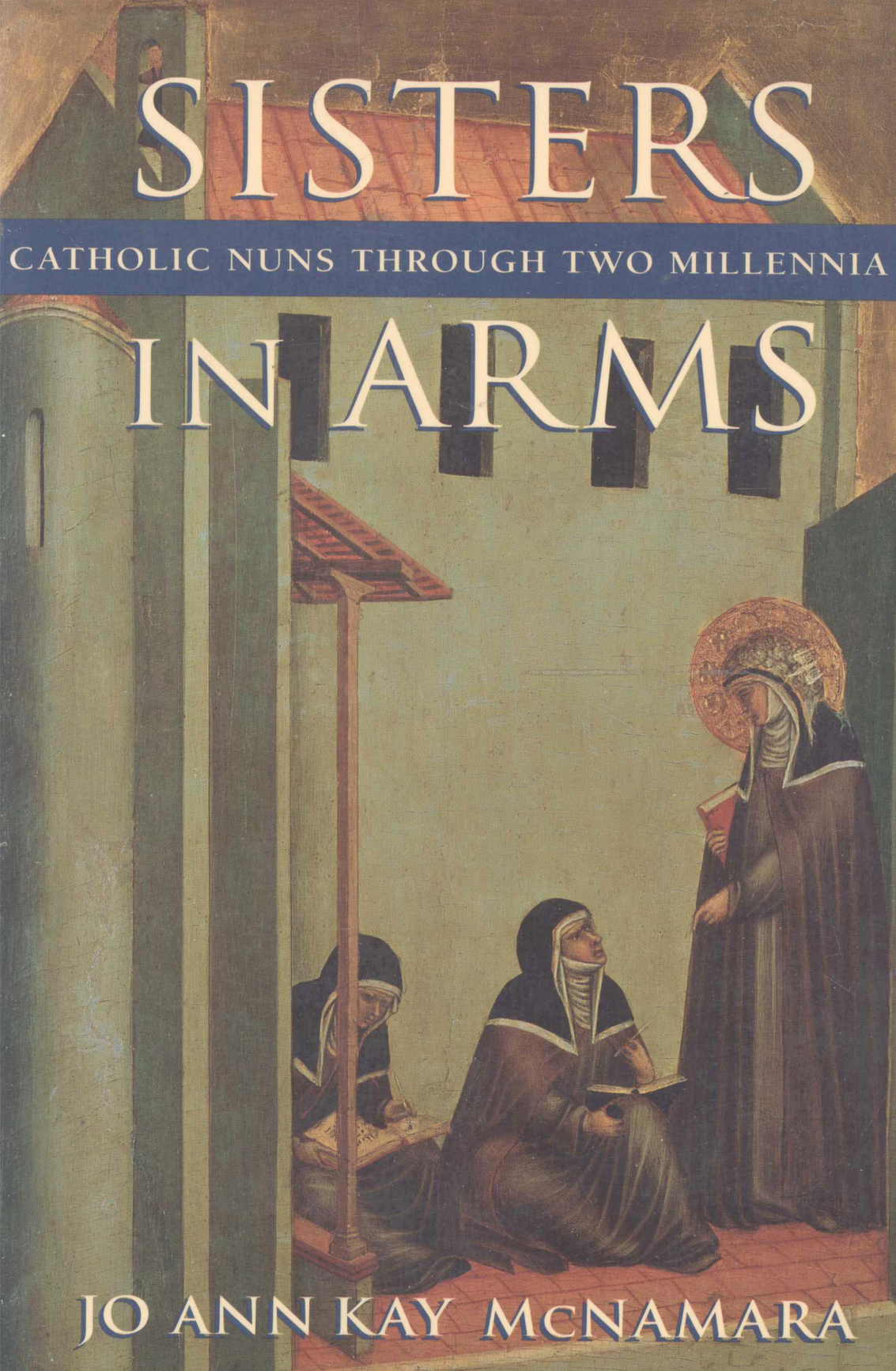
SISTERS IN ARMS

CATHOLIC NUNS THROUGH TWO MILLENNIA



JO ANN KAY McNAMARA

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Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia

