Nobles in Nineteenth-Century France

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Nobles in Nineteenth-Century France: The Practice of Inegalitarianism.

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Before 1789, nobles counted the French church as their choicest fiefdom. They had total control of the episcopacy, predominated among the fat livings of the cathedral canonries, and held the top posts in many opulent regular orders. Noblewomen frequently headed the wealthiest and most prestigious nunneries of the contemplative communities. Already in the decades before the Revolution, however, the rate of noble vocations declined more steeply than that of commoners’. In the rural parishes which served the bulk of the population a noble curé was rarely found, and if perchance he was, he usually came of a family in straightened circumstances. The peasant saw the seigneur in the front row of the parish church, but he almost never saw a noble at the altar, save on those rare occasions when the bishop, served by an entourage of attentive chaplains, made a visitation. The dissensions brought about among those who accepted or rejected the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the jolting effects of the sale of urban and rural property belonging to the Church, and the emergence of secular alternatives in matters ranging from education to the calendar were all lamented with especial feeling by nobles. In some eyes the 1801 Concordat appeared a major step towards restoring Catholicism to an eminent place in France, but to ecclesiastical nobles it was of slight consolation. It is true that half of the new bishops had been born noble, as had many of the vicars general, but the total number of dioceses had fallen from 139 to 50. Only with the Bourbons’ return in 1814 could nobles hope to recoup past advantages as a more confident Church leadership undertook a vigorous recruitment policy to rejuvenate an aging clergy and to proselytize parts of France where Christianity had been forgotten—if indeed it had ever been introduced. For nobles with any sense of recent history a nagging question was whether the Church would ever return to aristocratic direction. Much ground had been lost.
Can we generalize about noble attitudes toward religion after the Revolution? Here we confront the eternal questions of typicality. Were there marked differences in behavior between men and women, young and old? Do Chateaubriand’s effusions in the post-Concordat best seller *The Genius of Christianity* represent the provincial noblesse, or are they more a testimony to his shrewd sense of a good topic for the right time? What of Saint-Simon’s insistence on civil burial in 1825, the same year as the appearance of comte de Montlosier’s impassioned attack upon the Jesuits? Was not the most virulently anticlerical of Blanqui’s associates the baron Antoine de Ponnat? Were Napoleon’s titrés less pious than the noblesse? Were noblesse reticent towards that growing nineteenth-century ultramontanism that culminated in the exaggerated deference accorded to Pius IX? These social questions are made more complex by the bewildering galaxy of theological tendencies of the time, Gallican and ultramontane, although we should recall that only a minority of the laity, almost exclusively male, interested themselves in doctrinal niceties.

The reasons why particular regions of France contrasted markedly with each other in the level of religious practice have exercised several generations of scholars. That is especially true of those places in the country like western France, where during the Revolution the nature of the popular religion affected politics. It was equally true of Gard, where hatred of Protestants was lively during the Restoration and the July Monarchy. Urbanization or land tenures do not provide any completely satisfactory key to local politics and beliefs, and historians place more and more emphasis on events that led families to political or doctrinal polarizations. This leads us to ask whether nobles reflected the religious behavior of the area where they lived or whether they set the tone of such conduct. Only a comparison of the religious traditions of noble families from different parts of the country would make possible tentative conclusions. However, as pointed out below in chapter 7, nobles were more likely to marry partners from distant birthplaces and more dispersed properties than were most other monied French people.

There is little evidence to throw into doubt the noble consensus on the great worth of respect, obedience, hierarchy, and sacrifice as taught by the Church. These virtues were as self-evidently desirable in a submissive spouse as in a servant or a tenant farmer. Common assumptions underlay innumerable conversations, letters, and sermons and were usually justified by a simplistic contrast between eighteenth-century wickedness and the chance to reform it in the nineteenth century. The father of the future prime minister Joseph de Villèle wrote to his deputy son in October 1815, at the height of the White Terror in the southwest:
This immorality, which cannot be destroyed save by religious principles that the anarchists, sons and successors of the eighteenth-century philosophes, have busied themselves to destroy by degrees to lead us into the deplorable state where we are and from which we shall only escape when we shall truly return towards God and the religion that we honor, the worthy priests: nothing can better save us than He who brought punishment upon us for having neglected him, and for having strayed from the sentiments and probity that the Creator placed in the bottom of our hearts and from which we have distanced ourselves.¹

The self-conscious paternal pronouncement to a son who had taken on national responsibilities rings rather forced. However, most nobles, and, we may add, particularly their mothers, wives, and daughters, thought along similar lines about the need for Catholic practice to expunge the recent past.

Nobles were not, of course, exclusively Catholic. Lucien des Mésnards, a Protestant Legitimist, was imprisoned in connection with the duchesse de Berry adventure in 1832; most of his erstwhile fellows disapproved of his evangelical sympathies.² The Paris consistory counted the marquis de Jaucourt among its members. Protestant titles were found among the major Parisian bankers—baron Turckheim, for example.³ Jews figured among the Second Empire titrés; baron Rothschild and others intermarried their converted daughters with titled gentiles.⁴ Indeed, the tension between the religious and social links among nobles merits much more investigation.

