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f one extends Freud’s ideas beyond the point where he himself drew the line, it may be said that to indulge in the study of history means to enter into a rivalry with past generations that have drawn the veil of secrecy over so many happenings that, nonetheless, have managed to exert their influence upon our minds.¹

One of the clearest indicators of the expanding influence of the female element within Roman Catholic worship during the nineteenth century and the preconciliar twentieth century is the growing significance of the devotion offered to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The French historian Etienne Fouilloux points out that, as of circa 1850, there appear in the manifestations of piety clear Christocentric tendencies wherein, initially, the focus rests primarily either on the child Jesus or on Jesus Crucified, and, as of the twentieth century, likewise on the Sacred Heart, Christ the King, and the Consecrated Host. But surpassing all is the devotion offered to the Holy Mary that reached its pinnacle sometime during the first half of the twentieth century. One can only observe, says Fouilloux, that women, denied the priesthood, may find una compensazione in the figure of Mary, to whom are being assigned ever more attributes that, in the past, were the privileges of her son.² This increasing importance of Mary is evident not only in the pronouncements of the doctrinal authority, starting with the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and that of the Assumption one century

¹ Vandermeersch and Westerink, Godsdienspsychologie, 195.
² “Non si puo in effetti que sottolineare la convergenza tra pressione mariana e femminilizzazione del catolicesimo, di cui la prima parte del XX secolo segne egualmente l’apogeo; escluse dal sacerdotio [...] molte donne trovano una compensazione di qualche valore nella progressive attribuzione a Maria di tutti i poteri di suo figlio”; Fouilloux, “Le due vie”, 311. That the worship of the Blessed Mary may be seen as the index of the feminization within the Catholic Church was already pointed out in 1950 by Miegge, La Vergine Maria.
later, from the accredited epiphanies, the popular pilgrimage places, the countless congregations and devout associations that have made her name part of their title, but also from the numerous publications about, and representations of, the mother of Jesus. When Savart discusses the devotional literature in France, he starts out with works dedicated to Mary: “if, paradoxically, we begin with Marian devotion, and not with those addressing themselves to Christ, the former is by far the premier dévotion particulière by the number of works whose publication it has involved”. When he analyses a representative sampling of such publications, he can only draw the conclusion that “we almost see a transfer of divinity”. Likewise, the Belgian historian Jean Pirotte notes that amongst the 1131 devotional prints he analysed, some twenty-five percent were dedicated to Mary, one-third to Christ, and a mere half percent to God. Mother and Son clearly leave the Father and the Holy Spirit far behind ... or should we, like Fouilloux, speak of Mary as “una specie di quarta persona della Trinità” - that is, a kind of fourth presence within the Trinity?

Whoever can find an explanation for this steady advance of Mary worship will likewise immediately come upon some of the causes of the feminization of the Catholic Church. Even if one confines oneself to the literature that deals with the period following the Council of Trent, a brief exploration will already spawn a host of likely motivations: Mary becomes one of the driving forces of the Counter-Reformation and is strongly propagated by the Jesuits in their battle against Protestantism and, later on, Jansenism; Mary has long been the object of popular religious worship and the church hierarchy in the nineteenth century will therefore not hesitate to take advantage of her popularity to the benefit of ultramontanism; epiphanies and miracles constitute “proof” that rationalism and science are not the end of all things and that the supernatural does, in fact, exist; the Catholic Church will take advantage of this devotion to Mary in order to reinforce and enhance its influence and power, sometimes aided in this by governments that consider her an instrument for social control and the impetus towards the forming of a national identity; the figure of Mary is represented in a certain manner and propagated as the paradigm of the ideal female in order to support the patriarchal dominance... all plausible and rationally argued incidences that, nonetheless, tend to ignore one important fact. The remarkable aspect of this phenomenon, which as of the years 1930 will also - once again - run