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For John E. Halborg

Preface

IN SEEKING A TITLE for this book, I found myself torn between two of the most traditional metaphors for nuns. For a long time, I considered "Virile Women," relying on the rhetoric of late antiquity. As I plunged ever further forward in time, however, this title came to seem less and less viable. To be sure, even the twentieth century has produced its share of women who were praised by their male companions as manly, at least in spirit. But while their womanhood clearly defined their vocations, it was not in their own minds a demeaning condition in need of elevation to the manly sphere. "Brides of Christ," a male concept of female spirituality, serves very effectively to anchor women to a traditional gender role, but women themselves rarely indulge in its implicit eroticism in their writings. More often, they identify with the Virgin Mary in her maternal or queenly aspects or model themselves on the heroic virgin saints, Catherine, Margaret, Thecla, and Ursula.

Accordingly, I adopted a modification of the military metaphor that has always informed monastic rhetoric. Ascesis (military training), self-control, obedience, and self-sacrifice are the virtues of soldiers, and they are most perfectly realized among the soldiers of Christ. Nuns were and are part of that army even though they tend to be treated as irregulars in relation to the professional male clergy. Uniformed in veil and scapular, armed with prayer and good works, they have always been in the forefront of their religion's battles. They shared the prejudices, the will to domination, and the fanaticism that characterized the church they served. They shared too in the founder's vision of an apostolate to the

poor, the sorrowing, the sick, the abandoned children of the earth. They gave their lives, whether in the violence of martyrdom or in the long sacrifice of self-mortification, for those dreams and those ambitions. Some were heroes and some were cowards. Volunteers led daring attacks on seemingly impregnable fortresses. Conscripts sometimes let resentment blight their lives or made their own corners comfortable by slacking off on the discipline. Tyrannical drill sergeants known to generations of children were balanced by generous quartermasters determined to feed the poor and heal the sick.

And, of course, the title *Sisters in Arms* evokes that comradeship which has always given the military life its luster of heroism and virtue. Our sisters have been united in a long war not only against the enemies of their religion but also against the misogynist elements within that religion that have mocked and constrained their efforts. Like Voltaire, I have grown up to be a secular humanist, yet, like him, I must concede that all I am I owe to my Catholic education. The nuns of Saint Cyril's parish school in Oakland, California, and Saint Theresa's in North Tarrytown, New York, gave me my earliest entry into the world of learning and my earliest insight into the world of the women to whose study I have devoted so many years of my adult life. Sister Lillian Thomas Shank, of the Cistercian order, started me and many other women off on the study of nuns when she requested that we write something of their history for the use of her novices. The volumes she subsequently produced with John A. Nichols on medieval religious women have given shape and definition to this field. The sisters (including a handful of honorary lay sisters like myself) who make up the Network for the History of Women Religious have continued this effort into the modern world, bound together through the newsletter regularly issued by Karen Kennelly.

The notes to this text cannot begin to express my debt to my sisters and brothers in the scholarly community for their scholarship and interest. A few people stand out for work shared and insights provided. Among so many, I want specially to mention Connie Berman, Jim Brundage, Vern Bullough, Penny Johnson, Richard Kieckhefer, Asunción Lávrin, Barbara Newman, Bernadette McCauley, Mary McLaughlin, Joel Rosenthal, Jane Schulenberg, Nancy Siraisi, Susan Stuard, Margaret Susan Thompson, Barbara Welter, Suzanne Wemple, and Merry Wiesner-Hanks.

The feminist network of scholarly support and exchange of ideas that flourishes throughout the country and especially in New York City has provided me with regular forums and intellectual stimulation. These include the Coordinating Committee for Women in the Historical Profession, the Columbia University Seminar for the Study of Women in Society, and the now defunct Institute for Research in History, whose daughters, the research groups, live on. From the latter, many staunch friends have listened to my ideas over the years and a few have patiently put up with my obsessions above and beyond the call: Barbara Harris, Sarah Pomeroy, and Marilyn Williams (of the Family History group); Judith Neaman, Phyllis Roberts, Jim Ryan, Pamela Sheingorn, and Marcelle Thiébaux (of the New York Hagiography group).