Certain professions attractive to nobles weakened the religious commitment. That would seem to be true of the army. A former prefect of provincial noblesse was scandalized by the misconduct of military officers attending mass at Bourges: even the general thought it good form to chat constantly during the service.⁵ That officers did not always conduct themselves like prize seminarians enhanced the merit of more reverent members of the armed services. Lieutenant General Partouneaux wanted an entire regiment to attend the 1819 mission in Toulouse, and in October 1820 a procession of priests at the end of a retreat was headed and closed by detachments of cavalry.⁶ General Aurelle de Paladines gave a mark of his deference to religious sensibilities when he ended, in 1867, the long-established custom of playing a musical retraite next to Metz Cathedral in order that the martial din would no longer disturb religious services.⁷

At the fourteenth degree of the old military family from the Bas Limousin which had produced a flock of noteworthy senior officers over the centuries, Anatole de Séguar was a prolific author on the theme of
religious instruction for the troops. Between 1856 and 1879 there were nine editions of his uplifting biography of the twenty-nine-year-old marquis de Villeneuve, testimony to the interest in the exemplary death of a Zouaves sergeant killed at Sevastopol: “[Villeneuve-Trans], which he has just again illustrated by dying, was already in the time of Saint Louis one of the greatest and most venerated names of France.”

There were even more editions of Séguir’s *La Caserne et le presbytère*, a collection of stories in the same spirit, and his book of military hymns. The listings of his publications runs to over eight pages in the general catalog of the Bibliothèque Nationale, attesting to his proselytizing efforts over and above those required as a prefect and a state councillor.

Nobles themselves believed that family tradition best preserved religious purity. In individual cases this seemed dubious: the devout Albert de Mun counted Helvétius among his forebears, while Paul de Magallon d’Argens was a grandson of the marquis d’Argens, who had been a friend and chamberlain of Frederick the Great and author of the *Lettres juives, chinoises et cabalistiques* which were full of malicious, irreligious asides. Such strong contrasts are untypical; it is the persistence of loyalty to religion in a family that is more likely to impress. In Toulouse we find the same family names in protests before the Revolution (*Réclamations de l’église de Toulouse* [1788]), during the agitation against the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, among the members of confraternities and congregations established after the Concordat, and in protests against anticlericalism in the 1860s.

Family piety can scarcely be guessed from nineteenth-century political affiliations. Among the Toulouse noble conspicuously devout families were those who had rallied to Napoleon (Malaret, Cambon), ultra-royalists and Carlist supporters (Aspe, Dubourg, Malafosse, Saint-Félix), and supporters of the Orleanists (Aldeguier). There were no absolute linkages between Catholicism and right-wing politics despite such striking exceptions as the Gard department, with its polarization against the Protestant minority. Were not the blues and the whites of Brittany both Catholic in practice but with different politics? Many families displayed lukewarm devotion, contenting themselves with decent respect for form while avoiding any suspicion of excessive enthusiasm. For nobles as for the lower classes, religious practice and devotional exercises were a type of sociability. In towns like Nancy, Nantes, or Aix the noblesse had been little touched by the unbelief or deism of the tiny coteries of the intellectual critics of Catholicism. The assertion that counterrevolution wrought a wholesale change of heart on the part of impious nobles is open to question, even though the theme was insistently repeated by royalist propaganda. Only the court nobility
made an ostentatious return to manners which had never ceased to be current among their country cousins.

Respect for Catholicism did not necessarily mean respect for priests. Often the curé was the only spokesman with any moral authority on behalf of the peasantry, from which he frequently sprang. Out of the distant medieval past came conflicts between priest and seigneur over matters of tithes, precedence, and obedience, and in changing form those tensions remained widespread into the nineteenth century. In a rural setting the curé and the chatelain were sometimes two rival authorities. Many nobles continued to view the curé as someone whose status was between that of a head gardener and that of a notary. In the 1830s the immensely aristocratic bishop La Tour d'Auvergne left a château dinner party so that he might join his clergy, who had been convoked to the nearby rectory.¹³ He at least wished to underline that his birth did not come before his episcopal unity with his lowlier-born clergy.

For their part, secular priests complained bitterly that they dropped in public estimation because of their subordination to bishops laid down by the Organic Articles. The situation might change for the better, two of them wrote poignantly, if only their independence were respected: "In seeing it honored and respected a crowd of candidates would come forward; it would be possible to recruit them among the highest classes and to distribute positions according to the nature of talents and the importance of merit."¹⁴ One study of the northern diocese of Arras claims that after the 1848–51 agricultural crisis clerics were more respected by noble landowners than earlier in the century, mainly because the latter now looked for clerical aid in dealing with less docile peasants.¹⁵ Nineteenth-century nobles, particularly women, came to realize that their attitude was wanting towards their most effective intermediary with the population. One aspect of the "feminization" of French Catholicism was a heightened respect for the clergy from laywomen, and nuns, who sought their approval and guidance.

