

SEX AND CELIBACY IN EARLY MODERN VENICE*

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores the nature of relationships formed between nuns and male clergy in early modern Venice. It is based on the records of trials for the violation of conventual enclosure, the principle at the centre of the reforms of nunneries decreed by the Council of Trent, which aspired to sever all links between nuns and the world outside the cloister. The trials offer detailed insights into the interactions of male and female celibates, whose relationships were frequently monogamous, long-term, and intense, although rarely overtly sexual. I argue that the constraints of enclosure conditioned the nature of celibate desire, promoting a model of heterosocial engagement in which bodily intimacy was surprisingly unimportant.*

During the troubled summer of 1509, the Venetian diarist, Girolamo Priuli, wrote that the local nunneries were public bordellos, and the nuns public whores. This perversion of the moral order warranted extreme measures, and Priuli proclaimed that ‘there was no other remedy than to burn down the said nunneries together with the nuns for the sake of the Venetian state’. Priuli’s nervous outburst was born of a specific context: a few weeks earlier, Venetian troops had suffered a humiliating defeat at Agnadello, and the diarist was determined to identify the causes of God’s wrath against the Republic. Along with sodomites, he blamed nuns for bringing about the ruin of the Venetian state.¹

Although Priuli’s anxieties had a local significance, the tenor of his remarks would have struck chords throughout Christendom. A strong current of anti-clericalism was sweeping through Europe, and the corruptions of the church were envisaged in highly sexualized terms – consider, for example, representations of the papacy as the Whore of Babylon.² Against this background, there was nothing unusual about Priuli’s easy conflation of nun and whore.

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¹ Girolamo Priuli, *I diarii*, iv, ed. R. Cessi (Bologna, 1938), p. 115; 29 June 1509: ‘non hera altro remedio cha bruxare li monasterii predicti insieme cum le monache per salute del Stato Veneto’.

² Discussed by L. Roper in *The holy household: women and morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 108–9.

Equally familiar were depictions of the parish priest, living in sin with a concubine and several children, or the lecherous friar molesting his female penitents in the confessional. On the eve of the Protestant Reformation, it seemed as though the celibate ideal, promulgated for centuries by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, had become one of the principal liabilities of the Catholic church.³ From within the Catholic fold, some reformers made noises about relinquishing the principle of non-marriage among the priesthood; others moved to abolish the religious orders, for they held that their deep contamination could never be reversed.⁴ The issue of clerical marriage remained open throughout the Council of Trent: only in 1563, the final year of the council, did a hardline policy emerge, which – in the teeth of the Reformation – reaffirmed the inviolability of the vow of celibacy for nuns and male clergy as a point of faith, and which pronounced anathema on all who dared to assert that the married state was more worthy than virginity.⁵ Meanwhile, nearly half a century had gone by, in which Protestant propagandists had gleefully lambasted the hypocrisy of those sworn to chastity.⁶

Scripturally unfounded and apparently unenforceable, the Catholic commitment to chaste celibacy remained a constant source of concern for defenders of the old church. Reformers had to contend not only with the heretical challenge to the celibate ideal, but also with a far older tradition of ridicule and satire which existed within Catholic culture: a tradition which in Italy was nurtured by the *novelle* of Boccaccio and Bandello, and the irreverent dialogues of Aretino. Works in praise of virginity poured off the presses during the Counter-Reformation, but as the superiority of the chaste life was reasserted, so its inherent vulnerability was also underlined.⁷ Take, for example, the

³ Gregory VII was responsible for introducing celibacy as a requirement of the clergy, in the late eleventh century; H. C. Lea, *History of sacerdotal celibacy in the Christian Church* (London, 1932, 2nd edn; first published, 1867), p. 182.

⁴ Most famous among those who criticized the church's stand against clerical marriage was Erasmus, who argued, controversially, that chaste marriage was a higher state than virginity. His principal works on the subject are *Encomium matrimonii* (first published 1518, though written, Erasmus claimed, some twenty years earlier as a rhetorical exercise) and *Institutio christiani matrimonii* (1526). For a full discussion of Erasmus's views on marriage and celibacy, see Craig R. Thompson and Craig Ringwalt, eds., *Collected works of Erasmus*, xxxix–xl (Toronto and London, 1997), pp. 279–85. In 1538, a commission of leading churchmen, appointed by Paul III, published a document advocating reforms, *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia*: this included the recommendation that the religious orders be abolished, but maintained a commitment to celibacy within the priesthood; Lea, *Sacerdotal celibacy*, p. 450. For an account of Catholic attitudes to sex and celibacy at the time of the Counter-Reformation, see M. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and sexuality in the early modern world: regulating desire, reforming practice* (London, 1999), pp. 101–40.

⁵ N. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the ecumenical councils* (2 vols., London, 1990), II, p. 755; canons on the sacrament of marriage, 9 and 10.

⁶ S. Ozment, *When fathers ruled* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), pp. 3–25; Roper, *Holy household*, pp. 17–18; L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil* (London, 1994), pp. 43–4.

⁷ For example, Dionysius Carthusianus (c. 1402–71), *Divoto et utile trattato del divino Dionisio Certosino della lodevole vita delle vergini* (Milan, 1563); B. dell'Uva, *Le vergini prudenti* (Florence, 1582); G. d'Arabia, *Il trionfo della verginità* (Cremona, 1595).

comfortless words of St Jerome's 'Letter to Eustochium', a standard text in the repertoire of apologists for celibacy:

I do not wish pride to come upon you by reason of your decision [to espouse virginity], but fear. If you walk laden with gold, you must beware of a robber. This mortal life is a race. Here we struggle, that elsewhere we may be crowned. No one walked without anxiety amid serpents and scorpions.⁸

For Jerome, the whole point about virginity was that it was difficult to maintain, a rather mixed message which was nevertheless enthusiastically promoted among Counter-Reformation celibates.⁹ Faced with a paradigm of chastity in which sexual transgression and sexual purity were presented as being at once polar opposites yet ineluctably proximate, nuns, priests, and friars were encouraged to submit their every action to paranoid examination.

The rhetoric of prescription and condemnation helps to reveal the anxieties and aspirations of early modern Catholics as they developed their ideas about the celibate state. However, the stark opposition of chastity and damnation was by no means uniformly internalized by the celibate personnel of the church. And the expectation that female religious and male ecclesiastics would cast off all affective relationships and live for Christ alone was forced to compete with a range of contradictory demands. In this article, I shall depart from the warnings and entreaties inscribed in the conduct literature, and shall try to gain access instead to the experiences and perceptions of those who lived the celibate life. By focusing here on a range of actual relationships that existed between nuns and male ecclesiastics, my aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the sexual culture of the celibate world.

I

In 1581, the city of Venice boasted a population of nearly 135,000. Among these, over 4,000 had vowed to live in celibacy. To be precise, or as precise as an early modern census will allow, there were 2,508 female religious, 1,132 male religious, and 586 secular priests. Nuns, priests, friars, and monks represented a sizeable proportion of the adult population.¹⁰ The high number

⁸ *Letters of St Jerome*, trans. C. C. Mierow (Westminster, MD, 1963), I, p. 135. Discussed in J. Tibbetts Schulenburg, 'The heroics of virginity', in Mary Beth Rose, ed., *Women in the middle ages and the Renaissance: literary perspectives* (Syracuse, 1986), pp. 29–72, at p. 32.

⁹ For example, the 'Letter to Eustochium' was reproduced in *Alcuni avvertimenti nella vita monacale, utili et necessari à ciascheduna Vergine di Christo* (Venice, 1575). The copy of this text which I have consulted (Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, 118.c. 73) is bound together with another advice manual for nuns, *Avvertimenti monacali, et modo di viver religiosamente secondo Iddio per le vergini, et spose di Giesu Christo* (Venice, 1576). Echoing the gloomy prognostications of Jerome, the preface to the 1576 volume warns of the ease with which the individual may 'precipitare nel puzzolente fango della sporca libidine' (fall into the stinking mire of filthy lust), recommending a continuous regime of spiritual exercises and bodily exertions in order to stave off evil thoughts and mortal sin; p. 5.

