

## “I Willingly Speak to You about Her Virtues”:<sup>1</sup> Catherine de Saint-Augustin and the Public Role of Female Holiness in Early New France

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ON July 11, 1666, the new cathedral in the French colonial capital at Quebec was finally consecrated by the vicar apostolic of New France, Msgr. François de Laval. Catherine de Saint-Augustin, a nursing sister who belonged to the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec, described the elaborate ceremony in her journal. The celebrants in their regalia made three trips around the church sprinkling holy water and chanting prayers before they came to the main door. After striking the door three times with a cross, “to signify the power of Jesus Christ, sovereign bishop of the Church,” they entered, and majestically processed toward the high altar. Upon the altar sat four candles, which signified “that Catholics (have) spread to the four corners of the world.” In the middle of these was a single cross, “that of Our Lord,” which symbolically linked the entire Church throughout the world to its (European) center—“au milieu du monde.”<sup>2</sup> Following a number of minor rites including lessons and responses, the bishop circled the altar seven times sprinkling its base with holy water. The relics of saints were

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<sup>1</sup>Marie de l’Incarnation to Claude Martin, 7 September 1668. *Correspondance*, ed. Guy-Marie Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1971), 813–15 (Lettre CCXXXVIII). (Hereafter *MI Corr.*). “. . . mais je vous parleray volontiers de ses vertus.” All translations are my own except those from the *Jesuit Relations* (unless otherwise noted).

<sup>2</sup>Catherine’s account of the ceremony is found in Paul Ragueneau, *La vie de la Mère Catherine de Saint-Augustin, religieuse hospitalière de la miséricorde de Québec en la Nouvelle-France* (Paris: Florentin-Lambert, 1671), 145–52 (hereafter, *Vie*). “Aux trois coups de la Croix pour entrer dans l’Église, le Pere Brebeuf me dit que cela signifier le pouvoir de Jesus Souverain Evêque de l’Église”; “. . . signifient que les Catholiques épanus aux quatre coins du monde.” Ragueneau dates the ceremony to July 18, 1666, but the *Journal des Jésuites*, a chronicle of daily events kept by the Jesuits at Quebec, dates it a week earlier. *Le Journal des Jésuites*, ed. Abbés Laverdière et Casgrain (Québec: L. Brousseau, 1871), 346.

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interred within it, and the church was dedicated to the holy trinity—the new seat of a new bishop in a “New” World.

Catherine de Saint-Augustin’s description of this ceremony is richly detailed, symbolically significant, and surprisingly personal given that she was not present at the church that day. As a cloistered nun, she did not have permission to attend the dedication. Rather, she “found herself there in spirit by a special favor of heaven”; one of many she believed she experienced during her life.<sup>3</sup> Catherine recorded in her journal that she had been praying in the community chapel when a vision of the martyred Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf appeared to guide her through the dedication ceremony.<sup>4</sup> It was he who provided interpretations of the ritual’s symbolism, while Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary, Saint Augustine, Saint Catherine of Siena, and a host of others led her forth, “to be newly dedicated and consecrated to the Divine Majesty.”<sup>5</sup> In this way, Catherine managed to be “present” at one of the most important public events in the life of the young colony. She believed that during the ceremony she “received the same blessings as the church,” and thus linked herself to a liturgical ritual that served, symbolically, to consecrate all the lands claimed by France in North America.<sup>6</sup> She described how, upon entering the new church, she felt three thousand “true ministers of impurity” leave her and “go straight to Hell”; just some of the demons she believed had been tormenting her for years as she suffered temptations and mortifications in return for her own salvation and for that of Canada. Her presence at the ceremony, and interpretation of it, therefore, drew a direct connection between the work of local saints, the performance of traditions of holiness in colonial spaces, and the fate of the French colony and its Church.

The cathedral dedication is just one episode in Catherine’s mystical life, which she recorded in her spiritual journal, and later found a place in an extensive 1671 biography entitled, *La vie de la Mere Catherine de Saint-Augustin* (referred to here as the *Vie*).<sup>7</sup> Written by Catherine’s spiritual

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 145. “Nôtre Catherine de Saint Augustin y participa, et s’y trouva presente d’esprit par une faveur du Ciel toute particuliere.”

<sup>4</sup>Catherine de Saint-Augustin is referred to as “Catherine” throughout rather than by her surname for ease. Catholic female practices of taking religious names makes her surname, Longpré irrelevant. The same practice is used to refer to other female members of religious orders.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 146. “. . . pour être de nouveau dediée et consacrée à la divine Majesté.” Jean de Brébeuf (1593–1649) was among the first Jesuit missionaries to go to New France in 1625. He served many years in the Huron mission before he was taken captive and killed by Iroquois warriors in March 1649. He and Catherine never met in person.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 146. “. . . Et il me semloit qu’a chaque action de la ceremonie, le Pere de Brebeuf me faisoit approcher pour y recevoir la même part que l’Eglise.”

<sup>7</sup>Paul Ragueneau, *La vie de la Mère Catherine de Saint-Augustin, religieuse hospitalière de la miséricorde de Québec en la Nouvelle-France* (Paris: Florentin-Lambert, 1671).

director, the Jesuit Paul Ragueneau, the *Vie* frames Catherine’s life and explains her vibrant mysticism according to conventions of female Catholic sanctity then prevalent in Europe. Often, however, it is difficult to reconcile the deep and confining (especially for women) Counter Reformation traditions of Christian sanctity with colonial contexts, where the impact of the “frontier” had the potential to create social and cultural milieus that were less beholden to conventions, rules, and regulations than they were in France.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, Ragueneau’s account of Catherine’s spirituality overflows with deeply traditional themes that owe much to seventeenth-century French Catholicism, and to a long history of Christian mysticism and heroic suffering that date back to the first centuries of the Christian era.<sup>9</sup> On the other, Catherine’s description of the cathedral dedication (contained within the *Vie*), seems to present an early modern liturgical ceremony infused with innovations and variations in symbolism and meaning, which may point toward a developing New France identity. Therefore, in trying to understand the roles holy persons played in the colonial community, and the intersections between religious conservatism and innovation, it is important to move beyond discursive sanctity and attend to the live performance and its place in the public religious culture of New France. What made someone holy in New France? Why might Catherine de Saint-Augustin have seen Canada as an ideal place to become a saint? How might she have been seen, in turn, by colonial audiences? What, in short, do performances such as Catherine’s say about colonial identity, public life, and lived religion in early colonial Canada?

Performances, embodied practices, rituals, and expressions of knowledge can enact both memory and forgetting. Colonial holy performances invoked a long and deep tradition of Catholic sanctity, but, at the same time, worked to erase, or at least mitigate, the presence and challenge of the “New” World. They enabled not only the transfer and continuity of knowledge from Europe to Canada but also the forgetting—the overwriting or surrogation—of the

<sup>8</sup>The experiences of women in New France have been considerably debated by historians in recent years. Some have suggested that women enjoyed a privileged place in the colony, while others argue that their position was no different in Canada than in other pre-industrial European societies. Jan Noel, “New France: Les femmes favorisées,” *Atlantis* 6, 2 (Spring 1981), 80–98; France Parent, *Entre le juridique et le social. Le pouvoir des femmes à Québec au XVIIe siècle* (Quebec City: Groupe de recherche multidisciplinaire féministe, Université Laval, 1991); Jan Noel, “‘Nagging Wife’ Revisited: Women and the Fur Trade in New France,” *French Colonial History* 7 (2006): 45–60; Josette Brun, *Vie et mort du couple en Nouvelle-France: Québec et Louisbourg au XVIIIe siècle* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>For an overview of colonial female sanctity in New France, see Dominique Deslandres, “In the Shadow of the Cloister: Representations of Female Holiness in New France,” in *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas*, ed. Allan Greer and Jodi Bilinkoff (New York: Routledge, 2003), 129–52.

past in favor of a stable and continuous present.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the settlement of the Americas by Europeans might appear as an uninterrupted transfer rather than as the rupture it was, especially for indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, lying within colonial performances of cultural knowledge and the texts that recorded them was a deep history of how people interacted with the world and with each other. Performance was a system for learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, paying close attention to it promises to reveal not only the lived experience of early modern colonial sanctity but also the roles local holy persons filled in colonial public life.

Seventeenth-century performers of traditions of holiness laid claim to a special status that, if accepted by audiences (both ecclesiastical and lay, colonial and metropolitan), led to the informal canonization of the individual within the bounds of tradition, community expectations, and needs. Long before she was made into a character in her own life story through the hagiography that described her sanctity, Catherine was a living person who interacted with, and performed valued services for, her community. Her career as a “New” World saint was highlighted not only by a munificent theological charity but also by a performative asceticism directed toward local audiences where holiness was public and affecting. After her death, she was credited with miraculous interventions, which proved her holy status for believers. Through a close examination of each of these primary aspects of the holy performance (charity, asceticism, and miracles), I aim to show how tradition, the colony, colonial audiences, and Catherine herself interacted to create a public and useable form of local sanctity.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2–4.

