Between Crown and Commerce

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1852

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=37351
While civic leaders and physicians attributed plague to foreign yeasts and antisocial acts of self-indulgence, another group of elites—religious personnel—reactivated a traditional plague discourse of divine punishment. They preached that God was unhappy with Marseille, that Jansenist heresy within the Church and immorality among the wider population had provoked God’s anger. According to Bishop Henri de Belsunce of Marseille, “the voice of the priest—that of the holy Church herself, and her formidable censures, were spurned with contempt by rebel sons, who dared to elect themselves judges and arbiters of the faith.”¹ God, the bishop of Arles echoed, was punishing Provençals for “our spirit of revolt.”² Agreeing that Jansenists’ “multiplied sacrileges” were “the principal cause”³ of “the plague of error,” the bishops insisted that excommunication of heretics would restore the Catholic community to health.⁴

Such interpretations of and reactions to plague are hardly a surprise, given the ease with which medical, religious, and moral definitions of “contagion” could intersect in early modern Europe.⁵ One need only browse through the 1694 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* to see how medical catastrophe could prompt religious commentators to cry spiritual decadence. Of the seven definitions provided for “contagion,” only two were of a medical sort. While plague was the worst form of “communication of a malign malady,” “contagion” was also a figurative disease that included “vice,” “heresy,” “wicked mores,” and “evil things communicated by frequentation or example.”⁶

If ecclesiastics had associated spiritual corruption with plague for centuries, what was particular about how these utterances materialized in 1720? How did
they interact with secular calls for civic engagement? How did commerce factor into this religious response? Did religious reactions to plague strengthen civic republican traditions in southern France?

During the plague of 1720, traditional religious responses, including rhetorical and physical attacks on Jews, non-Christians, non-Frenchmen, and non-indigenous inhabitants, remained muffled. Rather, the loudest religious reactions to the epidemic developed out of doctrinal arguments within the Catholic community that predated the medical catastrophe. These discussions belonged to a broader religious conversation in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century France regarding Church governance and the proper limits to papal authority. Before the plague, Jansenists—Augustinian Catholics in France protesting ultramontanist claims—began invoking Gallican traditions to argue that the Church, represented by a general council, was superior to the pope. Comparing the council’s responsibility to restrain papal authoritarianism to citizens’ rights to oppose tyranny, Provençal Jansenists and their supporters in the parlement in Aix idealized civic participation. The Church, they argued, should be governed like a republic. The orthodox establishment responded by condemning all forms of “immorality,” including Gallican heresy, sexual corruption, and commercial luxury. When plague arrived in 1720, Jansenists and orthodox Catholics interpreted it as God’s punishment for religious decadence and perceived plague-stricken Marseille as a divinely chosen locus for a showdown between heterodoxy or orthodoxy.

In this context, questions of religious devotion and civic spirit converged in several ways. Three kinds of civic practices that emerged in plague-stricken Marseille—collective baroque ritual, charitable service, and public discussion—demonstrate that as with the republicanism discussed in chapter 5, religious responses to epidemic brought together old practices with new vocabularies. First, the religious establishment, led by Belsunce, consecrated Marseille to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. By organizing a collective and public ritual of atonement to re-Catholicize the city, Belsunce integrated Marseille’s civic space into his project for religious renewal. Public spaces once used for commercial exchange became sites for communion with God. Meanwhile, discussions over serving dying plague victims fused religious charity to acts of civic spirit. Jansenists and orthodox Catholics competed over civic service, accusing each other of unchristian neglect and self-interest. They appealed to a new species of abstract arbiter, a literary and participatory “public tribunal,” to decide who demonstrated proper religious civic behavior.

Although historians like Michel Vovelle and Dale Van Kley have analyzed longue durée processes of secularization and connections between revolutionary
politics and religious controversies in early modern France, convergences between religiosity and civic spirit remain surprisingly unexplored. The role religious discussions played in shaping civic practices and the ways civic concerns strengthened religiosity during the Enlightenment have received limited attention, perhaps owing to the assumption that the age of Newton, Voltaire, and the *Encyclopédie* saw religious activity retreat behind developments in secularism and deism. This chapter tests such assumptions with three main claims. First, it demonstrates that Jansenist ideas of participatory Church administration borrowed from and strengthened the secular ideal of civic service and republican governance, across France as much as in Marseille. Second, it shows that in plague-stricken Marseille, ecclesiastical and municipal leaders who saw religious decadence in terms of sociopolitical decay, and vice versa, moved comfortably between the ideas of a republic in crisis and a Church in crisis. Third, this chapter shows how despite trends in secularism, the eighteenth century saw the development of a religious and civic tradition—the Cult of the Sacred Heart—that would ultimately grow into an enduring alternative to secular republicanism after the end of the Old Regime.

Additionally, this chapter contributes to the historical analysis of “public opinion.” French historians generally agree that administrators, intellectuals, and writers began employing the rhetorical construct of “public opinion” in political discussions in the latter half of the eighteenth century. This chapter argues that while politics may have emerged out of its absolutist casing in the 1750s, the rhetorical practice of invoking the “public” as an abstract arbiter of rational justice predated the mid eighteenth century. Hardly confined to state politics, the “public tribunal” was vested with absolute authority in the context of debates between Jansenists and the Catholic establishment during the plague of 1720. The appeal to this “public tribunal” led ecclesiastics and laypersons into a discursive field where the Catholic community could hope to restore religious order. This space served as a fertile training ground for enlightened rational discussion and contestation against illegitimate power in the decades that followed. The discursive space of religious debate, and Marseille’s once-commercial physical spaces—the port, the galley Arsenal, and the boulevards—emerged as major sites where ecclesiastic leaders toyed with seemingly incompatible ideas of baroque religiosity, Enlightenment rationalism, and republican governance.
One of the most commonly held notions regarding religious responses to plague is that they involved the unleashing of verbal and physical attacks against Jews. Although this is true of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, such attacks were infrequent by the eighteenth. Somewhat surprisingly, given the intensity of the debates on the acceptability of Armenians and Jews as trading partners, citizens, and subjects in France (Chapter 3), there were very few attacks on Jews and non-Christians during the plague of Marseille in 1720.

