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REFORMING FEMALE CONVENTS: THE ROLE OF A VENETIAN AMBASSADOR IN CURIA (1519)*

Abstract

In 1519, Patriarch Antonio Contarini (1508–24) was trying to impose his authority over the female monasteries in Venice. He wanted to impose a stricter discipline and a more rigid lifestyle to the nuns, who were accustomed to comforts. However, he soon found major impediments from many Venetian families. The majority of nuns had aristocratic origins, and their relatives did not want them to lose their ancient privileges. Besides, monasteries symbolised the honour of the city and their families, so many noblemen reacted against any changes. After complaints began to spread, the government decided to get in touch with its ambassador in Rome, Marco Minio. Minio was asked to intercede with the pope: the Republic wanted a papal approval of Contarini's reformation to end the dispute.

In the present paper, Minio's correspondence on this subject is analysed to trace the process developed in June–August of 1519. The Venetian ambassador tried to balance words and a decision to appease both the Republic and the Holy See. The case study is indeed an example of clever procrastination which eventually made it possible for Venice to accomplish its goal.

Keywords: Venice, female monasteries, diplomatic mission, Venetian patriarch, discipline

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In this essay, I analyse the correspondence sent by Ambassador Marco Minio to the Venetian government in 1519. The main topic in this group of letters is a dispute that arose in Venice. Patriarch Antonio Contarini of Venice had decided to reform the female monasteries under his authority, imposing limitations and more rigid rules on the nuns. The problem was that a majority of these women came from Venice's most prestigious families, and their relatives protested against Contarini's decisions. Nevertheless, the government decided to support the patriarch and ordered Venetian Ambassador Marco Minio in Rome to request a papal approval for Contarini's reforms. At the same time, however, nuns and their families appealed to Rome to safeguard their antique privileges. So, Minio found himself in the middle of a conflict that needed to be solved, trying to weigh his words and actions to please both his government and the Roman court.

This kind of dispute concerned not only the independence and the antique privileges of the female monasteries but also the development of a state institution that would start to control and to discipline some part of the ecclesiastical sphere. So, this significant example regards both the research field of women's studies and the history of political doctrines in relation to the social discipline during the early modern period.¹

¹ For some of the recent works about the life of nuns during the Early Modern period in Italy, see: Letizia Arcangeli, 'Ragioni politiche della disciplina monastica. Il caso di Parma tra '400 e '500', in *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo*, ed. by Gabriella Zarri (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1996), pp. 165–87; Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in the Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999); Elisa Novi Chavarría, *Monache e gentildonne, un labile confine. Poteri politici e identità religiose nei monasteri napoletani, secoli XVI–XVII* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2001); Silvia Evangelisti, "'We do not have it, and we do not want it'. Women, power, and convent reform in Florence', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 34, no. 3 (2003), 677–700; Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice. Enclosed Lives and Broken Vows in the Renaissance Convents* (London: Penguin, 2003); K.J.P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Kate Lowe, 'Power and institutional identity in Renaissance Venice: The female convents of S.M. delle Vergini and S. Zaccaria', in *COLLeGIUM: Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 2: *The Trouble with Ribs: Women, Men and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Anu Korhonen, Kate Lowe (Helsinki: Tutkijakollegium, 2007), pp. 128–52; Alessia Liroso, *Le cronache di Santa Cecilia. Un monastero femminile a Roma in età moderna* (Roma: Viella, 2009);

To impose civic authority over female convents, the Republic of Venice decided to create a magistracy that could discipline these places, the *Provveditori sopra Monasteri di Monache*. This decision had been made a few decades before the Council of Trent and the imposition of the *clausura*.² The assembly of three Venetian noblemen was initially created in 1521 by the Council of Ten – one of the Venice’s most potent councils with both legislative and judicial powers for the ultimate safety of the Republic – and then institutionalised in 1524