<sup>11</sup>Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 53–78. Taylor criticizes Roach’s approach for failing to consider subaltern and dissenting performances that reject surrogation (174). For a more historical perspective on performance in the colonial world, see Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and especially Olivier Hubert, “Construire le rite comme un objet historique: Pour un usage pragmatique de l’anthropologie en histoire religieuse du Québec.” *SCHEC, Études d’histoire religieuse* 67 (2001): 81–91.

<sup>12</sup>Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell’s “five salient characteristics” of sanctity, derived from extensive statistical analysis of hagiographic literature composed between 1000 and 1700, include supernatural grace (or miracles), penitential asceticism, charitable work, worldly power, and evangelical activity. *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 158. The evangelical activity of colonial religious women has been explored by Dominique Deslandres in *Croire et faire croire: Les missions françaises au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 356–90. The worldly (that is, political) power of missionary women has not been significantly explored to date.

I. COLONIAL HOLINESS

Holy persons are some of the best documented but also most mythologized figures from the early colonial period. From the very early days of colonization, they appeared with a persistent regularity. In the mid-seventeenth century, especially, mystics, ascetics, missionaries, martyrs, writers, teachers, and doctors of souls and bodies came to the colony to sanctify themselves and to convert and save others. Mysticism thrived in early modern France and found a place in New France. Jean de Brébeuf, a missionary in Canada from 1625 to 1649, and Catherine’s celestial cathedral guide, was a practicing mystic during his life, as was the famous Ursuline nun and writer, Marie de l’Incarnation, when she arrived in Quebec in 1639.<sup>13</sup> By the early eighteenth-century, the Sulpician superior in Montreal, François Vachon de Belmont, could compare the Montreal ascetic Jeanne Le Ber to Rosa de Lima, the first canonized saint of the “New” World, claiming that what God had achieved in New Spain through this servant, he also wished to achieve in Canada through Jeanne.<sup>14</sup> Mysticism and saintly practices such as fasting, self-mortifications, and extreme prayer were common themes in writings by and about seventeenth-century devout men and women, and were also observed in select Native converts such as the Mohawk holy woman Catherine/Tekakwitha.<sup>15</sup>

The presence of performances and discourses of holiness in Spanish and English colonies suggests the social and cultural importance of sanctity was not limited to New France. In New England, the ecstatic religious experiences of Anne Hutchinson in the 1630s, and later Sarah Edwards and Abigail Hutchinson, echoed Catholic discourses of mystical holiness.<sup>16</sup> In New Spain, Saint Rosa de Lima was considered a new Saint Catherine of Siena and a protector and patron of her city.<sup>17</sup> In Canada, holiness was more than an abstract theological notion or an overseas extension of the French

<sup>13</sup>Marie de l’incarnation wrote hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of letters touching on all aspects of colonial life between her arrival in the colony in 1639 and her death in 1673. Those that have survived have been collected and published in *Correspondance*, ed. Guy-Marie Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1971).

<sup>14</sup>François Vachon de Belmont, “Abrégé de la vie et éloge funèbre de la Vénérable Sœur Jeanne Le Ber,” in “Éloges de quelques personnes mortes en odeur de sainteté à Montréal, en Canada, divisés en trois parties” (1722), *Rapport de l’archiviste de la province de Québec* (1929–1930): 144.

<sup>15</sup>Allan Greer, *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup>Susan Gustafson, *Eloquence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America*, (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute and University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 28–32.

<sup>17</sup>Kathleen Ann Myers, “‘Redeemer of America’: Rosa de Lima (1586–1617), the Dynamics of Identity, and Canonization,” in *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas*, ed. Allan Greer and Jodi Bilinoff (New York: Routledge, 2003), 251–53. See also Ronald J. Morgan, *Spanish American Saints and the Rhetoric of Gender* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002).

devotional culture of the time. It was a live performance beholden both to conservative forces from France and to local needs and expectations. It had a direct affect on colonial audiences, making it a significant aspect of the emerging French Atlantic world and an important, although often dismissed, element of colonial culture.

Canada's early history is speckled with holy performances, but Catherine de Saint-Augustin's was the first to become the subject of a full and independent hagiographic text.<sup>18</sup> Rather than merely a derivative Saint's Life, however, the *Vie* is a rich and detailed text that makes extensive use of Catherine's own writings supplemented with commentaries by Paul Ragueneau, who served as her spiritual director from 1648 until his departure from the colony in 1662. Thereafter, the two maintained a close relationship through correspondence. In comparison with other contemporary male hagiographers of colonial female lives, then, Ragueneau spent a significant amount of time in Canada. He knew the country and its inhabitants well, and, as a result, the *Vie* conveys a certain intimacy and vitality. Furthermore, evidence of Catherine's activities, relationships, and spirituality is found in letters, memoirs, journals, and chronicles written from a variety of perspectives, not least of which is her own.<sup>19</sup> Extent sources highlight the interaction of the performance of holiness with the colonial experience, of traditions and systems of knowledge with local needs and

<sup>18</sup>Prior to the publication of Ragueneau's biography, Catherine's contemporary, Marie de l'Incarnation, wrote biographies of three of her companions in the Ursuline convent, Marie de Saint-Joseph, Anne Bataille, and Madame de la Peltrie. Even so, these lack the depth and detail of the *Vie*, and the authoritative voice of the male ecclesiastical interpreter. See *MI Corr.*, 436–73 (Lettre CXL); 843–48 (Lettre CCXLIX); and 904–14 (Lettre CCLXIX). Earlier, Ragueneau had been at the forefront of efforts to have eight Jesuit missionaries from Canada canonized as martyrs, including Brébeuf, and had gathered a collection of documents pertaining to them. The resulting "manuscript of 1652" was never published, however. "Mémoires touchant la mort et les vertus (des Pères Jésuites) (1652)," Archives de la Société de Jésus, Canada Français (ASJCF), CSM no. 210. St-Jérôme, Québec. A printed version is found in *Rapport de l'archiviste de la province de Québec* (1924–1925): 1–92.

<sup>19</sup>These include a variety of letters written by Marie de l'Incarnation and found in *MI, Corr.*; Marie de Saint-Bonaventure de Jésus, "Lettre Circulaire" in *JR* 52: 56–81 (1668); Jeanne-Françoise Juchereau de St-Ignace and Marie Andrée Duplessis de Ste-Hélène, *Les Annales de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Québec, 1636–1716*, ed. Albert Jamet (Québec: Hôtel Dieu de Québec, 1939), passim (hereafter *AHDQ*). More recent biographies include Henri-Raymond Casgrain, *Histoire de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Québec* (Québec: L. Brousseau 1878); Léonidas Hudon, *Une fleur mystique de la Nouvelle-France: Vie de la Mère Marie-Catherine de Saint-Augustin, religieuse de l'Hôtel Dieu du Précieux-sang de Québec, 1632–1668* (Montréal: Bureaux du Messager Canadien, 1907); Guy-Marie Oury, *L'itinéraire mystique de Catherine de Saint-Augustin* (Chambray-lès-Tours: C. L. D., 1985). A wide variety of documents concerning her canonization procedure can be found in *Beatificationis et canonizationis servae dei Mariae Catharinae a Sancto Augustino (in saec. Catharinae Symon de Longprey) monialis professaee Sonorum Hospitalarium a Misericordia O.S. Augustini (1668): positio super introductione causae et virtutibus ex officio concinnata* (Rome: Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis Sanctorum Officium Historicum, 1974).

pressures. Consequently, they allow for an exploration of the public role this holy figure played in local society and culture.

## II. CHARITY

Seventeenth-century notions of heroic charity guided Catherine de Saint-Augustin’s religious vocation, and informed the ways her contemporaries received her performance of holiness. Churchmen and theologians of the time ranked charity first amongst the Christian virtues because they believed it united the soul most immediately with God, and thus facilitated the practice of the other two theological virtues (faith and hope), and the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude). Although the Council of Trent (1545–1563) had reaffirmed the necessity of good works for salvation, Catholic theologians continued to regard charity as a pure form of love for God rather than merely as the acts of kindness toward the less fortunate normally associated with the term today.<sup>20</sup> Charity was thought to come in degrees from a beginning stage practiced by those who wished simply to expunge their own sins, to a unitive desire on the part of *perfecti* to depart from the world of temptations and go with Christ.<sup>21</sup> In a draft version of his *vita* about the seventeenth-century Mohawk holy woman Catherine/Tekakwitha, the Jesuit missionary Claude Cholenec explained the importance of charity for the achievement of sanctity. “Charity is not only the queen of virtues, enriching all others, but it is also the source of sanctity, the shortest and safest road to holiness and perfection. . . . Without this virtue, however holy and perfect one appears before man, one is nothing before God.”<sup>22</sup>

According to Paul Ragueneau, Catherine’s desire to experience perfect charity and to become a saint led her to Canada.

The great desire that she had to suffer and to undertake for the love of God and the salvation of souls all that she could according to her courage and her zeal caused her to take the resolution to leave everything behind, family,

<sup>20</sup>M. Scaduto “Works of Charity,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. vol. 3 (Thomson Gale, 2003), 400–420.

<sup>21</sup>*Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. II, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 675 (session 6, ch. 10, 13 January 1547). E. Dublanchy, “Charité,” *Dictionnaire de théologie Catholique*, vol. 2 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1910): 2217–66.