The drawing together of noble and clergy in the nineteenth century was not a mere product of right-wing politics, waxing and waning in the light of the government's clericalism. It varied according to family and locality. Needless to say, officials usually saw this closeness in a political light. According to the Valence prefect in 1861, "The village curés search out the Legitimists, and these priests, who almost all belong to poor families, are proud to eat at the table of the château."¹⁶ The conflicts that emerged were individual ruptures of a tacit alliance. A dispute over the refusal to ring church bells in honor of the Mayenne prefect, Napoléon-Charles Legendre de Luçay, a château guest of the
Hautefeuille family, led to a scene between the marquise and two priests over Napoleon III’s Italian policy. With her *dame de compagnie* the marquise shouted and gesticulated “with violence” that the priests had come to “confuse these poor peasants,” and when the clergy returned to the priest-house, they were again menaced, this time by the marquis, who furiously (and anachronistically) described the bishop as an “intruder” (recalling the Revolution), as well as an “animal”: “You are all from the gutter [canailles], especially you, curé of Javron. If I didn’t have more self-esteem, I would punch your face.” This left something to be desired as noble respect for religion.

Nor was politics the only bone of contention, as an altercation between curé Chopard and the former seigneurial family of Roche gude (Drôme) shows. Between the arrival of the curé at Roche gude in 1828 and 1841 the relations between priest and noble were excellent, but then there was a row over extending church buildings that adjoined property belonging to the Roche gude family. The curé wished to demol­ish a connecting arch­way between the château and the church, an arch­way deriving not from now-abolished seigneurial privilege, as the pug­nacious curé claimed, but from a property transaction “enacted in 1728 between the marquis de Roche gude’s father and the commune, an act by which the marquis kept this right in return for a donation to the commune of a property known as the Guard House, which had, I believe, actually been used to enlarge the church.” The same curé had sued the son-in-law of the marquis, the comte de Guilhermier, for setting a river dam that affected fishing and the water flow. Other priests in France waged similar struggles against local chatelains who tried to maintain outdated seigneurial claims.

Perhaps occasional friction between curés and nobles is more understand­able if we look at the striking absence of noble priests among the parish clergy. This continued the pre-Revolutionary situation, although assiduity of practice still varied by region, as did the number of voca­tions. Nobles were more numerous among postulants to the clergy in Brittany, the west, and Lorraine than in Paris or the Midi. Just as under the Old Regime, the nineteenth-century secular clergy recruited primarily among urban artisans and shopkeepers and the well-to-do peasantry. Until the 1830s the careers of these lower-class postulants unfolded differently from those of the few well-born men who studied with them in the seminaries. Students from homes with more social graces and a higher level of general culture were favored for bishoprics and canonical stalls. In general, however, the rich nobles and bourgeois of the nineteenth century had a similar response to the lower clergy: as one historian phrased it, they refused the Church their children. In
1821 de Frayssinous regretted that the priesthood was given over "to the vulgar classes."\textsuperscript{20}

The evidence from a variety of diocesan studies points in one direction. In Montpellier diocese between 1846 and 1870, of 341 priests whose origins are known 80 percent were of modest background, while the local nobility and wealthy middle classes combined provided only 13 priests, or 3.8 percent of the total.\textsuperscript{21} Among the aristocracy as among wealthy commercial, manufacturing, and professional circles in Marseilles vocations in the mid-nineteenth century were "exceptional."\textsuperscript{22} In the Sarthe, where the social origins are known, among more than 1,500 ordinations during more than a century (1800–1905) only 2 nobles were found, and that in a region where the local nobles were said to be generally very attached to Catholicism and the Church.\textsuperscript{23} At Nantes, of 53 students attending the grand seminary in 1811 only 6 were of bourgeois or higher background; the remainder were from the families of small farmers.\textsuperscript{24} These findings apparently confirm the idea that nobles in the priesthood scarcely exceeded, if at all, the proportion of nobles in the French population: perhaps half of 1 percent.

This sparse noble recruitment was regretted in many an eloquent sermon after 1800. In 1851 the son-in-law of Herce, bishop of Nantes, deplored the absence of the "hautes classes" from the priesthood and was ingenuous enough, in the conservative atmosphere following the events of 1848, to suggest that an understandable repugnance of high society for an excessive egalitarianism ("a too great leveling") was reason enough to reserve for them the most desirable posts as deans and archpriests to stimulate vocations. Abbé Collet made a tart rejoinder to those notions in a pamphlet in which he claimed that virtue and piety were more needful to priests than polished table manners.\textsuperscript{25} In devout circles where the role of the French church was taken for granted as a bulwark against the philosophes' insidious poison noble leadership seemed proper. It implied a return to the pre-Revolutionary days.

Why nobles so markedly kept away from secular clerical life but entered into the regular orders is not self-evident. Was there a dislike for a lifetime of contact with the lower classes? Was the poor pay of the curés (despite improvements over the pre-Revolutionary salaries brought about by nineteenth-century governments) a special disincentive? Individual noble careers reveal some possible changes in a lifetime. De Charbonnel, of a sword family from a highly pious part of France, the Velay, showed a desire to become a priest early in life. He trained at Saint Sulpice, subsequently taught in various seminaries, and then was named bishop of Toronto although completely innocent of pastoral experience. After serving in Canada from 1851 to 1861, he
returned to France and became a Franciscan, a rule that allegedly attracted him because of its simplicity, although Charbonnel constantly showed great pride in his family’s nobility. Henri de Bonnechose, of Norman noblesse with a Protestant mother, studied law and was appointed a public prosecutor before his ordination by monseigneur de Rohan in 1833, whereupon he taught in seminaries and also in the college in Rome for French Seminarians renowned for the ultramontane outlook of its teaching staff, Saint Louis of the French. At age forty-eight he began his episcopal career, serving successively at Carcassonne, Evreux, and Rouen. Although we do not yet have all the information needed for an accurate comparison, it seems clear that among male nobles there was a lower rate of entries into religion during the nineteenth century than during the eighteenth. The proportion of nobles fell even more than their demographic decline among the rising annual totals of ordinations (averaging 1300–1750) between 1850 and 1868. We are confronted with the paradox of a more churchy nobility but fewer nobles in the Church.