Collections of primary sources demonstrate how Jews were murdered for allegedly conspiring to exterminate European communities by poisoning wells in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Jean-Noël Biraben, a French authority on medieval and early modern plagues, has shown that during the Black Death, lepers and Jews were tortured and burned alive in Tours, Périgueux, and Salignac and massacred by the populace in Toulon. Attempts by popes, princes, and authorities to curb vigilante violence failed in Provence. From Avignon, Pope Clement VI issued a bull stating that God did not distinguish between Christians and non-Christians during plague, while Queen Jeanne compensated the Jews by reducing their taxes and sending her army to curb popular violence. The inhabitants, however, continued their massacres.

By the sixteenth century, such attacks on Jews had waned. Historians studying the London plague of 1665–1666 have failed to uncover evidence of anti-Semitic outbursts. Other “target groups” replaced Jews as victims of attacks of mass hysteria. William Naphy has shown how the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries continued to see some “economically motivated anti-Semitism,” but that streetwalkers, travelers, and lower-class plague workers were targeted in growing frequency in the western Alps. This transition, he notes, was connected to rising fears of witchcraft. Those tortured, executed, and massacred were wanderers, widows, or poor travelers from neighboring states and towns: people whose combination of gender and poverty placed them at the edges of communal life. Plague epidemics, therefore, did not prompt a consistent form of anti-Semitic xenophobia in the early modern period.

Still the question remains: what happened to the population of religious others, non-naturalized and naturalized inhabitants of Marseille during the plague of 1720? The answer remains a mystery. Neither eyewitness accounts, plague histories, nor diaries point to large-scale criminalization of, or discrimination against, naturalized and foreign non-Christian immigrants. The only references
to xenophobic policy come from Marseille’sHôtel de Ville and the parlement de Provence in the first weeks of the plague. On 31 July 1720, after parlement suspended commerce between Marseille and other Provençal cities, the Hôtel de Ville expelled the Jews, non-naturalized foreigners, vagabonds, mendicants, and individuals of “disreputable character” from Marseille, “on pain of death.” This order, however, was never followed up, since the parlement forbade travel.16 The “foreigners” were trapped in Marseille. Meanwhile, a royal arrêt in October freed the galley slaves, ordering them to dispose of the corpses in Marseille’s streets. This latter order suggests that non-Marseillais and non-French galley slaves had continued living in the city once ships were grounded. If they survived, the Crown guaranteed them freedom after the plague. The assumption is that the majority of them died, along with half of the population of Marseille.

While administrative policies from 1720 did not focus on targeting Jews and non-Christians, religious responders to plague—bishops, priests, and other ecclesiastics—also refrained from implicating non-Christians as vectors of disease or provokers of divine anger. Rather, as the following discussion demonstrates, they remained chiefly concerned with the state of Catholicism in Marseille, and sought, in different ways, to restore a religious order to the city consistent with their theological leanings.

CONCILIARISM AND JANSENISM IN FRANCE AND PROVENCE

Calls for participation in Church governance predated the 1720 plague by centuries. Medieval proponents of conciliarism introduced the idea that only a “general council” could effectively reform the Church.17 These argued that an ecclesiastical council wielded more legitimate authority than the papacy. In early modern France, the monarchy merged conciliar arguments with Gallicanism, a tradition that “upheld the temporal independence of the monarchy and the spiritual independence of the Gallican Church in their respective relations with the papacy.”18

While French monarchs used Gallicanism to augment their power by limiting papal authority in France, it proved to be a problematic strategy. The principle of royal temporal independence undercut papal sovereignty, but the “republican implications of conciliar Gallicanism” threatened all sovereign rulers. As Pope Innocent XI remarked, “if councils were superior to the popes whose power comes from God, then the Estates General would have leave to press the same claim against kings.”19 Favoring rule by many over rule by one, conciliar arguments could—and did—fuel the constitutional theory of “limited monar-
civic religiosity and religious citizenship

The French Crown therefore stepped up efforts against conciliarism, particularly after the Abbey of Port-Royal-des-Champs became a Jansenist stronghold in the 1630s.

Seventeenth-century Jansenists called for a particular kind of Gallicanism and Catholic reform that followed the teachings of Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), bishop of Ypres. Led by Antoine Arnauld, Antoine Le Maître de Sacy, and Blaise Pascal, among others, French Jansenists called for a return to Augustinian traditions. Jansenists maintained that Adam’s original sin had enslaved man in his passions; only God’s incomprehensible grace could guarantee salvation. Emphasizing predestination, Jansenists rejected secular and ecclesiastical hierarchies. Le Maître translated the Bible, Mass, and Divine Office into French to increase lay participation in doctrinal discussions. Pasquier Quesnel’s Réflexions morales sur le Nouveau Testament (1692) argued that man admitted sins to God alone, not to bishops, cardinals, and popes; the Church was “composed of the angels, the just, the predestined, not recognizing any leader than the invisible Head.”

Such denial of hierarchy and human will steered Jansenism close to Calvinist Protestantism, outlawed in France with the Edict of Fontainebleau. Anti-Jansenists claimed that such Protestant-like arguments “transformed Christ’s ‘Monarchical’ church into a ‘Republic’” and endangered spiritual and secular order. Intent on realizing “the political principle . . . cujus regio, ejus religio: no confessional pluralism in the same territory,” Louis XIV crusaded against Jansenist Port-Royal and Pierre de Bérulle’s Oratory, “a congregation of secular priests that was devoted to the restoration of the priests’ sacerdotal dignity against regulars.” He razed Port-Royal in 1711 and solicited the papacy’s help against heresy. The papacy issued its Apostolic Constitution Unigenitus in 1713.