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1 De Flores, “Marie (sainte vierge)”.
2 Savart, Les catholiques, 592, 609.
3 Pirotte, “Le paradis”, 83: during the period 1926-1950, it is Mary who is most frequently depicted (28 per cent), more than Jesus (26.7 per cent).
4 Fouilloux, “Le due vie”, 305.
5 A few titles amongst the many: Châtellier, La religion; Id., L’Europe; Warner, Alone; Perry and Echeverria, Under the Heal; Carroll, “Previous Explanations”; Bethouart and Lottin, La dévotion (especially the contribution by Lottin, Hilaire, Boniface and Langlois); Boss, Empress, 156-186; Corrado Pope, “Immaculate and Powerful”.

into reactionaries within the Church,⁸ is that it was made possible by the clergy, and, thus, by males.⁹ Popes, cardinals, monks, friars, pastors and the like are, indeed, the active propagandists of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and favour assigning ever more quasi-divine attributes to the ‘Queen of Heaven’. How was this possible? Some authors believe that it also has to do with the fact that during that period the Catholic Church was led primarily by Italians and the devotion to Mary was propagated by priests and clerics, and, thus, by celibates. The latter point is being adduced to suggest that, aside from the rational argumentation, unconscious stimuli may also have been at work. In what follows, we examine to what extent this contention is being supported by historical and psychological research.

**ULTRAMONTANIZATION = ITALIANIZATION = FEMINIZATION?**

That something was happening to the devotions during the second half of the nineteenth century did not escape the notice of the well-informed church observers. “It seems to me that true and solid piety is being harmed by all the new romantically named devotions springing up on Belgian and French soil, and which instead of the serious and profound devotion of our ancestors, are elevating a certain vague, hazy, sentimental, effeminate religiosity…” (our italics) writes Jean Kockerols, the leader of the Belgian Redemptorists, in 1869 to the nuntius. “Sometimes statues of the Blessed Virgin or the saints, placed over the tabernacle, are more splendidly lit than the Blessed Sacrament”, affirms a second witness. “The worship of the Blessed Sacrament is neglected in many places [...] Too much sentimentality, too much devotional books,

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⁸ Fouilloux, “Le due vie”, 331-333 reports that as of the 1930s, Northwestern European Catholic middle classes spoke out against “un soprannaturale troppo addizionato d’acqua di rose” and pleas were made for a “minimalismo mariano” (see also the contribution by Monteiro), “Si va profilando un “cristianesimo d’urto”, adulto e virile (our italics) che numerosi intellettuali e militanti auspicano nelle chiese del nord-ovest d’Europa”. Savart, *Les catholiques*, 610-611 reports a few lay voices during the nineteenth century. “Some” in the words of one of these authors, “see in the Mary devotion ‘a prejudicial abuse of the honour of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God, and, which they don’t always add, to the dignity of man’”.

⁹ “Car ces cultes sont produits, définis et diffusés par des clercs, seuls détenteurs de la parole et de la plume au sein de l’Eglise. Sous l’influence des femmes? Cela reste à démontrer. A destination des femmes? C’est difficilement contestable [...] D’où l’intérêt d’étudier la littérature la [=la dévotion à Marie] véhiculant [...] en sachant qu’elle renvoie autant aux idées reçues du clergé qu’aux mentalités de celles à qui elle s’adresse”. Fouilloux, “Femmes”; Mc Sweeney, “Catholic Piety”, 208: “The devotional impetus and, in particular, the Marian revival, came not from masses but from the Church authorities under the personal guidance of Pope Pius IX”; Corrado Pope, “Immaculate and Powerful”, 182-183: “Pius [IX] and his immediate successors advocated new or renewed devotions that emphasized the affective rather than the rational or ethical aspects of faith.”
religious imagery.” As regards the latter, Cartuyvels’ opinion is supported by Jean Pirotte’s studies of the devotional prints in the Walloon province of Namur that in the nineteenth century saw wholesale distribution by, among others, the clergy. In spite of attempts to elevate the prints onto a higher plane until sometime well into the twentieth century, l’académisme dévot will maintain their preponderance. Yet, an indignant contemporary, Léon Gautier, “catholique convaincu et agissant”, had already written in 1875, “A characteristic common to all these miserable images is sickly sentimentality [...] Might these printmakers [imagiers] by chance be female [imagières]? Certainly, everywhere one senses the invisible presence of women [...] These people are afraid of men, and have chosen not to paint them any more [...] And yet, what we lack most is virility. Truthfully, we have no more men. Thus, stop making ‘baby Jesus-es’ and show us the Word made man, in his virile splendour.” Pirotte looks upon the ongoing success of this mièvreries [sickly sentimentality] as both symbol and cause of a larger movement of feminization of religion and quotes Gabriel Lebras, who detects in it one of the reasons of male absence during church services: “the virility of a good many uncultivated men is not comfortable with the sentimental canticles and little devotions saddening the sanctuary.”