In the hierarchy’s upper reaches the percentage of nobles always remained higher than among the clergy at large (see table 9). In 1828 they were numerous among the 468 vicars general, the 864 titular canons, the 1,788 honorary canons, and the 439 chaplains and 1,044 priests who taught in seminaries—all as enumerated in the Almanach du clergé de France. Despite the rally of the Restoration years, however, the proportion of noble bishops fell steadily. The fairly young men named bishops under the Restoration threw a long shadow, but once that generation began to die off, they were not replaced. They reflected the ecclesiastical policies of the successive regimes in France. The First Empire advanced bishops of Old Regime noble families who were sufficiently docile to Bonaparte. The Restoration markedly appointed nobles (seventy-five of ninety-six new bishops) especially during its first five years: the gratified new incumbents were now styled monseigneur instead of monsieur as in the Old Regime. The July Monarchy displayed the opposing tendency, as when the successful candidate for bishop of Langres could be praised for, among other sterling qualities, “the merit of having come up by his own efforts [s’être fait seul]. His birth is very obscure.” The Second Empire was concerned above all to find compliant candidates. Bishops overlapped regimes. An example is the former émigré monseigneur de Cosnac, who had taken part in Charles x’s coronation and who became archbishop of Sens in April 1830, a few months before the July Revolution. Passionately devoted to the Bourbons, he encouraged to good effect his clergy in hostility to the Orleanist regime, particularly in the Avallonais. The age of the clergy was important. In 1828 the
eldest of the cardinals and archbishops of France was Clermont-Tonnerre of Toulouse, 80, and the eldest bishop was Sébastiani della Porta at Ajaccio, 83. The youngest cardinal was the prince de Croy, grand almoner of France at age 55; the youngest archbishop was Quelen, of Paris, 50; and the youngest bishop was Bonald, at Puy, 41.

Even more influential than age was the length of time a particular bishop remained on his episcopal seat. The average incumbency was twelve to thirteen years, but how misleading this can be is revealed by the case of the Moulins diocese. Named by the royal ordonnance of 8 August 1817, the first bishop, Antoine de Pons, of ancient Auvergnat nobility, had served in Moulins as a vicar general since 1804 and as titular canon since 1814. Only in 1823 did the episcopal nomination receive canonical institution. Born in 1759, he managed to outlive both the Bourbons and the July Monarchy, dying in 1849. Staunchly Legitimist, de Pons was as conspicuously lacking in zeal for the July Monarchy as in personal humility: in 1843 an irate relative attacked him in an anonymous pamphlet disputing his right to use a heraldic coat of arms. His successor was appointed in the 1849 conservative reaction. Pierre-Simon-Louis-Marie de Dreux-Brézé, born in 1811 and third son of Louis xvi’s master of ceremonies, showed the mark of his clerical education in Rome, where he became a convinced ultramontanist. He spent his early career as a canon of Notre Dame in Paris, but in 1840 he became deeply involved in one of the mutual aid societies, which Legitimists encouraged warmly (that of Saint Francis Xavier), as well as in work for the Oeuvre de Saint-Jean, dedicated to the moral welfare of young apprentices in the capital. Dreux-Brézé was the youngest prelate in 1850, when he took possession of his see. Everything in his outlook and manner proclaimed him to be a grand seigneur: he enforced the full

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Number of Bishops</th>
<th>Noble Bishops</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>1804</td>
<td>46</td>
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<td>1870</td>
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splendor of the Roman rite, on occasion entered into disputes with the
civil authority, and was one of the three bishops who swept aside the
prohibition of the diffusion of Quanta Cura and the Syllabus of Errors
which he promulgated with particular solemnity in his cathedral in
1865. He vehemently upheld papal infallibility. Such strong views inevi­
titably produced growing opposition among part of his clergy, but he
maintained his ultramontane and conservative sympathies intact until
his death in 1893, by which time he was the oldest of French bishops.31

The disproportionate presence of noble bishops compared with their
presence in the clergy at large and even more so with their part in the
French population meant that they exercised greater influence in the
post-Revolutionary Church than in any other major institution. To what
extent noble bishops helped other nobles in appointments to positions of
influence is difficult to know. Very likely it was unconscious, or at least
rationalized into fulsome praise of the piety or excellent upbringing of
each individual. The fiery and ascetic provençal bishop of Marseilles,
Eugène de Mazenod, was solicitous of the foundress of the Sisters of
Saint-Joseph of the Apparition, the noble Mme de Vialar, and gave
given particular encouragement to the hospital of the Brothers of Saint John
of God, established in Marseilles by the noble Paul de Magallon, a per­
sonal friend of the Mazenod family in Aix-en-Provence.32

The undoubted fervor in religion of all concerned made the help
offered to fellow nobles more agreeable. Bishop Mazenod, in fact, irri­
titated his secular clergy more by his obvious partiality to the Oblate
Fathers of Mary Immaculate, an order founded by him, than by his
background in the robe nobility of Provence. Only by investigating each
dioece with a noble bishop could one begin to know exactly how much
aid was accorded to other nobles, and the range of personalities involved
would make generalizations difficult. Suffice it to say that there is no
evidence of a noble bishop opposed to his ilk in the Church. On the other
hand, the steady fall in the numbers of noble bishops presumably
brought about new ways in dioceses now led by men of less exalted
origins.

