

Besieged but Connected: Survival Strategies at a Quebec Convent

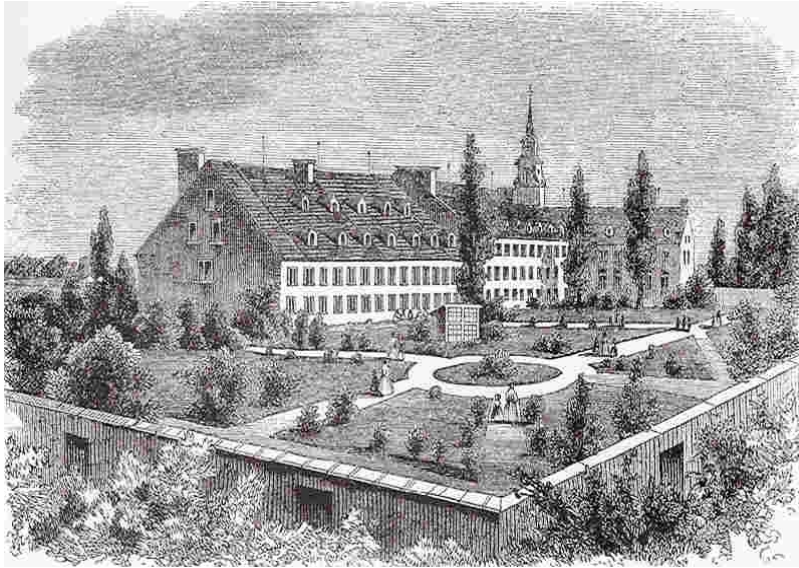
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Choir sisters at the eighteenth century Hôpital-Général de Québec rose in the pre-dawn blackness, then devoted some seven hours each day to sacred music, prayer, and meditation in their cells. Still, some of them were remarkably well versed in the ways of the world. Demonstrating the point are three nuns who served as Mother Superiors during invasions that brought the enemy right to their doorstep. Mother St. Claude de la Croix and Mother de la Visitation were Superiors, respectively, when the British troops arrived in 1759 and during the early Conquest period.¹ Fifteen years later Mother St. Alexis was forced to harbour invading American Revolutionary troops at the convent. Each of these Superiors came from families where women engaged in economic and clientage networks, a source of strength in trying times.

Indeed, those who took the veil in New France fell heir to several traditions that empowered them. First of all, the convent itself was a dedicated community that stood behind its elected leaders, placing a skilled personnel at the Superior's command. Secondly, nuns built upon a lay tradition of feminine economic enterprise in New France. Such enterprise was accepted by society and encouraged by a legal system that allowed women, and particularly widows and unmarried women, considerable control of land and resources. Thirdly, colonial correspondence indicates that gentlewomen – be they lay or religious – could win access to governing clienteles.² In sum, economic skills and mastery of clientage, present in the ruling families from which many sisters came, flourished in the collective setting of the convent. The similarities between Superiors and laywomen of their class deserve a closer look. This in turn raises questions about nuns' values, which will be assessed in the closing section of the paper.

¹ Another noblewoman, Mother Marie de l'Enfant Jésus, served only briefly in 1759-60, dying in office.

² Guy Frégault, for example, mentions women in clientele systems in his essay on "Politique et politiciens" in his *Le XVIII^e siècle canadien* (Montreal: Editions HMH, 1970), 180, 209. On women's legal rights, see Clio Collective, *Quebec Women: A History* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1987, 68-71 and 83; and F. Parent and G. Postelec, "Quand Thémis rencontre Clio: les femmes et le droit en Nouvelle-France," *Les Cahiers de Droit*, 36, 1 (March 1995), 293-319.



Hôpital-Général de Québec

Source: *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, January 1859

The Hôpital-Général de Québec, like the Ursuline and Hôtel Dieu convents, survived a catastrophic half-century of conquest by the British, new anti-Catholic prejudices, financial crisis, and then arrival of ill-disciplined American troops. Although all three Quebec convents faced these problems to a degree, convent resilience was particularly evident at the well-connected Hôpital-Général, where at times more than one half the choir sisters were members of the nobility.³ This hospice (which received the disabled, abandoned, quarantined, and mentally ill during ordinary times, and the wounded during wartime) experienced graver financial crises than the town's other two convents⁴, and counted heavily on friends in high places. The institution's Christian idealism also served it well, helping it consolidate those friendships. To see how three Mother Superiors built a survival strategy that blended religious ideals with enterprise and connections, let us turn first to the last in line, Mother St. Alexis. On an August day in 1797, she could be found holding court

³ Hôpital historian Micheline D'Allaire calculated that 45.9% of the nuns were noble, a figure apparently relating to the period 1700-60. M. D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-Général de Québec 1692-1764* (Montreal: Fides, 1977), 93, 114. About three per cent of the colonial population was noble. Marcel Trudel's 1764 list of twenty-one choir nuns includes eleven nobles. M. Trudel, *L'Eglise canadienne sous le Régime militaire 1759-1764* (Quebec: PUL, 1957), 2:314, 416.

⁴ Trudel, *L'Eglise* 2:289ff.

amidst a throng of visitors at the elegant convent outside the walls of the old city.