<sup>22</sup>Pierre Cholenec, “La vie de Catherine Tegakouita, première vierge Iroquoise,” is found in translation in *The Positio of the Historical Section of the Sacred Congregation of Rites on the Introduction of the Cause for Beatification and Canonization and the Virtues of the Servant of God, Katherine Tekakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1940), 290. The original letter is held by the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec. On the various *vitas* of Catherine/Tekakwitha, see Allan Greer, “Savage/Saint: The Lives of Kateri Tekakwitha” in *Vingt ans après Habitants et marchands: Lectures de l’histoire des XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles canadiens*, ed. Sylvie Dépatie, Catherine Desbarats et al. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), 138–59.

friends and even France itself, to go to Canada, of which she had no knowledge, and where she knew there was much to suffer and everything to fear. But she feared nothing, having been brought here by a love for God which accompanied her, and in which she placed all her confidence.<sup>23</sup>

Just as Canada became a stopping point for French migratory workers in the seventeenth century, so too did it become a destination for men and women in search of a deeper spiritual experience.<sup>24</sup> Whereas men tended to stay only a few years in the colony, however, religious women almost invariably remained for life. The religiously ambitious, men and women, believed that the greatest spiritual experiences were available only to those who detached themselves from tempting but ultimately detrimental, worldly allurements, including ecclesiastical power and glorification. Significant themes in early modern French mysticism included wanderings to far off places (both physical and spiritual) and the desire to suffer and to invert (however temporarily) the social hierarchies that placed France over New France, men over women, and the rich over the poor.<sup>25</sup> The would-be holy person's desire to seek out marginality was bound up with aspirations to humiliate and eradicate the self in order to achieve a more perfect union with God. Soon after she arrived in Canada, Catherine wrote a letter to the superior of her motherhouse in Bayeux in which she expressed her first impressions of her new home.

We have finally arrived in the land we have so longed for. But we did not get here without difficulties. We had to leave behind harsh struggles in France and suffer violent storms on the sea in order to arrive in this little paradise of Quebec, where now everything is changed to contentment. I say to you, my dearest Mother, that it is true that I left a house of holiness, but also that I have found another at the ends of the earth which cedes nothing to the first.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Vie*, 39–40. “Les grands desirs qu’elle avoit de souffrir et d’entreprendre pour l’amour de Dieu et le salut des ames, tout ce qui pourroit se presenter à son courage et à son zele, luy firent prendre la resolution de tout quitter, parens et amis, et la France même, pour s’en aller en Canada où elle n’avoit aucune connoissance, et où elle sçavoit qu’il y avoit beaucoup à souffrir et tout à craindre: mais elle ne craignoit rien, y étant uniquement portée par l’amour de Dieu qui l’y devoit accompagner, et auquel elle mettoit toute sa confiance.”

<sup>24</sup> On migration to New France, see Peter Moogk, “Reluctant Exiles: Emigrants from France in Canada before 1760,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1989): 463–505.

<sup>25</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 256–59.

<sup>26</sup> *Vie*, 55. “Nous sommes enfin arrivées en la terre tant souhaitée: Nous n’y sommes pas venus sans peine. Il a falu livrer de rudes combats pour quitter la France, souffrir de violentes tempêtes sur la Mer pour arriver dans ce petit Paradis de Quebec, où maintenant tout est changé en contentement. Je vous diray, ma chere Mere, qu’il est vray que j’ay quitté une Maison de sainteté, mais que j’en ay trouvée une autre au bout du monde qui ne lui cede en rien.”



By most any measure, however, New France in 1648 was far from a paradise for French settlers. Although it had been founded forty years previously, Canada in 1648 was a marginal and vulnerable colony made up of sparsely settled communities spread out along the Saint Lawrence River. The villages of Trois-Rivières and Montreal were little more than fur trading posts. While the colonial capital at Quebec harbored imperial ambitions—a governor and numerous religious institutions including, schools, a hospital, a seminary, and a Jesuit college—it was little more than a small town on the edge of a vast river and a vaster forest.<sup>27</sup> The ill-defined landmass claimed by France stretched from the Atlantic coast far into the interior and was populated primarily by indigenous peoples, some of whom were allied with the French, but many of whom were not.

Jesuit priests or colonial officials who may have dreamt of a culturally French and religiously Catholic imperial dominion, populated by converted Natives living side-by-side with productive French and Métis colonists, found only disappointment. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Iroquois League, a group of five indigenous nations located in what is now upstate New York, posed a particular threat to French settlement and to the vital alliances French officials had struck with other native groups—in particular, the Huron. In 1648, the Iroquois had taken and burned the Huron town the Jesuits called St-Joseph. The following year, Huronia itself fell, and in 1650 the entire Huron mission, once France’s most promising, was abandoned. At the same time, other Iroquois war parties struck at the heart of Canada, spreading panic amongst settlers at Trois-Rivières and Montreal and “casting terror and fright everywhere.” By 1653, the desolation had even reached the gates of Quebec, where the Jesuit Joseph Poncet was taken captive and another Frenchman was burned to death. These calamities for the French shaped the first years of Catherine’s life in Canada. Nevertheless, Quebec was a paradise for her because, according to Paul Ragueneau, there she “found what she had been looking for, crosses and sufferings that would accompany her until the day of her death.”<sup>28</sup>

Canada, it seems, entered into Catherine’s consciousness early in her life. In the opinion of many seventeenth-century Frenchmen the colonies were, above all, a place of suffering, exile, and violence. Wars with the Iroquois not only

<sup>27</sup>The census of 1666 counted 2,857 Frenchmen in the Quebec region, but the town itself had a population of only about 600. The total French population of the Saint Lawrence Valley amounted to 3,173. Allowing for errors in the data, the population may have been as many as 4,219. Marcel Trudel, *La population du Canada en 1666: Recensement reconstitué* (Sillery: Québec: Septentrion, 1995), 49–54.

<sup>28</sup>*Vie*, 53–55. “Mais elle y trouva ce qu’elle y étoit allé chercher, des croix et des souffrances qui l’y ont accompagné jusques à la mort.” “Crosses” were a common euphemism for sufferings of all kinds.

spread fear on both sides of the Atlantic but also contributed to an atmosphere of spiritual heroism. In France, the colony acquired a reputation as a poor place to be a settler but a splendid place to become a saint. Within this context, the young and precociously religious Catherine first conceived a desire to go there. In her writings, she later explained how, from a very young age, she had desired to suffer for God's will and for the salvation of others. A meeting with a Jesuit priest when she was just three years old left her with the powerful impression that those who suffered were in the best position to do the will of God and find salvation through charity.<sup>29</sup> When she joined the novitiate of the *hospitalières* of Bayeux at the age of twelve, she told the mistress of novices that she would never leave the convent except to go to Canada.<sup>30</sup> When the call came from Quebec to send reinforcements for the Hôtel-Dieu, Catherine volunteered despite her age (only fifteen), her status in the community (a novice), and the fierce resistance of her family.

Unfortunately, Catherine wrote little about the colony itself, overwriting her own experiences of rupture with the appearance of continuity from one paradise to another. Rather, her writings reveal a focus on her personal spiritual development that is consistent with the genre of female spiritual writing of the period. The journal was a common and useful tool of interior self-examination and exterior oversight, which provided confessors with the material they would later use to shape the holy performance for a positive reception amongst French ecclesiastical audiences. Although often regarded as one of patriarchal control, the relationship between spiritual women and male advisors could be rich and complex. Male confessors offered female mystics the chance for legitimacy and authority, while spiritual women offered their male confessors direct access to an "ecstatic form of religious experience beyond anything they had learned at seminary and university."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, a priest's relationship with a spiritually famous woman could enhance his own reputation. For Paul Ragueneau, who left Canada under somewhat of a cloud in 1662, Catherine perhaps offered the opportunity to improve his own standing and that of the Canadian mission generally following the difficulties of the 1640s and 1650s.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>31</sup>Jodi Bilinkoff, "Confessors, Penitents, and the Construction of Identities in Early Modern Avila," in *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800*, ed. Barbara B. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 95.

<sup>32</sup>Ragueneau was superior of the Huron mission when the Iroquois destroyed it in 1649–1650. Several Jesuits subsequently questioned his leadership, accusing him of being too political to be an effective missionary. Barthélemy Vimont to Goswin Nickel, 8 August 1655, in *Monumenta Novae Franciae*, vol. 8, ed. Lucien Campeau (Rome-Quebec: Institutum Historicum Soc. Iesu; Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1967–), 745 (doc. 150).

Although the original has been lost, significant segments of Catherine’s journal have survived in the direct and lengthy quotations Ragueneau employed in the *Vie*. A comparable case suggests that this practice was not unusual and, furthermore, that he likely altered the surviving quotations very little from what Catherine originally wrote. In 1677, the French Benedictine Claude Martin composed the *vita* of his mother and Catherine’s contemporary in Canada, the superior of the New France Ursulines, Marie de l’Incarnation. Like Ragueneau, Martin quoted extensively from Marie’s own writings. Where Catherine’s journal has been lost, however, Marie’s writings have, in part, survived. Direct comparisons with the originals show that although Martin took pains to render his mother’s writings into “a more intelligible style,” he made very few serious changes. Although Martin altered words here and there, added phrases of his own where he felt explanation was needed, and omitted some passages, overall his editing was restrained.<sup>33</sup> Given Ragueneau’s close spiritual relationship with Catherine and his desire to authenticate her holiness for ecclesiastical audiences in France, it is possible to assert with confidence that the quotations in the *Vie* differ only in detail from what Catherine wrote.