¹⁰ Biblioteca Museo Correr, MS P. D. 230 b-II, 'Description de tutte le aneme che sono in la Cita fata l'anno 1581'. The figure of 1,132 is the sum of 945 'frati' and 187 'poveri mendicanti'.

of female religious, as in other Italian towns, was in large part a consequence of socio-economic pressures operating within the noble caste. On the one hand, rising marriage dowries meant that many parents could not afford to marry all their daughters to earthly husbands. On the other, young men of similar social status were discouraged from matrimony so as to prevent the fragmentation of the patrimony which would ensue from a proliferation of heirs. There resulted an inevitable crop of unmarried noble women, which was absorbed by the city's convents.¹¹ Unmarried men had a broader range of options available to them, pursuing military, political, professional, or commercial careers, and it was common for Venetian noble bachelors to live with their brothers in male households. Thus the population of male ecclesiastics did not neatly mirror that of female religious. There were fewer men who had promised to live in chaste celibacy, and their social origins were far more diverse.¹²

This article is about the relationships which existed between these two social groups – female and male religious celibates.¹³ In the wake of the Council of Trent, nuns, priests, and friars were subject to new and intense scrutiny. The conduct of male clergy was closely regulated, and the imposition of compulsory enclosure on all nunneries was designed to sever links between female religious and the outside world.¹⁴ In Venice, the authorities of church and state cooperated in policing the movements of religious celibates. It was the task of specially appointed government magistrates – the *provveditori sopra monasteri* – to prosecute any outsider (lay or clerical) who sought to infringe the sacred boundaries of an enclosed nunnery.¹⁵ Meanwhile, it was the responsibility of the local ecclesiastical authorities – the patriarch of Venice or the bishop of Torcello – to punish nuns for their transgressions, and to carry out their own proceedings against priests and male religious.¹⁶ The trials conducted by these

¹¹ P. Paschini, 'I monasteri femminili in Italia nel Cinquecento', in *Problemi di vita religiosa in Italia nel 500* (Padua, 1960), pp. 31–60, at p. 58; J. C. Davis, *The decline of the Venetian nobility as a ruling class* (Baltimore, 1963), pp. 62 and 67; S. Chojnacki, 'Dowries and kinsmen in early Renaissance Venice', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 5 (1975), pp. 571–600, at p. 576; G. Spinelli, 'I religiosi e le religiose', in Bruno Bertoli, ed., *La chiesa di Venezia nel seicento* (Venice, 1992), pp. 194–5; V. Hunecke, 'Kindbett oder Kloster. Lebenswege venezianischer Patrizierinnen im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 18 (1992), pp. 446–76, at pp. 460–1.

¹² For evidence of forced vocations among men, see G. Zarri, 'Monasteri femminili in Italia nel secolo XVI', *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa*, 33 (1997), pp. 643–69, at pp. 653–7.

¹³ For discussion of relationships between female religious and laymen, and of same-sex relationships involving nuns, see M. Laven, *Virgins of Venice* (London, forthcoming).

¹⁴ For the tridentine crackdown on priests keeping concubines, see Tanner, ed., *Decrees*, p. 793; 'Decrees on general reform', cap. 15, session 25, 1563. For the papal bull instituting compulsory enclosure for all convents, see *Bullarum diplomatum*, vii, pp. 447–50: bull *Circa pastoralis*, 29 May 1566.

¹⁵ On the origins and workings of this magistracy, see I. Giuliani, 'Genesi e primo sec. di vita del magistrato sopra monasteri, Venezia, 1519–1620', *Le Venezie Francescane: rivista storica artistica letteraria illustrata*, 28 (1961), pp. 42–68, 106–69.

¹⁶ The patriarchal records of the 'crimes of nuns' were lost during the nineteenth century, and all that remains at the Archivio della Curia Patriarcale di Venezia is an index, entitled 'repertorium criminalium monialium'. Occasionally, transcripts of patriarchal trials have survived among the records of the *provveditori*. The imbalance in the historical record means that we know

authorities provide us with detailed knowledge of the relationships which existed between celibate men and women. But in order to understand how nuns and male clergy interacted, we need first of all to map the spaces in which they encountered one another.

Let us begin by considering the physical relationship of the church, the professional space of the clergy, to the nunnery. Figure 1 shows a sixteenth-century plan of the conventual church of San Servolo, a Benedictine foundation situated on its own island in the Venetian lagoon. To the right of the church lay the enclosed buildings of the nunnery. But the church did not exist exclusively or even primarily for the nuns' use. In fact, they were only permitted to enter the *chiesa interiore*, situated either to the side of the main church or, as in the case of San Servolo, raised on a balcony (*palco*). This was where nuns made their regular devotions, screened off from view. The rest of the church, the *chiesa esteriore*, was open to the public and served the spiritual needs of the outside community. For it was quite usual for people to attend their local monastic or conventual church, instead of or as well as going to their parish church. To preside over the range of devotional activities which took place within the conventual churches, nunneries commonly employed between ten and twenty priests.¹⁷ The majority of these were *mansonarii*, spiritual odd-job men who were paid a small sum for officiating at redemptive masses, and who drifted between churches in order to muster an adequate income. In theory, the work of these priests was limited to the affairs of the *chiesa esteriore* and there was no cause for them to come into contact with nuns. In practice, the comings and goings of *mansonarii* were hard to control and they often developed familiarity with the women from the convent that employed them.

The conventual church is an obvious place to begin to trace relationships between nuns and priests, but it was far from being an unconstrained meeting-place. The plan of San Servolo shows just two points of access between the nuns' quarters and the *chiesa esteriore*: the *fenestra da comunicar*, through which female religious received communion, and the *ruota* (here spelt *roda*) or wheel, a long-established feature of convent architecture, which enabled objects to be passed in or out of the nunnery, without revealing the person who stood on the other side of the wall. Such gaps in the enclosure were often the sites of illicit exchanges between nuns and priests. In 1609, the *mansonario* Marc'Antonio Lippamano was apprehended at San Zaccaria, 'with his head and shoulders in

rather more about the prosecution of men who transgressed the laws relating to convents than we do about the fate of nuns who were complicit in their crimes. Among the standard punishments administered to nuns were imprisonment in a convent cell, deprivation from office and from the chapter, forfeit of other privileges, for example receiving visitors in the *parlatorio*, restriction to a bread-and-water diet; occasionally, convicted nuns were removed to another convent.

¹⁷ Archivio Curia Patriarcale Venezia (ACPV), *Visite pastorali a monasteri femminili (Vis. past.)*, Vendramin: at Ognisanti (1610) there were ten priests; at San Biagio e Castaldo (1610), twenty-one; at Santa Caterina (1616), seventeen; at San Iseppo (1618), nineteen.

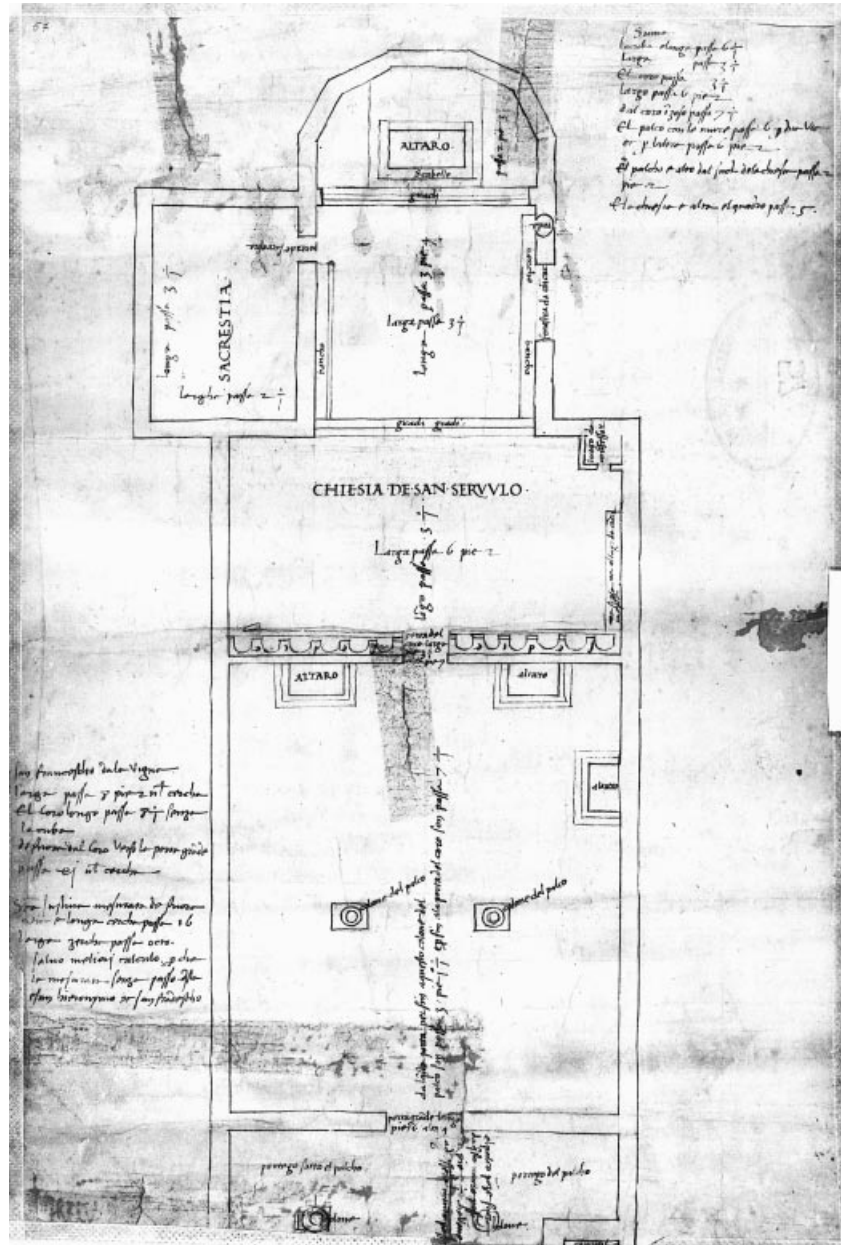


Figure 1. Sixteenth-century plan of the church of San Servolo. (ASV, *Miscellanea Mappe* 57, DS 25/16, positivo 66).