____ Clergymen rose in turn to speak in praise of Mother Marie-Catherine de Noyan de St. Alexis. Sisters recalled stories of her fifty-year service. From Montreal the dying bishop sent his co-adjutor, who conducted her through a throng of townspeople, friends, and relatives gathered to honour her long life in religion. Later in the day, when the co-adjutor yelled “To the plunder, gentlemen!” the thirty-six clergymen rushed to a table to pick from an array of handcrafted souvenirs. Crowning the event was a banquet spread before every inhabitant of the institution, its orphans, invalids and street people as well as its well-heeled pupils and pensioners.

The day was rich with ritual and obeisance. Its solemnities included nonstop morning masses from four to nine in the specially decorated church. When the worshipping throng adjourned to the community parlour, the co-adjutor presented an armchair to “the heroine of the fete,” and all were seated. Nine students with garlands of lilies in their hair moved the audience to tears as they recited a specially commissioned eulogy. As the chant to “Alexis queen of hearts” rose to idolatrous heights, the whole audience joined in:

...Tout plait, tout charme en elle:
Sa charité, sa candeur.
Par sa bonté naturelle
Elle gagne tous les coeurs;
Alexis est le modèle
Et l'idole de ses soeurs.⁵

On that day of 24 August 1797 inside their rambling riverside convent, said to be the most beautiful building in Canada, the aura of love and tranquillity contrasted sharply with the news from France. In the wake of the Revolution of 1789, sisters of the same Augustinian order had been chased from their convents, forced to abandon the habit, and

⁵ In her, everything pleases, everything charms:
Her charity, her simplicity.
By her natural goodness
She wins all hearts
Alexis is the model
And the idol of her sisters.

[Helene O'Reilly] *Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier et l'Hôpital-Général de Québec* (Quebec: Darveau, 1882). This volume intersperses the original seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century annals of the convent, which are quoted verbatim, with commentary from the late nineteenth-century compiler, whose references to historians of her day indicate some historical knowledge apart from written and oral convent sources. Sister O'Reilly's 743-page work is the key source for this paper. It is supplemented by Colonial Correspondence from the National Archives (NA), D'Allaire's monograph on the Hôpital, family histories, and several other sources. Most of the material from O'Reilly's compendium can readily be found arranged chronologically in the volume, or in the obituary notices. I am also indebted to Soeur Juliette Cloutier of the Hôpital Archives for her assistance in obtaining additional documents relating to specific Mother Superiors.

imprisoned for refusing to take the oath to the now officially dechristianized state. The combination of unyielding conviction and aristocratic background targeted the sisters for persecution by Revolutionaries. Nor did other privileged or educated women fare particularly well when the Rights of Man were advanced in France. In 1793 the Convention outlawed women's Revolutionary clubs. Learned ladies who had presided over literary salons found themselves shunned.⁶ And even across the Atlantic, outside the Quebec convent's walls, colonists echoed the popular Revolutionary refrain: corruption in France was not so much the fault of Kings as of their scheming consorts. Those were bitter times for aristocratic women. Yet the rows of glowing faces turned towards the day's heroine at the Hôpital Général de Québec included people as refined as many then languishing in French prisons or long ago driven in tumbrels to the guillotine. No such horrors touched that most aristocratic of colonial convents, where the aging daughters of New France's military *noblesse* lived on.

Still, the Hôpital had once seen danger from another quarter. As they reminisced that evening, they likely retold the story of Mother St. Alexis facing the invading Yankee troops who commandeered the Hôpital when she was Superior in the autumn of 1775. The nuns were forced to house four hundred soldiers "all people of detestable crudeness and effrontery," whose lack of discipline was lamented even by General Washington and the Congress.⁷ One day an American officer demanded to see the Superior. He reproached her indignantly: Not enough was being done for his sick soldiers there! He added that the King ordered that beds be prepared for them. "What King is that?" Sister St. Alexis archly enquired. "If it isn't the King, it's the Congress," he retorted. "Well then! Not for one nor the other, can we provide beds, because we don't have any, and besides we have no obligation to care for your sick," declared this daughter of a Canadian war hero.⁸ The angry officer stormed off and proceeded to threaten the chaplain and the doctor several

⁶ On increasingly negative views of prominent females during the Revolutionary era, see J. Guilhaumou and M. Lapiéd, "L'action politique des femmes pendant la Révolution française" in Christine Fauré, ed., *Encyclopédie politique et historique des femmes* (Paris: PUF, 1997); and C. Larrère in the same volume, "Le sexe ou le rang: La condition des femmes selon la philosophie des Lumières." Another useful collection is Marie-France Brive, ed, *Les femmes et la Révolution Française: acte du colloque internationale*, (Université de Toulouse – Le Mirail, 1989), vol. 2. See also Lynn Hunt, "The Unstable Boundaries of the French Revolution," in Michelle Perrot, ed, *A History of Private Life: From the Fires of the Revolution to the Great War* (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap, 1990), 13-45; S. E. Roesler, *Out of the Shadows: Women in the French Revolution 1789-95* (New York: Lang, 1994); and Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: UTP, 1989).