It is remarkable as well that Pirotte, like Cartuyvels, also points to “a tender piety à l’italienne [our italics]” and implicitly holds Italian influence responsible for the sentimental ‘feminine’ character of these devotions. The ultramontanism and centralism characteristic of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Catholicism did, indeed, bring in its train an ‘italianization’ of the devotions. Sabina Gola, who on the basis of the Bibliographie nationale investigated what was generally being published in Belgium between 1830 and 1880 about the politico-religious state of affairs in Italy, writes that she was struck by the proportionally large number of translations into French and Dutch of religious works authored by Italian ecclesiasts. First and foremost are the Jesuits, followed by the Redemptorists as close seconds with their widespread dissemination of the writings by and about Alphonsus Liguori, for instance, via their sermons on the Redemptorist Mission. Likewise, the growing numbers of travellers to Italy promoted the spread of Italian devotions, including the worship of

13 Ibid., 31.
14 Bruley, “La romanité”, 60-61: “Alors, pourquoi ne pas désigner, simplement, les ‘ultramontains’ sous le nom de ‘romains’ [...] ?... la romanization des pratiques religieuses a souvent été, de fait, une ‘italianization’ notamment dans les formes de dévotion.”
15 Gola, Un demi-siècle. Savart, Les catholiques, 77-78 reports the importation of Italian works into France, but this is only on a modest scale compared to what is brought in from Belgium (especially from Casterman), and wherein one can find a lot of Italian works translated into French (82 and 88-89).
Mary. Despland writes about France that the “Old gallican, somber, austere piety recedes before Italian smiles. Mary is now called Madonne, again in imitation of Italian ways” while in the Anglo-Saxon Protestant anti-papist writings this Italian influence is being criticized: “Italian Marian images were most often invoked as evidence that Roman Catholics were pagan idolators.”

Amongst the few authors paying attention to the Italianization of Catholicism, Michael P. Carroll figures as one of the most voluble. Between 1523 and 1978, the Pope was invariably an Italian native, while most of the College of Cardinals and the leaders of the Curia also were for a very long time born and raised on the peninsula. They were hardly inclined to oppose the dissemination of the culture in which they were raised.

According to Carroll, Italian devotions were now characterized by the central place that is accorded to Mary and the saints, by the multiplicity of names used in her invocations and – to which one may add – by the fact that also males have no reluctance to range themselves unabashedly on the side of the Mary Cult. In his various writings, Carroll attempts to find an explanation for the phenomenon, turning, aside from anthropological, sociological, and historical, especially to psychoanalytical insights. In search of an explanation for the success of the Mary Cult well into the twentieth century, Fouilloux refers to a basic Freudian insight, the longing of men to the purity of the mother. It is likewise the universally known central place of la mamma within the Italian family fabric that invariably returns as a motif in Carroll’s works and is fingered as the deeper cause of the devotion to Mary. At the risk of inflicting severe injustice upon a thesis that in the course of many years has been