the wheel, speaking with one of the reverend nuns'.¹⁸ The parish priest of San Lio, Battista Bancato, was denounced in 1618 for dallying away his mornings in the conventual church of La Celestia after he had performed his twice-weekly mass. He regularly spent an hour or so chatting with one of the nuns at the grille, through which the two celibates would exchange letters.¹⁹

These grilles and apertures were the weak points in the system of enclosure, across which nuns made their transactions with the outside world. Another permeable site on the edge of enclosure was the convent *parlatorio*, the one space where female religious were allowed to speak with family and other acquaintances from the lay world. There were complicated conditions limiting and controlling the occurrence of such conversations. Contact with male acquaintances was more tightly circumscribed than contact with females, and regulations stated the exact degrees of male kin who might be admitted to speak with a nun. Contact with male regulars was viewed as being the most dangerous of the lot, and the rules prohibited meetings between nuns and friars, whatever their blood relationships. A series of regulations published by the patriarch of Venice, Lorenzo Priuli, in 1591, specified that 'it is not permitted that any friar, or religious regular, even if he is bound by close links of kin, may speak with a nun, and this is expressly prohibited'.²⁰ The *provveditori* did their utmost to enforce this principle, whatever the circumstances. With uncompromising zeal, a friar called Cornelio was prosecuted in 1626 for visiting his sister, a nun at San Girolamo, following their mother's death.²¹

Yet the gendered structures of spiritual authority did not allow for total spatial separation of nuns and male clergy. Female religious relied on priests to provide them with the essential sacraments of communion and confession, and looked to their confessors for spiritual guidance. The erotic potential of the relationship between male confessor and female penitent was all too clear to the Catholic reforming hierarchy, and instances of abuse have been well documented.²² In Venice, the authorities made every effort to regulate the appointment and conduct of conventual confessors, and attempted

¹⁸ Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), *Provveditori sopra monasteri (PSM)*, B[usta] 264, S. Zaccaria.

¹⁹ ASV, *PSM*, B. 265, 1617 [m.v.], Celestia.

²⁰ Lorenzo Priuli, *Ordini et avvertimenti, che si devono osservare ne' Monasteri di monache di Venezia, Sopra le visite et clausura* (Venice, 1591), cap. 8: 'Non permetter, che alcun Frate, ò Religioso Regolare, ancorche fusse congiunto nelli predetti gradi di parentela, possa parlare con Monache, essendo ciò espressamente prohibito.' See also Antonio Grimani, *Constitutioni et decreti approvati nella sinodo diocesana, sopra la retta disciplina monacale* (Venice, 1592), cap. 23.

²¹ ASV, *PSM*, B. 267, S. Girolamo.

²² For Spanish examples, see S. Haliczer, *Sexuality in the confessional: a sacrament profaned* (New York and Oxford, 1996). On the erotics of the confessional, see also Luisa Ciammitti, 'One saint less: the story of Angela Mellini, a Bolognese seamstress (1667-[?])', in E. Muir and G. Ruggiero, eds., *Sex and gender in historical perspective* (Baltimore, 1990), pp. 141–76, at p. 150. Angela Mellini, an Ursuline tertiary, brought before the Inquisition in 1698, spoke of 'the temptation to commit a mortal sin' with her confessor, Father Ruggieri. She claimed that her temptation was particularly great when she was 'in the confessional before him', and that she only had to look in the direction of the confessional to experience 'great heat in all the parts of my body and ... movements in my genitals'.

(unsuccessfully) to restrict their term of office to one year.²³ The ideal man for the job was a secular priest (rather than a friar), who was virtuous, patient, and at least fifty years old.²⁴ But however pious (or impotent) the confessor might appear to be, he always remained the object of suspicion. Consequently, instructions for convent confessors shied away from the model of the intimate spiritual director, and instead aimed to create impersonal functionaries. Once again, the physical space in which a nun came into contact with her confessor was tightly constrained: the *confessorio* was situated on the edge of the enclosure and brought priest and penitent together across an iron grille. Patriarch Vendramin instructed the nuns of San Girolamo in 1609:

It is not fitting to the gravity and piety of the female monastic state, that the faces of penitent nuns be seen by their confessor; and, for this reason, your most illustrious lord, renewing that order which has been given by his predecessors, commands that an iron net with minute holes, be appended to the window of the confessional, and it should be always fixed and immoveable.²⁵

In the words of Bishop Grimani, the penitent should be ‘heard and not seen’.²⁶ This was, of course, the theory of the rule-books. In practice, the *confessorio* could provide a snug and private meeting-place, in which priest and nun could chat intimately and perhaps share food and drink. The solemn injunctions of Vendramin or Grimani should be seen in relation to the kind of confession practised at Sant’Andrea de Zirada in the 1560s. Here, the confessor sat surrounded by cushions, with supplies of sweet wine at his side, and the nuns visited him to gossip about the confessions of others rather than to lay bare their own souls. His critics declared that he practised ‘not confession but confusion’.²⁷

The regulations governing female religious space aimed to distance nuns both physically and emotionally from the outside world. Again and again, this objective was confounded, as is apparent from the abundance of trials prosecuted by the *provveditori sopra monasteri* for breach of conventual enclosure. All kinds of people found themselves on the wrong side of the laws which regulated access to convents: nuns’ friends and relations were prosecuted for visiting outside the permitted hours, or for illicit conduct in the *parlatorio* (most commonly, eating); convent employees, such as doctors, business managers, builders, or cleaners, were brought to trial for the merest infringement of enclosure; the rules were interpreted particularly strictly against prostitutes and Jews. This article is concerned with just one group of transgressors: the

²³ ASV, *Compilazione Leggi*, B. 288, fo. 316, 1546, 10 Sept., Cons. X & Zonta.

²⁴ Grimani, *Constitutioni et decreti*, cap. 62.

²⁵ ACPV, *Vis. past.*, Vendramin, 1609, S. Girolamo: ‘Non conviene alla gravità, et pietà monachale, che le monache penitenti siano vedute in faccia, dal confessore, però rinovando sua Signoria Illustrissima l’ordine dai predecessori dato commanda, che alla fenestra del confessorio sia fatta una lama di ferro con busi minuti, et stia sempre fitta, et immovabile.’

²⁶ Grimani, *Constitutioni et decreti*, cap. 62.

²⁷ ASV, *PSM*, B. 263, 1566 [m.v.], S. Andrea de Zirada, fo. 9r: ‘chel non faccia confession ma confusion’.

clergy. Of the 263 cases brought before the *provveditori* between 1550 and 1650, for which records survive, 58 had clergy, secular or religious, at their centre. These trial records help us to reconstruct the relationships which grew up between nuns and priests or friars across the convent walls. They show how interactions between male and female celibates were conditioned by the physical constraints of enclosure. And they point to the particular emotional needs of men and women living the celibate life. Of course, there was no blueprint for relationships involving nuns and male clergy, but a series of case studies will draw out several common patterns, which will in turn suggest some new angles from which to approach the sexuality of early modern celibates.

II

My first case study dates from February 1571, when it was brought to the attention of the *provveditori* that a group of Augustinian friars from the communities of San Antonio and San Salvador were regular visitors at the nunnery of San Servolo.²⁸ We are already familiar with the layout of the church of San Servolo. However, these friars did not content themselves with loitering at the *fenestra da comunicar*, but chose instead to make themselves at home in the *parlatorio* and *confessorio* of the convent. The friars came to San Servolo in search of entertainment and sociability. The nuns provided them with meals – sufficiently grand to be described as ‘banquets’ – and, after dinner, male and female religious played cards and dice together. They played for money, and by all accounts the nuns tended to win. At any rate, it was rumoured that Don Fedrigo, the prior of San Antonio, had lost his community some 800 ducats in the course of these evenings of recreation. During carnival, as was customary in Venetian convents, the nuns put on theatrical shows; the friars sometimes stayed at San Servolo all night to watch the nuns perform. Such events were the highlights in the social calendar of San Servolo, but the relationships between female and male religious continued at a more prosaic level throughout the year. The nuns took in the washing of the friars, and they did their mending for them. Within the convent there were *converse*, lower-status nuns who were admitted to do the menial tasks for the rest of the community, and who were sometimes given greater freedom to leave the enclosure; these took food parcels of biscuits and fresh eggs to the friars at San Antonio and San Salvador. The friars sent back covered baskets which concealed reciprocal gifts.