⁷ See Victor Coffin, *The Province of Quebec and the Early American Revolution*, (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1896), 527. The description of their grossness is from *Saint-Vallier*, 407.

⁸ Captain Pierre-Alexis Payen, officer in the Troupes de la Marine and holder of the St. Louis Cross. The tendency of noble nuns to assume parental names as names in religion (as Mother St. Claude also did) is another indication of the manor-convent links discussed in this paper.

times with his sword. The officer was later reprimanded for his bullying. Still, Mother St. Alexis was evidently chastened by his complaint. Shortly afterwards she issued bandages and blankets and begin ministering to the enemy wounded.

Daring to confront her angry assailant, Mother St. Alexis showed rather striking confidence in the hands of an occupying army. Striking too are those paeans she received two decades later in the 1790s, a post-Revolutionary era when authoritative women were retreating from the public eye, and receiving public acclaim began to be seen as immodest in a lady. St. Alexis' regal quality is all the more surprising given the circumstances of her birth. Her mother was widowed in 1728 and remarried in November 1731. The future nun was born in 1730 and sent to the convent as a baby.⁹ Though a late nineteenth-century convent annalist averred "we do not know why a child so young would have been entrusted to the nuns," it seems probable that cooperative hands at the convent (where several relatives were nuns) agreed to care for an infant whose presence was embarrassing and inconvenient.

Mother St. Alexis, who lived to the ripe age of eighty-eight, was literally a cradle-to-grave *couventine*, an unalloyed example of total immersion in convent life. She arrived at the Hôpital-Général at eighteen months of age, and left it only for a few short visits to the homes of friends and relatives. Her character, learning and attainments reveal the convent culture that shaped her. She was one of a number of administrators that the annals of Quebec convents from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries describe as *femmes fortes*.

Can we hope to know the true character of the three Mother Superiors under review? Unfortunately obituary notices and other descriptions of nuns in the Hôpital annals tend to be even more uniformly laudatory than obituaries usually are. Though we will not hear of anyone's whining voice, bad breath, or mediocre mind, it is nonetheless possible to glean something of the personality of each nun from the particular qualities the annals mention. Mother St. Alexis from her youth was singled out for "sweetness but firmness, enjoying great confidence" and was described as "being much loved." Here was a toddler some of the nuns probably enjoyed pampering. No wonder this person with "rich natural abilities" acquired "the happiest of dispositions."¹⁰ The story of her repartee with a threatening American officer, the fact that she became confidante of several cultured French emigré priests who visited the Hôpital, her six-time re-election as Superior, her reputation as the convent's "ornament," and the unusual literary outpourings on her anniversary attest learning and leadership. She also possessed her share

⁹ *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 5:661, and Aegidius Fauteux, *La Famille D'Aillebout* (Montreal: Ducharme, 1917), 128-30. This author also traces the links between the families of the three Superiors, intermarriages of the Boishébert-Ramezay clan with the Lanaudière-Paen de Noyen group, and with the Legardeur Repentignys, as well as kinship to Madeleine de Verchères.

¹⁰ *Saint-Vallier*, 495; on being well-loved, 497, from "l'acte de reception."

of the business acumen that historian Micheline D'Allaire has ascribed to her Augustinian Order.¹¹

One of Mother St. Alexis' terms as superior occurred in the early 1790s, when the scant metropolitan revenues that survived the Conquest were extinguished completely by the French Revolution. The Superior was not paralysed by the prospect of material disaster. In the family of her mother's first husband, the Charly St. Anges, women were economically active, shipping out furs in exchange for merchandise from France. Her mother's family of birth, the Ailleboust-D'Argenteuils, also included female transatlantic traders.¹² Dealing astutely with finances was not an unaccustomed or déclassé activity among her kinswomen.

Nor was it foreign to convents. Under Mother St. Alexis' leadership, the nuns brought in income by manufacturing all kinds of handsome painted, carved, or quilled wooden boxes, as well as tapestries, rugs, and travelling bags, the kind of items coveted by wealthy eighteenth-century tourists. They also produced chandeliers, gilded statuary, and other decor for sale to churches. One of the nuns who was a particularly gifted artist belonged to the family of the sculptor Levasseur, himself a pensioner at the Hôpital. The community also resorted to the less genteel business of taking in laundry. The latter would have fallen not to choir nuns but to converse sisters drawn from humble families who did most of the heavy labour, again replicating a system nuns learned in the homes of their birth.¹³ When she became too hard pressed to retain all the field workers needed for the convent lands, Sister St. Alexis secured Bishop Hubert's permission to dispense with cloister to undertake this vital task. After hearing mass each morning, a crew of nuns went out to work in the fields, returning at eight at night. Seeing women toiling outdoors would not have shocked the people of New France, where women frequently joined the men at haying and harvest time. Other convents did the same in times of need.

Besides the ability to manage these varied enterprises, Mother St. Alexis also had the benefit of kinship to many other members of the colonial *noblesse*. In this she was typical, for the colony's 181 noble families intermarried extensively. Since nearly one in five noble daughters took the veil,¹⁴ the convents too were riddled with kin networks.

