

## Introduction

THIS BOOK IS A collection of fourteen articles that explore the hostility toward the establishment of convent life, both Anglican and Roman Catholic, in Victorian England. The majority of the articles deal with Anglican religious life for women. Anglican sisterhoods began to gain popularity in the early part of the nineteenth century, partly due to the influence of the Oxford Movement and the growth of Anglo-Catholicism within the Church of England. This way of life offered women an opportunity to perform valuable work in their church, but it also offended the sensibilities of the Victorian culture that could only conceive of a woman's proper vocation as a wife and mother. Opponents to sisterhoods used traditional anti-Catholic stereotypes, which emphasized the alleged evils of convent life, for example, physical and spiritual abuse associated with convents, the unnatural character of celibacy and sisterhoods, and believed that other questionable practices associated with Roman Catholicism, such as vows, auricular confession, liturgy, and allegiance to the See of Rome, might be introduced into Protestant England. The year 1850 saw the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy in England, and this heightened the fears and suspicions of Catholicism, and the criticism of religious life for woman, both Catholic and Anglican, increased. Chapter 1 describes an early attempt to have Parliament legislate for state inspection of convents to ensure that the nuns did not suffer any abuse or lose of English liberties. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 discuss "some traditional anti-Catholic critiques and alleged abuses associated with convent life. If sisterhoods were allowed to flourish in England free from state inspection, similar occurrences would certainly take place. Anglican sisterhoods, however, did perform valuable services, especially the establishment of orphanages, but even this praiseworthy service faced opposition. Chapters 6 and 7 explore the cri-

tiques of two Anglican sisterhoods that worked with orphans. Convents also performed valuable services for the poor and outcast women of society. Chapter 8 deals specifically with the institution of “convent laundries,” that is, attempts by Anglican sisterhoods to rehabilitate “fallen women,” and the opposition by an Anglican organization, the Convent Enquiry Society.

The education of young girls was another area in which convents, especially Roman Catholic, excelled, and an increasing number of Protestant families wanted to take advantage of this opportunity. Chapter 9 describes how some concerned Britons feared that these convent schools would destroy the English character of Protestant girls. Conversion to Roman Catholicism could become a strong temptation, and consequently parents were admonished to avoid convent schools. In general, the Victorians venerated the patriarchal family structure, and the place of daughters in the family structure was well defined. Chapter 10 points out that convent life, by its nature, tended to destroy this bond and could interfere with the rights of the parents. Chapters 11, 12, 13, and 14 discuss the alleged control of priests over the lives of nuns, and this power, some argued, could lead to abuse. Three of these chapters explore the Roman Catholic practice of auricular confession, which was popular in Anglican sisterhoods, and the reasons why some saw it as a threatening and dangerous practice that could harm naive women. Chapter XIV details the scandalous activities of the ex-Roman Catholic priest, Giacinto Achilli, and the manner in which he corrupted women, including nuns. The court case, which grew out of John Henry Newman’s attack against Achilli, illustrated the power that some unscrupulous men might exert over women.

These articles have been published in America and abroad, and this book brings together these studies of anti-convent polemics. In addition to looking at anti-Catholicism and the fear of both Anglican and Catholic sisterhoods being established in England, this book also explores the prejudice which existed against women in Victorian England who sought their independence by joining sisterhoods and working in areas such as orphanages, rescue work, and education. This drew a hostile response from the nineteenth-century masculine ethos. Women, according to this view, should remain passive in matters of religion. This book, consequently, also highlights the significant achievements of sisterhoods in the spiritual, social, and educational areas of Victorian

England. Nuns did play an important role in many areas of life in nineteenth-century England and faced opposition from men who saw their dominance threatened by female religious. Although the open hostility they encountered has subsided to an extent in the twenty-first century, some suspicion of women who speak out and challenge their churches and a patriarchal society has not disappeared. The accomplishments of the nineteenth-century nuns and the opposition they endured should serve as both an example and encouragement to all men and women committed to the Gospel.

My home institution, Saint Vincent College, Latrobe, Pennsylvania, celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of co-education during the 2008–2009 academic year. After more than a century, this all-male, Catholic, Benedictine, liberal arts college welcomed its first group of women in August 1983 at a campus-wide celebration. The president of the college, Fr. Augustine Flood, OSB, challenged these women, who correctly saw themselves as pioneers, to take charge of the college. Within a few years, this had taken place. The early classes of women graced the campus with their enthusiasm, scholarship, and determination to make this college, to quote Benedict's Rule, "a school of the Lord's service." This book is dedicated to these first women students at Saint Vincent College and their lasting contributions to higher education in the Benedictine tradition.

—Rene Kollar