The interactions which have been described so far appear to amount to little more than the convivial exchanges of two communities. And though the nature of some of these transactions was clearly gendered (with female religious cooking and sewing for their brothers in Christ), sexuality played no obvious part. Yet the investigation carried out by the *provveditori* suggests that there was more to these dealings. For the friars who were called to give witness about the

²⁸ ASV, PSM, B. 263, 1570, S. Servolo.

conduct of their brothers consistently supplied the names of those who had had particular relationships with members of San Servolo. They spoke of ‘amicitia’ (friendship), ‘intrinsichezza’ (intimacy), and ‘domestichezza’ (familiarity) uniting certain nuns with certain friars, and they observed that particular friars ‘had a special affection and spoke most often with one nun, rather than the others’.²⁹ The friars invoked religious terminology to explain these intimacies, speaking of their spiritual daughters (‘fie spirituali’): ‘Don Tranquillo has for his spiritual daughter a nun called Suor Regina, Don Concordio’s I believe is called Helisabetha ..., Don Paulo Hebreo has a *conversa* [for his spiritual daughter]; her name is Costanza.’ The witness who provided this information, himself a member of San Salvador, went on to say that ‘almost all the friars of San Antonio frequent the convent’, and that they are forever boasting about their ‘spiritual daughters’.³⁰ Moreover, it was rumoured that when Don Concordio (of San Salvador) began to show ‘friendship and favour’ towards a nun at the Dominican convent of Corpus Domini, suor Helisabetha, Concordio’s ‘spiritual daughter’ at San Servolo ‘entered into a state of desperation for him’.³¹

Other accounts of events at San Servolo go further, and we learn of ‘marriages’ (‘sponsalitti’) taking place between the friars and their ‘spiritual daughters’. Don Apollinario of Ravenna, another witness from San Salvador, recalled how he heard that a certain Don Gregorio ‘was conducted to San Servolo by Don Concordio ... and he was given a nun as his spiritual friend, and apparently, he gave her a ring, and they carried out certain ceremonies’. Don Apollinario also remembered another occasion of this sort:

Last Epiphany, or around this time, Don Tranquillo led Don Cornelio from Venice to San Servolo in order to give him a spiritual [daughter] and throughout the house it was said, ‘Don Tranquillo is marrying Don Cornelio’ [in the sense that a priest ‘marries’ a couple] and he has led him to San Servolo to this end.³²

What are we to make of these relationships between friars and their ‘spiritual daughters’ or ‘spiritual friends’? The terms belong more readily to the language of the confessional than to the realm of erotic or romantic love (pointedly, these are ‘daughters’ rather than ‘wives’); and the *confessorio* was indeed one of the principal sites in which the nuns and friars encountered each

²⁹ Ibid., fo. 13r: ‘che havevano special affetione et ragionamento piu sovente con una monaca che con le altre’.

³⁰ Ibid., fo. 1v: ‘Don Tranquillo ha per fia sua spiritual una, che si domanda S. Regina, quella de Don Concordio, salvo el vero, io credo che lhabbia nome S. Helisabetha ..., quella di Don Paulo hebreo è conversa, et ha nome S. Costanza’; ‘io so poi che in S. Antonio vi hanno pratica quasi tutti li frati de San Antonio, et sento varrii gloriarsi, questo ha una fia spiritual, questo un’altra.’

³¹ Ibid., fo. 2r: ‘era intrada in desparere per lui’.

³² Ibid., fo. 8v: ‘fu condoto a San Servolo da Don Concordio ... et li fu data una monaca per amica spirituale, dove mi par à me, che li desse l’anello, et che facessero alcune cerimonie’; ‘che la vigilia della Epiphania passata, over in quei giorni Don Tranquillo menò Don Cornelio da Vinetia a San Servolo per darli una spiritual, dove che per la casa si diceva, Don Tranquillo fa le nozze a Don Cornelio, per lha menato à questo effetto San Servolo’.

other. But the transactions between female and male religious which took place at San Servolo owed at least as much to the model of secular marriage as they did to that which linked the priest and his spiritual charge. And while there is no evidence to suggest that these pseudo-marriage rituals led to sexual liaisons, it is clear that they invested the relationships between female and male religious with a formal sense of possession. Friars boasted about their 'spiritual daughters', and suor Helisabetha became 'desperate' because Don Concordio had grown close to another nun in a different convent.

In common with the other cases we shall look at, the relationships which existed at San Servolo between nuns and friars were multi-dimensional. Interactions between male and female celibates were characterized by varying combinations of spiritual, domestic, convivial, and amorous elements. Take, for example, the case against fra Marc'Antonio Cazzano, brought before the *provveditori* in 1617, whom it was alleged sent to the convent of Sant'Anna 'now sheets to be washed, now messages and love letters'.³³ The provision of food and even clean laundry could imply more than simply domestic assistance. These were gestures which often took on the significance of a ritual, and which signalled intimacy between male and female celibates. In a notable example, suor Deodata of San Iseppo laid claim to the affection of two friars by washing, cooking, and sewing for them. According to her prioress:

It would take a long time to tell you everything that she has given them: she has sewn a great number of surplices (to my knowledge, she has made more than 20 for one of the friars), and she has sewn some stupendous items for the other friars. I have seen her sewing handkerchiefs for them as well as shirts, collars, false sleeves, hats stupendously embroidered with gold and silver, for she works miraculously with pearls and jewels; and she also sends them baskets of cakes and biscuits.³⁴

It is clear from this testimony that Deodata's exchanges with the friars went beyond making herself useful. While continuing to do the friars' washing, she embarked upon a complex and intense programme of gift-giving. Other trials allow us to detect meaning and mutuality in the exchanges between female religious and male clergy. According to a trial of 1617, Girolemo Grandi, a priest from Santa Trinità, wrote regularly to suor Giustignana at San Daniel and, on one occasion, 'he put a ring in with the letter'. He also employed a friend to write 'a beautiful love sonnet' to send to a nun at San Sepolcro, who had sent him a love letter. And he was believed to be courting another nun at San Daniel for whom he had supposedly commissioned a portrait of himself,

³³ ASV, *PSM*, B. 265, 1617, S. Anna: 'hora drapi da lavare, hora imbasciate, et hora lettere amorose'.

³⁴ ASV, *PSM*, B. 263, 1571, S. Iseppo, fo. 2r-v: 'Saria longo à dir ogni cosa la ghe ha cusido una quantita de rocheti, che credo certo, che i passa vinti fatti per el ditto frate, et altri frati con lavori stupendi, et adesso lho vista à cuser per ditti frati fazzoleti, tachie camise, colari de sarza, manegheti postizzi, che i porta, capelli stupendissimi de recami de oro, arzeno soprarizzo, perche lei lavora miracolosamente con perle et con zogie, et cestoni de bozzolai, torte.' The friars whom Deodata courted, fra Illuminato and fra Bastian, came once again from the Augustinian houses of San Antonio and San Salvador.

bearing the arms of her family.³⁵ Here, the parallels with secular courtship are striking: the gift of a ring signifying betrothal, and the commissioning of a portrait to represent the union of two families.³⁶ The exchange of meaningful tokens was a conspicuous feature of another trial which took place in the same year, also focused on the convent of San Daniel. The proceedings were against the priest, Francesco Dei, and arose from his relationship with the *conversa* suor Barbara.³⁷ Brought before the *provveditori* as visual exhibits were love letters written by Barbara, a letter and ‘madrigal’ in the priest’s own hand, and the *Office of the Blessed Virgin* which belonged to Francesco and contained pressed flowers sent by suor Barbara as well as written allusions to the nun.³⁸

Surveying the evidence which is presented here, it appears that male and female celibates rehearsed all the rituals of flirtation, courtship, and even marriage, excepting only bodily consummation: they participated in the cultural paraphernalia of sexuality minus the sex. In the 58 cases involving male clergy which survive in the records of the *provveditori*, only two revealed with any degree of certainty that ‘carnal commerce’ had taken place between a nun and a cleric.³⁹ This is not to say that interactions between nuns and male clergy were entirely devoid of physical contact. Denunciations often claimed that conversations in the *parlatorio* were accompanied by ‘touching and kissing’. Take, for example, Girolamo Grandi, the priest found guilty of sending and receiving letters and presents to nuns at San Daniel in 1617, who was caught reoffending at the same convent in 1619. This time, Girolamo was alleged to have bragged that he had ‘touched the tits’ of nuns.⁴⁰ The chaplain at the conventual church of Santa Maria Maggiore was accustomed to hang around after mass each morning, speaking to the *converse* who fulfilled the roles

³⁵ ASV, *PSM*, B. 265, 1616 [m.v.], Celestia, S. Daniel: ‘lui messe nella lettera un’anello’.

³⁶ For the importance of gifts in signalling betrothal, see P. Rushton, ‘The testament of gifts: marriage tokens and disputed contracts in north east England, 1560–1630’, *Folk Life*, 24 (1985–6), pp. 25–31; D. O’Hara, ‘The language of tokens and the making of marriage’, *Rural History*, 3 (1992), pp. 1–40; L. Gowing, *Domestic dangers: women, words, and sex in early modern London* (Oxford, 1996), p. 159; C. Peters, ‘Gender, sacrament and ritual: the making and meaning of marriage in late medieval and early modern England’, *Past and Present*, 169 (2000), pp. 63–96 at pp. 87–8; N. Davis, *The gift in sixteenth-century France* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 44–8. For the Venetian context, see A. Cowan, *The urban patriciate: Lübeck and Venice, 1580–1700* (Köln, 1986), p. 128.