The warmth of such relationships is captured in the memoirs of Philippe Aubert de Gaspé. He described his uncle Charles de Lanaudière, a hero of the 1760 Battle of St. Foy just outside the Hôpital, which

¹¹ M. D'Allaire, "Les prétensions des religieuses de l'Hôpital-Général de Québec sur le palais épiscopal de Québec," *Revue d'Histoire de l'Amérique française*, XXIII, 1 (juin 1969), 66-7.

¹² On trading women from these two families see Kathryn Young, *Kin, Commerce and Community* (New York: Lang, 1995), 18-19, 40-2.

¹³ "Converse sisters," as opposed to "choir nuns," were religious of working class origin who performed manual labour in a convent, who had less say in its governance, and who followed a less arduous or less formal routine of chapel prayer.

¹⁴ Gadoury, 86.

received the wounded as they fell. He recalled how his cousins Mother St. Alexis and Mother Catherine often told him that “that great baby de Lanaudière gave us more trouble during his illness than all the other wounded men in our hospital put together.” It appeared, de Gaspé wrote, “that my dear uncle, finding himself among relatives, made liberal use of this privilege to tease the nurses.”¹⁵ As a boy, de Gaspé was taken to see another relative who was a lay pensioner at the Hôpital. The Hôpital curate who celebrated the Mass merely smiled at the tuneless enthusiasm of the little boy, who could not refrain from accompanying the nuns’ choir.

This indulgent priest, Father Rigauville, was also related to Mother St. Alexis. He used his ability to travel freely across the colony to secure contracts for the nuns’ manufactures and students for their boarding school, helping forestall a threatened closure of the Hôpital. This kinsman of the Superior also left his *seigneurie* to the Hôpital when he died. Rigauville laboured so tirelessly on their behalf that the nuns deemed him their second founder. Unlike some earlier ecclesiastical supervisors, the gentle Rigauville seems to have shown no interest in curbing what one of his predecessors called the nuns’ “abusive spirit of independence and liberty.”¹⁶ With Rigauville the bonds are more suggestive of kinship and affection than of hierarchical or patriarchal authority. The nuns also maintained generally good relations with Bishop Briand, whose royalist politics matched their own. Mother St. Alexis’ male relatives in the Lanaudière, Rigauville, and de Salaberry families were among the minority of colonists who answered the 1775 call of British governor and Catholic bishop to take arms against the rebel invasion.

Kinship accounts for much of the largesse bestowed on the institution. The nuns taught Mademoiselle Geneviève St. Ours from the age of five and occasionally hosted her as an adult pensioner. She was related to all three of our Mother Superiors and to three other nuns. This admiring recipient of convent services was well aware of its financial woes. In September 1790, her letter to her “Dear and beloved friend and cousin,” exhorted Mother St. Alexis to dry her tears and rest easy. Mlle. St. Ours had arranged with her brothers to use her own legal portion of the family *seigneurie* towards remitting the convent debt of 14,789 *livres*, thereby softening the blow of its lost French revenues.¹⁷ The other Superiors under consideration, Mothers St. Claude and de la Visitation, also had beneficent relatives outside the walls and under their roof, siblings who became pensioners.

The convent’s links spanned continents and ethnic divisions. It had one and sometimes two agents working in France to procure supplies and tend investments. The nuns learned to cultivate British gentlemen too, lobbying their new rulers at Quebec. An incident in 1784 shows the same grasp of public affairs D’Allaire noted in her study of the Order:

¹⁵ [Memoirs of] Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé, *A Man of Sentiment* (Montreal: Véhicule, 1988), 96.

¹⁶ NA, Series C11A, Bishop Dosquet to Maurepas, 16 October 1730.

¹⁷ *Saint-Vallier*, 459-61.

Our Mothers established first in principle that that law [of Habeas Corpus] which was about to come into force in Canada enshrines one of the most precious rights ... of the individual; they next ascertained that the Legislative Council had recently formulated a project tending to exclude from this privilege the religious orders.¹⁸

The annals record that the nuns examined possible motives for the exclusion, one being misplaced concern that this right would encourage members to escape. They decided to request this English right since they were now “faithful subjects of Great Britain.” The appeal alluded to “our Governor’s frequent pitying the slavery of members of orders, due to their vows – slavery he would want to mitigate with the right of *habeas corpus*.” The remark about slaves suggests Catholics were well aware of prejudiced talk against convents. The law was redrafted to include the nuns. They also reached an accord with the new government for subsidized care of the mentally ill.

Two earlier Superiors at the time of the British siege demonstrate the same two traditions of economic enterprise and cultivation of patrons. Mother Charlotte de Ramezay de St. Claude de la Croix was Superior the spring that the long-dreaded British invasion fleet entered the St. Lawrence. Soon bombardment began, an event that nearly flattened the town and sent hundreds of refugees scurrying to the Hôpital outside its gates. Mother de la Visitation became Superior just after the colony’s final surrender to the British in 1760. The two Superiors were cousins and daughters of warriors.