These feminist networks also brought me the friendship of Joyce Seltzer, who has supported this book from its inception as its editor and helpful critic. Deadlines have come and gone and we have negotiated our way through a change of publisher, but Joyce has firmly kept to our original vision of a one-volume history for the broadly educated public that would at last give the Catholic sisterhood a distinct historical identity.

Medieval recluses were advised to keep no animal near them but a cat. Their instructors presumably made that exception because cats are part of a working household, diligently keeping the vermin at bay. My cat is no exception but in addition, like the hermitage cat, she has been a friendly muse. I doubt I could have kept my patience with this work for so many years without the support of Brumaire, lying across my desk purring.

Finally, I can never sufficiently state my debt nor measure my affection for two men. My son, Edmund Clingan, has from the first moment of his life given me an unanswerable argument against the renunciation of the flesh. His kindly spirit and his challenging intellect have worked their way deeply into my mental processes and inform every page of this book. Father John E. Halborg, my friend and collaborator on several projects, provides a living model for the possibilities of syneisactic friendship. Our quarrels, our respective neuroses and ego trips, and our deep differences of opinion on many important subjects have repeatedly given way before the strength of that friendship, and in gratitude for that fidelity I dedicate this book to him.

SISTERS IN ARMS

Contents

Introduction: Chastity and Female Identity

CHASTITY COMBINED with celibacy, the renunciation of biological sex and of social coupling, was virtually unknown to the family-centered societies of antiquity. Unmarried men had a range of sexual choices and made no virtue of self-denial. Few women with desirable assets in property or beauty ever succeeded in reserving their own bodies from the domination, protection, and even the love of men. Poor or aged women who lost their male guarantors were engulfed in obscurity. Unknown disappointments or hopes led women from every rank and economic condition to answer Jesus' call to break old family ties and follow after him. Women and men traveled in chaste partnership, forging a new religion and a new social vision. This apostolic life, transcending gender in pursuit of the kingdom of heaven, gave them the foundation of chaste celibacy on which an autonomous identity could arise. Jesus said that Mary of Bethany, who devoted her attention to his teaching, had chosen "the better part" over her sister Martha's housewifely ministrations. The women who followed him to the cross and kept his memory alive thereafter were determined that it would not be taken from them.

As their faith became a church, a clerical hierarchy arose that, by a process not revealed in our sources, excluded women from its ranks. Women consecrated to the religious life, regardless of the degree and discipline of their commitment, remained part of the laity, arbitrarily barred by their sex from ordination and its privileges, chiefly the sacramental monopoly that qualifies men alone as channels for the saving grace

generated by Christ. The church has long taught that the character of priests cannot affect the virtue of their sacraments. Women religious have never enjoyed this exemption. To share in Christ's redemptive mission, they have had to develop alternative spiritualities rooted in prophecy and mysticism or in the imitation of Christ through works of charity. Compassion—the emulation of Jesus' suffering in hope of sharing the distribution of grace through prayer, self-sacrifice, and good works—entitled them to rank in a spiritual hierarchy that has always stood apart from the clerical hierarchy in a dangerously competitive position.

Castimony, which united the religious with Christ, became in time a legitimate alternative to matrimony. Widows, wives living apart from their husbands, repentant prostitutes, and women who had never known a sexual relationship embedded themselves firmly in the core of the infant religion and contested the efforts of conservative authorities like Paul to keep the sexes decorously segregated. An "order" of widows developed a female apostolate to the sick and needy and an educational mission addressed particularly to women. Early Christian communities supported women with notable spiritual gifts in return for prayer and for sharing the revelations that sprang from their intense meditations. These "widows" were the fountainhead from which many springs flowed: communities of virgins, recluses, cloistered nuns, and care givers using various titles experimented tirelessly with the possibilities of the chaste life among sisters.