³⁷ ASV, *PSM*, B. 265, 1616 [m.v.], S. Daniel.

³⁸ The madrigal and letter sent by the priest read as follows: ‘Amami BARBAR ella/Ama il cor mio, che brama/Di sol amar chi l’ama;/Giusta legge in amare/E frà l’altre maggiore/Dar per amor amore. Si come dolcissimo mio ben, unico mi contento, giamai altra creatura videro l’occhi miei, laqual in alcuna parte potessero pareggiare alle celesti doti tue, così in questo tempo altra Rosa simile à queste che t’invio, puossi vedere da alcuno. Godile dunque mio bene et ricordati che se queste seccaransi per uscir dalle mie mani, le tue chel nel sen porti ravivaransi quando da me come queste baciati saranno a Dio unico ben.’

³⁹ ASV, *PSM*, B. 264, 1613, Chioggia, for a series of cases against a group of priests in Chioggia, alleged to have had carnal relations with female religious; ASV, *PSM*, B. 265, 1618, S. Giorgio dei Greci, for an atypical case centred on the Greek Uniate community in Venice, in which a Greek priest was accused of having sexual relations with a Greek nun.

⁴⁰ ASV, *PSM*, B. 266, 1618 [m.v.], S. Daniel, S. Giovanni di Torcello: ‘el se vanta de haver tociado le tette, et altro alle Muneghe’.

of sacristans. In 1620, the *provveditori* received a denunciation against the priest, claiming that ‘he gave vent to his appetites’ with a certain sub-sacristan, and that there passed between them ‘a thousand amorous things’. The denouncer went on to comment: ‘I don’t know whether their exchanges have arrived at that ultimate amorous end, but if this has not yet happened there is certainly a danger that it will.’⁴¹ In fact, as we have seen, such exchanges rarely led to ‘that ultimate amorous end’.

There are good historical reasons why even the most intense affective relationships between nuns and male clergy were seldom consummated. I began this discussion by considering the physical barriers designed to keep female religious out of the reach of clergy. The regulations were backed up by tough penalties and, in 1605, entering a convent without licence was made a capital offence.⁴² Evidence from the case against the priest Francesco Dei gives clear indications of the ways in which the constraints of enclosure conditioned his relationship with suor Barbara. The *provveditori* confronted Francesco with the words that he had written to the nun, making the following inference: ‘This letter and this madrigal suggest that obscene occurrences took place: because it is difficult to say in a letter to a loved one “I kiss you”, if one has not really kissed her previously.’ But Francesco would have none of it: ‘I never kissed her’, he asserted.⁴³ In fact, elsewhere, he claimed never even to have seen suor Barbara, let alone kissed her, ‘having only spoken to her in darkness at the *ruota*, nor have I ever seen her but only heard her voice’.⁴⁴ In one of Barbara’s own letters to Francesco, she informed him of forthcoming services in the church, in order that they might ‘see each other at a distance’.⁴⁵ Francesco was obviously fighting for his reputation, but he may not have been so far from the truth when he implied that the hottest aspects of their relationship were confined to the written word.

III

Embarking upon the 200 odd pages of testimony and denunciations gathered by the *provveditori* in 1619 during the trial against the priest Domenego Zon, one might imagine that here, for once, is the real thing: a genuine case of carnal debauchery between male and female celibates, of the kind so often depicted by propagandists and satirists.⁴⁶ The initial denunciation of this trial sets out the nature of the charges:

⁴¹ ASV, *PSM*, B. 266, 1620, S. Maria Maggiore: ‘sfuoga i suoi appetiti con una certa seconda sagrestana ò sottosagrestana con questa passano mille cose amoroze, non sò se arrivino à qual fine ultimo amoroso, ma se non è, stà però in gran pericolo’.

⁴² ASV, *PSM*, B. 1, fos. 39r–41v; 1604, 7 Feb. [m.v.], Cons. X.

⁴³ ASV, *PSM*, B. 265, 1616 [m.v.], S. Daniel, fo. 30r: ‘Questa lettera e questo madrigale persuadono anco operationi osceni: perche difficilmente si dirà in lettere à persona amata ti baccio, se non si haverà prima bacciata da vero.’

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, fo. 19v: ‘havendoli parlato alla ruoda solamente la quale era scura, ne se vedeva cosa alcuna, alla voce sola’.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, unnumbered folio: ‘rivedersi al lontano’.

⁴⁶ ASV, *PSM*, B. 266, 1619, S. Maria degli Angeli.

That a certain priest, Domenego Zon ..., a man of wicked life and evil nature ... persists in going to the convent of the Angeli di Murano, in order to visit the nuns there, performing dishonest acts ... touching and kissing them shamefully. And he has carnally used more than one of these nuns, scaling the walls of the nunnery several times at night.⁴⁷

Domenego was the former chaplain at Santa Maria degli Angeli on the island of Murano, from which post he had been removed in 1615. He was banned from speaking with any of the nuns and forbidden to enter either the church or *parlatorio*, or even to walk alongside the canal which bordered the convent. Further, he was not allowed to send presents or letters to the nuns, nor could he receive them, a standard prohibition in cases tried by the *provveditori*. But Domenego's dismissal did not mark the end of his acquaintance with the nuns of the Angeli, and in 1619 he stood accused of carrying on in the most scandalous fashion with four women in particular. Two of these – suor Gaspara and suor Gieronima – were *converse*. Both were aged about fifty, and they made a habit of visiting Domenego at his home in Venice, once he had been forced out of his job on Murano. Then there was suor Elena Bragadin, a professed nun, also in her fifties or thereabouts, of noble birth and some fortune. Finally, there was the young and beautiful suor Tecla, another *conversa*, but one who did not enjoy the same freedoms to leave the convent as those afforded to Gaspara and Gieronima.

The allegations received by the *provveditori* in 1619 provided uncommonly detailed descriptions of the 'dishonest acts' which had occurred between priest and nuns. The two *converse* were said to be intoxicated with desire for Domenego. Taking them into his bedroom by turns, he aroused the women 'with lustful kisses, and illicit touching, and mutual corruptions', so that they 'burnt with libidinous fire'.⁴⁸ Of suor Elena, it was claimed that Domenego had 'consumed the flower of her virginity and modesty' some years before at the church grille, 'on which occasion, the conversation passed from spiritual to profane matters, resulting in all manner of illicit deeds, with pollutions and every indecent occurrence that one can imagine' (significantly, 'carnal commerce' did not figure on the witness's list).⁴⁹ Domenego's sexual encounters with suor Tecla, meanwhile, took place on the balcony outside her room. The

⁴⁷ Ibid., fo. 1r: 'Come un certo prete Domenego Zon ..., huomo di cattiva vitta et malla qualità ... continua andar al monasterio delli Angeli di Murano à visitatione di quelle monache facendo con quelle atti inhonesti come saria dir tochar bacciar vergognosamente si come questo habbi usato carnalmente con più d'una di quelle monache, scalando le mura di esso monasterio diverse volte intempo di notte.'

⁴⁸ Ibid., fo. 2r: 'con ... libidinesi bacci et toccamenti illeciti et corrotioni et dell'uno et dell'altro ad infocarle che ardevano di libidinoso fuoco'.

⁴⁹ Ibid., fo. 2v: 'ha consumato il fior della sua virginità et pudicitia'; fo. 7v: 'che la pratica con lei principiò alle grade di chiesa ... Con la qual occasione de ragionamenti spirituali, passorono à profani in modo tal che à quella grada vengor à tutti illeciti con polutioni, et con quelle cose indecenti, che possono imaginarsi; de commercio attualmente carnal lui non se ne è mai lassato intendere.'

priest, it was claimed, had taken a pair of ladders to the convent, and had climbed up to the scene of passion, ‘committing a thousand illicit acts and obscene actions leading to pollutions on both sides’.⁵⁰

All this talk of ‘corruptions’ and ‘pollutions’ appears to establish that the relationships between Domenego Zon and his lovers were unequivocally of the flesh. Some interesting embellishments to the accusations further stressed the sordid nature of the sexual interactions which had occurred. Suor Elena was supposed to have exclaimed on seeing Domenego’s penis, ‘Oh what a tiny little thing!’, a remark which the priest shamelessly repeated to a group of fellow ecclesiastics.⁵¹ In similar vein, Domenego was alleged to have explained to a companion whom he had kept waiting for two hours while he was at suor Tecla’s balcony: ‘these nuns never finish’!⁵² Most remarkable was the story that Domenego and Tecla had exchanged night-shirts, in order, it seems, that their bodily emissions might mingle. The accusation was as follows:

that he had a shirt of the said nun, and he put it on in the evening ..., and if there occurred pollutions, whether voluntary or casual, he sent the shirt to her saying ‘these are the tears of your baby’, and she did the same *vice versa*, having a shirt that belonged to the said priest Domenego.⁵³

Domenego Zon was said to be ‘the most perverse man imaginable’.⁵⁴

The testimony against Domenego Zon and his lovers from Santa Maria degli Angeli is uncommonly explicit. Unfortunately, from the historian’s point of view, it is also highly unreliable. For a certain priest named Niccolò Baruzzi – the principal witness in this case, and the main source of all the accusations discussed so far – was discovered to have committed perjury on a grand scale. The collapse of Niccolò Baruzzi’s scheme against Domenego Zon, an old acquaintance and colleague with whom there were clearly scores to be settled, came nearly fifty pages into the trial transcript, and a month and a half after the *provveditori* had commenced their proceedings. One Tomio Carraro, alias Menego Settimo, whom Baruzzi had employed as a false witness, broke down on the first day of questioning, and admitted the fraud in which he had agreed to participate.⁵⁵ The *provveditori* responded severely to the contempt for justice shown by Baruzzi and Carraro, sentencing them to the galleys for four and seven years respectively. They did not, however, give up on the case against Domenego. More than ten new witnesses were called, and the priest was eventually found guilty of ‘scandalously frequenting a female convent,

⁵⁰ Ibid., fo. 7r: ‘commettendo mille atti illeciti, et operationi oscene con polutione dell’uno, e dell’altro’.