The tall Mother St. Claude was by all accounts a forceful character. Daughter of an ill-tempered Montreal governor, she grew up amid a life of privilege in the Chateau de Ramezay. Her brother, Lieutenant du roi Roch de Ramezay, would yield up the starving town to British forces in the autumn of 1759. Mother St. Claude reputedly showed her own martial spirit by spreading false rumours of British defeats in those bitter final months, a bid to demoralize British officers who were recuperating at the Hôpital. The British suspicions swirling about her support the annals’ indication that she was a redoubtable character.¹⁹

Mother St. Claude displayed a keen awareness of the aristocratic condition into which she was born. Nobles were a class apart, said even to have different blood from commoners. They were further set apart with separate laws, a high degree of endogamy, dress codes, taboos on manual labour, and the injunction to “live nobly and serve the King.”²⁰ Living

¹⁸ *Saint-Vallier*, 447-8.

¹⁹ “Les officiers britanniques respectaient sa fermeté, et redoutaient en quelque sort son influence.” *Saint-Vallier*, 393. On spreading false rumours, see Captain John Knox, *Historical Journal*, ed. A.G. Doughty (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1914), 2:213, 237, 368. This editor casts doubt on the story. Trudel and D’Allaire give it more credence in *L’Eglise Canadienne*, 1:78, 2:294 and *DCB*, 3:544.

²⁰ Lorraine Gadoury, *La Noblesse de Nouvelle France* (Quebec: Hurtubise, 1991), 15-20. For a discussion of noble attributes, see also J. Noel, “Women of the New France Noblesse” in Larry Eldridge ed., *Women and Freedom in Early*
(continued...)

nobly involved living a gracious lifestyle and showing courtesy to other nobles who were all part of the King's "family." The courtesy of bluebloods extended even to nobles of other nations, seen for example in officers entertaining enemy nobles in their tents on the eve of battle. As for serving the King, noble nuns looked after (or if one prefers Foucaultian terms, incarcerated) fevered soldiers. This was a fitting counterpart to their brothers' efforts on the battlefields, sometimes costing their lives.

Aristocrats stuck together. Like the weddings of her sisters, Mother St. Claude's investiture was a social gathering attracting prominent guests. In the early eighteenth century the convent's aristocratic founder, Bishop Saint-Vallier – a former chaplain at the French court – favoured the *noblesse* and contributed to their dowries; Governor Vaudreuil did the same. When a successor of Saint-Vallier's attempted to curb what he saw as the excessive independence of the nuns by appointing a non-noble mother superior (violating the convent rule that required election), Mother St. Claude was prominent among those who rebelled. Continuing to obey the noble Superior, several of the sisters wrote direct appeals to the court, which the Governor duly forwarded with his dispatches. The governor discussed matters with Hôpital nuns numerous times in response to their resistance, and advocated their cause in the colonial dispatch of 1728. The Crown did not rescind the appointment, but an election was called shortly afterwards in 1729 and a noble was selected. Thenceforth all Superiors until the Conquest were noble. The nuns also secured support of Governor and Intendant against Bishop Dosquet's attempt to reduce their numbers and place them under control of the Hôtel-Dieu. He was no match for Governor Beauharnois, a member of the Phélypeaux clan that was well connected at the French court.²¹ In the Gallican church of New France final decisions about convent procedures (constitutions, expansions, even size of dowry and attire) rested with the Crown rather than the Bishop. Finding allies in government was therefore essential. However, convents did so at a price. They could be required, for example, to accept as postulants protégées of the Governor or even the Minister of Marine.²²

²⁰ (...continued)

America (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 29-31.

²¹ NA, C11A, vol. 50, letters of Geneviève de St. Augustin Supérieure to Votre Grandeur, 4 October 1728 and Soeur Agnes to the same 19 October 1728; Bishop Dosquet to Maurepas, 16 October 1730. See also Dale Miquelon, *New France 1701-1744* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 253 and Dale Standen, "Politics, Patronage and the Imperial Interest: Charles de Beauharnois's Disputes with Gilles Hocquart," *Canadian Historical Review*, LX, I, 1979.

²² NA, B, vol. 87, Maurepas to La Galissonnière and Hocquart, 18 January 1748; vol. 89 Conseil de la Marine to la Jonquière and Bigot, 30 avril 149. Micheline D'Allaire, *Les dots des religieuses au Canada française, 1639-1800* (Montreal: Hurtubise, 1986), 24, notes the interference. On Crown authority over convents see also Marguerite Jean, *Evolution des Communautés religieuses des femmes au Canada de 1639 à nos jours* (Montreal: Fides, 1977), 201-8, as well as Guy Fregault's essay on church and state in his *XVIII^e siècle canadien*, 86-158.

In becoming a client of the Crown and its colonial brokers, Mother St. Claude was following a pattern familiar from childhood. The family devoted itself to entertaining official visitors, reviewing troops, and other activities as part of the aristocratic imperative to live nobly and serve the King. “What would people think of us,” her weary mother is reported to have told her children after an arduous round of entertaining, “if we refused to associate with his Majesty’s officers, with high-ranking citizens?”²³ As girls, Mother St. Claude and her sister declared they would enter the convent to avoid such duties. Indeed her younger sister Catherine, who became an Ursuline, made a name for herself by warning students away from worldly frivolities. In particular, she turned a wrathful eye on the *panier* skirt. A demoiselle who succumbed to the *panier* mode would wear a wooden underframe fitted with side panels at the waist, allowing her skirt to billow out to a circumference that might surpass three metres. Admiring gazes were drawn to the resultant ability of heavy fabrics to defy gravity, of lighter silks to bounce with every step the lady took.