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16 About Italian devotions in Belgian travel accounts Viaene, Belgium, 271: “More importantly, some crucial revivalist devotions, such as the sentimental piety towards the Virgin […] had their roots in 18th-century Italy”. An example of such an eulogy on the Italian devotional practices: “La piété”. Also the homeward bound ‘Zouaves’ must have played their part. See also Sanfilippo, “Du Québec” and Buerman, elsewhere in this volume.
17 Despland, “A Case”.
18 Engelhardt Herringer, Victorians, 99. According to Heimann, Catholic, one ought not to exaggerate the Italian influence in English Catholicism.
19 “Italianization” delivers only a few hits on the Internet, in contrast to the multiple “romanization”, but rarely with respect to the nineteenth-century Church history. Carroll, The Cult; Id., Catholic Cults; Id., Madonnas; Id., Veiled Threats. Cholvy and Hilaire, Histoire religieuse, 154-165, 177, 179 pay also attention to the Italian influence on the ultramontane devotion, something that in 1985 “bien des historiens ont ignoré ou mal décelé” (163).
20 Chadwick, A History, 551-552 expresses the same opinion when he notes that “Latins” have a better chance of beatification or canonization than others: “It might be affected because the Congregation of Rites consisted almost entirely of Italians and a majority of the cardinals in those days was always Italian, as were the popes, and the kind of sanctity most easily preferred was likely to have a ‘romance’ feel about its expressions of fervour or about the achievement that were possible”.
21 Something that was noticed by the nineteenth-century travellers to Italy: “Alors même qu’en France afficher, surtout chez les hommes, une foi un peu ostentatoire entraîne le ridicule et les sarcasmes, à Rome, la dévotion à la Vierge et aux saints s’affiche ouvertement dans toutes les classes, aussi bien chez les hommes que chez les femmes, sans susciter la moindre remarque désobligeante” (our italics) Amalvi, “Le Mythe”, 117, following a travel account from 1890.
remoulded, refined, revised and adapted, Carroll's main premise comes down to the fact that in the Oedipal phase, crucial for Freudian disciples, the father figure remains 'absent': the child grows up in a “father-ineffective family”. This absence does not necessarily have to be physical, as it suffices that the mother, not the father, incarnates the authority within the family. The latter, also as a result of socio-economic circumstances, is (and would have been) the case in numerous (especially Southern) Italian families. The ‘normal’ initial attachment of the son with his mother, his identifying with her, would within that context be insufficiently held within bounds and stymied during the Oedipal phase, that is to say, it would ineffectively be followed by the second stage in the resolution of the Oedipus complex, namely the identification with the father, precisely because of the latter’s weak psychological presence. The boy receives inadequate motivation to identify with the ‘weak’ father and remains stuck inside his childhood attachment to his mother. Only later on, when he comes to understand that by so doing he fails to assume the expected gender role, is this machismo behaviour over-compensated, without, however, being accompanied by the disappearance of the childhood bond with the mother, with all of the unconscious guilt feelings occasioned as a result. This then represents a repressed attachment that, at least according to Carroll, would find its manifestation via the Mary Cult.²³ This, in a nutshell and greatly simplified, forms one of his main themes.²⁴ Luisa Accati arrives via a different route, and without having read Carroll, at the same observation: “As a consequence of this [Italian and Catholic] structure sons do not develop (or develop only with great difficulty) the ability to take over certain selected aspects of their fathers’ identities and behaviour and to translate them into an idiom of their own, at the same time rejecting other aspects which are less suited to their character. Instead, they feel a repugnance in identifying with their fathers.”²⁵ Robert Orsi, in his penetrating study on the Italian immigrant community in New York, describes “Italian Harlem was a private matriarchy […] Mothers dominated the life of the home […] The source of the oldest son’s authority was his close relationship with his mother […] Oedipal rivalries raged right on the surface of the life of the ‘domus’ […] Competition between father and son is total. There can only be one victor: either the father withdraws, or he fights back and expels his rival from the ‘domus’”.²⁶ From these authors we retain the sense that, in Catholic contexts, males that were raised inside a family situation dominated by the mother are more likely to turn into fervent Mary

²³ This is Carroll’s approach from 1986: Carroll, The Cult, 49-74. In 1992, a still further developed (Kleinian) version follows, in id., Madonnas, 138-161.