Anne Jacobson Schutte, ‘Between Venice and Rome: The Dilemma of Involuntary Nuns’, *The Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 41, no. 2 (Summer, 2010), 415–40; Silvia Evangelisti, *Storia delle monache* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012); Alessia Lirosi, *I monasteri femminili nella Roma del XVII secolo* (Roma: Viella, 2012); Serena Ferente, ‘Le donne e lo Stato’, in *Lo Stato del Rinascimento in Italia (1350–1520)*, ed. by Andrea Gamberini, Isabella Lazzarini (Roma: Viella, 2014), pp. 313–32; Silvia Carraro, and Anna Rapetti, ‘Female Monasteries in Venice: Religious Dynamics and Political Power’, in *Life and Religion in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Flocel Sabaté (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp. 219–33. On the concept of social discipline, a broad approach, cf.: Pierangelo Schiera, ‘Stato moderno (voce)’, in *Dizionario di politica*, ed. by Norberto Bobbio, Nicola Matteucci, Gianfranco Pasquino (Torino: Utet, 1983), pp. 1150–56; id., ‘Disciplina, disciplinamento’, *Annali dell’Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, 18 (1992), 315–34; Gigliola Fragnito, ‘Istituzioni ecclesiastiche e costruzione dello Stato. Riflessioni e spunti’, in *Origini dello Stato. Processi di formazione statale in Italia fra medioevo ed età moderna*, ed. by Giorgio Chittolini, Anthony Molho, Pierangelo Schiera (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994), pp. 531–50; Winfried Schulze, ‘Il concetto di “disciplinamento sociale nella prima età moderna” in Gerhard Oestreich’, *Annali dell’Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, 18 (1992), 371–411; Pierangelo Schiera, ‘Disciplina, stato moderno, disciplinamento: considerazioni a cavallo fra la sociologia del potere e la storia costituzionale’, in *Disciplina dell’anima, disciplina del corpo e disciplina della società tra medioevo ed età moderna*, ed. by Paolo Prodi (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994), pp. 21–46; Pierangelo Schiera, *Specchi della politica. Disciplina, melancolia, socialità nell’Occidente moderno* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999); Michel Foucault, *Sorvegliare e punire. Nascita della prigione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014).

² However, Venice was not the first one to follow this attempt to control female monasteries: Florence and Genoa also created similar institutions. Genoa decided to start a provisional commission of four men in 1459; but it was not until 1462 that a municipal council was established, led by the archbishop, which was finally recognised in 1551. Meanwhile, Florence established a Magistracy called “Deputazione sopra monastery” in 1544; Gabrielle Zarrì, *Recinti. Donne, clausura e matrimonio nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000), p. 75.

with a senatorial decree.³ In 1521, the prerogatives of this magistracy were defined:

L'Anderà parte che per autorità di questo Consiglio sia preso, et deliberato che de presente per scrutinio de ditto Consiglio elleger si debbano tre honoratissimi et di primarii zentilhomini di questa città, possendosi tuor di ogni luogo, et officio, quali insieme ad ditto reverendissimo patriarcha habbino ad udir, et intender le lamentationi, et querelle di queste monache conventuale circa il viver suo.⁴

Resuming the main points in English, three patricians had to be elected by the Senate to work with the patriarch to take care not only of the disputes between nuns but also of their lifestyle. In the decree, the term 'complaints of nuns' is used, which brings the question of whose complaints and what events had led to the creation of a magistracy that would supervise female convents? This essay will answer the first part of the question and present the reasons that led the Republic to take control of the female monasteries, from their habits to their incomes.

In 1519, the government decided to get in touch with the Venetian ambassador in Rome. The Council of Ten asked him to take actions at Pope Leo X's court to appease a fierce dispute that was ongoing between the Venetian patriarch and some of Venice's most ancient convents that had also appealed to Rome for help. So, two years before the temporary institution *Provveditori* was established, the government had started to interfere with the female convents' operations. The reason was, on the one hand, the patriarch's struggle to discipline the nuns; on the other, attempts undertaken by Venetian patrician families of nuns to maintain their ancient privileges.