Unigenitus denounced the Jansenists’ doctrine of efficacious grace and calls for an anti-hierarchical Church. It rejected the Jansenist emphasis on lay participation in doctrinal affairs: Jansenist teachings that “all sorts of persons, [ought] to study the Scriptures, to know its spirit, piety and mysteries” were pronounced heretical. Unigenitus condemned the claim that “to peacefully suffer excommunication and unjust anathema, rather than betray the truth, is to imitate St. Paul.” The episcopal establishment took aim at Jansenism’s most Calvinist-seeming teachings by denouncing ideas that valued the elect and predestined over the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Unigenitus, however, proved unsuccessful and divisive. Louis XIV ordered the parlement of Paris to register the bull as law. The archbishop of Paris, Cardinal de Noailles, in addition to several bishops and the faculty at the Sorbonne, however,
rejected it and demanded that Rome provide explications justifying the bull. Though the parlement of Paris succumbed to royal pressure and registered *Unigenitus* as law in 1714, “several individuals refused to adhere to its mandates. Insubordinate ecclesiastics were imprisoned; others were obliged to flee.” When the king died in 1715, the crisis over *Unigenitus* remained unresolved. Louis XIV’s successor, the Regent Philippe, duc d’Orléans, experimented with new strategies to contain religious turmoil, but as royal edicts and papal bulls continued to repress religious dissent, Jansenists in Provence began unleashing their most stringent attacks against papal tyranny and the Church hierarchy. Marseille became a hotbed of religious discussion in the years just before the plague.

Marseille’s Oratory College and Notre-Dame des Anges, “a Provençal Port-Royal,” educated and housed a large number of Jansenists. While only a handful of priests in southern France admitted to being appellants, so called because they appealed to a “future general council” of the Church to reject *Unigenitus*, Provençal Jansenists increasingly vocalized their contempt of the Church hierarchy. In the years between *Unigenitus* and the plague, Provençal Jansenists articulated three major points. They reiterated the ideals of Gallican liberty; they used political metaphors in religious discussions; and they mobilized the republican language of political will to describe and solve religious crises. These developments in Provence reflected a trend throughout France as Jansenists politicized their rhetoric against papal sovereignty. In Provence, these claims crescendoed after Pope Clement XI excommunicated appellants with the bull *Pastoralis Officii* in 1718. The ultramontane position of Marseille’s Bishop Belsunce helped kindle Jansenist reactions.

*La politique des Jesuites demasquée et l’appel justifié par les principes des libertés de l’Eglise gallicane*, an anonymous pamphlet dating from 1719, illustrates the politicization of Jansenist rhetoric in Provence. The author compared papal power to despotism and the sovereign Church to a republic. He began with the Gallican claim that Church sovereignty rested in its body of believers, not in the pope: “the throne of Peter is not the center where truth resides forever stable and immobile.” Rejecting papal infallibility, he argued that “truth lies in the Church; infallibility is only given to her.” Popes and bishops only held the right “of representation and juridical declaration” as administrators. “The faith,” he wrote, “forms the public law of the Holy Nation (*nation Sainte*); nothing is clearer in a nation than public law; nothing is less subject to change than these laws.” Just as a kingdom continued to exist despite the deaths of monarchs, so too the Church was immortal despite the death of mortal rulers.
The author specifically compared the Church to a republic: “It is principally to the Christian Church that one can apply what Aristotle once said, that a republic is a society of free people: *civitas est societas liberum.*” As first ruler of this republic, Christ established “a government of complete humility and charity; if he forbade the rebellion of inferiors and the tyranny of superiors, he wanted the pastors to command according to the laws. . . . and the faithful to obey the same laws. This is the essential liberty.” Guaranteed such freedoms, the lay population had the right to distinguish between just and unjust submission. The author accepted “legitimate submission of inferiors to a governor who bans independence and libertinage for just subordination.” Citizens had the right, however, to refuse unjust submission to any “despotic” or “tyrannical domination” that produced “slavery.”

The metaphor of citizens fighting against despotism appeared in countless Jansenist treatises in Provence. The *Lettre à Monseigneur l’évêque de Marseille,* for example, described illegitimate extensions of paper power in Rome. The anonymous author discussed how the pope had acquired “a taste for the idol of infallibility” and usurped “prerogatives that he never received from either Jesus Christ or the Church.” Papal rule turned into “a despotic government.” Worse, this despotism of “the court of Rome [was] contagious.” Meanwhile, the distinguished Jansenist Vivien de La Borde, author of *Principes sur l’essence, la distinction et les limites des deux puissances, spirituelle et temporelle* and *Du témoignage de la vérité* (1716), introduced a more radical argument. While he echoed Jansenist condemnations of papal despotism, he took the language of political will further to encourage a revolution in religious organization. He urged virtuous citizens in the Church community to testify to the truth and to topple the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

La Borde distinguished how pope and prince ruled over spiritual and temporal domains respectively, and that the extension of one authority into the other resulted in “confusion and disorder.” The spiritual community, or Church, he wrote, was a nation; as with “all nations of the world,” it had “its laws, its rights, its police, its government, its primary and secondary magistrates, etc.” Extending this analogy further, he likened ecclesiastical leaders to “France’s parlement of Paris.” These magistrates enjoyed infallibility only when it expressed the infallible “voice of the state”:

The holy order of Church magistrates is established as a public symbol, to turn away nonbelievers while the faithful citizens must find in their ministry the consolation, instruction, exhortation, and correction they need. Because all is divine
in the Holy Nation, the magistracy is divine and cannot die . . . It is through the
magistrates that the state speaks. The voice of the state is divine, and is conse-
quently infallible. The voice of its magistrates is therefore [infallible]. But is this so
in all circumstances? Does each magistrate enjoy the privilege of infallibility? In
sum, the magistracy of the Church is divinely infallible only in circumstances
where in all other nations the magistracy is humanly infallible.38

The pope and his ultramontane bishops, La Borde claimed, transgressed these
boundaries of magistracy and limited infallibility. *Unigenitus*, he continued, in-
troduced a new era of “oppression” as Church leaders “obscured” the “voice of
the state.”39