²⁴ The thesis brings to mind what a namesake of Carroll, John Carroll, argues in his Guilt. Also with this author, the “Mother-dominated family” figures as the central element, albeit in a different context. According to this moralistic sociologist, the – in his view – sad situation prevailing within the Western society is brought about by the gradual fading away (since the Romantic period) of the – originally Puritanical – patriarchal family featuring strong-willed fathers and like sons. He connects with the reasoning of the other Carroll in the sense that, within Italy, Puritanism never developed into a factor to define culture there.

²⁵ Accati, “Explicit Meanings”, 252; 254: “the Italian family is matricentric”. Italy is said to remain today the country where sons keep living with their mothers longer than anywhere else, the so-called “mammoni”, cf. Der Spiegel, 6 July 2006.

worshippers and that such situations are more prevalent in Italy than elsewhere. It would be interesting – albeit not easy – to examine to what extent non-Italian male Mary disciples passed through an analogous psychic prehistory.

**CLERICALIZATION = FEMINIZATION?**

The males that disseminated the Mary Cult throughout the whole of the Catholic body were not only Italian. They were also clerics, and their views were very favourably received abroad by their soul-brothers, priests, and religious groups. Pirotte quotes the testimony of a well-informed source that attributes the success of the sentimental devotional prints to the ready acceptance they enjoy amongst the Christian masses, “the Christian people, headed by the clergy, [who] unconsciously recognize themselves [in the prints] and take pleasure in them” [our italics]. More specifically, it is the devotion to Mary, elevated to the “Queen of the clergy” that burgeons mightily within the clerical community.

Psychologists have concluded that the family background of priests and clerics in general does, indeed, display a great resemblance to what Carroll characterized as being a typical Italian phenomenon. Karl Guido Rey, in his *Das Mutterbild des Priesters*, based on a survey amongst (candidate) priests that counted 265 usable responses, talks about “The mother as the main drive for the priestly vocation” (“Die Mutter als Hauptantrieb zur priesterlichen Berufung”) and “The vocation enhancing effect of the father image being religiously indifferent or negative” (“Die berufungsfördernde Wirkung des religios indifferenten oder negativen Vaterbildes”). There is question of a poor father experience (“mangelhafte Vatererlebnis”) as a result of the physical or affective absence of the father figure, which, in its turn, may be brought about by the fact that he is pushed away from his parental role through the behaviour of the mother (“dass er durch das Verhalten der Mutter aus seiner väterlichen Rolle verdrängt wird”). The author does not hesitate to conclude that “the archetype of the priest appears to be of androgyinous nature” (“Der Archetyp des Priesters scheint androgyner Natur zu sein”). The similarity with the “father-ineffective” (M.P. Carroll) or “mother-dominated” (J. Carroll) family is striking, as is the androgyne as antipode to the machismo, that other possible answer for the (unconscious) mother attachment. We find the same idea with Jakob Crottogini, *Werden und Krise des Priesterberufes*, in this instance a non-psycho-analytically inclined researcher: “Within the family the most crucial importance is the religious attitude of the mother.”