Nowhere was the noble contribution to the nineteenth-century re­
ligious revival more pronounced than in the female regular orders.
Noble girls surged into religious orders, as exemplified by the five
daughters among ten children of an impoverished Breton family of
Saint-Pol-de-Léon one of whom became superior general of the Nantes
Religieuses de la Retraite.33 Between 1851 and 1861 the number of
nuns more than doubled—from 34,200 to 89,200—and the sharp in­
crease continued unabated over the following decade.34 Particular or­
ders such as the Rennes Augustines or the Nantes Ursulines, attracted
noble postulants especially. Whether the rise in the numbers of nobles
resulted from pinched family economies is not easy to say, although this was widely believed at the time.

Noble women were particularly drawn to the more emotional and ritualized faith of the nineteenth century. This sometimes lay between secular and cloistered life. Mme de MacCarthy was attracted to the religious traditions of the Franco-Irish family into which she married at Toulouse. She became when still young a leading light among the local society ladies who made donations of nursing and of money to an association involved with dressing the sores of poor women. In due course she adopted a female relative who later became a nun. After the death of her husband, Mme de MacCarthy spent her last years in a community.35 This kind of religiosity was in no sense limited to nobles, as a study of the middle-class women in the Lille region during the nineteenth century has clearly demonstrated. It is worth emphasizing, however, how that charitable behavior was to a significant extent a mimicry of nobles.36

The eighteenth century had been marked by the establishment of charitable and educational orders of nuns, but noblewomen preferred the cloistered orders. After the upheavals of the Revolution this tendency diminished. The government and prefects particularly encouraged the return of the hospital orders. During Napoleon’s visit to Bordeaux in 1808, imperial largesse was granted to a charitable foundation working with penitent prostitutes (filles repenties) housed in the former convent of the Annonciades which was headed by Marie-Thérèse-Charlotte de La Mourous, of one of the city’s noble families.37 There was a new welcome for nuns such as the Cordelières, Benedictines, Visitandines, and Ursulines, engaged in socially useful work.38 Noblewomen were now more prominent: Mlle Négrier de la Ferrière founded a hospital for poor incurables at Le Mans in 1815 which survived for nine years. Nobles also served in teaching orders, such as the Ladies of the Sacred Heart, whose mission was the education of middle-class and noble girls.39 Noblewomen were still well represented in contemplative orders such as the Bénédictines du Saint-Sacrement, established by Mother de Cossé-Brissac.40

A number of remarkable noblewomen entered religion after marriage, such as Mme Bonnault d’Houet, whose husband died less than a year after their 1804 wedding. In 1817 she took a vow of chastity and henceforth devoted herself to the establishment of free schools for young girls by a society of the Fidèles Compagnes de Jésus, which received papal approval in 1837. Mme Bonnault d’Houet had a pronounced taste for bodily mortification, a devotion to virgin martyrs, and a regret to have ever known conjugal life.41 Baronne de Chatillon, born at Autun in 1819, was brought up in a profoundly religious atmosphere
until her marriage at age twenty-two with Rambert de Chatillon, a Savoyard senator. They were childless, noted for piety and good works. After twenty years her husband died, and the baronne entered the Franciscan Third Order and established the Chambéry Providence. Hélène de Raigecourt became a hospital nun after the death of her husband delivered her from an unhappy married life. Among the 103 biographies of nuns examined in a study of the theme of physical mortification and the exaltation of the soul during the nineteenth century, at least 10 percent concerned sisters born nobles.

Noble laywomen were affected by the new sympathies of the upsurge of belief in the miraculous which was a feature of the nineteenth century. The Marian cult reached new heights with the appearance of the Virgin in 1846 at La Salette and the apparition seen by Bernadette Soubirous in 1856 at the Massabielle grotto. Monseigneur Philibert de Bruillard, bishop of Grenoble, was extremely cautious about the La Salette apparitions, but in response to the numerous pilgrims he permitted Mass to be said. Some of his clergy appealed against him to the metropolitan, Archbishop Bonald of Lyons, before addressing the pope. Not all noble ladies cared for the new enthusiasms: Mme de Ventavon of Grenoble supported a debunking noble priest who said that the La Salette shepherd boys were hoodwinked by a dotty local spinster, Mlle de la Merlière, who dressed up for the purpose. By and large, however, noblewomen followed the marked trend of the century towards a more emotional religion. Both at home and at school noble girls were encouraged to respect religion and to feel intensely on the subject, as Mme d'Armaille recalled.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the education of children. Clerical tutors were sometimes employed by families of sufficient wealth, but nobles actually preferred to send their sons to clerical-run schools. Religious colleges run by Jesuits and Dominicans prolonged the ascendancy that they had enjoyed in the education of nobles under the Old Regime and that continued into the twentieth century. Catholic education was intimately bound up with the teaching orders with many noble pupils which transmitted the deportment and beliefs suitable to young nobles, as well as gave access to the network of friendship and acquaintance among their peers that would be useful later in their careers or perhaps marriages. Lamartine met at school at Belley his lifelong friend Virieu, of one of the oldest families of nobility in Dauphiné, and sought his advice throughout his life despite a growing contrast in their politics. Many less illustrious nobles owed to school friendships contacts with their peers who were not related to them.