A carriage ride away from the Ursuline convent Catherine’s sister, Mother St. Claude, gradually rising to the office of Superior at the Hôpital Général, viewed the world with a more accommodating eye. Like her mother before her, she became hostess to people of rank, supplying special quarters to officers, and housing proteges of the Governor, even when it meant bending convent rules. She is recorded as going out of her way to provide polite conversation and English tea to an enemy officer under her roof (though – an accident, surely – she boiled the unfamiliar beverage to an ominous resin). In the same way that Mother St. Claude and her colleagues sought help from colonial officials to preserve the rule of aristocratic nuns within the convent, Mother St. Claude’s mother had penned supplications to preserve the interests of her own noble family. Men and women of the officer class did this regularly. Madame de Ramezay secured a commission for her son, and pensions for herself and daughters.²⁴

“Doing good to people of rank,” it has been observed, was a code of honour in ruling circles of the *ancien régime*. Nuns, like other nobles, knew the system required visiting, petitioning, setting a fine table for a fine guest, gifts, names dropped, and favours rendered. At convent recitals the high voices of pupils flattered in turn the “generous nobility” of the Governor, the Intendant, the Intendant’s wife, adding that

A heart sensitive to the plight of the unfortunate
Can count on a happy destiny...²⁵

This reminded the visiting dignitaries that the nuns and their works were conduits to the ultimate Patron. “One cannot,” the Annals recorded,

²³ Abbé Francois Daniel, *Histoire des grandes familles francaises du Canada*, (Montreal: Senécal, 1867), 438-40.

²⁴ NA, C11A, vol.50, Madame de Ramezay to Maurepas, 8 October 1728; vol. 56, Mme de Ramezay to Maurepas, 25 August 1731; vol. 58, Hocquart to Maurepas, 15 October 1732.

²⁵ *Saint-Vallier*, 268.

“have too many heavenly protectors.”²⁶ Earthly ones were not neglected either. In Mother St. Claude’s early convent days, the nuns even went to dinner parties at the Governor General’s chateau. Governor Philippe de Vaudreuil’s wife brought medicine to the bedside of a dying noble Superior, and the Governor and friends dropped in to an extent that appalled successive Bishops as violating cloister.

Patron-client relations were typically face to face, generating few documents. The Governor and Intendants’ visits, their recorded defence of the convent against the Bishop, and praise of its “indispensable service” to the colony, however, are strong clues. Pointing in the same direction is historian Micheline D’Allaire’s observation that the Crown from 1730 onward tended to favour the Hôpital’s interests.²⁷ Imbroglions with ecclesiastics became a thing of the past, as the two beneficent government officials continued in office until 1747-8. The Annals single out Governor Beauharnois and Intendant Hocquart as “among the first rank of friends who gave unequivocal proof of their goodwill ... according their protection on every occasion.”²⁸ The annalist also reported with satisfaction that Bishop Pontbriand, who began his twenty-year term of office in 1741, from the outset appreciated the merits of the Superior and “relied entirely on her prudence for all the conduct of the House.”²⁹ He, too, they ranked among their prime friends and protectors.

Just as patron-client relations show continuity between convents and manor houses, so do their economic activities. The widowed Madame de Ramezay (and later her unmarried daughter Louise) worked to develop lumber production at Chambly near their seigneurial lands. Though the widow failed, Louise prospered and undertook other business enterprises including tanneries in Montreal. Louise’s sister, Mother St. Claude, likewise directed enterprises. In the same decades Louise was travelling back and forth between her operations at Montreal and those at Chambly, Mother St. Claude herself was travelling out to oversee operations on her convent’s St. Vallier *seigneurie*, combining her practical concerns as financial officer with honorifics of the seigneurial role such as becoming godparent to the child of a *centsitaire*. She also followed her father’s footsteps as a builder. A 120-foot wing with unusually spacious cells for the nuns was added to the Hôpital during one of her several terms as its financial officer or *dépositaire*. The annalist saw Mother St. Claude’s upbringing as an asset: “Obliged by her office to have daily dealings with people of all ranks,” it was recorded, “she showed herself by the nobility of her manners and delicacy of her behaviour, always worthy of her high birth.”³⁰

Superiors oversaw their complex services, lands, and manufactures in the manner of chatelaines. Visitors such as Swedish botanist Peter

²⁶ *Saint-Vallier*, 310.

²⁷ D’Allaire, *L’Hôpital-Général*, 135. Two of the supportive letters sent by Governor and Intendant in this period are found at NA MG1 vol.57 oct 1732 and vol.107 26 oct.1735.

²⁸ *Saint-Vallier*, 315.

²⁹ *Saint-Vallier*, 307, 315.

³⁰ *Saint-Vallier*, 393.

