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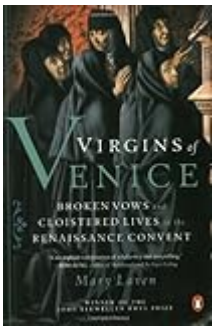

Mary Laven. *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent.* New York: Penguin Books, 2002. xxxiii + 282 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-03183-2; $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-200401-2.

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Published on H-Catholic (July, 2006)

Brides of Christ, Daughters of the Republic

Mary Laven's book, *Virgins of Venice*, received the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for literature published in Britain in 2002, and I can see why. It is very readable and offers some complex ideas about sixteenth-and seventeenth-century Venice, along with its fifty female convents and three thousand nuns, in a style that both specialists and non-academic readers will understand and enjoy.

Laven introduces her topic by taking the reader on a walking tour of the Ghetto Nuovo, the section of Venice to which its Jewish population was confined in the early sixteenth century. Laven thus introduces what I think is her most interesting thesis and contribution to the study of Renaissance nuns: in an effort to restore civic pride and good government after a military defeat in 1509, and hurt by rivals' attempts to cripple the city's hold on the Adriatic Sea trade, the Patriarch and the Senate targeted certain segments of the city's population as emblematic of its fall from grace. Authorities thus sought to reform, contain and enclose these elements in order to regain God's favor. By placing the history of Venice's convents and nuns in this wider context, Laven moves beyond an analysis of the city's nuns and their houses to a more profound understanding of how they functioned both as extensions of the city and reflections of it.

Laven uses several contemporary sources–visitation reports, a diatribe against monastic life written by a very unhappy nun, civic magistrates' trial reports, and the writings of social commentators–to assess the quality of life within the Venetian convents. These records reveal two areas that ecclesiastic and civic authorities thought needed reform, the break down of common life and breaches of enclosure. Problems with communal life included gifts of fancy clothing from family members to individual nuns and cliques of special friends within the convents. Both types of infractions reflect two characteristics of Venetian convent life: the aristocratic status of the nuns and the high incidence of women becoming nuns where blood relatives were already professed. Both types of infractions were also ways by which nuns dealt with what Laven identifies as "the monotony" of convent life (p. 20).

Laven also shows how breaches of enclosure enlivened the regularity of monastic life. These included

the parties and celebrations the nuns themselves hosted in their parlors on various occasions–when a nun was professed, for example–as well as certain civic rituals, including the gondola rides of brides-to-be to every convent where their relatives lived. These long-standing rites and celebrations were compromised by the access to some of the convents by unscrupulous clerics, especially underemployed friars, male suitors, and gossipy lay servants, who carried in news from the outside, thus distracting the nuns from their lives of prayer and devotion. Nuns also left their enclosures, sometimes to visit family members, and in a few instances to pursue romantic ties with men. While Laven provides some spectacular stories of nuns tunneling out to meet paramours, by and large such incidences were few in number.

Authorities addressed these problems in several ways. They warned repeatedly against fancy dress, maintaining ties with family members within and without convents' walls, and excessive socializing with outsiders. The city also formed a special magistrate of three counselors to oversee the convents and to adjudicate disputes concerning enclosure that arose between nuns and outsiders, and also disagreements among the nuns themselves. Efforts to enforce enclosure so that people had a harder time getting into the convents also included additional construction–higher walls, fewer doors, and barred windows, for example–and also a lengthy licensing procedure for workers and tradesmen to enter the nuns' premises. Despite these ongoing efforts of reform and enclosure–many of which predated similar efforts by the Council of Trent–Venetian authorities were thwarted by the nuns themselves and the aristocratic and influential families from which they came. Gifts of fashionable clothing to individual nuns, nurturing close friendships, and throwing parties for relatives and friends in conventual parlors were mechanisms by which the nuns and their families maintained important family ties and which ensured continued patronage of the convents by the nuns' relatives.

Gifts and celebrations were also acknowledgements of the nuns' spiritual contributions to the city. Several conventual churches served local parishioners, and the nuns' prayers were highly valued for their intercessory powers. Venice's female convents were also the burial places of the city's elite. But these were not the only ways in which the nuns contributed to the welfare of city. Another was to enter a convent to maintain family honor and marriage strategies. Laven suggests that up to 50 percent of Venice's female monastic population was forced into a convent to accommodate aristocratic families' marriage strategies and the soaring costs of dowries. In so doing, these women "internalized the needs of their families" (p. 43) and, by extension, the welfare and needs of the city itself. Gifts and parties can also be seen then as ways of appeasing unhappy of daughters forced into a lifestyle not of their choosing. While Laven acknowledges the "rhetoric of coercion" (p. 44) that characterizes many contemporary writers' views of nuns and their convents, these women's actions support her thesis that the status and value of the city's convents were closely tied to the well being of the city itself.

These and other practices which detail the connection between the city's nuns and their families show the degree to which the convents were embedded in the social and spiritual fabric of the city. This alliance, and the significance of the convents to the city's view of itself, is most evident in the ritual of the doge's symbolic marriage to the abbess of one of Venice's convents, Santa Maria delle Vergini (p. 78). Dating from the convent's foundation in 1224, the ritual occurred when a new abbess took office. In the ceremony the doge publicly "married" a newly elected abbess by placing on her finger the ring of St. Mark, an act which simultaneously showed the abbess's submission to the doge and also his patronage of the convent. The ceremony also highlighted the spiritual connection between the city and the convents in that "the abbess invested ducal authority with sanctity which guaranteed continued prosperity and power" (p. 80). In times of trouble, then, the virtue and holiness of the city's nuns and their convents were crucial to civic and ecclesiastical authorities and their measures of reform reflected their perceptions that the right-ordering of the convents would restore God's favor to the city.

Laven's analysis of Venice's convents concludes on a mixed note with a chapter about nuns and their lovers and an epilogue. She does point out that their sexual desires cannot be known, that same-sex relationships were rare, and cautions against taking Boccaccio's views of nuns as lustful creatures tormented by carnal desires; yet ending her analyses with a few salacious stories detracts from her otherwise complex and interesting analysis. Her epilogue reviews the convents' dissolutions with Napoleon's annexation of Italy and the subsequent closure of religious houses. With that action, more than eleven hundred nuns were expelled with state pensions and the expectation of a return to their families. Whether or not this expectation was met is unknown, but what a sorry end to institutions and women who had played such integral parts in the spiritual and civic life of the city.

Citation: Marilyn Oliva. Review of Laven, Mary, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent.* H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

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