Despite Catherine’s persistent focus on her spirituality, even the most religious and mystical of her writings, when combined with other sources such as the *Jesuit Relations* and the *Annales de l’Hôtel-Dieu de Québec*, convey the presence of the colonial frontier, making it possible to piece together aspects of her colonial encounter, and impressions of the colony’s affect upon her. Of the three *hospitalières* who journeyed to Canada in 1648, Catherine alone was singled out for special comment by the Jesuit superior, Jérôme Lalemant. In his yearly report, or *Relation*, he commented on the “zeal which led her to desire Crosses with love” and marveled that at such a young age Catherine would voluntarily insist upon a virtual exile in New France.<sup>34</sup> Although she retired behind the cloister walls of the Quebec hospital almost as soon as she arrived, and for the most part led a life of regulation and order, Catherine’s writings impart a spirit of excitement and adventure as well as fear and uncertainty. “We are not in great danger [from the Iroquois] in our house,” she wrote to her father. Yet “we are between life and death. . . . All of it, I assure you, causes me no fear.”<sup>35</sup>

Her work in the community hospital brought her into daily contact with the terrible violence caused by war and disease amongst Native and French

<sup>33</sup>Claude Martin, *La vie de la vénérable Mère Marie de l’Incarnation* (Paris: Louis Billaine, 1677). Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 129–32.

<sup>34</sup>*JR* 32: 132. “Son ardeur luy faisoit souhaitter les Croix avec amour” (my translation).

<sup>35</sup>*Vie*, 57. “Nous ne sommes pas en grand danger dans nôtre Maison. . . . Nous sommes entre la vie et la mort. . . . Tout cela, je vous assure, ne me fait aucune peur.”

populations. In the hospital, the nuns cared for bodies while trying to convert souls. Occasionally they were successful. In one case, reported in the community's *Annales*, a "hardened and opinionated" Native man belonging to an unspecified nation, who found himself in the hospital, was reportedly so moved by the self-sacrifice of the sisters that he largely abandoned his strident opposition to Christianity. According to the community's *Annales*, his "thoughts and reflections [on the charity of the nuns] softened his iron heart which gave in, and being made a good Christian, he showed that charity is an excellent preacher."<sup>36</sup>

Anecdotes of this sort achieve a disproportionate presence in the historical record because they provided just the sort of didactic lessons nuns and priests liked to record for reading audiences back home. In reality, however, colonial life was difficult and complex. Even for a cloistered hospital nun of some privilege it presented physical, social, and spiritual challenges beyond anything a French convent offered at the time. The Hôtel-Dieu was constantly short of funds and continually overwhelmed. Often Natives from the nearby Sillery mission, located four miles upriver from Quebec, would go to the sisters for help when they contracted European diseases or suffered wounds in battle. For the most part, outcomes were not good. When the Huron mission collapsed in 1650, four hundred refugees arrived "at the door of the hospital." It was left to the sisters, including the recently arrived Sœur Saint-Augustin, to find a way to feed and care for so many, even filling the role of priest by sitting at the convent grill to hear confession from the Christians.<sup>37</sup>

To contend with the challenges posed by the colony, Catherine quickly began to think not only of her own religious vocation but also of the colony and its inhabitants, both French and Native, as a form of spiritual charity. Although she claimed she feared nothing, much of her vocation of suffering and self-sacrifice seems dedicated to keeping at bay the forces of evil that must have seemed to her to populate the land. She saw demons everywhere, and she took it upon herself to chase them away and defeat them. Her writings give the impression that she found the colony very difficult to love. Virtually from the time of her arrival, she suffered terrible temptations to flee and return to France. In an undated letter addressed to the superior of the motherhouse at Bayeux (who also happened to be her aunt), Catherine admitted, "In truth, if God did not preserve me from loving my creature comforts too much, all the good things that you tell me [about life in France] would only give me the desire to taste it." She seems to have lapsed into a

<sup>36</sup>AHDQ, 132. "Ces pensées et ces reflexions amolirent ce coeur de fer qui se rendit, et s'etant fait bon chretien, il fit voir que la charité est un excellent prédicateur."

<sup>37</sup>Mère de Saint-Bonaventure to Sébastien Cramoisy, 29 Septembre 1650, in *JR* 36: 58–60.

spiritual depression, which manifested itself in temptations against her vocation and in a desire for the sanctification that such sufferings promised according to long Christian tradition.

It was only in 1658, however—ten years after her arrival in the colony—that Catherine experienced the mystical call that would define her vocation and give meaning to those sufferings. The following year she formally offered herself to the divine as a victim. From then on, she experienced a deep and profound spiritual life, which she recorded in her journal. She believed she mystically experienced the divine in conversations she had with God, Jesus, and numerous saints of the Church who appeared to her in visions. Both theorist Gavin Flood and historian Michel de Certeau emphasize the dialogical nature of the mystical encounter, arguing that the holy person’s identity develops in textual conversations between herself and the divine and between tradition and community.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, De Certeau suggests that, in the late Middle Ages, mysticism was thought of as a normal way of communicating with the divine and expressing profound religiosity, but by the late seventeenth century theologians increasingly viewed it as extraordinary and abnormal.<sup>39</sup> As a result, formal spiritual biographies began to portray mystical experiences as ineffable and sublime. The introduction to the *Vie* includes a vigorous defense of mysticism generally, and Catherine’s in particular. In it, Ragueneau insisted that Catherine’s struggles with demons were an obsession and not a possession. Possession, he explained, “is a malignant operation by which the devil becomes master of the powers of the man, taking away thought and liberty, and speaking and responding by the mouth of the possessed.” Obsessed persons, on the other hand, know their afflictions are caused by demons, and suffering for divine justice remains a choice.<sup>40</sup> In this way, he carefully separated Catherine from the infamous possession of the Ursuline nuns of Loudun in 1640s France.<sup>41</sup> Even so, before the *Vie* was published, Jansenists and other rigorists in France who were growing skeptical of mystical experiences, demonic voices, and physical manifestations of divine grace, raised objections to Catherine’s vocation. It was likely only through the

<sup>38</sup>Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 157–64; Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15–16.

<sup>39</sup>Michel de Certeau, “Mysticism,” trans. Marsanne Brammer, *Diacritics* 22, no. 2 (1992), 11–25. See also Marie-Florine Bruneau, *Women Mystics Confront the Modern World: Marie de l’Incarnation and Madame Guyon* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 3–7.

<sup>40</sup>*Vie*, 172. “La possession est une operation maligne, par laquelle le diable se rend maître des puissances de l’homme, jusques à luy ôter la reflexion et la liberté, et à parler et répondre personnellement par sa bouche.”

<sup>41</sup>Michel De Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

patronage of the Duchesse d'Aiguillon, foundress of the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec and niece of Cardinal Richelieu, that the *Vie* was published.<sup>42</sup>

Despite rhetorical efforts to soften Catherine's mysticism, and ongoing efforts to separate female mystics from conscious thought and action, it is clear in Catherine's writings that she regarded her vocation and holy performance as a choice and herself as a missionary. Early on in her mystical relationship with Jean de Brébeuf, which began in 1662, Catherine reported that the former missionary asked her in a vision to help the Jesuits in their work. He told her he was greatly pained to see the country for which he had given his life "now a land of abomination and impiety." "Sister Saint-Augustin! Have pity on us! Help us I pray you!"<sup>43</sup> She agreed. Two years later, she was again mystically presented with the choice to continue to suffer for God or to return to a more ordinary vocation. She told Ragueneau that when she prevaricated by responding that she wanted what God wanted, her answer was refused. "Absolutely he wanted me to make the choice myself." She then committed herself to suffer for others, asking that in return her soul be entirely purified and that all her sins, past and future, be forgiven.<sup>44</sup>

Voluntarily Catherine became a missionary and a victim of charity. While gendered notions of holiness dictated that female mysticism was contemplative and reflective, Catherine's performance and writings, and even the *Vie*, present a religious vocation that was active and public.

Her charity for the next life was truly all powerful to undertake everything, to suffer everything and to do everything. Even when her entire heart turned against her salvation by the work of the demons that seemed to fill everything with their malignant qualities, even in the middle of such revulsions, she offered herself to God as a public victim who immolated herself for future salvation. . . . She continued in this spirit of charity until her death.<sup>45</sup>

### III. ASCETICISM

It was through asceticism that Catherine manifested her charity and mysticism before local audiences and acquired a public presence in the colony. Although

<sup>42</sup>*Vie*, 8–15. Oury, *l'Itinéraire mystique*, 12.

<sup>43</sup>*Vie*, 182. "... maintenant une terre d'abomination et d'impieeté ... Sœur de Saint Augustin! nous porterez-vous compassion! Aidez-nous je vous en prie?" In Catherine's mystical life, Brébeuf replaced Ragueneau as her spiritual advisor when the latter left the colony in 1662. *Vie*, 179–89.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 193. "... mais absolument il voulut que je fisse choix moy-méme."