Kalmwere were impressed by their courtesy and the lavish table they spread:

The abbess led me ... through all the apartments, accompanied by a great number of nuns. Most of the nuns here are of noble families and one was the daughter of a governor [Mother St. Claude]. She had a very grand air ... They all seemed more polite than those in the other nunnery. ... The dishes were ... as numerous and various as on the tables of great men ... [including] several sorts of wine and ... many dainties.³¹

It was during the 1760-66 tenure of Mother Marie-Joseph Legardeur de Repentigny de la Visitation, that novelist Frances Brooke visited and reported that “one forgets the nun and sees only the lady of distinction.”³² The notion was seconded by Bishop Briand who found their conversation and habits altogether too worldly (perhaps exacerbated in his day by postulants alleged to have joined the convent in search of safety during the war).

During the Superiorship of Mother de la Visitation, the familiar themes re-emerge. Rather than treading the same ground again, one might simply juxtapose two letters that show the aristocrat’s instinct to take charge and make connections. Mother de la Visitation’s mother was Agathe St. Père, who is credited with establishing the textile industry in Canada. When woollen supplies being shipped to the colony in 1704 perished in a shipwreck, St. Père ransomed nine English weavers from Indian captors and had them instruct the townspeople on looms she distributed. Married to an illustrious military officer and moving in ruling circles, she persuaded the Governor and Intendant to endorse her request for a Crown subsidy. In their dispatch of 1708 they enclosed her confident appeal to the Minister of Marine. She touted her own initiatives and “the perfect awareness I have of the care you take over this country” and sent samples of the cloth her employees made. She suggested to the King a number of other colonial resources to be tapped: buffalo wool for clothing, and a natural rot-resistant material for ship’s rigging. Agathe St. Père showed familiarity with the Crown’s concern for colonial development and no bashfulness in singing the praises of her own work.³³

Sixty years later, in a colony recently fallen to the British, St. Pere’s daughter in turn wrote to the Minister of Marine at the French court. She was exasperated by the Crown’s failure to send the accustomed compensation to the Hôpital-Général for its care of the wounded during the last two years of the war. Mother de la Visitation’s letter exudes the same sense of entitlement as her mother to appeal directly to the Versailles and expect a response:

Monseigneur,

³¹ Adolph Benson ed., *Peter Kalm’s Travels in North America* (New York: Wilson-Erickson, 1937), 2:454-5.

³² Cited in Trudel, *L’Eglise* 2:302.

³³ NA, C11A, v. 22, Mme Repentigny to Ministre, 13 October 1705. See also Marine Leland, “Madame de Repentigny,” *Bulletin des recherches historiques*, 1954, 75-7.

The Peace is concluded, and we lament to see this unfortunate colony lose the glorious title of New France ... sensible of the loss to France of an immense country whose value she doesn't appreciate, the English, more attentive to the interests of their nation, take pains to keep it ... Isn't it time, Monseigneur, after three years of waiting and suffering, to be reimbursed for the sums we advanced for the healing and redeployment of our troops? ... take note, Monseigneur, if you please, that the *rentes* with which our good and well-loved King gratified our house, have been withheld since that unfortunate war. They have been retained in his coffers; would not sending them be an act of justice that is our due?³⁴

Unlike her mother's letter, Mother de la Visitation's appeal did not receive the crucial endorsement of Governor and Intendant. With the fall of the colony, those officials had fled to France. Without their protection, some combination of warm Christian hospitality and cold calculation enabled the convent to face the unknown.

Was it only her veil and her celibacy that differentiated the managerial nun from the lady of the manor? One wishes to do justice to those who gave their lives to religion and whose piety was often noted from childhood.³⁵ Still, it seems clear the vows of poverty and obedience were not unconditional, given the lavish banquets, gorgeous buildings, and class favouritism, as well as the worldliness and insubordination bishops berated. Turning to the fourth vow, that of Christian hospitality, helps demonstrate the complex values at work within an aristocratic convent.

Hospitality to all who entered their portals was a promise made by the Augustinians of the Hôpital Général and the Hotel-Dieu. This had been honoured to the extent that Superiors were known to give the nuns' personal linen to bandage wounded soldiers, and the Hôpital's bread supply to a woman begging at the door.³⁶ In his history of the Church after the Conquest, Marcel Trudel noted that each of the Quebec convents spent some time nursing British soldiers during the Conquest period, and he sees this hospitality as winning them preference with the new rulers. Trudel contrasts British remuneration and generosity to the convents with what appears to be harsher treatment of male clergy such as the Jesuits at a time when the priesthood was already decimated by death and emigration.³⁷

Certainly the Hôpital-Général distinguished itself in its hospitality to the enemy. The battle of Montmorency was fought in June 1759, shortly after the invading fleet arrived at Quebec. Mother St. Claude personally cared for a British officer wounded in this encounter; it was reported that she wept when he died. In response, General Wolfe promised that should victory be his, he would extend protection to her

³⁴ The convent eventually received about one fifth of its 131,846 *livres* claim on the French Crown. *Saint-Vallier*, 374-5, 393.

³⁵ Mother de la Visitation for example was recorded as recognizing her vocation early, such that "ces premières touches de la grace d'en haut ... ne recurent aucune atteinte de l'air contagieux du monde, ni des rapports de la jeune fille avec la belle société qui fréquentait le salon de sa mère."

³⁶ *Saint-Vallier*, 370.