La Borde advocated a radical overhaul of the Church constitution. He sug-
gested that the monarchical Church be reconstituted as a republic, “where each
deputy, without prejudice of rank and preeminence that place one under the
other, raises his voice for all bodies of the nation.” In such a republic, La Borde
imagined witnesses replacing judges and magistrates. The greatest authority, La
Borde argued, resided not in “the authority of judgment,” but in the “authority
of testimony.” Elect citizens, distinguished by their rejection of amour propre,
“concupiscence” “interest, passions and all the intrigues that oblige the mouth
to contradict the heart” would rescue truth and liberate the Church.40

La Borde conceded, however, that such citizens were hard to come by. During
unstable “times of violence,” such as his own, witnesses became “suspect,” tes-
timony was “obscured, and contempt progressively spread [as] Satan transformat[ed]
into the Angel of Light.”41 La Borde’s Church was a republic in crisis. After
overthrowing despotic magistrates, a handful of virtuous citizens faced the
challenge of restoring “truth,” by provisionally ruling “in the name of the great
number.” Unless mankind was “restored to the state of innocence,” the com-

La Borde’s worldview was a pessimistic one; republics hung precariously be-
tween corruption and extinction. His dark musings seemed to be transformed
into reality when, a few years after he described this religious crisis, plague
broke out in 1720.42

**Orthodoxy against Jansenism in Provence, 1703–1719**

While Jansenists called for a reform of the Church from below, Orthodox Catho-
lies advocated reform from above. Both Jansenists and their opponents insisted
on the need to restore virtue to the religious community. Jansenists saw virtue
as a prerequisite for legitimate representation and participation in doctrinal decisions. The virtuous elect would overthrow despotism and restore the “voice of the church-state.” In contrast, the establishment saw virtue as an end rather than as a means; restoring virtue involved crushing heresy and the sexual and commercial depravity that threatened the Church from below.

Papal supporters stepped up their condemnation of Jansenism upon the assumption of power by the Regent, Philippe, duc d’Orléans, who they believed had instituted a dangerous policy that empowered Jansenists. While Louis XIV had attempted to root out heresy, the Regent ordered “complete silence” on doctrinal disputes. This strategy, “despite its tendency to favor nobody, was favorable to the Jansenists, who were left in their desired positions.” Furthermore, because the Regent owed his position to the parlement of Paris, he had restored the noble magistrates’ privilege of remonstration. Parlements began exercising their authority by entertaining “appeals by priests interdicted for opposing Unigenitus.” Parlements thus became shelters for the religiously dissident.

Led by the pope, the orthodox attacked Jansenism by mobilizing the metaphor of contagion. Unigenitus depicted Jansenism as plague. “The contagion of its pernicious maxims has passed along . . . from nation to nation, kingdom to kingdom,” it asserted. “We recognize that the dangerous progress it has made, which increases daily, comes principally from the venom of this book [Quesnel's Testament], which is concealed, like an abscess, whose corruption is not visible until one makes . . . incisions.” Provençal archbishops and bishops stood behind the pope. In Marseille, Bishop Henri de Belsunce began campaigning against heresy upon his arrival in the city in 1709. He was joined by Joseph-Ignace de Foresta, bishop of Apt, one of the first in France to openly protest Quesnel's Testament (15 October 1703), Jacques de Forbin de Janson, archbishop of Arles, and Monsieur de La Tour du Pin-Montauban, bishop of Toulon.

Shortly after Unigenitus, Belsunce described to a colleague how he crusaded against Jansenism: “I burned, on the Eve of Saint John, more than a thousand Quesnels, and I shall have the pleasure of burning another two thousand tomorrow on the Eve of Saint Peter’s!” In addition to book-burning, Belsunce threatened appellants with excommunication. Meanwhile, Bishop de Foresta wrote of how the duc d’Orléans showed an “excess of clemency” to heretics. He likened the Sorbonne and the parlements to the Pharisees: “A spirit of vertigo and error filled the majority of the Jews: the priests, the doctors and the interpreters of the law, by their enlightenment and their piety, concealed their general corruption.”

The parlement de Provence in Aix responded to Belsunce and Foresta by citing the Regent’s desire to hush religious chatter. Insisting that Belsunce
encouraged religious disorder, it issued two *arrêts* (7 December 1718 and 4 January 1719) against him. In addition to forbidding Belsunce and his subordinates from harassing the Oratory, the parlement suspended the bishop’s revenues for five installments.”

Belsunce appealed to the Regent to annul the parlement’s orders, claiming that Marseille’s Fathers of the Oratory refused to “submit to the Church or the bishop” and spread Lutheran doctrines. Belsunce reminded the Regent that no secular entity enjoyed authority over doctrine; neither “the king nor his parlements had the ability to decide whether *Unigenitus* would become the judgment of the Church, because this question directly concerned faith.” He furnished royal ordinances dating back two centuries that conceded authority regarding matters of faith to the ecclesiastical establishment. This authority, he described, was jeopardized by secular bodies that elected themselves experts in doctrinal affairs; “The Sorbonne and parlements have become the judges of doctrine, and voilà, schism and Presbyterianism is established.” This spirit of revolt, he claimed, was nothing short of treason.

On 15 June 1719, the Regent again ordered “absolute silence” on religious matters. Belsunce solicited papal aid. Proclaiming that the time for “patience, silence, and slowness . . . has passed,” Clement XI thereupon issued his bull *Pastoralis Officii*, excommunicating appellants. The Aixois magistrates sided with the appellants. In the midst of this religious uproar, the plague appeared in Marseille.

**BELSUNCE AND THE COMMERCIAL CITY:** Battling Heretics and Libertines

The plague of 1720 not only gave bishops in the Provençal dioceses an opportunity to sharpen their attacks on Jansenists, it provided Belsunce with a platform to condemn sexual depravity and luxury, which he saw as particularly rife in his urban diocese in Marseille, a bustling commercial metropolis of 100,000.