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 80. "Sa charité pour le prochain étoit vrayement toute-puissante à tout entreprendre, à tout souffrir et à tout faire; lors même qu'elle sentoît tout son coeur revolté contre son prochain, par l'opération des démons, qui sembloient l'avoir toute remplie de leurs qualitez malignes; puisqu'au milieu de toutes ces revoltes; elle s'offroit à Dieu comme une victime publique qui s'immoloit pour le prochain ... continuant dans cet esprit de charité jusqu'à la mort."

many members of religious orders in early Canada, men and women, engaged in self-mortifications, Catherine’s asceticism separated her from the crowd. According to Ragueneau, “Her mortifications were continual in every sense, in all their power, on her body, on her soul, on her spirit, and on her will.”<sup>46</sup> She wore bracelets covered with iron points that pierced her skin as she worked in the hospital. She slept little at night and never took rests during the day. When she did sleep it was on a hard board. In winter she would often roll in the snow. “She combined the austerity of fasts with bloody disciplines, and all the mortifications she could.” She would often tear at her body to root out the cause of a sin of which she believed herself guilty. All the while her internal struggles with demons, and long days and nights spent in prayer, took their toll on her physical health. But, Ragueneau wrote, “she was always victorious by the grace of Jesus-Christ.”<sup>47</sup>

Practiced to varying degrees, asceticism went hand in hand with mystical pursuits from the very early days of the Church. While late antiquity is often the focus of histories and theoretical studies of the phenomenon, religiously motivated self-discipline and bodily mortifications were hardly uncommon in post-Reformation Europe. There was a strong penitential streak in French society that endured from the sixteenth-century wars of religion and late medieval tradition to the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>48</sup> Voluntary suffering in pursuit of perfect theological charity, indifference toward the world, submission to the will of God, and obedience to authorities all find long precedent in the annals of the Church. Through such practices, ascetics sought to transform themselves by drowning the proud will in cascading waves of sufferings, mortifications, and humiliations.

At the same time, however, ascetics also worked to reform society by making themselves models for others to emulate. Through voluntary suffering, Catherine responded to, and attempted to alter, the colonial world she confronted in her daily life in Quebec. Often, Ragueneau wrote, God would give her knowledge of sins committed by others, and of the resistance others posed to God’s grace and justice so that she might offer herself for their salvation and that of the country. She bore “upon herself punishments which had been prepared for others.”<sup>49</sup> On numerous occasions he credited her with bringing outcasts back into society and with rescuing sinners from

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 80. “Sa mortification a été continuelle en tous ses sens, en toutes ses puissances, en son corps, en son ame, en son esprit et en sa volonté.”

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 86–87. “Elle joignit l’austerité des jeûnes, des disciplines sanglantes, et de toutes les mortifications qu’elle pût.” “. . . toujours elle a été victorieuse par la grace de Jesus-Christ.”

<sup>48</sup>Ann W. Ramsey, “Flagellation and the French Counter-Reformation: Asceticism, Social Discipline, and the Evolution of a Penitential Culture,” *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 577.

<sup>49</sup>*Vie*, 237. “Et de porter sur soy les punitions qui étoient préparées pour les autres.”

purgatory. In one instance, she promised to procure masses and offer monthly confessions in return for divine assurances that all the sick who died in the Hôtel-Dieu would receive God's mercy.<sup>50</sup> In another, a possessed girl, Barbe Hallay, was placed in her care. Marie de l'Incarnation reported that a great battle ensued between Catherine and the demon possessing the girl, from which Catherine emerged battered and bruised, but victorious. Barbe Hallay then rejoined the sanctioned social and faith communities.<sup>51</sup>

For the most part, Catherine undertook to suffer for those who were outside of society in one way or another. She offered herself for someone who was called to the religious life but was having trouble remaining faithful to her vocation. She converted a man who had been experimenting in witchcraft.<sup>52</sup> She took care of souls, not only physically as a part of her duties as a hospital nun, but also spiritually in the mystical sufferings she undertook according to what she believed was God's will. In her journal, she described the mortifications she undertook on behalf of a particular sinner for whom Bishop Laval asked her to pray in early 1667.

The second day of January, while saying Matins with the community, I was so violently tempted that I was almost in total despair. After Matins, I turned against myself, and I promised Our Lord that as soon as I could leave the choir I would discipline this miserable rebel body to the law of the spirit. My intention was to strip naked, jump into the snow and bury myself completely and to remain there for such a long time that I would be happy for once. As I was getting ready to execute my plan, it occurred to me that I should not do it without permission. In the meantime until I could ask, I contented myself to stand in the snow up to my waist and to stay there for the length of time it took to say the *Miserere* twice. The rest of the night I was able to rest a little better than usual.<sup>53</sup>

While Canada may have offered opportunities for spiritual and physical sufferings that were unavailable in France, mysticism on both sides of the

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 163–65; *MI Corr.*, 814 (Lettre CCXXXVIII), 7 Septembre 1668. This event took place in 1660–1661. Another account, not mentioned by Ragueneau or Marie, suggests that Barbe Hallay was exorcized by a lay woman using a relic of Jean de Brébeuf. "Récit du soulagement d'une possédée par l'entremise des reliques du R. P. Jean de Brébeuf." *ASJCF*, CSM no. 247.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 284, 289.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 282. "Le second jour de Janvier, en disant Matines avec la Communauté, je fus si violemment tentée, que j'en étois quasi au desespoir. Apres les Matines, je me fâchay contre moy même, et je promis à Nôtre Seigneur que si-tôt que je ferois sortie du Choeur, je domterois ce miserable corps rebelle à la loy de l'esprit. Ma prétention étoit de me dépouïller, de me jeter et de m'enfoûir dans la neige, et y demeurer si longtemps, que j'en fusse contente pour une bonne fois. Comme j'étois en devior d'exécuter mon dessein, il me vint en pensée que je devois pas faire cela sans congé: de sorte que jusqu'à ce que je l'eusse demandé, je me contentay de me mettre seulement dans la neige jusques à la ceinture, et d'y rester environ deux *Miserere*. Le reste de la nuit je fus un peu plus de repos qu'à l'ordinaire."



Atlantic adhered to strongly conservative protocols. The ascetic’s immediate goal was to tame the personal will, but to do so in a way that shaped the self toward a higher good, the law, and the will of God and Church. Catherine’s mortifications were tempered by “the law of the spirit” and obedience to her superiors. While she may have aimed to place herself to one side of structures of temporal power, in no way did she rebel against the Church itself. Indeed, she sought acceptance in it by clinging to the guidance of her confessors and by struggling to have her religious experiences declared orthodox by imitating models and examples that came before.<sup>54</sup> As a result, her writings express an instantly recognizable brand of ascetic spirituality. She mortified herself because she believed God willed it and Church authorities sanctioned it.

Besides suffering for the living, Catherine’s community extended to the realm of the dead. In her journal, she described how she suffered for souls in purgatory so that they might enter heaven that much sooner.<sup>55</sup> Purgatory was a late medieval development in Catholic theology that posited a place less distant than heaven or hell where the living could maintain some contact with the dead and where penitential suffering could continue after death. The doctrine of purgatory, reinforced at Trent, meant that, to some degree, Christianity became a “cult of living friends in the service of dead ones.”<sup>56</sup> Catherine’s patronage linked the faithful departed to those left behind, and because many of those souls in purgatory for which she suffered had lived in France, she also showed how religious suffering in the colony could benefit the metropole too.

Yet there was always a risk that the devil might try to trick the holy, and it was believed that women were particularly susceptible to diabolical wiles. While at Mass on April 2, 1661, a Saturday, Catherine had another vision of Jesus. At first kind and filled with love for her, this *Jésus prétendu* (so-called Jesus) soon changed and became accusing and threatening. “He told me that the shortest and most assured route to my own damnation was that very one which I was on.” The vision made her question her commitment to charity and her ascetic vocation. But, she later recalled, she soon began to suspect its authenticity. When communion was offered to her, this false Jesus disappeared.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Steven T. Katz, “The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 36.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, Book 5, “Sa vie souffrante pour les ames de Purgatoire.”

<sup>56</sup>John Bossy, “The Mass as Social Institution, 1200–1700,” *Past and Present* 100, no. 1 (1983): 42. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. II, 774 (Session 25, Dec. 3–4 1663).

<sup>57</sup>*Vie*, 165–68. “Il me representoit que le plus court et le plus assuré chemin de ma perte étoit celui que je prenois.”