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28 Rey, *Das Mutterbild*. The surveyed respondents grew up and worked during the preconciliar period.
29 Without, however, attributing to this any pejorative connotation. Rey, *Das Mutterbild*, 109, 140. About the “origine bisexuelle de nos vécus religieux” and “La loi du père et sa fonction”, see de Saussure, “Questions”; Zock, “The predominance”. About the ‘feminine nature’ of the Roman Catholic priesthood in the eyes of the anti-clerical opinion, see Art and Buerman, “Anti-clericalisme et genre”. About clerical identity in historical perspective: Monteiro, “Männer Gods”.
Oraison writes at the start of the 1960s: “In one of France’s major seminaries, during rather informal psychological examinations, the specialist who had been called in found that at least 70 per cent of the young people (average age 21) psychologically speaking, did not have a father: either he had died, was ineffectual and not very ‘present’, or ill and infirm.” And, not surprisingly, Drewermann, a far less non-controversial author, also spends time on the extensive Mary Cult practised by the clergy: “There is no monastic rule, no instruction for priests or no papal address, which would not come to speak about the promotion of monastic chastity and celibacy, as with inner necessity, of devotion to the Blessed Mother”. To him, there can be no doubt about the link that exists between “Chastity requirement” [...] “mother fixation” [...] and Catholic Marian devotion. One may agree or disagree with his views on such a link, yet its existence is affirmed by nearly all researchers and could well be an explanation of the other fact that the generally married Protestant ministers are by no means given to the – in their eyes exaggerated – veneration of the Mary figure as are the Roman Catholic clergy. Consequently, André Godin, in his 1994 overview of the psychological literature on the theme, can point out as one of the acquired insights that those called are stimulated by a mobile inconscient: “the prevalence of a maternal image [...] as a motif of the celibate”.

To what degree are these psychological insights confirmed by historiography? Gender-oriented historical research has abundantly demonstrated that throughout the nineteenth and until well into the twentieth century, the ideal female deployed her talents within the private sphere, whereas the public domain was the province of the male. This separation fluctuates, depending on class, country, religion, and time frame, but, nonetheless, appears broadly characteristic of the era. The Roman Catholic Church also holds to this conviction, and, confronted with declining male involvement in Church matters, emphasizes the major role that has to be played by women, and certainly by mothers in the religious education of their offspring. Fathers only get interested – if they get interested at all – in their sons once these reach seven years of age or older. “It is rare, in a biography of a 19th-century man of the church, that the vocation is not linked principally to his mother’s faith”, writes Geneviève

33 Ibid., 512. On Drewermann’s importance for religious historical recording, see Art, “Kerkgeschiedenis na Drewermann”.
35 See Van Osselaer and Pasture, eds, *Households of Faith*. Langlois, “‘Toujours plus pratiquantes’”, does point out, in fact, that this is a phenomenon probably happening at all times but that manifests itself more strongly during certain periods than others. Accati, “Explicit Meanings”, 242 points to the significance of the question if it pertains here to a dominant Catholic or to a dominant Protestant context. Recently, M.F. Carroll has devoted an entire volume to the ‘Protestant’ bias that is alleged to characterize and distort North American research into religion: Carroll, *American Catholics in the Protestant Imagination*. 
Gadbois in her article with the telling title “Vous êtes presque la seule consolation de l’Eglise’. La foi des femmes face à la déchristianization de 1789 à 1880”. Paul Seeley in turn believes that the answer to explain the reason for the continuation of a small but active male elite within the bonne société of Lyon is to be sought in the very strong maternal and weak paternal input into the education of these ‘hommes d’oeuvres’. Jean-René Chotard, who at one time was himself a student at a preparatory seminary, describes in penetrating fashion the bond that exists between mother and son and the link with the absence of the father.

But it is particularly in the writings of the clergy itself that the close ties between the mother, Mary, and the priesthood are revealed. Some texts create in the outsider the impression that there is question of identification with Mary (or a striving for it), thus, for instance, in the text of Jean-Claude Colin († 1875), founder of the Society of Mary: “Let them [the Marists] perpetually keep in mind that they, on the basis of a merciful election, belong to the family of the Blessed Virgin, mother of God [...] But if they want to be and become the sons of the immaculate Mother, they must breathe and radiate her own spirit, namely that of humility, self-abnegation, profound connection with God and ardent love for one’s neighbour; in all ways they must think, feel and act like Mary, since otherwise they would only be unworthy, degenerate sons”. Mary as a sublimated mother figure finds forceful expression in the words of the priest Poppe, who evoked her with Moeke (more or less a diminutive of ‘mama’).