The *Statuts synodaux du diocese de Marseille* he published in 1712 reveal Belsunce’s anxiety about spiritual fragility in Marseille prior to the plague. The bishop intended the *Statuts* to help ecclesiastics in the diocese of Marseille “maintain a holy life.” Bombarded with the luxuries and “vanities of the century,” they faced a serious challenge, he stressed. Belsunce directed his brothers in Christ to avert their eyes from the temptations that flooded Marseille. He ordered churches to be washed at least once a year, swept every week, and purified of “anything indecent.” He provided his ecclesiastics with a list of places and sights to avoid in Marseille. In addition to forbidding smoking, opera, billiards,
palm readings, card games, and bowling, he particularly prohibited activities associated with sexuality. “The frequentation of cabarets being an infallible mark of the derangement of mores . . . we forbid all ecclesiastics, clergymen, religious, and hermits of our diocese, and all secular priests and regulars, under pain of suspension for a month . . . to eat and drink in the cabarets or other places where one can buy alcohol in quantity.” He forbade male religious from employing “women under the age of fifty years, or whose reputation has been ambiguous at a less advanced age.” “Mothers, sisters, aunts, or nieces” of male ecclesiastics were prohibited from visiting religious houses.59

Belsunce equated women with sexuality. He described women in the streets dressed “in simple cornets with their hair down, breasts exposed.”60 He recounted to Pope Clement XI how ecclesiastics at the famous abbey of Saint Victor opened their doors “to women curiously attired; they invite them in . . . introduce them into their private rooms and offer them things to eat.” Religious celebrations, he continued, were not immune to female sexual depravity. In addition to Ascension, Pentecost, and the Nativity, the Marseillais Catholic calendar boasted no fewer than twenty-five feasts a year. On such occasions, he wrote, “the sanctity of our temples is profaned in the worst manner with immodesties and scandalous irreverence we can no longer tolerate in this city and diocese.”61 Belsunce’s dread of female sexuality led him to impose physical barriers against women in religious spaces: “we order that confessional stalls have small rails; they are to take place in the open, and never in obscure locations; we forbid confessors to take the confessions of girls and women in their rooms, [or] in sacristies and closed areas, under pain of suspension ipso facto.”62

Belsunce’s campaign against sexuality to perfect holiness among his ecclesiastics can be attributed to his Jesuit education and his baroque-inspired episcopacy. The second son of aristocratic Protestant parents who made pragmatic concessions by educating him at the Jesuit Louis-le-Grand lycée in Paris, Belsunce compensated for his Huguenot origins by fervently embracing the Catholic religion. He continued his studies at the Collège de Clermont in Paris and entered the Society of Jesus. Battling multiple illnesses, he left the Society in 1699 and became vicar-general of Agen, where he completed a biography of his saintly aunt, Suzanne de Foix.63 He arrived in Marseille in 1709.

The Jesuit program stressed “external observances, collective rituals, and some of what Protestants would consider magical superstition,” Lynn Martin writes. Adoration of saints, veneration of images, festive processions, and extravagant sermonizing were the chief elements of Jesuit religiosity. Belsunce’s ministry followed this model of baroque piety; he organized pastoral visits to
religious orders, restructured Marseille’s lay confraternities to fall directly under his supervision, and promoted a collective, “publicly demonstrative” Catholicism characterized by externally manifest devotion. He emphasized the power of images to strengthen or disrupt religious devotion; holy images and holy sites strengthened devotion, while corrupt images led the soul astray. What goes on “in the interior, man can ordinarily judge by what appears in the eyes,” he warned. The image of the sexual woman became, for him, the symbol of impiety.

Belsunce regularly used the symbol of the depraved woman in his attacks on immorality during the plague. He subsumed the evils of religious heresy and commercial luxury in the figurative symbol of the debauched female. He depicted commercial Marseille as a prostitute, describing in his most famous mandate delivered during the plague: “Marseille . . . which you delighted to show, to excite the admiration of strangers; her beauty . . . her magnificence . . . [and] commerce that extended from one end of the world to another . . . she is destitute.” “This city,” he continued, “whose crowded streets we could scarcely pass through—with their affluence, their industry and their commerce, is now delivered up to solitude, to silence, to indigence, to desolation to death!” The commercial city had become a nesting ground for vice: “luxury reigned without moderation in all estates . . . There was fraud in commerce, wrangling in the bars, and blasphemy in the sanctuary.” God, therefore, responded with plague: “It is by the excess of our crimes that we merit this severe judgment. Impiety, irreligion, bad faith, usury, impurity, and luxury were at the height among you!”

Though he criticized Marseille for its sins, Belsunce claimed that God had specially designated the city to carry out his divine mission. Marseille, in other words, was destined for an exceptional role in Church history. If God had targeted the city for destruction because of its bad example, the plague offered Marseille an opportunity to emerge as the best example of spiritual renewal. Like Jerusalem, or Savonarola’s Florence, Marseille was divinely selected for Christian regeneration; “After the siege of Jerusalem,” Belsunce insisted, “I think what which we experience is the most dreadful there ever was.” According to the bishop, the Great Plague of Marseille was a historical watershed in ecclesiastical history. The epidemic would usher in a new age for Catholicism. The city hung in the balance between “total ruin” and “deliverance.”

While distinct from the secular responses to plague generated by Commandant Langeron and Marseille’s échevins, the religious reaction to plague that Belsunce developed reinforced some similar concepts. Implicating women, sexuality, and commercial luxury, he focused on the same moral and social corrupters
that the secular elites targeted. Additionally, secular and religious elites alike mobilized various metaphors of crisis—of a community strung between life and death, salvation and damnation, virtue and corruption. Plague-stricken Marseille, in other words, could be symbolized either as a republic in crisis or as a religious community in crisis, and arguments for the recovery of political and religious virtue could spill over and meet.