Venice has always seemed a 'pious' city. Indeed, as Edward Muir stated,

³ The Senate had already tried to order an election of two magistrates who could control Venetian monasteries (*Correttori sopra monasteri*) in 1518, but it seems to be a failed attempt. The topic would not be resumed until 1521; Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter cited as: ASVe), Senato, Deliberazioni, Secreti, filze, 3, fols not numbered, 20 April 1518.

⁴ ASVe, *Provveditori Sopra Monasteri di Monache*, b. 1, Capitolare I, fol. 6v, 21 September 1521.

Punctuation, along with abbreviations, has been normalised for the editing in all the transcriptions.

Not only did the city harbor the body of the Evangelist Mark, but it gloried in numerous churches, in patronage of religious orders, in charity to the poor, in unflagging opposition to the infidel Turks, and in devout processions. These works were, of course, everywhere encouraged by Catholic dogma as a means to attain salvation, but to the civic-minded Venetians such extraordinary devotion proved Venice a chosen city of God, a city infused with grace.⁵

This grace also spread over female convents – the holders of powerful symbolism, mostly displaying the honour of these sacred places. Indeed, a strong relationship existed between nunneries and patricians families since many religious women came from Venice’s most influential and noble social groups. Besides, with the lapse of time, many grants, bequeaths, and ancient foundations transformed them into rich and luxurious places.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, however, the atmosphere around the nunneries changed, and it was going to affect the fierce stability of female convents. On the one side, we had the Venetian Republic which, in the long process of the so-called ‘birth of the modern state’, was trying to build its new sovereignty extending its prerogatives over ecclesiastical matters, as Paolo Prodi recalled.⁶

⁵ Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 16. For more recent references see, for instance: Matteo Casini, ‘Cerimoniali’, in *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, vol. 7, ed. by Gino Benzoni and Gaetano Cozzi (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana Treccani, 1997), pp. 107–160; Gaetano Cozzi, *Ambiente veneziano, ambiente veneto. Saggi su politica, società, cultura nella Repubblica di Venezia in età moderna* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1997); Eduard Hüttinger, ‘Venezia come mito’, in *Venezia da stato a mito*, ed. by Alessandro Bettagno (Venezia: Marsilio, 1997), pp. 9–36; Filippo De Vivo, ‘The diversity of Venice and her myths in recent historiography’, *The Historical Journal*, 47, no. 1 (2004), 169–77; Piero Venturelli, ‘La costituzione mista e il “mito” di Venezia nel Rinascimento. Alcune considerazioni sugli scritti etico-politici di Donato Giannotti e di Gasparo Contarini’, in *Studi di storia della cultura. Sibi suis amicisque*, ed. by Domenico Felice (Bologna: Clueb, 2012), pp. 135–82.

⁶ Paolo Prodi, ‘La Chiesa di Venezia nell’età delle Riforme’, in *La Chiesa di Venezia tra Riforma protestante e Riforma cattolica*, ed. by Giuseppe Gullino (Venezia: Edizioni Studium Cattolico Veneziano, 1990), pp. 63–75. Venice had also created other magistracies such as the Esecutori sopra la Bestemmia (1523–37), with control over crimes like blasphemy, defloration and pandering; the Inquisitori di Stato (1539) which dealt with the disclosure of secret state affairs; Gianni Buganza, *Le complessità*

Information regarding improper behaviour of nuns had been gathered since the fourteenth century when the Avogaria di Comun was assigned to collect evidence regarding citizens accused of having sexual relations with nuns (so, technically, of being *monachini*). The Avogaria was, mainly, a judicial court for appeals, but it also acted as a surveillance authority over the whole city through the control of public order. Indeed, it was functioning as a critic conscience of the State,⁷ due to its prerogative of inspecting sentences emitted by other magistracies.⁸

So the Avogadori, playing a role within multiple functions, may be set in the path leading to the transition from the justification of power as an instrument for dominating sin to the justification of power for the public interest.⁹ The Venetian government, in this case, would aspire to discipline the nuns, since they were a symbol of Venice's integrity and honour than to control their lifestyle for a moral purpose only.

Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth century, a discussion was held,¹⁰ until a more definitive version emerged in 1486. For example, in the resolution issued on the 30 May 1486, more severe and stricter penalties were added (both in detention and in financial terms) for the *monachini*. The incarceration was increased to two years in the *prexon orba* and a fine from 400 to 1000 ducats.¹¹ Therefore, each attempt, fully or partially accomplished, to disgrace the spouses of Christ had to be punished.

However, from thirteen registers hold in the Avogaria's archives¹² it can be detected the minimal presence of *monachini's* cases. In other

dell'ordine. Il processo penale veneziano e le ragioni del principe tra diritto, società e destino (Marsilio: Saggi. Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 1998), p. 122.

⁷ Buganza, p. 6.

⁸ Alfredo Viggiano, *Governanti e governati: legittimità del potere ed esercizio dell'autorità sovrana nello Stato veneto della prima età moderna* (Treviso: Fondazione Benetton, Canova, 1993).

⁹ Paolo Prodi, *Una storia della giustizia. Dal pluralismo dei fori al moderno dualismo tra coscienza e diritto* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000), p. 169.

¹⁰ ASVe, Maggior Consiglio Deliberazioni, Registri, 17, fol. 164r, 9 June 1349; ASVe, Maggior Consiglio Deliberazioni, Registri, 19, fols 190v–191r, 24 August 1382; ASVe, Maggior Consiglio Deliberazioni, Registri, 23, fol. 11r, 31 January 1455.

¹¹ ASVe, Maggior Consiglio Deliberazioni, Registri, 24, fols 74r–v, 30 May 1486.

¹² ASVe, Avogaria di Comun, Raspe, Reg. 3652–3664. With a time span of 61 years, 1465–1525.

words, this type of sinful crime was not popular within the city or, perhaps, it was not listed at the top of the Avogadori's priority list.

Nevertheless, a debate regarding the lifestyle of nuns in convents began. Prior Antonio Contarini of S. Salvatore was elected by the Senate as Venetian patriarch in 1509. Contarini decided to continue Patriarch Tommaso Donà's attempt to reform female convents,¹³ and from 1515 on, he was appealing to Rome to obtain Pope Leo X's approval for his plan of renovation.

In one of his letters addressed to the pope he listed eight convents that might cause serious concern, and added that a reform was a matter of the utmost importance: 'nihilominus relictio religionis iugo in peius collapsae fuerunt, unde necessarium fuit et opportunum remedium aliquod in venire, quo huiusmodi sanies et periculosum ulcer de religione expiana eradicaretur et tolleretur'.¹⁴ Contarini was indeed a strong supporter of the observance movement, which preached a religious lifestyle more similar to the early Church. So to stop a loose, luxurious and expensive lifestyle, followed by the so-called 'conventuali', Contarini started to transfer groups of nuns to the convents led by the *conventuali* (usually the more ancient ones, mainly Benedictine and Augustine).

This, however, threatened the old privileges of some nuns which would mean in turn to attack the patrician families of those nuns. The noble elite decided to ask Rome for assistance. By doing so, they violated a law of the Republic, promulgated by the Senate on the 22 March 1501, which stated that no appeals to Rome could be done without prior authorisation of the government. To put an end to the conflict, Venice's Heads of the Council of Ten summoned Marco Minio, the Venetian ambassador to Rome.

The focus is a group of letters, *responsive*, sent by Minio to the Heads of the Council of Ten between June 1519 and August 1519.¹⁵ It is indeed a collection of diplomatic documents on the reform of female

¹³ Tommaso Donà was the Venetian patriarch from 1492 to 1504.

