house for the purpose.⁵⁴ At this point the people of Troyes dealt him a painful blow. Four hundred little girls showed up at the school. Whether this overload was an innocent accident, or an exercise of the malicious sense of humour for which, according to their historian, the people of the region are well known,⁵⁵ it certainly created a problem for Poncet. He decided to commandeer the empty classrooms of the *Congrégation*. The trouble was that the nuns refused to give up the keys. "The ill humour of these women is giving me trouble," he wrote.⁵⁶

If the nuns were ill-humoured, they had good cause. It was clear now that they were in danger of losing their monastery. In July the bishop appointed an outside bursar, a man named Leclerc, to take the first steps towards closing it down. Leclerc began by taking an inventory of the community's goods and revenues – an inventory which, he claimed, proved that the house was insolvent. To his horror, on the very same day the nuns called in notaries and proceeded with their own inventory, which (they claimed) proved that the house was solvent.⁵⁷ Eleven days later he went again to the monastery, this time to demand that the nuns surrender their registers and their keys, that they dismiss all their servants and send away their boarders, and that, whether they like it or not, they accept the chaplain appointed by the bishop. He received a furious refusal.

⁵³ Archives Nationales (hereafter AN) G⁹ 168: Extrait de Registre du Conseil d'État, 30 mai 1750.

⁵⁴ AN G⁹ 168: Mandement de M^{sr} l'Evesque de Troyes pour l'Etablissement d'une Ecole publique de filles.

⁵⁵ Carré, *Histoire populaire*, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁶ AN G⁹ 168: Poncet de la Rivière — Commission des Secours, 5 août 1750.

⁵⁷ AN G⁹ 168-11.

In authorizing these demands the bishop had gone too far. He had given a layman permission to enter a female monastery and to lay down the law to its members, in contravention of all the rights which they enjoyed by canon law and by the law of the land. The nuns promptly called in notaries again, this time to register an appeal to Parlement. The bishop's ordinance, according to their complaint, "is a piece so null, so irregular, so monstrous, that it seems incredible that it should come from the Bishop of Troyes." The enemies of the community, they claimed, were deceiving His Majesty into believing that it could not support itself. The bishop was depriving it of its "incontestable right" to choose its own chaplain; he was abandoning it to the discretion of a layman, "although it has not been accused of the slightest wrongdoing."⁵⁸

The commission in Paris was becoming uncomfortable. On the one hand it was anxious to support the authority of the bishop; on the other, it recognized that he was now acting beyond his powers. Furthermore, it now had before it two sets of notarized documents, each contradicting the other on the question of the house's financial condition. "I shall be glad to know ... which of the two to believe," remarked the official reporter.⁵⁹ The nuns were now marshalling an impressive array of support from the officials of the city and the *bailliage*; on the other hand, the Bishop was serving notice that this was a fight he could not afford to lose. "This affair is too important, for the Church, and for my see," he wrote. In the background, barely mentioned, was the real threat that the nuns represented: Jansenism, the heresy that he had been chosen to destroy, and which was coming dangerously close to destroying him.

On August 17-18 the matter came to a rowdy climax. Poncet, following the commission's advice, was moving ahead resolutely to close down the house. To make this procedure legal, public notice had to be given, after which his representatives were to go to the monastery, there to draw up a report of *commodo et incommodo*, giving reasons why the house should be closed. On arrival they found not just the nuns, but a crowd of a hundred people headed by city councillors, representatives from the *bailliage*, and two canons from the cathedral. These men insisted that the report should also contain their statements of support for the nuns. In the end the bishop's commissioners withdrew, hoping that by the following day the crowd would have dispersed. On the contrary, it grew to three hundred, now breathing threats against the commissioners and even against the bishop.

⁵⁸ AN G^o 168: 13 juillet 1650.

⁵⁹ AN G^o 168-11.

Poncet decided that the most prudent course was to call off the action, and wait until the situation calmed down.⁶⁰ He left for Paris, to plead his case in person. The nuns continued to shower the authorities with petitions, but all in vain. Failing to get redress from the Crown, forbidden to receive novices or to teach school, subject still to the bursar who disliked them as much as they disliked him, they realized that the demise of the community was only a matter of time. Twelve years later – in 1762 – the nuns were gone.⁶¹ They were, however, preceded in their departure by their bishop. Poncet’s zeal in the pursuit of Jansenists ended up by exceeding the bounds set by both the pope and the king. His enemies in Parlement and in the local government now banded together and in 1758 forced him into exile. With his disappearance the general agitation died down. Only a few incidents marred the remaining years before the Revolution.

Poncet has been acclaimed as one of the great bishops of Troyes.⁶² It is a little difficult to support this view. Certainly he showed great determination in the face of what was virtually a general mutiny in his diocese. Furthermore, his disciplinary methods were not unusual for the times: other bishops, Jansenist and orthodox, were equally ruthless in dealing with non-conforming clergy and communities. But he was intemperate beyond the line of duty, and he certainly contributed to the ugly bitterness which the crisis left behind. Jansenism, it is generally agreed, did great damage to the Church of France, not only because of the heresy, but because of the bitter political in-fighting which it occasioned. “It is inaccurate to attribute the crisis only to a rebellion of intellect and conscience,” writes a church historian. “Believers themselves were in part responsible.”⁶³ Non-believers and *philosophes*, as well as the general Catholic public, watched from the sidelines as the Church tore itself apart.

The memory of the *Congrégation* of Troyes – such as it is – is overshadowed by imputations of heresy. These, however, demand a thoughtful examination. The community had been heir, from the earliest days of the Counter Reformation, to a certain rigorous approach to religion – Jansenism even before Jansenius. Its practice of this type of spirituality, tolerated and often actively nurtured by its immediate superiors, had most probably evolved and sharpened in form. But never in a hundred years and more was there – for those nuns, in that monastery, in that particular diocese – a serious question of disobedience to the Church. Now, suddenly, all their protections were stripped away, and they were faced with a stark choice: obedience to

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Roserot, *Dictionnaire Historique*, vol.4, p.1561.

⁶³ Riverot de Melin, *Le diocese de Troyes*, p.172.

the present, or obedience to the past. The choice that they made put them on the wrong side of orthodoxy, and earned them a bad reputation which has lasted until modern times. Perhaps in this more tolerant age they, will be viewed with a little more understanding.