**CIVIC RELIGIOSITY: COMMERCE, HERESY, AND THE SACRÉ-CŒUR**

During the plague, Belsunce fashioned a new civic religiosity for his diocese by consecrating the city to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Motivated by his struggle against heresy, sexuality, and commercial luxury, the Festival of the Sacred Heart redefined Marseille as a God-chosen community, distinct from the rest of France. What emerged in the festival was a contradiction; a bishop who denounced commercial luxury used the city’s commercial public spaces as a unifying source to deepen the diocese’s sense of cohesion, to strengthen spiritual life among the lay population, and to marginalize religious outsiders.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart predated Belsunce’s career as bishop. ECClesiastical authorities during the Counter-Reformation stressed Christ’s compassion, charity, and love in their reaction against Calvinism. In this context, the Sacred Heart emerged as a powerful icon following the founding of the Visitationalist order (1610) by Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales. This order emphasized an intimate spirituality based on “an inspired union with the heart of Jesus.” In the late seventeenth century, Marguerite-Marie Alacoque, a Visitationalist nun at the convent at Paray-le-Monial, began reporting visions, ecstatic reveries, and divine voices. From 1680 on, she described how Jesus had commanded her to promote devotion to the Sacred Heart. Insisting that the Sacred Heart “demanded recognition from the Sun King,” she claimed that it would strengthen Louis XIV against heretics and political dissidents. It remains unknown whether the king learned of these demands; in any case, he never acted on them. Nonetheless, Alacoque received support from a powerful ally: the Jesuits. In Aix-en-Provence and Marseille, Jesuits energized devotion to the Sacred Heart. Aix celebrated a Sacred Heart festival in 1693, and devotion to the Sacred Heart appeared in Marseille among Visitationalist convents in 1695.

The Visitationalist Anne-Magdelaine Rémuza (b. 1696) and Belsunce coordinated efforts in the early eighteenth century to establish Marseille as the center of the cult. When eight years old, Rémuza had “asked her parents for permission
to renounce the world and consecrate herself to God in the Monastery of Saint Claire.”74 At sixteen, she took her Visitationalist vows. Soon after, she reported reveries like those of Marguerite-Marie Alacoque. Jesus, she claimed, removed her heart from her body in exchange for his.75 She sported a blemish that remained on her chest until her death.76 Faith for Rémuzat consisted of internal devotion and external manifestation. Outward bodily signs of faith like the stigmata and bloody wounds indicated devotion within. This type of faith was consistent with Belsunce’s appetite for spectacular public ceremonies and outward signs of devotional purity. Faith, for Rémuzat and Belsunce alike, involved visual presentation. The Cult and Festival of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Marseille was born out of their predilection for an image-driven faith.

Belsunce, who had encountered devotion to the Sacred Heart at Louis-le-Grand, supported Rémuzat and authorized her to do “whatever was consistent with the wishes of the Heart of Jesus.” In 1718, Rémuzet and Belsunce won papal support to establish the Association de l'Adoration perpétuelle du Sacré-Cœur de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ (Association of the Sacred Heart). As head of this association, Rémuzat called on nuns to give “their hearts to Jesus Christ, to make themselves victims who can repair by their adoration and by their homage the indignities that He received in the adorable Eucharist.” Consecrating themselves “wives of Jesus Christ” these Visitationalists stressed love, adoration, and devotion in their commitment to the Sacred Heart.77

During the plague, in October 1720, Rémuzat told Belsunce of a message she had received from the Sacred Heart. God, she said, “wants to purge the Church of Marseille of its errors. . . . He demands a solemn festival on the day that he himself has chosen, the day following that of the Holy Sacrament, to honor his Sacred Heart.”78 Belsunce responded with his Mandate of 22 October 1720, consecrating Marseille to the Sacred Heart and establishing the festival in the city’s ecclesiastical calendar. He announced that the consecration, a demonstration of the city’s collective contrition, would help end the epidemic:

To appease the anger of God; to end the formidable scourge that desolates the flock that we hold dear; to honor Christ in the Holy Sacrament; to repair the outrages committed by vile and sacrilegious communions [i.e., by the Jansenist appellants], and the irreverence that He suffers in His mysterious love for man; to make him love all the faithful committed to our bosom; finally in reparation for all the crimes that have attracted the vengeance of Heaven; we have established in the diocese the Festival of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which will be celebrated every year, on the Friday immediately following the octave of the Most Holy Sacrament.79
The inaugural Sacred Heart festival was a communal event designed to cleanse Marseille of heresy, immorality, and commercial decadence. The festival combined spiritual sentimentality with visual theatrics that only a metropolitan city could sustain. The accounts of the event written by Belsunce and the royal prosecutor, Pichatty de Croissante, captured the dramatic appeal to God:

The first of November, the festival of All Saints (1720). Monsieur the Bishop left his palace in procession . . . and wanting to appear as a scapegoat charged with the sins of his people, as if he were the destined victim of their expiation, he marched barefoot with a rope around his neck, the Cross in his arms, to the end of the Cours on the side of the Gate of Aix where he celebrated a public Mass at an altar that he had dressed, and after a beautiful exhortation that he made to the public, he led them to penitence to quell God’s anger and to obtain the deliverance from this cruel plague. He consecrated the city to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, for whose honor [the Devotion] was already established, a festival holiday for all time, by his last mandate . . . ; the tears that fell from his eyes during this holy ceremony and the extremity of his words excited repentance in every heart, even those of the least sensitive; each struck with profound pain requested the Mercy of the Lord.

The procession and consecration took place in the new Marseille of the 1666 agrandissement, not in the narrow streets of the Vieille Ville. It began at the Bishop’s Palace and stretched through the city. At “eight in the morning, [Belsunce] ordered rung all the city bells and dressed an altar at the summit of the Cours, which is one of the most remarkable places in this city.” Cannon from royal galleys blasted, and dramatic effect was added by “the impetuous wind that we call the mistral.” The procession continued for three hours, “the most magnificent there ever was, to the infinite noise of the cannon of the citadels, the galleys, and vessels that were in the port that lasted continuously for over a half-hour.” The procession wound through the center of the port, where the bishop gave the benediction and celebrated Mass.