⁵¹ Ibid., unnumbered folio; denunciation presented to *provveditori*, 27 May 1619; fo. 7v: ‘Et che S. Elena li diceva, Ohibò, che cosetta piccola.’

⁵² Ibid., fo. 23v: ‘ste muneghe non finesse mai’.

⁵³ Ibid., fo. 7r: ‘che lui haveva una camisa di detta monaca, et la sera se la metteva in dosso ..., et se li occorreva polutioni ò volontarie ò casuali, lui gli la mandava dicendoli, questo è il pianto del tuo puttin, et ella versa vice faceva il medesimo havendone una di detto pre Domenego’.

⁵⁴ Ibid., fo. 2r: ‘questo Dominico Zon sie il piu perverso huomo che piu possi imaginarsi’.

⁵⁵ Ibid., fo. 24r; 8 July 1619.

sending and receiving letters and presents, and committing other contraventions of the law'; he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment.⁵⁶

This flimsy verdict and comparatively lenient sentence come as rather an anti-climax after all that we have heard about Domenego and his lovers. This is, perhaps, because modern historians are not immune from the sensationalism evinced by some early modern commentators. But notwithstanding the tricks of Baruzzi and his accomplices, the trial of Domenego Zon helps us to build up a cultural context for understanding relations between early modern celibates. For Baruzzi's evidence was designed to be plausible as well as damaging, and so he drew on a range of cultural referents with which both he and his interrogators were familiar.⁵⁷ If his story ultimately strained credibility, this was perhaps because it was overimbued with early modern stereotypes of lusty priests and insatiable nuns. But as a fellow priest and associate of Domenego, Baruzzi clearly had first-hand knowledge of the transactions which typified relationships between male and female celibates.

In two key respects, the details of the case against Domenego Zon regarding his links with the nuns of Santa Maria degli Angeli coincide with elements in the other case studies which I have discussed. First, there is rich evidence from Baruzzi, backed up by other more reliable witnesses, of Domenego receiving gifts and material support from the female religious he consorted with. Secondly, Domenego was said to have invoked the metaphor of marriage in forging his relationships with nuns. By looking at the whole range of Niccolò Baruzzi's allegations, and by situating them alongside the testimony of other witnesses, we quickly lose the one-dimensional image of lascivious corruption, and are forced to accept a far more complicated view of celibate sexuality.

What did Domenego Zon gain from his relations with the nuns of the Angeli? One answer went like this: 'beds, mattresses, sheets, blankets, ... clothes, shirts, handkerchiefs ..., 50 or 60 ducats at a time, and every edible delicacy, and all this [Domenego] recorded in a notebook'.⁵⁸ These were supposedly the gifts which he received from suor Elena – seemingly the most smitten of the four nuns and also the one with the greatest personal wealth at her disposal. As for Gaspara and Gieronima, they did not have their own funds to draw upon, but were accused of embezzling money in order to provide material assistance to

⁵⁶ Ibid., unnumbered folio; 3 December 1619, for all three sentences: 'per havere ... scandalosamente praticato ad un Monasterio di Monache, mandando, e ricevendo lettere, e presenti, et commettendo altri mancamenti contra le leggi'.

⁵⁷ N. Z. Davis, *Fiction in the archives: pardon tales and their tellers in sixteenth-century France* (Cambridge, 1987), demonstrates how historians might profitably embrace the untruths which are to be found in court records; see esp. p. 4. For a fuller discussion of the methodological issues at stake in the interpretation of the trial records of the *provveditori sopra monasteri*, see M. Laven, 'Testifying to the self: nuns' narratives in early modern Venice', in B. Pullan, ed., *The trial in history* (Manchester, forthcoming).

⁵⁸ ASV, *PSM*, B. 266, 1619, S. Maria degli Angeli, unnumbered folio; denunciation presented to *provveditori*, 27 May 1619: 'Havendoli dato letti, sdramazzi, lenziolli, coperte ... veste, camise, faceletti ... , ducati 50/60 alla volta de mangiative le più delicate che si trovino il tutto stà descritto in un suo zornale'; see also fo. 8r.

Domenego: thus, bequests to the convent which were intended to pay for votive masses ended up in the pockets of the corrupt priest.⁵⁹ Only suor Tecla was free from accusations of having given financial aid to Domenego. According to one witness, Domenego once admitted that he preferred suor Tecla to suor Elena, ‘for she was younger and more beautiful than the other nun’.⁶⁰ An alternative view on the matter came from Valerio Bognolo, the brother-in-law of suor Tecla, who claimed of Domenego: ‘I believe that he showed most affection to those nuns who could do him most good.’⁶¹ Valerio, doubtless keen to protect the honour of his kinswoman, pointed out that Tecla was just a poor *conversa*. Yet, while this witness had his own reasons for wanting to shift attention away from Tecla and on to Elena, Domenego was certainly in pursuit of cash, as well as youth and beauty.

Other witnesses substantiated the claims of Domenego Zon’s parasitical relationship with the convent of the Angeli. Virgilio Rubi, an old acquaintance of Domenego who worked at the Rialto, received baskets of cakes and biscuits from the nuns to pass on to the priest.⁶² And according to fra Francesco Longo da Noal, *converse* brought edible goodies direct to Domenego’s house.⁶³ Marietta Moro, the sister of suor Tecla, confirmed the story that Elena Bragadin had provided the priest with sheets, mattresses, and money, while she also detailed a number of more sentimental and devotional gifts sent by the nun: ‘a most beautiful Nativity scene, an Agnus Dei, flowers, and other similar things’.⁶⁴ Suor Elena’s servant, Anzelica, claimed she had taken soup, fish, and meat to the priest’s house near San Giovanni e Paolo.⁶⁵ Most tellingly of all, Domenego himself was prepared to admit that he had received a deal of charity at the hands of the nuns, not so much for himself as for his nieces and sisters who lived with him. Besides sending baskets of food and financial contributions, the nuns had provided his household with an assortment of domestic items: pictures, wooden stools, ladles, and plates. When pressed, Domenego confirmed that he had also received a mattress from the nuns (though he claimed this was the gift of suor Paula Giustinian rather than suor Elena), and that he had been sent fabrics with which to clothe his nieces. Finally, he was happy to concede that Elena had sent him several books, a box of flowers, and an Agnus Dei, but insisted that all these gifts were destined for his nieces’ collection.⁶⁶

Despite the oddities and quirks of the Zon case, the succession of gifts and favours which he received from the Angeli was virtually textbook.⁶⁷ The

⁵⁹ Ibid., unnumbered folio; denunciation, 27 May 1619.

⁶⁰ Ibid., fo. 15r; testimony of Virgilio Rubi: ‘lui mi haveva detto di portar più amor à lei che à S. Elena, perche la gera più zovene, e più bella di quella’.

⁶¹ Ibid., fo. 46r: ‘credo che l’havesse più affetto à quella, che li faceva più ben, perche S. Tecla è povera conversa’.

⁶² Ibid., fo. 11r.

⁶³ Ibid., fo. 25r.

⁶⁴ Ibid., fo. 40v: ‘La ghe mandò una volta un presepio bellissimo; agnus dei; fiori; e cose simili.’

⁶⁵ Ibid., fo. 52v.

⁶⁶ Ibid., fos 61r–6r.