¹⁴ The monasteries were S. Anna, SS. Blasio e Cataldo, S. Marta, S. Secondo, S. Maria delle Vergini, S. Maria della Celestia, S. Bernardo and S. Chiara; Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, Conc. Trid. 21, fol. 347r.

¹⁵ ASVe, Capi del Consiglio di Dieci. Lettere di Ambasciatori, Lettere degli Ambasciatori, Roma, 1515–38, fols 65r–81r.

monasteries in Venice. They displayed a web of relations and actions, including nuns' appeal to Rome to the patriarch, and eventually to a pair of two potential cardinals. By connecting links and facts, I will try to reconstruct the manner of solving – even if temporary – of this conflict.

First of all, Marco Minio. He was appointed as 'oratore in curia' on 9 February 1516, as the document of the Senate states:

NOS Leonardus Lauredanus Dei gratia: dux venetiarum etcetera: essendone note per molte praeterite actione, la prudentia et altre dote de animo de ti Marco Minio destinato orator nostro al summo pontefice te commettemo che cum el nome del Spirito Sancto debbi proseguir el camin tuo verso Roma cum quella diligentia che patisse la ragion di tempi [...] ¹⁶

The report asserts, as a kind of ritual formula, that patience and perseverance were the most important virtues of a proper ambassador. In the document it is also stated how Minio could have asked for help of two powerful Venetian cardinals.

Cum li nostri doi veramente reverendissimi cardinali te ritroverai frequentemente usando l'opera loro quando ti accaderà a beneficio dele cose nostre. Et non dubitamo che per lo singular affecto verso la patria, continueranno in affaticarsi in tutte quelle cose cognosceranno ceder in honor et commodo de la republica nostra. ¹⁷

The names of the two prelates are not mentioned, although they are obvious: Marco Corner and Domenico Grimani. Both the cardinals came from the two most prominent Venetian noble families. Marco was a nephew of Caterina Corner, the former and last queen of Cyprus. At the same time, Domenico's father was first *capitano da mar* (general of the Venice's fleet) Antonio Grimani, and then the Doge of Venice (1521–23). Thus, with these background connections, there was no doubt that Minio could have received strong support from the papal court. Furthermore, this type of relations between these three men was indeed suitable for solving the conflict that arose from the nuns' dissent.

In the first letter bringing up the subject of Contarini's reform, dated 17 June 1519, Minio tries to justify the delay regarding Venice's request

¹⁶ ASVe, Senato, Secreta, Registri, 47, fol. 58v, 9 February 1516.

¹⁷ Ibid., *fol*s 58v–59r.

to Rome. Indeed, as it appears from the ambassador's letter, Venice's Heads of Ten had requested a papal approval for Contarini's reform. However, as Minio said, that kind of official petition would demand a complicated and time-consuming procedure, seeking the approval of several Roman offices.

To start the process, Minio asked for minutes of the Venice's petition to the pope; this kind of action was suggested by Leo X's personal secretary, Cardinal Presbyter Lorenzo Pucci of Santi Quattro Coronati. In all his letters, Minio refers to him as Sancti Quattro. Pucci supervised all the appeals addressed to the pope, and, as Minio said, it was also Pucci who would decide upon the official approval. The request had already started its journey through various offices and also submitted the attention of the 'datario'.¹⁸

The second issue that appeared in the same letter is the suggestion made directly by the *curia* for producing a *bullā pontificalis*, not a *littera in forma brevis*.

[...] se conveniva far cusi perchè in verità non si poteva expedire per breve salvo cose de miserabile persone overo di poca importantia, et che l'altro giorno quelli deli officii gravemente si haveano dolesto che simile expeditione si faccesseno per brevi maxime che la rason et lo ordinario voleva si faccesseno per bole.¹⁹

Minio reported that only miserable and petty things were asked through a *littera*, submitted by a 'man of little importance'. Hence, Venice should request a *bullā*. Accordingly, the explanation given by the Venetian ambassador is focused on the major relevance of a bull, in comparison with a *littera in forma brevis*, although it appears that the bull might have cost more than a *breve* due to its more complicated and lengthy passages to different roman offices. So, the ambassador tries to balance both demands, using his own power of decisional autonomy.