Although he condemned the city for its luxury, Belsunce embraced the symbols of Marseille’s commercial identity and French naval supremacy—the Cours, the port, and the royal galleys—to take back the city from evil. Marseille was no mere backdrop for his supernatural drama; it participated as the protagonist. The city’s public spaces were crucial to the inhabitants’ reconciliation with the divine. “[S]taged in the cours, a center of the city’s former splendor . . . the festival for its participants was probably more intense due to the participants’ awareness that the appeal to the Beyond was coming out of the city’s monument to itself,” Daniel Gordon writes. The boulevards, created as the main arteries for
Belsunce at the foot of the Cours of Marseille. Courtesy Archives municipales de la ville de Marseille, 11Fi32.
commerce, became a means to reconnect with God. Marseille’s act of contrition simultaneously served as the city’s homage to itself.

By reasserting the entrenched hierarchies of the Catholic community that they opposed, the festival processions to the Sacred Heart in November 1720 and on 20 June 1721 also helped marginalize the Jansenists. Members of Marseille’s religious confraternities, distinguished by their colors and distinctive costumes, processed behind the religious and secular elite through the city, visually demonstrating the ecclesiastical chain of being. Moreover, the sentimentality and the visual theatrics of the festival’s public appeal to the divine flew in the face of Jansenist theology. The Jansenists “reproached . . . the partisans of the Sacred Heart for having introduced sentiment in prayer.” Perceiving sentiment as synonymous with human pleasure and sin, Jansenists opted for a theology void of love, charity, emotion, and ostentatious displays of devotion.82 If the Sacred Heart was a cult of the city, theirs was a theology of the remote and private. Heretics and Protestants who refused participation in such festivities could be culturally marginalized. The bishop’s consecration of Marseille to the Sacred Heart, therefore, reserved the city for its orthodox establishment. Marseille the commercial city became Marseille the city of the Sacred Heart.

THE JANSENIST REBUTTAL: APPEALING TO THE PUBLIC TRIBUNAL

The Festival of the Sacred Heart did not, however, signal an end to conflicts between Marseille’s ecclesiastical establishment and the Jansenist appellants. The religious struggle, now linked to issues of civic engagement, escalated over arguments regarding service to the sick and dying. Both parties stressed the importance of charitable works and each accused the other of failing in its civic duties. Whereas Belsunce initially blamed the appellants for inviting plague to Marseille, the latter months of the epidemic saw him accusing them of betraying the community in a time of need. Religious traitors proved to be civic traitors as well.

Service was essential to Belsunce’s theology; Jesuit humanism, as Dale van Kley has remarked, was more civic than contemplative.83 Embracing the principles of charity outlined in hagiographic texts, Belsunce lauded the examples of Charles Borromeo and François de Sales, who stressed that “charity was the ‘proper virtue’ of bishops, understood both in the manner of compassionate love for God and neighbor and in the sense of a bishop’s organized aid to the needy.”84 Belsunce insisted that caring for the sick, distributing Sacraments, and organizing aid were critical acts of civic service during medical crisis. He interpreted
the alleged invisibility of the Jansenists in the streets as a sign of their lack of civic responsibility.

Belsunce and his subordinates made themselves visible through Marseille, allying themselves with the pères de la patrie: “the illustrious commandant,” “zealous échevins,” and all “who a thousand times courageously exposed their lives for the public good.” A witness described the bishop’s commitment: “The prelate has acquired an immortal glory, before God and man, he goes everyday through the streets discovering where the sick lie . . . he visits their bedsides, consoles them, encourages them, confesses them, and makes them well, both spiritually and secularly.” “His acts of piety are most heroic . . . This holy prelate remains with an unshakable firmness resolved to give his life for the health of his sheep,” Pichatty de Croissante echoed. “His charity is active,” he continued, “he is in the streets in all the quarters of the city to visit all the sick in the most high and most somber apartments of the houses; in the streets through the cadavers, at the public places, at the Port, the Cours.” Again, as in his account of the festival, the city and its monuments figured prominently in Croissante’s narrative of religious civic spirit. He also praised Belsunce’s subordinates who had died serving the sick.

Belsunce found such civic service lacking in his appellant adversaries. “Our appellants and Jansenists have looked out for their own safety,” he charged. “Those who are of the morale sévère [Jansenists] misjudge their duties and devoted themselves to saving their own lives, and those who are called the morale relâchée [the orthodox] sacrifice their lives . . . to aid their brothers.” Belsunce employed informants to declare the absence of Jansenist civic activity. “Authentic witnesses to the truth” furnished certificates containing versions of the affirmation that “we attest that since the beginning of the plague in Marseille, we have never found in the streets of this city one Father of the Oratory; that we do not know if there has been any plague-stricken house that has received succor or aid from them.” Belsunce accumulated over forty testimonies from Capuchins, Trinitarians, Carmelites, Jesuits, Observationalists, confessors, canons, vicars, and superiors of religious houses, who testified that Jansenists preferred to save themselves rather than help their neighbors in need.

Provençal Jansenists refuted the bishop’s charges. Some insisted that it was the bishop who had failed in his duties: “He was shut in his palace with his Jesuit.” They defended the Oratorians’ civic activity with letters of support from Dieude that described how the Oratory was the first religious house to fall victim to the plague.

Ultimately, Provençal Jansenists developed a new strategy to challenge the ecclesiastical authorities. While the bishop made a public appeal to God in the Festival
of the Sacred Heart, the appellants appealed to another abstract power, the “pub-
lic” to support their arguments against the bishop. Historians have noted how an
appeal to such an abstract authority emerged in religious and political discussions
between 1750 and the start of the French Revolution. The “public” was not, how-
ever, a novel invention of the latter half of the eighteenth century. Jansenists mo-
ibilized this alternative authority in their criticisms of papal and royal power at the
dawn of the century. Far from restricted to the religious world, the “public” was
also imagined as a universal and impartial judge in literary movements as early as
the end of the seventeenth century.94 The same year the plague broke in Marseille,
the baron de Montesquieu invoked the “public” in his famous anonymously pub-
lished Lettres persanes. “I have offered these letters to try the taste of the public,” he
wrote in the book’s opening pages; the “public” would decide whether it was good
or bad. Such an abstract authority could, and would, compete with formal institu-
tions of power for the remainder of the century.