Incidents such as this one reveal some of the doubts Catherine had about her vocation. She may have wondered how she could become holy in a land she believed to be infested with devils. Her writings are filled with accounts of the temptations she suffered, especially to return to France. Yet had Catherine done so, it is unlikely she would have achieved a significant audience for her holy performance. Canada lent an instantaneously heroic element to her vocation and enhanced her visions and sufferings in the eyes of her contemporaries, both amongst the ecclesiastical hierarchy and in the lay *dévo*t community in France. “If I had listened to the council of many persons [those who encouraged her not to go to Canada],” she wrote in an undated letter, “I would never have possessed the good that I possess in Canada.” In the colony, she found spiritual fulfillment in “all the little crosses that are inseparable from the country.”<sup>58</sup> “My poor Canada, such as it is, gives me everything I need,” she wrote to the superior of Bayeux, her aunt. “I wish only for the grace that I hope for from Our Lord to stay here my whole life.”<sup>59</sup>

Canada was a crucial part of her vocation, and without it she was unlikely to achieve her goal of becoming a saint. Even so, despite prevalent cultural models, it may well have been a great psychological challenge to accept that God wished to sanctify her through temptations and punishments, and to make her his servant by asking her to suffer. Indeed, a mystical vocation was a bit of a gamble for spiritual women at the time. Accusations of heresy and trickery at the hands of the devil, as well as a perceived loss of humility or obedience, could destroy a reputation. The same Tridentine doctrine that encouraged male mystics to seek out the poor and humble and preach to them, sought to circumscribe female spirituality, which male theologians often viewed as potentially subversive and even dangerous. Yet, if successful, such a vocation could reap extraordinary spiritual, and sometimes temporal, rewards.<sup>60</sup>

Performances of female sanctity, therefore, tended toward a precautionary secrecy during life, while hagiographies written after death cleaved to established models as a way of proving the orthodoxy of the subject. Even the superior of the Hôtel-Dieu, Mère Saint-Bonaventure, claimed, in a letter she wrote shortly after Catherine’s death in 1668, that she knew nothing of the great temptations and sufferings her sister had experienced in life. “We were well aware that her bodily weaknesses were great and constant, and we saw that she bore them like a saint. . . . But we were surprised, after her death, to learn that for sixteen years God had been trying that brave Soul by

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>60</sup>Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 322–28.

periods of aridity and temptation, seasons of spiritual abandonment and extreme destitution.”<sup>61</sup> Beyond the circle of her confessors and the bishop, no one officially was to know about Catherine’s extraordinary vocation. Only after her death would Paul Ragueneau reveal how God had conducted her in perfect orthodoxy.

Yet, as in the case of her charity, clues in the sources reveal the lived relationship Catherine had with the colony and its inhabitants, and they make clear that knowledge of her extraordinary vocation did, indeed, reach wider audiences. Some in her immediate circle certainly suspected what was going on, and it seems word of her extraordinary devotions slowly leaked beyond the walls of the cloister.<sup>62</sup> A passage from the same letter in which Mère Saint-Bonaventure denied knowledge of Catherine’s trials seems to suggest that the opposite may have been closer to the truth. “We know that she spared no pains when an opportunity offered to win a soul to Our Lord, either by her prayers or her mortifications—even to the point of giving herself up to divine justice in the quality of a victim. And in truth, God did not spare her, but made her feel the weight of his arm, terribly punishing in her the sins of those for whom she made a sacrifice of herself.”<sup>63</sup> It is difficult to image that the other nuns of the Hôtel-Dieu remained ignorant of the spiritual trials of one of their own. Although a member of the Ursuline order, Marie de l’Incarnation wrote that the Jesuit Pierre Chastellain, who became Catherine’s spiritual advisor following Ragueneau’s departure from the colony in 1662, showed her parts of Catherine’s spiritual journal and had told her about the bruises and wounds Catherine had received in combat with Barbe Hallay’s demons.<sup>64</sup>

In her seminal work, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum argues that asceticism enabled holy women “to determine the shape of their lives”—to try to control their environments, to change or convert others, to criticize authority figures, “and to claim for themselves teaching, counseling, and reforming roles for which the religious tradition provided, at best,

<sup>61</sup>“Lettre Circulaire,” in *JR* 52: 67. “Nous sçavons bien que ses infirmités corporelles estoient grandes, et continuës; et nous voyions qu’elle les supportoit saintement. . . . Mais nous avons esté surprises depuis sa mort, lors que nous avons appris que depuis seize ans Dieu avoit éprouvé cette Ame forte, par des ariditez et tentations, des abandons interieurs et des delaissemens extremes.”

<sup>62</sup>*Vie*, 335.

<sup>63</sup>“Lettre Circulaire,” in *JR* 52: 66. Nous sçavons qu’elle n’épargnoit aucunes peines, dans les occasions de gagner une ame à Notre-Seigneur, soit par ses prieres, soit par ses mortifications; jusqu’à s’estre adandonnée à la Divine Justice, en qualité de victime; qui vraiment ne la pas épargnée, et qui luy a fait sentir la pesanteur de son bras, punissant terriblement en elle, les pechez de ceux pour lesquels elle se sacrifioit.”

<sup>64</sup>*MI Corr.*, 813–15 (Lettre CCXXXVIII), à son fils, 7 Septembre 1668.

ambivalent support.<sup>65</sup> The sorts of power and influence denied to late medieval women by the demands of Church, family, and society were equally, if not more, present in the early modern period. In Canada, they combined with the rigors of the natural environment, the hostility of the Iroquois toward the French, and the general vulnerability of the colonial community to compound the sense of helplessness and isolation French settlers must have felt on a daily basis. Asceticism publicly and physically manifested the internal sufferings Catherine believed she endured for others and for the salvation of the colony. It also restored to her a modicum of control and power over her circumstances, which the dangerous colonial world and the gendered hierarchy of the Church seemed to want to deny her. Even when they took place in private, performances of asceticism, charity, and mysticism found a way of becoming public. According to Gavin Flood, ascetic acts only have meaning in the context of tradition and community.<sup>66</sup> Far from aiming to destroy the ego and body, Catherine intended to have tangible effects on her surroundings—to become an example, to reintegrate the wayward back into Christian society, and to reinforce the religious and cultural bonds and boundaries of the social group that, from her perspective, were paramount for survival in the “New” World.

Catherine and her contemporaries in the New France Church aimed for more than just survival, however. They hoped to build in the colony the Tridentine Church of which reformers in France could only dream. An earthquake which struck Canada in the winter of 1663 provides an opportunity to glimpse her mysticism and asceticism at work. On February 5, the Monday before Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras, Catherine was alone praying before the altar when she had yet another vision.

I had then a considerable impression, like an infallible certainty, that God was ready to punish the country for the sins which are committed here, particularly for the scorn shown the Church. It seemed to me that God was very angry. . . . That night at the same time that the earthquake began, I saw in spirit four demons occupying the four corners of the land, and they were shaking it violently as though they wanted to turn everything over; and no doubt they would have done so if a superior power, which gives motion to everything, had not stood in their way.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup>Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 220.

<sup>66</sup>Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 7–8.

<sup>67</sup>*Vie.*, 238–39. “J’eus pour lors un présentiment assez considerable, et comme une assurance infallible, que Dieu étoit prêt de punir le pais, pour les pechez qui s’y commettaient, sur-tout pour le mépris qu’on faisoit de l’Eglise. Il me sembla pour lors que Dieu étoit beaucoup irrité. . . . Le soir au même instant qu’un tremblement de terre commença, je vis en esprit quatre démons, qui occupoient les quatre côtes des terres voisines, et les secouoient fortement, comme voulant tout renverser; et sans doute ils l’auroient fait, si une puissance superieure, qui donnoit comme le branle à tout, n’eût mis obstacle à leur volonté.”

The earthquake that shook New France that day was centered somewhere near the Saguenay region, northwest of Quebec, and measured about a seven on the Richter scale. Reports from the time indicate that it was powerful enough to flatten large hills, uproot entire forests, and alter the courses of rivers. Yet no one was killed or even seriously injured, and no great damage was done to buildings in nearby Quebec, in Trois-Rivières, or Montreal. What would now be considered a natural event, at the time was not viewed as natural at all. Rather it was considered a warning to the people of New France that God was angry.<sup>68</sup> A few days after the earthquake, Catherine had a second vision. In it, she saw Saint Michael the Archangel carrying a scale in his left hand, as he often does in Christian iconography, and in his right, three arrows which Catherine believed he was about to unleash on the colony because of three sins which were general in society: impiety, impurity, and lack of charity. She prayed to Saint Michael to have patience and offered herself as a victim to atone for these sins if God would only pardon others and spare New France.<sup>69</sup>

Several accounts from the time speak of the earthquake and its effects, and record Catherine’s visions in terms remarkably similar to her own. None, of course, mentions Catherine by name, but each, nevertheless, displays knowledge of her religious life. In the *Relation* for that year, the Jesuit superior Jérôme Lalemant was most concerned with the effects the earthquake had physically on the colony and spiritually on colonists. He mentioned Catherine’s first vision alongside that of an Algonquin woman who had also, apparently, received a divine warning of what was to come.<sup>70</sup> Two other commentators, Marie de l’Incarnation and the Jesuit Charles Simon, were rather more pointed. Both claimed firsthand knowledge of Catherine’s visions. It should not, by now, be entirely surprising that Marie de l’Incarnation might have had some knowledge of what was happening amongst the Augustinians. The same, however, cannot be said about the Jesuit Charles Simon.<sup>71</sup> This missionary spent less than a year in Canada, from November 1662 until the following September, and had no known

<sup>68</sup>Lynn Berry, “‘Le Ciel et la Terre nous ont parlé’: Comment les missionnaires du Canada français de l’époque coloniale interprétèrent le tremblement de terre de 1663,” *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française* 60, no. 1–2 (été-automne, 2006): 19–21.