⁶⁷ See Bishop Grimani’s instructions for confessors, *Constitutioni et decreti*, cap. 62: ‘S’astenghino totalmente di accettare presenti da loro, ne di cose mangiative, ne d’altre ... Ne meno gli diano a farli lavori di camise, fazzoletti, collari, et simil biancarie, ne gli dia drappi à lavare.’

largesse of the nuns towards Domenego corresponds to the excessive magnanimity shown by suor Deodata of San Servolo to her beloved friars. The range of gifts, from food to furnishings to religious keepsakes is by now familiar. So too the sense that female religious communities were at times exploited by male clerical hangers-on. At Santa Chiara di Murano, in 1620, it was complained that the friars from San Francesco della Vigna were the ruin of the convent, eating the food which was meant for the nuns, and reducing them to extreme misery and penury.⁶⁸ Francesco Dei, whom we have encountered sending love letters and poems to suor Barbara at San Daniel, was condemned by one of the nuns for taking advantage of his lover: 'he eats everything that she has; she works day and night in order to feed that priest'.⁶⁹ And yet there is no reason to assume that female religious were passive victims in their relations with male clergy. On the contrary, the actions of certain nuns displayed an energetic motivation of their own. Suor Deodata obstinately pursued her personal affairs at the expense of the communal interest, apparently courting the unpopularity of her fellow nuns: for her, giving was a means of breaking free of her institution, of attaining an individual identity. In the case of a rich and noble nun such as Elena Bragadin, acts of generosity may have reinforced her own sense of status: the provision of alms to Domenego Zon underlined the fact that he was her social inferior. Further, according to Domenego's own testimony, Elena helped to provide dowries for the priest's nieces, a deed which signalled not just charity but also influence.⁷⁰

Domenego evidently perceived his dutiful role as an uncle as a point in his defence, and was willing to admit that the nuns had assisted him with providing for his nieces (if nieces they were). He proudly testified 'That my home has always been a little nunnery of young virgins; I have married off 12 of my sisters and nieces, and among my little girls not one of them as ever been of bad reputation.'⁷¹ In much the same way, the priest, Francesco Dei, had also tried to justify his actions: 'I am poor and burdened with family'; 'I had to mend my poverty and to maintain my family, that is my mother and two sisters, one unmarried and the other a widow with children.'⁷² These trials reveal that nuns provided financial support to priests, and that ordained men could be encumbered with paternal responsibilities. By analysing the material transactions of nuns, priests, and friars, we are made aware of the extent to which worldly affairs impinged upon the celibate ranks, a tendency which clashed

⁶⁸ ASV, *PSM*, B. 266, 1620, S. Chiara di Murano: 'essi frati sono la rovina di quel Convento, et mangiano quello, che doveriano mangiar quelle poverine, le quali per questa causa in particolare, sono ridotte in estrema miseria e mendicà'.

⁶⁹ ASV, *PSM*, B. 265, 1616 [m.v.], S. Daniel, fo. 12v.

⁷⁰ ASV, *PSM*, B. 266, 1619, S. Maria degli Angeli, fo. 71r.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, fo. 85r: 'Che la mia casa è stata sempre un picciol monastero de verginelle; havendomi maritate al numero di 12 trà sorelle, e nezze, e delle mie creature non vi è stata mai alcuna di cattivo nome.'

⁷² ASV, *PSM*, B. 265, 1616 [m.v.], S. Daniel, fos. 18v and 39v: 'son poveretta (sic), cargo de famegia'; 'reparavo alla mia povertà, et sostentavo la mia famiglia che è di madre, e due sorelle una nubile, et una vedova con figlioli'.

with the ideals of the Counter-Reformation. But it is clear also that celibate men and women deliberately appropriated aspects of lay culture, and that they were continually borrowing from lay models of gender, sex, and marriage in the formation of their relationships. Before closing the case against Domenico Zon, let us consider the ways in which marriage is introduced as a model for his closest relationships with female religious.

Both suor Elena and suor Tecla received the dubious honour of being styled ‘wives’ by Domenico; both were additionally graced with the title of ‘St Peter’s daughter-in-law’ (presumably, an allusion to the priest’s imagined station in the apostolic succession).⁷³ Each woman was kept in ignorance of the other, and when Elena eventually discovered the truth (because a letter meant for Tecla accidentally fell into her hands), she berated the traitor who had deceived her for so long. For a period of five or six years, suor Elena failed to mention her relationship with the priest whenever she made her confession. Her lover sought to convince her in daily letters that they were married, and that ‘the carnal deeds that had occurred and continued to occur were those of a husband and wife’. But, in the year of the Jubilee – a time of plenary indulgence – Elena wrote to Domenico, saying that ‘she wanted to make a general confession and to liberate herself from the hands of the Devil’. He promptly wrote back with the following response: ‘that it was sufficient for her to write down her sins for him to see, since he was a priest who had care of souls, and that he would absolve her of whatever sins she had committed’. Further, on no account should she mention *his* deeds to anyone else, including those which he had committed ‘as a husband to his wife’. Finally, Domenico told her that ‘as his wife she should obey him and that she should leave to him the care of her soul’.⁷⁴

We will never know whether or not there was any truth in these allegations, since they were derived from the untrustworthy testimony of the priest, Niccolò Baruzzi. But even if the story was unfounded, it was significant that marriage figured so prominently in Baruzzi’s idea of a sex scandal involving a fellow priest and his female religious lovers. In the celibate world of nuns, priests, and friars, we might expect to find interactions between the sexes uncomplicated by issues of courtship and marriage. And yet, in many respects, relationships between nuns and male clergy aped relationships between married women and men. In the Zon case, marriage provided a model of power relations which served the corrupt priest well. With Domenico’s claims both to priestly and husbandly authority, he successfully pulled out all the patriarchal stops at once. It was, perhaps, the same at San Servolo in 1570 where the friars

⁷³ ASV, PSM, B. 266, 1619, S. Maria degli Angeli, fos. 8v–9r.

⁷⁴ Ibid., unnumbered folio; denunciation, 27 May, 1619: ‘che però le carnalita che sonno corse et corrono sonno di marito et moglie’; ‘voleva far una Confessione generale et liberarsi dalle mani del Diavolo’; ‘che bastava che li scrivesse li suoi peccati perche essendo sacerdote che haveva havuto cura di anime l’assolveva da qual si voglia colpa et che per niun modo dovesse apalesare à niuno li fatti suoi et ciò ghe lo cometeva come marito à moglie et che come moglie doveva obedirlo et che lasciasse à lui la cura dell’anima sua’.

condescendingly called the nuns ‘spiritual daughters’, and sealed their relationships with a formal ceremony in which rings were exchanged. But the adoption of the marital model within the celibate world was not just a source of patriarchal power. Marriage supplied celibates with a vocabulary in which they could play out their relationships. That vocabulary was already familiar to them not just as a result of their exchanges with the lay world but also because the ceremonies of profession and ordination, with their vows and pledges, were precisely imitative of a secular wedding.⁷⁵ When such vows were re-enacted by female religious and male clergy in the new context of an earthly relationship, they conveyed a sense of monogamous respectability, even sanctity, to that union. And when the bond was dishonoured, there was reason for indignation and distress. At a time when religious vocations for men and women were often the result of social expediency rather than personal choice, conjugality – the state denied to celibates – featured prominently among the desires and fantasies of both sexes.

IV

It is clear that the celibate ranks of the Catholic church were neither straightforwardly chaste (as St Jerome and his followers wished) nor unremittingly lustful (as satirists, moralists, and even a number of recent historians have depicted them). Given that, in Venice, it was well known that many nuns and clerics lacked a genuine sense of vocation, we should not expect to find an unwavering commitment to the ideal of chastity among nuns, priests, and friars. The assumption that the frustrations of celibate life precipitated men and women into bold and risky acts of sexual transgression is equally misplaced.⁷⁶ But the point of this article is not to prove that between two exaggerated myths, there lies a moderate reality. Far from being moderate, the relationships which have been brought to light were often intense, peculiar, and extreme. We might want to place them within a tradition of intimacy between men and women, united in a spiritual relationship: Héloïse and Abelard, St Clare and St Francis, Teresa of Avila and Peter of Alcántara, Jeanne de Chantale and François de Sales, Angela Mellini and Giovanni Battista Ruggieri, the nuns of Port-Royal and the abbé de Saint-Cyran.⁷⁷ Some common threads appear to link relationships between male and female

⁷⁵ Giovanni Badoer, *Ordo rituum et caeremoniarum tradendi velamina monialibus, Quae jam emiserunt Professionem, vel eodem tempore emittunt* (Venice, 1689); printed pamphlet located in ASV, *Compilazione Leggi*, B. 288. The marriage to Christ, complete with ring, recurred in the sexual fantasies of Benedetta Carlini, the visionary nun from seventeenth-century Pescia, at the centre of Judith Brown’s study, *Immodest acts: the life of a lesbian nun in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 1986).

⁷⁶ R. Canosa, *Il velo e il cappuccio: monacazioni forzate e sessualità nei conventi femminili in Italia tra 400 e 700* (Rome, 1991), pp. 10–11; Haliczzer, *Sexuality in the confessional*, pp. 6, 147.

⁷⁷ For the two last and least well-known of these relationships, see Luisa Ciammitti, ‘One saint less’, and Alexander Sedgwick, ‘The nuns of Port-Royal: a study of female spirituality in seventeenth-century France’, in L. Coon et al., eds., *That gentle strength: historical perspectives on women in Christianity* (Charlottesville and London, 1990), pp. 176–89.

religious celibates across different times and locations.⁷⁸ However, in what remains of this article, I shall focus on the specific historical context to which the stories that I have discussed belong.