Then, a different concern emerges in another *responsiva*, that is the reform of female convents in the neighbourhood of Venice: 'per

¹⁸ The office of the Dataria usually supervised the financial concessions and transactions.

¹⁹ ASVe, Capi del Consiglio di Dieci. Lettere di Ambasciatori, Lettere degli Ambasciatori, Roma, 1515–38, b. 22, fols 65r–v, 17 June 1519.

quanto a li monasteri de monache de le contrade è de bisogno havere una instructione simile a quella fu materia data da li monasterii de monache de Venetia ad ciò si possi fare una simile expeditione'.²⁰ Therefore, Venice asked Minio for another document of confirmation from Rome to secure even the monasteries set in peripheral areas such as Torcello, Murano and Burano. Since their proximity to the city centre, discipline and control had to be required, to safeguard the inner heart of honourability. Convents should be reformed under Contarini's zeal.

Nevertheless, the problem had just started to spread. Indeed, the core of Minio's activities related to this topic, and the most entangled to solve, is related to three of Venice's most ancient female convents, which had decided to take actions against Contarini's reformation using the only legal and formal way they got: officially pleading to the Pope for help. They chose to use different legal methods, from directing the pleas towards the Sacra Romana Rota tribunal and asking directly for the papal court. However, it would be better to introduce these subjects. The three convents were San Zaccaria, Santa Maria delle Vergini and Santa Maria Celeste (usually called Celestia).

San Zaccaria e Le Vergini, two of Venice's major monasteries, used to compete for being the most outstanding one, and 'the reason why the convents employed strategies of empowerment was precisely in order to maintain their pre-eminence as notable Venetian institutions'.²¹ It is also stated how,

in a list of twelve 'notable things to show Signori visiting Venice', alongside the doge's special barge, the Bucintoro, that carried him down the Grand Canal, and the basilica and piazza of S. Marco, was the singing of the nuns at Le Vergini or S. Zaccaria (note the order, with Le Vergini first).²²

Therefore, the remarkable presence of some of Venice's monasteries in the life of the city was essential and distinguished since they gathered

²⁰ ASVe, Capi del Consiglio di Dieci. Lettere di Ambasciatori, Lettere degli Ambasciatori, Roma, 1515–38, fol. 68r, 24 June 1519.

²¹ Lowe, *Power*, p. 132.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 141. The sentence is a paraphrase from Sanudo's text; Marino Sanudo, *De origine, situ et magistratibus urbis venetae, ovvero la città di Venetia, 1493–1530*, ed. by Angela Caracciolo Aricò (Milano: Cisalpino-La Goliardico, 1980), p. 62.

together the women from the noblest Venetian families. And this was clearly the reason for the conflict with Patriarch Contarini. Both Le Vergini and San Zaccaria monasteries had ancient and nearly legendary origins. The first one was of the Augustinian order, founded at the beginning of the thirteenth century, under Pietro Ziani (1205–29). In the early seventeenth century a chronicle appeared, probably composed by the nuns themselves, stating that the true origin was a consequence of the meeting between Alexander III and Emperor Frederick Barbarossa in 1177. It was far from the truth, but it was spreading at a time of uncertainty for the nuns, and they needed something that could reinforce their claims to maintain their ancient privileges.²³

According to the anonymous author, the establishment of the monastery was a gift from the emperor, ‘in homage to Venice for negotiating their peace settlement, it symbolised the republic’s formal recognition as an independent state’.²⁴ This kind of anachronism would represent both the independence of Venice from exterior powers and the unique importance of Le Vergini. The chronicle indeed features *Dux* Sebastiano Ziani’s outstanding importance since he was the one that put an end of the conflict, thanks to his diplomatic abilities. Meanwhile, Le Vergini was never under the patriarchal jurisdiction, but under the *ius patronatus ducalis*; it displayed a rare of case of an upmost independence which could not be lost to a reformer patriarch.