<sup>69</sup>*Vie*, 239–40.

<sup>70</sup>*JR* 48: 51–53 (1663). Other accounts include: *AHDQ*, 138–49; Pierre Boucher, *Histoire véritable et naturelle des moeurs et productions du pays de la Nouvelle-France vulgairement dite le Canada* (Paris: Florentine-Lambert, 1664), avant-propos; and Catherine’s own account in *Vie*, 236–40.

<sup>71</sup>Marie de l’Incarnation discussed the earthquake in a series of letters, the most significant of which is dated 20 August 1663. *MI Corr.*, 686–706 (Lettre CCIV). It was only in a letter she wrote after Catherine’s death that she named the recipient of these visions. *MI Corr.*, 813 (7 September 1668).

formal relationship with Catherine. Yet he claimed that he learned of all the apparitions he reported from the very person who had experienced them.<sup>72</sup>

The detail offered by these two writers suggests that knowledge of Catherine's communications with God, her mystical experiences, and her ascetic practices, extended at least to a small circle of the religious elite in New France who were willing to make them more broadly known. Her visions and "great communications with God" bolstered their interpretation of the earthquake as a chastisement and enhanced their warnings of a growing immorality and lack of religion in colonial society.<sup>73</sup> All three noted the salutary effects the earthquake had on religious life. Soon churches were filled as colonists flocked to confession. Carnival was forgotten, replaced by conversions and repentance. For a short time, a reformed and purified faith centered on penance was not only offered by religious specialists but also accepted by the wider community.

This was not a top-down process only. All accounts report what appears to be a calculated turn to religion by the general population. Holed up in the Hôtel-Dieu, the local holy woman, whose exploits were not as unknown as the conventions of religious humility claimed, helped to render a potentially devastating disaster into something salutary for the community, pledging herself to temper God's anger and save the colony.

Theorist Richard Valantasis suggests that it is through asceticism that the performer of holiness aims to change both herself and her culture. He writes, "At the centre of ascetical activity is a self who, through behavioral changes, seeks to become a different person, a new self; to become a different person in new relationships; and to become a different person in a new society that forms a new culture." Asceticism, he continues, consists of "performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity."<sup>74</sup> Through symbolic and physical removal from the world she rejected, extreme disciplining of her body, and adherence to the traditions of sanctity then current in the Church and

<sup>72</sup>JR 48: 182–223 (1663). The surviving version of Charles Simon's account is a Latin translation made by François Ragueneau, brother of Paul and rector of the Jesuit College at Bourges. JR 48: 182–222 (1663). Thwaites translates the recipient of the vision of Saint Michael using the male pronoun, yet the similarities between Simon's account, Marie de l'Incarnation's, and Catherine's own version, plus the ambiguity of the Latin, leave little doubt that it was Catherine's vision Simon had in mind. JR 48: 221.

<sup>73</sup>MI *Corr.*, 688 (Lettre CCIV), August–September 1663. "... grandes communications avec Dieu."

<sup>74</sup>R. Valantasis, "A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism," *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 547–48; also Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 807.

community, Catherine offered her faith group an alternative cultural model rooted in reformed Christianity.

The effects of the earthquake, however, were short-lived. Toward the end of January 1664, Catherine had another vision in which she saw demons celebrating the great progress they had made in the colony since the previous year.<sup>75</sup> At about the same time, she wrote, Brébeuf appeared to her and told her she needed to pray for the country. God was again very angry and was preparing to take action. Likewise, Marie de l’Incarnation observed shortly following the earthquake, “There are now many frightened people, we see that there will be many conversions, but it will not last unless we can find a way to bring the world to us.”<sup>76</sup> Catherine committed herself to a life of asceticism and victimhood for the salvation of New France based on the premise that the “New” World would come to her and not the other way around. In doing so, her willingness to suffer for the sins of the country made her a public figure who seemed to ameliorate to some degree the potentially devastating effects of God’s wrath, the extreme alterity of the colonial world, and its greatest dangers.

#### IV. MIRACLES

It was not, however, so much as a reformer, but rather as a patron and even a miracle worker, that Catherine would be remembered in the colonial community after her death. By the seventeenth century, local holy persons and miracles had long provided Christians with an accessible way into the faith.<sup>77</sup> Miracles stood at the heart of ritual and collective experiences of the divine, and they demonstrated the practical efficacy of religion.<sup>78</sup> As a nurse, Catherine de Saint-Augustin had made use of a relic of Jean de Brébeuf to cure and convert “a most opinionated heretic.” This man, apparently a Huguenot, had found himself in the care of the Hôtel-Dieu when he fell

<sup>75</sup>*Vie*, 251.

<sup>76</sup>*MI Corr.*, 689 (CCIV) à son fils, August–September 1663. “Il y a maintenant bien du monde effrayé, nous voyons bien qu’il y aura beaucoup de conversions, mais cela durera peu, nous trouverions bien le moien de ramener le monde à nous.” Catherine’s demons had predicted just this outcome in 1663. “Ensuite les démons me dirent qu’ils feroient leur possible pour continuer ce renversement, qu’il y avoit bien du monde affrayé, et que la peur des faisoit recourir à Dieu, et penser à leur conscience; mais qu’ils seroient bien en forte que cela ne leur serviroit de guere.” *Vie*, 239.

<sup>77</sup>On devotional life and miracles in New France, see Marie-Aimée Cliche, *Les pratiques de dévotion en Nouvelle-France: Comportements populaires et encadrement ecclésial dans le gouvernement de Québec* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1988), 29–31.

<sup>78</sup>Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 38–41. See also Thomas A. Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

mortally ill. Catherine pulverized some of Brébeuf's surviving bone fragments and mixed them into the man's drink, and she almost immediately noticed a complete change in him. He became "as peaceful as a lamb" and, according to the *Annales*, pleaded to be instructed in the true religion. He embraced Catholicism and made a public abjuration of his former beliefs. He was also perfectly cured of the illness that had originally brought him to the Hôtel-Dieu.<sup>79</sup> Through the relics of Brébeuf, Catherine achieved the cure and conversion of this unnamed heretic and, what was more important, the reintegration of a threatening outsider back into the sanctioned social community of the faithful. While this conversion may have enhanced Brébeuf's claim to sanctity and Catherine's reputation as a living holy woman, it was ultimately the local community that benefited most from it.

Miracles were an expected part of sanctity, and a holy reputation rarely succeeded without them. They rendered the difficult and challenging model of lived holiness, characterized as it was by a complex theological charity, asceticism, and deep personal sufferings, into something accessible and useful. According to Catholic doctrine, miracles only occurred after the death of the holy person. They were considered essential proof that an individual who had demonstrated qualities of holiness in life was, indeed, a saint in heaven capable of acting on behalf of the faithful. Catherine had offered herself as a public victim, suffering God's anger on behalf of sinners and the colony, and if, occasionally, extraordinary things took place which seemed connected in some way with her great piety, "people need[ed] to remember that God's bounty is infinite, and that his conduct of holy souls is not less admirable in the order of grace than hers was in the order of nature."<sup>80</sup>

Catherine's extraordinary performance in life became the basis of her miracle-working reputation after death. Soon after she died, people in the colony and in France began to pray to her for assistance. Her sisters in the Hôtel-Dieu came to regard her as their special protector. She was someone whom they could invoke in times of need or crisis and who might advocate with God on their behalf, and on the behalf of the colony and its Christian population.

In 1686, for example, the superior of the Hôtel-Dieu engaged a young Jesuit priest, François de Crépieul (1638–1702), to pray to Catherine and ask her to intervene with God in the interests of the religious community. In the mid–1680s the nuns found themselves hard-pressed to recruit new postulants to their ranks. They were overworked, and the hospital struggled to fulfill all

<sup>79</sup> *AHDQ*, 148. "un hérétique des plus opiniâtres." On relics in early Canada, see Dominique Deslandres, "Signes de Dieu et légitimation de la présence Française au Canada," *Les signes de Dieu aux XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, ed. Geneviève Demerson and Bernard Dompnier (Clermont-Ferrand: Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de l'Université Blaise Pascal, 1993), 146–47.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



the duties required of it by the local community.<sup>81</sup> In a population as dependent upon its hospital as Quebec was at the end of the seventeenth century, such a crisis threatened to adversely affect the entire colony. Crépieul was a well-known devotee of Catherine who, several years before, had received a vision of her in a dream. From then on, he made a point of returning each year from his mission at Tadoussac, north of the town, to say Mass at the Hôtel-Dieu to thank Catherine and God for the graces he had received. On one such occasion, Crépieul lost his *chapelle* (portable altar) and other belongings which he had left carelessly on the riverbank when a sudden and violent wind stirred up the water. On the spot, he made a vow to render a gift to Catherine if he should recover his belongings. The next day he found them downstream on the riverbank, and in recognition of this grace, he gave “two little works made by the savages” to the Hôtel-Dieu.<sup>82</sup>

To Crépieul, Catherine had proven her power and holiness, so he owed her a particular devotion. He responded favorably, then, to Mère Saint-Bonaventure’s request for aid, telling her that Catherine de Saint-Augustin herself had provided him with assurances that the Hôtel-Dieu would recover. “We soon saw the accomplishment of that prophecy,” wrote the superior, “and, since that time, our novice ranks have always been full.”<sup>83</sup> In 1687, five new postulants joined the community, and over the course of the next two years only four members died. It seemed that the crisis that had precipitated recourse to the supernatural had been averted. Moreover, by enlisting Crépieul’s aid, the nuns had reinforced their bonds with their traditional temporal defenders, the Jesuits. As a result, the Hôtel-Dieu’s position in the colonial community was assured, the defense of the Jesuits procured, and Catherine’s holiness proven, all of which reflected brilliantly on her successors on earth. There should be little wonder that the nuns regarded these events as miraculous and Catherine as a saint in heaven.