Scholars have easily perceived men who have served the Catholic Church in their orderly ranks as monks and secular clergy, distributed according to their specialized vocations. Women religious have been torn between lay and clerical status, between episcopal and monastic jurisdictions, between active and contemplative vocations defined by male authorities. Thus, despite the variety of their activities, women's experience of the religious life, as it came to be called, had profoundly different lineaments from men's and merits a separate history stressing the unity of that experience. No human institution is older than this sisterhood. Its impact has been felt throughout the world but, against all reasonable evidence, monastic historians traditionally refused to see anything but their cloister walls and enveloping veils. Reasoning that women do not build institutions or conquer new worlds or make history, the scribes who shape the past have ignored their untidy existence or simply accorded it

a hasty nod before pressing forward with the more readily accessible history of male institutions. Still, religious women have a past that has much to teach us, not only about female creativity and accomplishments but about the possibility that women and men may yet enjoy a fuller humanity beyond the barriers of gender distinctions.

Men too came to renounce active sexuality for the sake of unqualified devotion to God. Asceticism was a movement for lay people who cast off all the bonds of worldly commitments. The monastic movement was essentially conceptualized on the primitive model of Jesus' companions, with women as full partners in urban apostolates and desert asceticism. Even in sexually segregated communities, monks and nuns, brothers and sisters, subjected themselves to the same disciplines and shared their labor and its fruits. Chaste celibacy endowed virgin martyrs and desert mothers with the power and authority that nature normally reserved for men by restricting women's autonomy and integrity. The ideology of asceticism argued that manliness was acquired through training and discipline, which women could undertake as well as men. Indeed, the Fathers of the church enjoyed the rhetorical strategy of praising virile women at the expense of effeminate men.

Virginity wiped out gender differences and turned women into men by giving them independence and the authority to pursue a lofty spiritual calling. This ideology was formulated in late antiquity by a cadre of highly articulate men under the influence of wealthy and charismatic women devoted to exploring the chaste life. Based on the ideal of the spirit's triumph over the body, it encouraged a cooperative lifestyle of pooled resources and mutual encouragement exemplified by the desert retreat of Jerome and Paula. They defined virginity by intention and behavior rather than physical accident, resting on a concept of the soul and even the body as malleable to the perfect will. In the circles where the theology of the everlasting virginity of Mary the mother of God developed, it became possible to think of baptism as restorative of virginity. Virginity survived rape when the victim withheld her consent. Widows and married women who left the conjugal bed could enjoy a secondary virginity, and women who had never known sexual activity "became" virgins by taking a vow of consecration.

Even as the Fathers engaged with their female associates in these flights of ideological fantasy, however, they gendered virginity female.

They extended their unqualified admiration to its proponents while bemoaning their own failure to preserve pristine purity. Moreover, they did not accord themselves the forgiving second chances that they held out to women, preferring to gender incontinence as masculine. Chastity, though required, was never the defining characteristic of male monastic life, which extolled obedience, poverty, and humility as its quintessential virtues. Chaste celibacy, originally merely a vehicle for liberating time and energies for divine service, tended to be promoted as an end in itself for women. As the clerical hierarchy incorporated monks into the priesthood and co-opted many monastic virtues, the legal condition of celibacy (the unmarried state) overshadowed the spiritual value of chastity. But for women, all virtues were folded into an engulfing discourse on sexual purity. In the second millennium, praise of virginity degenerated into fretful nagging about keeping all the senses fastidiously unspotted, as well as the mind that controlled them.

Ascetic women became an embarrassing anomaly to a male clerical order. Peer pressure, slander, seduction, and rape have been mobilized to neutralize women who choose a life without sex. At the beginning of our story we will encounter women from puberty to old age who were put to death for refusing to marry. In the Middle Ages, dirty jokes and pornographic fantasies detailing the fictional longings of unwilling nuns gave license to the sexual ambitions of young men seeking wives or just a brief diversion by breaking into convents. Until quite recently, even the handful of modern scholars who have studied nuns have tended to reinforce these ancient slanders, blaming the social conventions that enabled families to determine arbitrarily whether their women would be assigned to a life of matrimony or castimony. Protestants prided themselves on "rescuing" women condemned to languish without husbands, and modern historians have habitually ignored the clear testimony of the women who resisted their assaults. Enlightenment fantasies of the perverted sex to which innocent virgins were subjected behind convent walls are still published, but not the rebuttals of women who went to the guillotine rather than give up their cloisters. In the nineteenth century, anti-Catholic mobs mounted violent attacks on some convents while modern science claimed that rejection of "normal" (procreative heterosexual) sex was a sign of mental illness and might also lead to physical debility. Even today, the true or fictional accounts of renegade nuns