Even S. Zaccaria possessed an aura of a mythic establishment: it was founded in the tenth century, named after St Zacharias, modelled after the chapel near the palace in Ravenna and the one situated in the imperial palace in Constantinople.²⁵ Furthermore, the monastery was established near the Venice’s heart of power, the Ducal Palace, displaying the crucial presence of religious women from the patriciate who would pray for the stability and well-being of the Republic. Being one of the first monasteries built in Venice, along with S. Lorenzo, it might be

²³ Lowe, *Power*, p. 134.

²⁴ Sperling, p. 16.

²⁵ Veronica Ortenberg West-Harling, ‘Personal names and saints’ cults in Venice, the Adriatic and the entroterra in the ninth and tenth century’, in *The Age of Affirmation: Venice, the Adriatic and the Hinterland between the 9th and 10th Centuries*, ed. by Stefano Gasparri and Sauro Gelichi (Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2018), pp. 263–76.

referred as *Eigenklöster*, a private monastery, founded by some families of the nobility.²⁶ It was also to follow the Rule of St Benedict.

Counteracting Contarini's attempts to reform, the noble relatives decided on two different ways of actions. Le Vergini and La Celestia asked the papal court for a commission to confirm their privileges, while S. Zaccaria 'decided that a sophisticated legal solution was their best chance of success, and they took a case against the patriarch to the Roman Rota'.²⁷

Thus, they had indeed sent official pleas to the Pope's court, and to one of Rome's tribunal, the Sacra Romana Rota. From what Minio stated in his letter, Le Vergini succeeded in obtaining a papal brief which could certify its benefits:

Alli dui recepi tre littere di nostra sublimità, due in la materia della reformatione delli monasterii de questa città et de quelli di Torcello cum la copia de uno breve otenuto per le venerabel done del monasterio delle Verzene.²⁸

During the first days of July, the Venetian ambassador was informed directly by his government that one of the Republic's most important convent had accomplished a great step to stop Contarini's attempt to control female convents in a more authoritarian way.

An order from Rome might crash with Venice's prerogatives due to the fact that it was Venice who, even if the designation had to be confirmed by the pope, was in charge of the patriarch's election. It was natural that Minio could foresee another dispute. Consequently, he had to act quickly. Four days later, on 9 July 1519, he advised the Heads of Ten of an order that would revoke the brief obtained by the nuns of Le Vergini.²⁹

However, this was not the only conflict that Minio had succeeded to end. Indeed, he also stated that he was to obtain the abrogation of the citation made by S. Zaccaria against the patriarch. The nuns, in this

²⁶ Silvia Carraro, *La laguna delle donne. Il monachesimo femminile a Venezia tra IX e XIV secolo* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2015), p. 18.

²⁷ Lowe, *Power*, p. 147.

²⁸ ASVe, Capi del Consiglio di Dieci. Lettere di Ambasciatori, Lettere degli Ambasciatori, Roma, 1515–38, fol. 69r, 5 July 1519.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 70r, 9 July 1519.

case, had asked for the intervention of the highest appellate tribunal in the papal court, the Roman Rota.³⁰ They attempted to countercheck Contarini's reform, hoping for a verdict that could stop the patriarch. It seems that there is no sign of information elsewhere, apart from Minio's few references.