The contributions published in the specialized editions of preparatory seminary superiors, Le recrutement sacerdotal (1900-), are amongst the most explicit texts on the topic. Aside from the many contributions dedicated to the role that can be played by the mother, even including the responsibility she bears during the blossoming of a budding priestly calling, the journal also repeatedly discusses the place occupied by Mary within the spiritual life of the seminary student and the priest.

“Our little seminarian, torn from his family to live the Seminary’s austere boarding school, will suffer in his heart from this emotional isolation.” He will need to find a mother, “a real living mother, if an invisible one, and one close to him, who will console him in the dormitory when his heart is heavy and while he, completely

37 Seeley, “O Sainte Mère”.
38 Chotard, Séminaristes, 92, 141-144.
39 “In mente perpetuo teneant se esse, delectu gratioso, de familia B. Mariae Dei genetricis… Si ergo vere filii huius alme Matris sint et esse desiderent, ipsius spiritum se spirare debere sentiant, spiritum, videlicet, humiliatis, propriae abnegationis, intima cum Deo unionis et ardentissimae charitatis erga proximum; ut Maria cogitare, ut Maria sentire et agere debent in omnibus, aliter enim non essent nisi indigne et degeneres filii.” Quoted by De Fiores, “Marie (sainte vierge)”, 470, from the Constitutions of the congregation. This author emphasizes the “dimension mystique” of the text.
40 And was for that reason reprimanded by his spiritual superior. See Van de Velde, Priester Poppe, 41, 46-47: “Moeke, moeke liefste moe/spreek toch weer uw kindje toe...” Also M.J. Chirion (1797-1852, founder of the ‘Sainte Marie de l’Assomption’) invoked Mary as “Maman”: Keselman, Miracles, 226 n. 44. Amongst Italian immigrants “Mary was called ‘Mamma’”. Orsi, The Madonna, 226.
moved, is saying the rosary”, writes abbé Duperray, spiritual director of the Petit Séminaire de Charlièvre (Loire) in 1937. He substantiates this contention with quotes garnered from a survey amongst his disciples: they are dreaming “of tomorrow bringing about the reign of Mary, my good heavenly mother” (208). “In the evenings, before going to sleep, I converse with my heavenly mother, in the same way I converse with my earthly mother” (209). The young seminary student sees Mary as the substitute for the spouse he will never have: “My quite sensitive heart reclaims the pure, sweet, delicate affection that is feminine affection. This is what Jesus is proposing for my renouncing everything, including the affection of a wife, to follow him and become a priest. It’s fortunate that the Blessed Virgin was there. Isn’t she capable of providing the feminine influence I badly needed? But of course! [...] She is in heaven, no doubt. Yes, but it’s a real living reality with a heart of flesh like mine” (211-212). What is experienced as devotion during one’s time as a seminary student grows, in the eyes of the Jesuit priest F. Charmot, into identification during adult life.42 “The priests carry on with the maternal function of Mary [...] [playing] in effect, with regard to the Eucharist the role of a mother who generates and makes grow the body of Jesus Christ” (121). When laymen may then count already on the special grace and favour of Jesus (“Jesus verily ‘marries’ them”), “the priesthood enters into an even greater intimacy with Him [...] Jesus communicates to him a divine maternal power, more than a participation in divine life, [...] In him [the priest] has, by the virtue of the Holy Spirit, the birth of Christ as did the Virgin Mother.” And thus: “The virginity of the priesthood must imitate that of Mary, since its functions extend and complete those of the Virgin Mary [...] A priest is above all a virgin. He is the continuation of Virgin: what a privilege!” According to Accati, this pertains to a belief that harkens back to the apologies of the priesthood that were written during the seventeenth century in reaction to the attacks by the Protestants, such as, the Traité des saints ordres by J.J. Olier (1608-1657). According to her, the bond between mother/Mary and son/Priest emerges as a consequence of the Counter Reformation and forms the basis of clerical power.43 Whatever truth there may be in this latter opinion, for the nineteenth and preconciliar twentieth century, the texts written by clerics that establish the bond between mother, Mary, and chastity are there for the taking. To what degree this also holds true for the prior period needs to be investigated.