³⁷ Trudel, *L'Eglise*, 1:76-81, 335-48; 2:417.

and the Hôpital. After Wolfe's death, General Murray kept the pledge. When British forces occupied the institution, they treated the nuns with great respect.

Meanwhile, going beyond her vow of Christian hospitality, Mother St. Claude also plied the path of aristocratic *courtoisie* she had learned as a child. Only a week after her brother yielded the starving town to the British, she sent to General Amherst a gift of preserves the nuns had made, with a fawning note. They were "eager to present their respects to his excellency, to express their deep appreciation for his protection, wishing him health."³⁸ In the final year of the colony's existence, with Mother de la Visitation now its superior, the Hôpital continued to treat the British wounded, burying on its grounds those who did not survive.

The British military government responded with the customary courtesy of well-bred gentlemen to ladies of similar rank. Governor Murray sent provisions to the Hôpital sisters over the course of that hungry winter of 1759-60 and paid for British patients. Made aware of their desperate finances when the French court failed to reimburse wartime expenses, Murray appealed on their behalf to both the French and British governments.

As for the nuns, who can say what proportion of their conduct was calculation, what proportion charity? In 1759-60 they showered with kindness the formidable British invader; the following decade they begrudged the sickly American one. Or was the operant difference that of manners: did hospitality falter in the face of the unspecified "coarseness" and "dissipation" of the Americans? Did they act out of noble ideas of courtesy, Christian vows of hospitality, *realpolitik*, or all three? As noted, Mother St. Alexis evidently did take it to heart when accused of neglecting the Americans, and changed her ways. The motives, and the conduct, seem complex. They were based on more than one code of honour, not unalloyed with baser metals.

Whatever their motives, in those trying times the nuns' networks proved vital. The ties established during the Conquest period by Mother St. Claude and Mother de la Visitation remained firm, Carleton's government awarding the Hôpital a contract to care for British invalids. Governor Carleton's aide-de-camp during the Revolution was Mother St. Alexis' kinsman, Lanaudière, and his efforts were seconded by the other relatives who supported the cause. The nuns feared their buildings would be targeted when the Americans occupied them. Carleton, however, ordered his forces not to fire on the Hôpital, a questionable decision from the military point of view since it handed a safe base to ill and vulnerable invaders.

With friends in high places and a government that compensated them for their work, the sisters survived both the two sieges and the change of rulers. One might conclude they fared considerably better than lay members of the aristocracy. Mother St. Claude's brother Roch, along with a number of fellow officers, fled to France where they received a nasty scapegoating for the loss of Canada, some facing prison. Others,

³⁸ For the full text see Trudel, *L'Eglise*, 2:311-12.

including Roch de Ramezay, eked out a penurious existence, and their families were imperiled again by the French Revolution. In the colony, Mother de la Visitation lost her closest male relatives on the field of battle and her surviving brother fled to France. Mother St. Alexis' stepfather also emigrated to France, where he was imprisoned in the Bastille.³⁹ Another of her relatives died a captive in a Pennsylvania prison. Nobles who stayed in the colony and managed to survive both wars were deprived of the government largesse to which the French regime had accustomed them.⁴⁰ Humiliated by an influx of newcomers who ridiculed their antiquated chivalry, this now impotent class could neither persuade nor compel the *habitants* to resist Yankee invaders. Noblemen learned to keep quiet about the military exploits that had once been their glory, while those chosen for Governor Carleton's Council learned to stifle their true opinions. Aubert De Gaspé, born in 1786, mentioned several times in his memoirs how he and others of his class for decades dreaded taunts of being "French and bad subjects" of the new monarch. Among the French Canadians, they lost leadership to the middle classes. Their sisters at the Hôpital-Général rebounded from the hardships and humiliations of wartime more quickly and more fully. Their services before and after the Conquest were praised by Governors, Legislature, townspeople, and visitors. In terms of numbers, they had more professed nuns in the 1790s than at the most flourishing period of French rule in the 1740s.⁴¹

As the well-attended adulation of Mother St. Alexis that August day in 1797 suggests, the nuns at the Hôpital-Général de Québec experienced a generally happier fate than their families exiled in France or struggling in fast-changing currents at home. Some indefinable blend of economic enterprise, religious idealism, and ability to attach themselves to ruling clienteles preserved the sisters and their work. At a time when the ebb tide of French empire could have submerged their way of life, they displayed all the structured buoyancy of a lady in a *panier* skirt.

³⁹ Fauteux, *La Famille D'Aillebout*, 129.

⁴⁰ For comments of Carleton, Haldemand, and Masères on the desperation of the officer class after the Conquest see NA, B, vol 42, Haldimand to Germaine 25 July 1778; also Coffin, 297-8.

⁴¹ Forty-two professed sisters in 1793 compared with thirty-four in 1743. On the quality of the nuns' care, even Captain Knox, who accused Mother St. Claude of spreading false military rumours, noted that when British troops were transferred from their own regimental hospitals to the clean and orderly Hôpital, they were "inexpressibly happy." P-G Roy, *La Ville de Québec sous le régime français* I, (Quebec: Redempti Paradis, 1930), notes the renown of their school. For the praise of Governor and Intendant, see NA, C11A, Beauharnois and Hocquart to Ministre, 24 October 1737.