With the technical improvement in printing during the first half of the nineteenth century, ever more books could be cheaply printed to
carry the moral and religious injunctions proper to young nobles. The work of Mme S. de Renneville, although not directed exclusively at her peers, was permeated with this morality. A case in point is her *Galerie des jeunes vierges, ou modèle des vertus qui assurent le bonheur des femmes*. Mme de Rémusat wrote on women’s education. Noble matrons were numerous among writers of children’s books: Mmes de Tastu, de Witt, and de Genlis and, of course, the immortal Russian, comtesse Sophie de Séguir. Their works dissimulated class distinctions behind a pink haze of religiosity, but ultimately they were totally opposed to egalitarianism.

Between 1801 and 1814 more than fifty new male congregations appeared or were developed despite Napoleon’s disapproval of regulars, and this increase accelerated during the Restoration. Like noblewomen, noblemen were more drawn to closed orders. The Trappists appealed to the émigré Le Clerc de la Roussière of the Maine: he had stayed with French Trappists at Darfeld in Westphalia. Upon his return to France in 1807, he bought a former priory for a Cistercian foundation, and in 1815 a new community (five fathers, ten brothers) began life in common. One Trappist who wrote devotional works, such as the *Aspirations aux sacrées plaies de N.S. Jésus-Christ*, emphasizing religious exaltation, was a former chamberlain of the Austrian emperor, General de Géramb.\(^48\)

Mendicants and teaching orders dedicated to the poor had less social cachet than the others. The Jesuits, by contrast, had always drawn upon an aristocratic clientele for their colleges. Like the Dominicans, they attracted noble vocations. One of the most famous society preachers of the 1830s and 1840s was a Gascon noble Jesuit, Lacroix de Ravignon. Numerous new congregations continued to be set up, and the middle years of the nineteenth century saw a massive increase in the numbers of monks—tenfold from the three thousand of the 1840s. A former imperial general staff captain, Paul de Magallon, was elected superior in 1819 of the Saint John of the Cross hospital by companions mostly of modest background with a weaker general culture and less knowledgeable about administration and society than the nobleman. His family connections proved useful in collecting from the local aristocracy and again in 1852, when he established at Marseilles an Association d’âmes d’élite parmi les Catholiques de la Haute-Société Marseillaise.\(^49\)

If we turn from nobles within the Church to their lay attitudes, the education of the lower classes was of great importance. Almost all accepted that clerical teachers were best suited to instill respect, moral uprightness, and deference to betters. In newspaper articles, books, and sermons the contrast was tirelessly drawn between the “good,” pious
Old Regime peasants and the Revolutionary officials, usually portrayed as urban men-of-law, schoolteachers, grasping speculators, and occasionally renegades and ungrateful overseers, from whose malice the peasants saved their (always benevolent) former seigneurs during the Revolutionary holocaust. Education for the masses should be primarily catechetical, emphasizing continuity in an unchanging rural order. This viewpoint had some validity in a country still composed predominantly of peasants, but it was alien to the squalid new suburbs of the rapidly growing cities of France which attracted migrants.

Nobles put their faith in the Ignorantins (Brothers of the Christian Doctrine) and others especially concerned with lower-class education who would reinforce deference and submission to the status quo. They were deeply grieved by damaging scandals like that of Brother Léotade, found guilty in 1847 of attempted rape and murder of a fourteen-year-old girl in Toulouse, or that of Brother Alexandre, convicted in 1869 of *attentats à la pudeur* on young boys at Beauvais. There were many obsessional sexual innuendos or overt claims of clandestine sexual activity in mid-century anticlerical writings. Conversely, nobles and supporters of Catholic education emphasized that it was a purer form of instruction than that in the state schools.

A measure of the importance attached to the schools’ social mission to the lower classes were the legacies in wills, donations, and fund-raising efforts on their behalf. When the Sisters of Providence were established at Arras to train teaching nuns for work in country schools, many local nobles gave one hundred to six hundred francs (at a time when a laborer’s hire was 1 Franc 50 per day), and the comte de Bryas donated two thousand francs.\(^5^0\) Only a few liberal nobles supported the Lancastrian system, as it was called in reference to its English origin, where older children taught the younger what they had learned.\(^5^1\) The duc de Lévis vigorously attacked Belgian exponents of this mutual instruction system on the grounds of intrinsic inequalities between individual and racial abilities. Women, he felt, could only be encouraged in reprehensible disobedience and desire for social change by such instruction.\(^5^2\)

Noble laywomen were at the forefront of a variety of Catholic agencies of edification and instruction. This was less true before the Revolution. A variety of studies made clear a decline in Old Regime male devotional associations in the decades before 1789, but it is unclear whether the same was true of females. Apparently such lay bodies revived during the nineteenth century. Often involved with particular institutions, such as orphanages or prisons, women in particular were concerned with collecting dowries for poor girls, training in skills such as lace making, and saving girls from prostitution. Men were associated with similar activities. The Toulouse prefect in 1809 was startled during a mission at
the ostentatious religiosity of noble participants whom he had never thought to be devout, while the city’s traditional confraternities underwent a jump in noble membership. The confraternity at Laval (Mayenne) was presided over by nobles throughout the 1850s and the 1860s and was involved in works of charity. The records of the Moulins Engilbert (Nièvre) Association de Bienfaisance et de Charité in the late 1860s showed that nobles, both men and women, consistently gave more money than the local curé or the commoner members.