readily gain a popular market. The accounts of women who founded new communities or flourished in old ones are too often left to private presses with limited circulation. In our own libertarian age we still refuse to recognize the legitimacy of choosing chaste celibacy, linking it to caricatures of nuns as ignorant classroom tyrants and feminists as angry hags.

Nuns are not only peculiarly vulnerable to outside critics but by nature highly self-critical of their failure to conclude a quest for perfection whose goal always recedes. Religious women who lacked the structural advantages of offices and ordination to enhance their spiritual confidence could rarely trust their own virtue unless they achieved a visionary state in which divine assurances were granted them. Care givers always feared they would fail to maintain their own humility toward the poor made humble by life's cruel oppressions. And the rules of the game were apt to change rudely. Priestly arbiters who equated female perfection with silence and invisibility treated active charity as inherently corrupting. Secular humanists came to value the active life but condemned contemplatives as socially useless. Taught to be obsessively concerned with their own purity, nuns were often driven frantic by the endless pressure to find sources of impurity within the convent and within the soul itself and burn them away through ever more strenuous self-mortifications. They were caught within their own embattled psyches, where no perfect state could ever be gained or maintained.

Obviously, contact with men, always unavoidable, became a terrifying threat to that purity. Clerical insistence on the irresistible power of sexual attraction generated a double anxiety to safeguard not only the unsullied purity of women but also the fragile virtue of men who were said to be prone to lapse into uncontrollable frenzy in their presence. Inevitably, the rulers of the church came to the conclusion that women religious had to be confined behind walls and grilles. But much as they feared sexual temptation, clergymen feared women entirely withdrawn into a world without men even more. This complementary threat of female autonomy always drove them back to the *cura mulierum,* the care (and control) of women.

The entire structure of male authority in any age is rooted in the ideology of gender differences. Religious men and women living together in chastity, recognizing equal spiritual capacities, lay an ax to that root

by minimizing those differences. The practice had a name among primitive Christians—syneisactism—a word that has found no modern equivalent. Against syneisactics, sexual temptation has been repeatedly inflated as the devil's snare, leading women and men who imprudently consort with one another to physical transgression at best and at worst to heresy. Thus, the history of nuns is haunted by the presence of men who often admired them yet feared their own admiration; who controlled them but did not trust them; who invested emotional currency in the mythology of mystery and difference rather than the ideal of understanding and equality.

The failure of syneisactism created fertile ground for the growth of a separate feminine sensibility and strengthened the bonds of sisterhood in religion. The trials and triumphs of community resound through the literature of, for, and about nuns in every age and environment. This book provides only an initial glance into the camp behind the cloister redoubts so cunningly camouflaged by the mocking, belittling imagery of popular culture. It does, at least, call attention to foremothers who, for two millennia, have broken new paths for women in a hostile and forbidden world. They served their god and their church and in doing so they fulfilled themselves and laid a foundation for all women. Without the daring and sacrifice of these nuns, it is impossible to imagine the feminist movements of modern times finding any purchase in the public world. They created the image and reality of the autonomous woman. They formed the professions through which that autonomy was activated. They still devote their lives to the care and development of human beings everywhere.

Now at last the ideology of syneisactism based on the erasure or at least suppression of gender differences may have its day. In the modern world, where women and men have at last come to work together and live together in uneasy truce, we are still seeking to expand the areas where gender gives way to individual talent. Wherever women and men struggle to realize their full human potential, they join in spirit with this ancient sisterhood. The history of nuns points to a more integrated life for everyone, transcending gender differences and forging a new personality combining those characteristics so unfortunately divided by sex.

I

THE ROMAN EMPIRE