42 Charmot, “Le prêtre”. “Marriage to Christ was, of course, limited to women. There is some evidence that an analogous relationship of males to Mary as wife was also important, at least in the training of the clergy,” Keselman, Miracles, 99.

43 Accati, “Explicit Meanings”, 242-243; Ibid., 241: “The Counter-Reformation Roman Catholic Church embodies nothing less than this principle [the son identifying with his mother]. It is a group of celibate men (i.e. men who remained tied to their mothers), who do not share the power which husbands and fathers wield, but instead manage the potency of women.” Besides, ibid., 242: “The Oedipal dependence of a son on his mother is not an invention of Freud’s, but a social relationship constructed over the course of four hundred years by the Catholic Church (especially by the Jesuits). What Freud found was the product of this long labour by unmarried men who became ever more devoted sons”. 
CONCLUSION

To answer the question why the Mary Cult, unequivocal symbol of the feminization of Roman Catholicism in the nineteenth and the preconciliar twentieth century, was particularly propagated by males, psychologists refer to the psycho-biography of the actors. Absent fathers are said to be characteristic of the Italian family situation as well as of the prehistory of many of the clergy – including non-Italians. The possible resulting incestuous ties with one’s mother and unconscious guilt feelings could be translated into either a Latin machismo or an androgynous complementation of the gender role. The Mary Cult could be interpreted as a symptom arising from this fixation on the mother figure. A brief exploration of the historical literature and of a number of printed sources does not contradict this hypothesis but, nonetheless, can only confirm it up to a point. The central role of the mother in the Italian family is affirmed by Accati’s and Orsi’s studies on Italian-American families, while, likewise, other anthropological studies point to the special nature of the mother/son relationship in the Mediterranean region. There cannot be any dispute about the italianization in Catholic devotional life that followed in the wake of the Roman Question, whereby ‘Mary’ morphed more and more into the figure of the ‘Madonna’: the question remains, though, how deep this penetrated – nonetheless deep enough to elicit reactions, also from within the Church community. That the manifest interest of the clergy in Marian devotion could be related to the absence of the father figure appears to be confirmed a contrario by the studies and printed sources that illustrate the importance of the mother for passing on and maintaining the Catholic tradition and the burgeoning and safeguarding of a priestly calling. For adolescent, isolated students at the (preparatory) seminary, Mary fulfils the role of a surrogate mother, while some adult priests indeed do identify themselves with her – and thus with the mother figure. For ‘some’, aside from the fact that in this case, as so often happens in cultural history, no truly undisputed causal connections can be proven, the question remains as to how general, both in time and place, the aforementioned pattern really was. Nonetheless, it seems highly probable that it happened.

Historians are mostly sceptical vis-à-vis psycho-historical explanations – the ‘absent father’ is, indeed, a topos – if not a deus ex machina – in quite a body of psycho-historical literature, which is really not very surprising given the focal importance that is accorded to the Oedipal phase by adherents of Freud.

On the other hand: psychologist historians only aim at proposing additional explanations and adducing and accounting for factors that relegate other approaches to the sidelines. They tend to draw attention to recurring scenarios, without wishing to imply, however, that no other psychological prehistory is possible and that no factors other than unconscious stimuli or motives could play a role in elucidating the phenomenon of the large-scale clerical devotion to Mary. Their approach deserves, for what concerns an understanding of the feminization symptoms within the Roman Catholic Church, greater attention than what thus far has been the case.

44 He would also be held responsible for the receptivity of the German population towards Nazism: Loewenberg, “The Psychohistorical Origins”.
The muscular Christian’s fists were in the service of ‘the weak’. Tom Brown’s first defence of the new boy, George Arthur, who is being bullied by some of his dormitory mates because he goes down on his knees to say his prayers before going to bed.