So great was their conviction that their departed sister was a saint that in 1689 the nuns petitioned the Bishop of Quebec for permission to translate (move) her mortal remains from her burial plot in the monastery’s grounds to a place inside the convent chapel. Translation was an honor traditionally reserved for canonized saints destined to be interred in the altar of a church. But, because Catherine was only venerated informally and locally, the best

<sup>81</sup>Despite these fears, demographic studies show that membership in the Hôtel-Dieu grew continually from its foundation until the 1720s when a royally mandated increase in the dowry charged to novices put a brake on enrollment. Louis Pelletier, *Le clergé en Nouvelle-France: Étude démographique et répertoire biographique* (Montréal: Les Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1993), 39.

<sup>82</sup>AHDQ, 223–24. “deux petits ouvrages sauvages.”

<sup>83</sup>AHDQ, 223. “En effet, nous vîmes bientôt l’accomplissement de sa prophétie, et, depuis ce tems la, nôtre noviciat a toujours été bien rempli.”

the nuns could do to indicate her holiness was to move her remains closer to the altar. "Then we opened her grave and we gathered all her bones with great care and we put them in a small coffin, covered it, and carried it to the foot of a cross in the chapel dedicated to the Cavalry, judging that this illustrious woman who had so loved the Cross and who had suffered in so many ways, would be thrilled to rest below a piece of the True Cross."<sup>84</sup> This ceremony, which took place twenty-one years after she died, marked the vitality of Catherine's memory and reputation amongst the community. Furthermore, it provided the sisters with an opportunity to display their reverence and respect, and to lay claim to her legacy while promoting her sanctity to wider audiences.

Although the performance of the translation ritual, like Catherine's own performance of holiness, was ostensibly a private affair, it was not kept secret. Through it, the nuns made it known that holiness had been nurtured within the walls of the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec. When the motherhouse at Bayeux learned of the translation, they wrote to Quebec asking for some of Catherine's bones so that they too could venerate her. The *Annales* of the Hôtel-Dieu go on to narrate several miraculous events attributed to Catherine's favor. In one case, a young man walking by the Seine in Paris discovered a copy of Ragueneau's *Vie* and was inspired to become a missionary in Canada as a result of reading it. In another, a Visitation nun in the French city of Caën obtained a cure through Catherine's intercession.<sup>85</sup>

Reports of miracles from within the colony also reached the sisters, who carefully recorded them. On one occasion, a *habitant* called Nicholas Matte from the parish of Dombour (on the eastern tip of Montreal island), having heard others speak of Catherine and her holy life, decided to pray to her for a cure to an infirmity suffered by his son. He commenced a novena (a nine-day sequence of daily devotions) in Catherine's honor, on the final day of which he discovered his son completely cured. Matte then reported the cure to the local priest and gave a formal attestation, which he offered to sign in his own blood.<sup>86</sup>

The cure of Nicholas Matte's son contains all the central elements of a typical miracle anecdote from the time: an incurable illness, fruitless medical intervention, a recommendation to pray to a holy person for help, a devotion of some sort, followed by a complete and enduring cure to which the *miraculé(e)* offered official testimony. Yet it stands out because of Matte's

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 243. "Nous ouvrîmes donc sa fosse, et nous recueillîmes avec grand soin tous ses os, que nous mîmes dans un petit cercueil proprement couvert, et nous portâmes cette petit châsse au pied d'une Croix a l'oratoire qui est dedié au Calvaire, jugeant que cette illustre deffunte, qui avoit tant chéri la Croix et qui en avoit souffert de si sensibles, seroit ravie de reposer aupres d'un morceau de la vraye Croix."

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 237–44.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 243.

decision to invoke an unproven local holy person over the established saints of the Catholic Church. Catherine’s reputation had spread beyond the walls of the convent. People in New France, from Quebec to Montreal, were talking about her. Confidence in her must have been high. In life, Catherine’s mysticism and asceticism had constituted a difficult and challenging model that invoked an alternative way of ordering society, but in death her community transformed her performance into something accessible and responsive to their needs.

It is difficult to say just how widely Catherine’s influence extended. The Jesuit Cr peuil’s gift of two works of aboriginal art indicates that such gifts were considered appropriate by Church authorities for a Christian holy woman, and it provides some indication of the extensive cultural mixing that was taking place in New France. Religions, both European and indigenous, were vital elements in the colonial encounter. Yet, beyond the menacing (and stereotypical) presence of the Iroquois in both Catherine’s writings and the *Vie*, there is little evidence to suggest a sustained engagement between Catherine and indigenous audiences either during her life or after she died. Even so, through her work in the hospital, Catherine would have come into almost daily contact with aboriginal peoples, both Christians and non-Christians, most of whom would have been either Montagnais (Innu) or Algonquins who lived in the vicinity of the French at Quebec. By the 1660s, these nations had been allies of the French for more than fifty years, and many lived in Jesuit mission villages, where multiple forms of colonial Christianities were practiced. In her performance of holiness, Catherine was reacting to the “New” World, as well as deeply engrained European, traditions and influences.

While the nuns of the H tel-Dieu were busy recording their memories of Catherine and examples of her favors in letters, notes, and ultimately their *Annales*, a more communal and informal knowledge of her found life outside the cloister walls. For the most part, local sanctity was non-literate. In the colony, the visual predominated. Eyewitnesses preserved memories and spread stories that travelled by word of mouth up and down the Saint Lawrence River. While Ragueneau’s *Vie* transformed Catherine into a conventional holy figure for French audiences, in Canada colonists regarded her as “notre Catherine.” She was someone familiar, someone powerful, a patron and intercessor, but also someone who knew them, their country, and their challenges. Despite official secrecy, they came to know her over the years of her life and after her death as someone who might favor them.

## V. CONCLUSION

In the Christian tradition, holiness and place are intimately connected—performances are staged in the monastery, in the hermit’s cell, or *au bout du*

*monde* (at the ends of the earth) in Canada. In the colony, Catherine saw all that she desired to escape in the old county. New France was already inverted. It was several steps removed from the institutions of power and authority that ruled over French religion and public life and, therefore, was well matched to the pursuit of perfect charity. By removing herself physically and spiritually from the taint of decadent civilization, Catherine presented a critique of French culture and society while remaining firmly within the traditions of the Church. She sought answers to the challenges posed by colonialism in the well-established lexicon of Catholic sanctity, cleaving to conservative and traditional models. Yet she hoped to shape the colony by bringing it into line with her worldview. Even so, she had difficulty committing to New France, which she saw as a demon-infested land, so she transformed herself into a victim of charity and asceticism.

At the same time, her performance of holiness served local audiences and filled a public role. The holy performance transformed the divine into existential experience, brought God and Christ into the “New” World, and provided an avenue of recourse for people in need. The holy might cure the ill, bring outcasts back into society, help maintain essential community bonds, and even rescue Canada from divine anger. Extraordinary holy performances, even those that took place behind cloister walls and before altars, found ways of becoming public in the close-knit community of New France. While it may have been only after Catherine’s death that Marie de l’Incarnation declared her willingness to “speak (to you) about her [Catherine’s] virtues,” and to name her as the recipient of the earthquake premonitions, it seems she and others had been talking about Catherine, however discretely, for some time.

It seems premature, however, to speak of the development of a specific colonial identity viewed through the holy performance of someone like Catherine de Saint-Augustin. While she may have aimed to create a reformed Church in the colonies, she did so firmly within boundaries established by Catholic conservatism and French devotional culture. Moreover, notions of communal identities are notoriously blurred.<sup>87</sup> Her audiences were potentially multiple, both indigenous and French, ecclesiastical and lay, and the ways they received and responded to her varied. For Marie de l’Incarnation, Paul Ragueneau, Barbe Halay, Nicholas Matte, and all the others whose names went unrecorded but nevertheless saw something special in Catherine and turned to her for help, the live performance of the traditions of sanctity held meaning and fulfilled urgent

<sup>87</sup>For more on the challenge of notions of identity in history and colonialism, see Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, “Identity,” in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 59–90.

needs. The local holy person was made through the combined forces of tradition, the colony, audience, and the self in the give and take between conservative notions of sanctity and local demands, and in the lived relationships that allowed Catherine to become an example for others. Just as she had managed to make herself “present” at the dedication of the Quebec cathedral in 1666, she also carved out a wider presence for herself within the colony. She envisaged a public role for herself as a reformer and, with the help of sympathetic supporters and audiences, managed to achieve it. However, the lasting form it took may not have been quite what she had imagined or hoped it would be.