In his anonymous Justification des PP. de l’Oratoire de Marseille, contre les ac-
cusations de l’évêque de cette ville (June 1721), a Jansenist called on this “public
tribunal” to judge the validity of Bishop Belsunce’s accusations against the Or-
atory. “So that the entire world informed of the truth . . . can judge if the Fathers
of the Oratory are truly guilty, . . . it is for the public that I write, [the public] that
I recognize as the judge.”95 He entrusted this public “to prove the innocence of
the Fathers of the Oratory of Marseille . . . for the whole kingdom.”

The Justification opens with the question: “Why the public for a judge?”96
There were, after all, established tribunals capable of judging accused parties.
The “public tribunal,” the author insisted, surpassed all others:

The public is the sole judge where jurisdiction is not confined to the limits of a
province or a state: it is the only judge that can draw the knowledge of causes that
other tribunals cannot or do not want to know. It is the only judge that, not being
constrained by judicial forms that do not permit accusations or defenses outside
what human laws have determined, considers in the affairs brought to its tribunal
only the truth of the facts, the soundness of proofs, and the force of demonstra-
tions: it is the only judge that, having a true interest in knowing the character of
those that compose the body of civil society, always and forever listens with plea-
sure to the denunciation of the guilty and the justification of the innocent.97

The “public tribunal,” the author concluded, was “a natural judge.” It was the
only authority that enjoyed total impartiality and rationality. “The public tribu-
nal, only being interested in knowing the truth, always listens with pleasure to
accusations and to defenses, without examining the persons who speak, but
rather solely the accuracy of facts.”98 That made this abstract body superior to existing forms of magistracy.

The author then described the makeup of this “public tribunal.” Following Gallican principles, he claimed that it would be comprised of citizens. “It is the duty of a good citizen,” he insisted, “to defend a congregation distinguished by its piety, by its erudition, by its inviolable attachment to the rights of our kings, to the liberties of the Church, and to the maxims of the kingdom that for a hundred years have not ceased . . . to equally instruct both people and scholars.”99

Mobilizing concepts of liberty, rationality, and equality against Belsunce, whom he characterized as self-interested, irrational, and arbitrary, the author depicted the bishop’s authority as illegitimate, diametrically opposed to the legitimacy embodied in the “public.” He dismantled each of Belsunce’s allegations against the Oratory by discrediting him and his witnesses. Belsunce “was a priest filled with ultramontane principles” who rejected the “liberties” of the Gallican church. This “fanatic” had “seduced” the public and defended himself with counterfeit evidence.100 Other Jansenists echoed the author’s skepticism. Vivien de La Borde asked: “The letters of Belsunce, are they the work of reason? Haven’t such proceedings been inspired by sentiments, tricks, inductions . . . mad falsities?” The bishop, these Jansenists argued, depended on testimonies from subordinates who supported him to secure their own positions within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Because the Jesuits, Capuchins, Recolets, Trinitarians, Observationists, Dominicans, Augustinians, Antonians, Carmelites, and Minimites who testified against the Oratory were under the bishop’s aegis, the Jansenists disqualified their testimonies: “Interested in the affair, declared enemies of the Oratory,” they were “very suspect.”101

The author contrasted the Oratory’s piety, humility, and honesty with an orthodox establishment characterized by irrationality and self-interest. While the bishop made a show of his civic activity, the Fathers of the Oratory served in silence and refused to flaunt their civic service. Despite having been disgraced by the bishop, they opened their home and visited the sick. The Superior of the Oratory, Père Gautier, and his priests “assembled at the Hôtel de Ville to offer the échevins their persons, their goods, and their lives.”102 Gautier even concocted and distributed his own preservatives to the municipal leaders. Finally, the authors argued, the testimony of genuine witnesses secured the Oratory’s innocence. Echevins Dieude and Audimar, joined by Commissaire Bonnefoy and Doctor Bouthillier from Montpellier, lauded the fathers for their service, saying that “they lacked neither zeal nor charity.”103 Given the choice between legitimate
testimony and self-interested deceit, the public tribunal’s decision, these authors claimed, would prove an easy one.

God was not happy with Marseille. On this, Jansenists and orthodox Catholics could agree as they competed to reconcile the ecclesiastical community with God. Despite their doctrinal differences, they were in common preoccupied with the problem of restoring virtue to a religious world in crisis. For both Jansenists and orthodox Catholics, appearances deceived. Vivien de La Borde suspected all potential witnesses to the truth in a universe where “Satan transformed into an angel of light.” Henri de Belsunce scoured his churches, convinced that images of immodesty penetrated the holiest walls.

Both Jansenists and orthodox Catholics commonly assumed that the restoration of physical health and religious order hinged on the question of civic participation. While each sought to validate a different kind of religious order, one based on ecclesiastical hierarchy, the other based on Gallican liberty, they both strengthened republican traditions of civic engagement. Belsunce’s alliance with Commandant Langeron, his emphasis on civic service, his religious condemnation of commerce, and his Manichean rhetoric of damnation versus deliverance intersected with Langeron’s secular arguments for civic activism and moral severity to restore Massilia as a virtuous republic. Meanwhile, the Jansenists’ comparisons of the Church to a republic animated the inclusive ideal of citizenship.

But it was the Jansenist author of the Justification who provided the most radical approach in overcoming spiritual corruption. Calling for a “public tribunal,” he invited any truth-seeking individual, theoretically of any provenance or background, to participate as a “citizen” in open, rational public discourse. While Langeron’s emergency courts wielded sovereign power, this writer appealed to an authority that would ultimately surpass that of the traditional royal and municipal courts. Abstract and universal, this source of legitimate judgment would, over the course of the Enlightenment, develop into a formidable authority residing in a political space separated from traditional entities of power: pope, Crown, parlements, and other official bodies. Such a “public tribunal” would ultimately become the chief sovereign authority to whom both subjects and the Crown would appeal, not only in religious discussions, but in political debates on the very nature of legitimate governance. In its infancy, this abstract tribunal found application in the limited space of religious confrontations in plague-stricken Marseille. It would develop into one of the central figures of revolutionary thought by the end of the century.