Noble interest in charity was both theoretical and practical. The interest of writers on poor relief and participants in programs of public assistance was, more or less consciously, social control. Nevertheless, it would be a serious injustice to belittle any desire to alleviate suffering. The efforts of Louis-Auguste Guays des Touches, son of a Restoration magistrate, may stand as representative of this aspiration at its best. This bachelor possessed a townhouse on Laval’s place de Gast and a château in the commune of Bignon, where he became mayor in 1855. From 1848, at the age of twenty, he filled many of his days with good works. He was a member of the Saint Vincent de Paul conference, organized the leisure of young workers and apprentices, and set up lotteries for the benefit of the poor. He collected money and oversaw the construction of a new parish church at Bignon (1859–62) and went on pilgrimages to Rome, to Saint Julien du Mans, and to the newly re-established Solesmes abbey. His most important activity was the 1855 foundation at Laval of an organization to help poor children in prayer and play, and in 1874 he left his estate to the diocesan grand seminary, doubtless with the intent of supporting young priests’ education. One could multiply instances of nobles who preached by example, although rarely with such complete abnegation as Guays des Touches. The Hagerue family of the Pas-de-Calais conveyed their fervent regard for the newly proclaimed dogma of the Immaculate Conception by giving sixty-eight indigents dinner on silver plate with due attention to etiquette. A daughter of the family served the table, seconded in her efforts by the Enfants de Marie.

In the history of nineteenth-century Church-state relations nobles had an increasing propensity to support the clericals. The more fervently they did so, the less were they marked off sharply from the other faithful. In one sense ultramontanism increasingly outweighed legitimism, as Michel Denis and Stéphane Rials have pointed out, despite the dual loyalties of most nobles and many priests. After 1830 Rome became ever more important than the Austrian court of the pretender, but the shift was already going on before. For this reason it is vain to look for a precise collective “noble” outlook on the policies followed by successive governments towards the Catholic church. There was no partic-
ular “noble” consensus on how to respond to Napoleon’s imprisonment of Pius VII from 1809 to 1814, or the 1817 Concordat, or the 1825 Sacrilege Law, or the anticlericalism of the 1830s, or the anxieties generated by the collapse of papal temporal power in Italy in the 1850s other than to say that in the majority nobles followed the mainstream of Catholic opinion in France. When Charles, comte de Montalembert, denounced the cooperation of the Church with the state in his celebrated polemical book *Les intérêts catholiques au XIXe siècle* (1852), he wrote above all as a son of the Church rather than as a noble.

It is perhaps possible, however, to see a particular noble style in the way nobles supported the clerical cause. The reconstruction of the Laval diocese (curiously enough first established as a juring diocese in 1790) was largely the result of a campaign by local nobles. At the death in 1854 of the Le Mans bishop (monseigneur Bouvier), the new diocese was authorized by Napoleon III, crowning the efforts of a local devout noble, Guillaume d’Ozouville, who persuaded Mme de Vaufleury of Laval to donate the property that served as an episcopal palace in order to obviate the general council’s fear that the new establishment would be a burden on local taxes. Ozouville was the author of a pamphlet calling for the return of the upper classes to the clergy, as mentioned above. There was fiscal support from local nobles as though to compensate for the paucity of vocations. In a similar way at Rennes in December 1843, when none of the local authorities attended the benediction of the cathedral bells in an official capacity, the Legitimist nobles turned out in droves. Legitimist nobles enthusiastically seconded the devotion to the Sacred Heart when it was made a festival of the Church Universal by Pius IX in 1856 and often recalled that the counterrevolutionary Vendéens had used it for their symbol.

In general the linkage of religious ritual with political anniversaries was promoted. A report from Aix in 1860 noted: “Today, 21 January, at 11 A.M. was celebrated in the Church of St. Jean de Malte a commemorative Mass for the death of Louis XVI; the nave was draped in black. In the numerous and contemplative congregation which took part one numbered few common people [*gens du peuple*], but on the other hand one saw joined together many ladies belonging to the *classe aristocratique*.” At Toulouse in 1863 a performance of Émile Augier’s anticlerical play *Le fils de Giboyer* provided a pretext for young nobles to provoke a stylish uproar against the notion that clericals were “vicious hypocrites, the Legitimists laggardly dunces, the gentlemen insolent and haughty, the rich bourgeois compliant ninnies.” As at the Aix memorial Mass, the common people were conspicuously absent from this Legitimist demonstration, revealing the steep loss of interest in royalism by the lower classes.
What was noble was the ostentatious derring-do: a commoner supporter of clerical concerns would not kick a police commissioner or threaten duels in the manner of the marquis Buisson de Bounazel. The papal Zouaves provided a new galaxy of ultramontane heroes. Even more than the colonial adventures, which provided stirring prospects to Lamoricière to display feudal values of superiority over inferiors, the decision to defend the Holy Father fitted into a nineteenth-century catalog of knightly values. The highly conservative prefect Joseph-Antoine Ferlay, who was a native of the Drôme department which he administered, saw the extravagance in 1861:

> The clergy and a little Legitimist coterie has made a great fuss about the departure for Rome of a young man called d'Arblatier; this youth has been an N.C.O. in a cavalry regiment. (He left it because his officers thought he was incapable of being an officer.) His father served bravely during the First Empire; but then he fell into an excess of devotion, and he is considered as an intense Legitimist to the point that he did not wish to swear the oath as a municipal councillor of his commune.\(^{63}\)

This “excess of devotion” advanced among nineteenth-century nobles. Of the sixty from Mayenne of the two thousand French Zouaves, most were nobles.\(^{64}\) Among them was Georges d'Héliand, whose ancestors had been military and whose grandparents were imprisoned under the Revolution. He left for Rome at age eighteen and arrived at the Terni camp on 27 August. Within a month he was shot dead in battle at Castelfiardo. Upon receiving the news his widowed mother wrote, “I ought to thank God, who let my Georges taste a happiness that I could not give him. . . . Happier than many mothers, I have been able to enjoy for an instant the good conduct of my Georges.”\(^{65}\) On the same day six nobles and two commoners had been killed on the battlefield.\(^{66}\)

The first seven decades of the nineteenth century provided a contrast to the legends of irreverent aristocrats at Versailles, legends derived from Parisian models instead of country squireens. Now, from the 1801 Concordat and on through the century, regular attendance at Mass, education in clerical establishments, and a decorous observance by womenfolk in particular of the moral dictates of the Church were more typical. This was part of the larger shift of pious practice which contemporaries saw when they looked at congregations: “In Paris, one hardly meets anybody in the churches save elegant men belonging to the enlightened classes,” wrote one 1837 author, who seems not to have noticed the women present.\(^{67}\)

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s there was an implicit ambivalence, not often recognized, between the primacy to nobles of Legitimist doc-
trine, itself marked with “miraculous” elements such as the birth of the pretender after his father’s assassination, and a Catholicism particularly congenial to feminine ideas of the family and of the support provided by its womenfolk as the “invisible sustainers” of all that made nobles in their own eyes superior to the mass of the population. It made little difference whether the national government was conspicuously sympathetic to Catholicism, as were the ultra ministries of the Restoration, or hostile, as during the alarming days of 1848. The Revolution had detached practice from being part of the support of the state itself, and this turned many towards a family piety where the celebration of the feast days of Saints and dynastic birthdays provided a self-absorbing and inward-looking religious ritualism. Perhaps only the hostility aroused by the French position on the temporal sovereignty of the Holy See for a time reversed the dichotomy that increasingly characterized the century. Under the reign of Napoleon III the Catholic nobility could reflect that for the first time since the Wars of Religion their blood had flowed for the faith at Castelfiardo. The difference between the 1870 nobles and those of a century earlier was not so much their observance or their doctrinal views as it was the conspicuous affirmation of ritual and orthodoxy which an earlier generation would have found clumsy.

Catholicism of the sort praised by nobles set itself against the triumphant forces of the century. Latter-day seigneur and parish priest both advocated a solicitous paternalism which many in society disputed, as did a number of clerical intellectuals. Whole sections of the urban lower classes became indifferent to the faith, while nobles made ostentatious practice an obligation for their families. Nobles tacitly agreed on an ideal concept of religious behavior which, if it did not describe their conduct, at least served to propose to their peers how they ought to behave. The noble biographer of the young Hélion de Villeneuve-Trans described him as having begun to slip into Parisian temptations when he heard the news of his father’s fatal illness and was recalled home to more pious conduct:

After having received one last time in the presence of his family the sacraments of the Church with a great calm, the marquis de Villeneuve-Trans spoke to his son of the life that he should lead and of the honor of his name which he left to him pure and unstained; he urged him to have always in his mind the memory of his ancestors, great by faith and by their chivalrous devotion to France, to always carry in a worthy way a name illustrated by so many generations; then he gently went to slumber in the arms of his dear son and in the peace of the Lord.68
The biographer assured readers that this deathbed homily returned the young man to more virtuous paths. His message was that the noble family was a shield against urban vices.

This insight was especially directed at females. Noblewomen played a more important role than at any time since the seventeenth century as an intermediary between state and the poor. They tried to provide occasional employment for “their” destitute, as well as support for the needy. In towns women were active in fund raising, from a duchesse de Rohan in Paris, who shamed the deputy from Bergerac Maine de Biran into increasing his charitable donation, to the ladies in diocesan societies who took up collections at the cathedral doors. We have no in-depth study of women’s charity in France from the eighteenth century to the twentieth, but there seems little doubt that noblewomen were increasingly at the forefront of efforts undertaken. At a time when noblemen were a shrinking minority in Church leadership and the number of their vocations fell more than their group declined as a proportion of the national population, noblewomen were ever more important to the social activities of the Church.