Indeed, nine days after the ambassador stated to the Council of Ten that he would stop both the nuns' attempts to fight back, he wrote again, saying that everything was settled down. He added that nothing would get stop Contarini's praiseworthy reform again: 'non passera più alcuna cosa che habia ad impedire tanta laudabel opera'.³¹ However, the whole thing was settled in favour of the Heads of Ten's wishes. Contarini's reform was about to be confirmed, and on the 24 August 1519, the ambassador attached to his letter the list of expenses that had to be settled by the Republic (it was a total of eighty-one ducats).³²

So, eventually, the Venetian government claimed its rights against the nuns' attempts to stop Contarini's plans. The *bonum commune* had an irreplaceable role in the justification of power relations. So, imposing a strict discipline to limit immoral behaviours might have helped Venice to control even these spheres of power that had not been under its authority before. As Prodi also asserted, the state would secularise its politics, expanding its prerogatives in different circles.³³ It was a gradual process that would lead to the stabilisation of the so-called modern state. It was not an easy way, as the case of Venice proves it.

The nuns were not completely defeated yet: they would fight for their independence, appearing with their relatives during government's assemblies and complaining for the patriarch's method.³⁴ Two years

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., fol. 73r, 18 July 1519.

³² Ibid., fol. 81r, 24 August 1519.

³³ Prodi, *La Chiesa*.

³⁴ The diarist Marino Sanudo reports these events in his texts; see Marino Sanudo, *Diarii (1496–1533)*, ed. by Rinaldo Fulin, Federico Stefani *et al.*, 58 vols. (Venezia: Visentin, 1879–1902). For instance, he reported the presence of Le Vergini's relatives on May 24. The families complained to the assembly (Collegio) about Contarini's decision; Sanudo, *Diari*, 27, p. 321, 24 May 1519. He also wrote about disorder at the monastery of S. Zaccaria, where the nuns screamed and cried about their unjust treatment by Contarini; Sanudo, *Diari*, 28, p. 11, 1 October 1519. Then, the diarist

later, on 17 September 1521, a specific magistracy would be created by the Council of Ten to discipline female convents, the *Provveditori sopra Monasteri di Monache*.³⁵ The sexual relations with laymen would continue,³⁶ but the administrative management of the rich entries of female convents has stopped, as it would occur even to male monasteries a century later.³⁷

However, this case study has revealed the social and political relations that acted in the context of Minio's activities. The ambassador had to deal with the Heads of Ten, aristocratic Venetian families with interests in monasteries, and also with the papal officials and prelates. It was a particular event, but it can show us how an ambassador could carefully choose words and decisions for his cause's favour. Pleas, patience and procrastination, were the key elements for a successful diplomatic mission, and Marco Minio's assignment regarding Venetian female monasteries represents an evocative example. Eventually, the ambassador accomplished his mission, balancing his actions between courtesy to Rome and loyalty to the Republic.

discussed a meeting between the Venetian assembly and a group of nuns from S. Chiara, led by their abbess, who was 106 years old. They were granted permission to leave their monastery to explain their complaints to their cardinal protector, Domenico Grimani; Sanudo, *Diari*, 31, p. 162, 2 August 1521.

³⁵ ASVe, *Provveditori sopra Monasteri di Monache*, b. 1, Capitolare I, fols 6r–v, 17 September 1521. The Council of Ten granted the *Provveditori* power to issue temporary leave permits for the nuns and to control their accounting registers and dowries. They could also limit the visits to the monastery: families might only meet with the nuns after having received approval from the Magistracy.

³⁶ See, for instance, Laven; Sperling; ASVe, *Provveditori sopra Monasteri di Monache*, *Processi criminali e disciplinari*, bb. 263–83 (1554–1793). There are 21 envelopes that contain disciplinary cases against nuns, led by the *Provveditori* (mostly for illicit affairs).

³⁷ ASVe, *Provveditori sopra Monasteri di Monache*, b. 1, Capitolare II, fol. 1r, 30 June 1637. The Council of Ten gave the *Provveditori* authority over the male monasteries' accounting registers. In other words, the Magistracy could administer all the monasteries' finances, properties and incomes.

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