This brings us back to the courtroom: the source and the filter of all our information. All the cases considered in this article are, viewed from a legal standpoint, instances of transgression. Every relationship contravened the laws of the Venetian state; and it is for this reason that it made it into the historical records. But what exactly was being transgressed? It appears from the trials that the overwhelming concern of the *provveditori* was not with sexual transgression but with breaches of enclosure – the principle which aspired to isolate nunneries from all dealings with the outside world. The concern with prosecuting the transgressors of enclosure rather than the violators of chastity – the latter always entailed the former – reflects developments in secular legislation. Of the laws passed in 1509, 1514, 1566, and 1605, all of which redefined the penalties which could be imposed on *monachini* (men – lay or clerical – who were involved in illicit relationships with nuns), only that of 1566 instituted a separate scale of punishments for men ‘convicted of having had carnal commerce with a nun’.⁷⁹ For the other three pieces of legislation no such distinction was effected. Take the law passed by the Council of Ten in 1605, which for the first time prescribed the death penalty for *monachini*. Rather than placing the emphasis on the sexual violation of Christ’s brides, engagement in sexual relations had technically become an irrelevance. The law stated that any man found guilty of having entered a convent without legal grounds, day or night, should be executed, ‘even if he were not convicted of carnal commerce’.⁸⁰

We have become accustomed to viewing the period of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation as one obsessed with sexual honour, and menaced by sexual incontinence. Laws which controlled dancing and drunkenness in lay society, and which limited association between the sexes, especially among the young, were ultimately designed to prevent extra-marital sex, with its damaging consequences for the community, from taking place.⁸¹ And yet the

⁷⁸ For a wide-ranging discussion of relationships between men and women, brought together in their spiritual activities, see Patrick Collinson, ‘“Not sexual in the ordinary sense”: women, men, and religious transactions’, in his *Elizabethan essays* (London, 1994), pp. 119–50. More specific similarities may be charted between the nuns of early modern Venice and the residents of the thirteenth-century Dominican convent in Zamora in north-west Spain, where nuns ‘paired off’ with local friars, exchanging letters and gifts, and washing their clothes for them; P. Linehan, *The ladies of Zamora* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 48–51.

⁷⁹ ASV, *PSM*, B. 1, fos 28v–9v; 29 March 1566, Cons. X. Here the man who had had sex with a nun was liable for ten years’ banishment plus a fine of 1,000 ducats. These punishments were to be exactly halved for any man ‘found inside a convent even if he were not convicted of carnal commerce’.

⁸⁰ ASV, *PSM*, B. 1, fos 39r–41v; 1604/5, 7 Feb., Cons. X.

⁸¹ H. Medick, ‘Village spinning bees: sexual culture and free time among rural youth in early modern Germany’, in H. Medick and D. Sabeian, eds., *Interest and emotion: essays on the study of family and kinship* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 317–39, at p. 321; U. Rublack, *The crimes of women in early modern Germany* (Oxford, 1999), p. 144.

evidence surveyed here suggests that, in policing the interactions between female religious and male clergy, the Venetian authorities made no distinction between relationships which were non-physical (or, at least, non-penetrative) and those which involved bodily union. Whereas in a trial for rape or fornication, involving lay men and women, the midwives might be called in to examine the female body for signs of penetration, in the trials we have looked at the *provveditori* would focus their investigation on the convent walls, searching for signs of intrusion.⁸² If *parlatorio* offences and gift-giving feature more prominently in the documents than acts of physical sexuality, then this reflects the concerns of the legislation.⁸³

The relationship between the law and transgression was not, however, a passive one, and we need to broaden our focus to consider the ways in which the policies of church and state actively affected the behaviour of female religious and male clergy. The impact of these policies is apparent throughout the trials we have looked at. Relations between nuns and priests or friars took place on the peripheries of enclosure: in the *parlatorio* or at the church grilles. Convent gardens or balconies were the trysting-places of only the most daring. Often prevented from communicating face-to-face, go-betweens were employed to convey messages between nuns and their clerical lovers. Affection or commitment were signalled from afar by the sending of letters and presents. The Counter-Reformation drive to introduce female monastic enclosure, accompanied by a campaign to rid the clergy of concubinage, conditioned and changed the nature of relations between nuns and ecclesiastics. Historians who have studied the occurrence of sexual transgressions in Venetian convents in the late medieval period have observed a ‘golden age’ of conventual sexuality, drawing to a close in the mid-sixteenth century.⁸⁴ One scholar perceives the shift as being from ‘illicit sexuality’ to ‘tolerated conviviality’ (parties, theatrical performances, and meetings in the *parlatorio*). Some such shift certainly took place, but we should question the view that the new culture of conviviality was tolerated or that the transactions which occurred between female religious and male clergy were ‘deprived of any real danger’.⁸⁵ On the

⁸² Helen Hills has argued that the Tridentine decrees on enclosure shifted ‘the anxiety of inviolability previously focused on nuns’ virginity onto the separateness of their space’, ‘Cities and virgins: female aristocratic convents in early modern Naples and Palermo’, *Oxford Art Journal*, 22 (1999), pp. 29–54, at p. 34. On the role of midwives and ‘expert women’ in verifying the intactness of virgins, see M. Ferro, *Dizionari del dritto comune, e venice* (10 vols., Venice, 1778–81), iv, sub ‘deflorazione’, p. 198; G. Ruggiero, *Boundaries of Eros: sex crime and sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (New York and Oxford, 1993), pp. 37–8.

⁸³ For the sceptical view that criminal records reveal nothing other than the workings of the judicial system, see M. Sbriccoli, ‘Fonti giudiziarie e fonti giuridiche: riflessioni sulla fase attuale degli studi di storia del crimine e della giustizia criminale’, *Studi storici*, 29 (1988), pp. 491–501. For an opposing view, see E. Grendi, ‘Sulla “storia criminale”’: risposta a Mario Sbriccoli’, *Quaderni storici*, 73 (1990), pp. 267–75.

⁸⁴ Canosa, *Il velo*, p. 226. See also Ruggiero, *Boundaries of Eros*, on the ‘culture of illicit sexuality’ which prevailed in certain convents in fifteenth-century Venice, p. 84.

⁸⁵ Canosa, *Il velo*, p. 11.

contrary, the shift to conviviality may be seen as the creative response of nuns and their lovers to the new challenge of enclosure.

The cases brought before the *provveditori* allow us to glimpse some of the ways in which the reforms and legislation of the Counter-Reformation period were received, resisted, and negotiated, and to see how the new demands and restrictions on religious celibates were incorporated within their own unwritten codes of conduct. For it was not just the actions of nuns, priests, and friars which were conditioned by regulations; their desires and frustrations were also shaped by the policies of church and state. Priests and regulars of both sexes were highly sensitive to attempts to detach and isolate them from the secular world. The prevalence of involuntary vocations compounded their sensitivity. Sealed up within an enclosed convent, nuns welcomed priests and other visitors into their parlour because they could bring them news from outside. Links with clergymen employed by the convent or friars from a nearby male community, although proscribed, provided female religious with an obvious source of company. In return, nuns carried out domestic chores for male ecclesiastics, an alternative to the secular concubines whom the Counter-Reformation church considered unacceptable. In forming and pursuing these relationships, male and female celibates enacted rituals from the lay world, defying their exclusion from secular society. Courtship and betrothal shaped the desires of many celibates; some even nurtured fantasies of reproduction. As Domenico Zon supposedly told suor Tecla on presenting her with the semen-stained night-shirt: 'these are the tears of your baby'. The story of Domenico and the nuns from the Angeli reveals with particular vividness the ways in which male and female celibates consciously broke down the barriers between lay and clerical society. Like other priests we have seen, Domenico imported his worldly affairs into the convent, and engaged the involvement of a number of nuns. Unlike the enclosed women, Domenico also held a position in the secular world, as the guardian of a number of female dependants. The priest and his nuns fully understood that they were bound to chaste celibacy, and steadfastly denied all accusations of sexual misconduct. But what they could not absorb was the notion that they were required to keep secular and religious life apart. Domenico looked to the convent for worldly support and found it; returning to his domestic world, he construed his household as 'a little nunnery of young virgins'.

In his account of a seventeenth-century cause célèbre, in which sexual transgression and demonic possession catapulted a French community of Ursuline nuns to infamy, Aldous Huxley observed: 'Sex mingles easily with religion, and their blending has one of those slightly repulsive and yet exquisite and poignant flavours, which startle the palate like a revelation – of what? That, precisely, is the question.'⁸⁶ The cases examined in this article have allowed us to glimpse at times that elusive eroticism which, according to

⁸⁶ A. Huxley, *The devils of Loudun* (London, 1994), p. 13.

Huxley, belongs to the religious context. And yet any attempt to answer the question he poses on the basis of this evidence would lead to some unexpected conclusions. The poignant flavours turn out to be those of cakes and biscuits, the revelations concern clean laundry and darned collars. While Huxley sought in his study to pinpoint a timeless essence at the heart of religion and sexuality, what we have uncovered here belongs to the specific context of the Counter-Reformation. The triumph of enclosure reshaped celibate desires and the old culture of illicit sexuality was replaced by new and unsettling forms of sociability. How telling that, at this historical juncture, the term most commonly used to describe the illicit intimacies of nuns, priests, and friars was *domestichezza* – familiarity of a particularly homely kind.