

PART THREE
From Saint to Demon (1753-1777)

11. Disturbing Deviance?

When Fra Desiderio di Casabasciana returned to Rome he deposited a considerable amount of documentation in the offices of the Propaganda. He himself was interviewed by the cardinals in the presence of the pope, and the entire case was examined by experts chosen by Benedict XIV.¹

In a letter to Cardinal de Tencin of 5 December 1753, Benedict XIV wrote that he had questioned at length his “good friend”, a Father Sergio from the Pii Operai who was a consultant to the Holy Office, professor of theology and a prefect of studies at the Propaganda, in order to know which “theologians in Rome were the most knowledgeable and most independent of any party, and thus better able to serve the Holy See”. His correspondent replied on several occasions that “unfortunately, the party spirit had also gained a foot-hold in Rome, and that he only knew of two who were really learned, candid, free of commitments, and therefore able to give good advice. One of these was the father, now Cardinal, Galli, and the other, a Fr Mancini . . .”. Benedict XIV added that he preferred the first, who was older, and a superior of “his congregation of Canons Regular of the Holy Saviour”, and . . . Bolognese like himself.²

These were in fact the two experts whom the pope consulted soon afterwards to study Hindiyya’s case, using the material that Desiderio di Casabasciana had gathered during his mission. The friar had submitted findings in strong support of the Maronite mystic, claiming to have seen proof of the greatest virtues in her:

What I can say with a clear conscience is that, having carefully considered and observed Hindiyya’s virtuous acts in my presence, I saw that they were accomplished easily and skilfully, with great spiritual solace, and, [I would almost say] with the sole purpose of pleasing God, never having discovered that she could have any reason for pleasing men.

Even so, he knew how to remain cautious, believing that it would be extremely difficult to claim a supernatural character for Hindiyya’s acts and preferring to defer judgement to the person who would have to examine his detailed report.³

We might expect that these experts, who were carefully chosen by the Curia, would not dare to adopt a position contrary to what the pope, when he was still Cardinal Lambertini, had written on the subject, or that they would differ from his previous decisions regarding female mystics, notably that of the “affected sanctity” of Crescentia of Kaufbeuren (1745), at a time when the head of the Church was steeped in a climate of critical rationalism.⁴ His *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonisatione*, as well as the works of Cardinal Giovanni Bona (died 1674), are the main references for Cardinal Antonio Andrea Galli and the Friar Minor Isidoro Mancini. They suspiciously reviewed all the evidence, barely concealing their misogyny behind a genuine rationality.⁵

Both experts expressed a strongly hostile view of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, basing their opinion on the affirmation of a centralising Roman authority. They insisted that Benedict XIV had explained in his treatise why the Holy See would not elevate this devotion to the status of an office and a mass, despite the revelations of Marguerite Alacoque. Mancini recalled that “the Church has not established whether the heart is the sensitive principle of all virtues and affections and the centre of all inner pleasures and pains”.⁶ It would therefore have been necessary “to hear the oracle of the Holy See” before founding the new religious order and creating a solemn feast of the Sacred Heart.

Hindiyya’s ecstasies were among the main reasons for their impatience with her mysticism. They were too frequent and not accompanied by the signs expected according to the teaching of the spiritual masters. External signs showed that the visions were corporeal, and imaginary rather than intellectual, as they should have been. Moreover, Hindiyya did not emerge from her deep trances on command, through obedience, which would have been a good sign. According to Desiderio, on the other hand, she would relapse into her ecstasies when he ordered her to do so, which was something new and unheard of. Eyewitness accounts also reported that during her ecstasies, her face became redder and more beautiful. According to Cardinal Bona, however, in genuine ecstasies the exact opposite occurs.

The other elements underpinning the belief in Hindiyya’s “sanctity” were dismantled one after the other. Fra Isidoro Mancini condemned the affirmation that she had the gift of tongues and all branches of knowledge, and that she had been graced with a spiritual marriage symbolised by the wearing of a ring. The stigmata were, in his opinion, imprinted in an indecent way. As for Cardinal Galli, he questioned the divine inspiration of the rules of the congregation of the Sacred Heart which, as we have seen, had been criticised by Mancini. According to a summary of the case many of the things that were reported were unbelievable, incoherent, puerile and unworthy of the will of God and the dignity of the Angels and the Saints who “are seen to lower themselves to base ministries, childish

conversations, and ridiculous jokes”. “What contradicts the dignity of the Divine Majesty the most is the quite unique and unusual way, lashed with exceptional stupidity, in which Our Lord Christ is supposed to have imprinted the holy stigmata on the body of the deluded nun”.

Isidoro Mancini advised the pope not to authorise the rules of the congregation of the Sacred Heart and not to grant spiritual privileges to the new foundation. For the rest, Cardinal Galli recommended following the instructions the pope had given to the apostolic ablegate.⁷

If Hindiyya was clearly declared to be deceived, if her ecstasies, visions and revelations were recognised as obvious illusions, there was, however, no question of dissolving the new congregation and dispersing the nuns, or of removing the mother superior from her convent in Bkirki. These procedures had already proved unfeasible. On the other hand, after the spiritual directors of the Maronite mystic had been severely censured for their incompetence and their excessive credulousness, the decision was taken to prohibit Jarmanus Saqr from continuing to exercise this function. A search was undertaken to find the person who would be suitable for the difficult mission of directing Hindiyya. On 25 January 1755 a letter left Rome for Alexandria in Egypt to announce to the Observantine Friar and missionary, Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo, that the eye of His Holiness had fallen upon him. True to the pragmatism with which he was generally credited, Benedict XIV this time took careful measures and announced them cautiously. Instructions sent to the appointed cleric state that “it is generally believed that the said nun was not guided by the spirit of God”, and “the lack of skill and excessive credulity of her previous directors” had contributed to this state of affairs. In order to ensure, as far as possible, the eternal salvation of this “deluded woman (from what we know so far, and can determine)”, a new director should be chosen who would be learned, prudent and experienced. Fra Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo was such a man.⁸

He set off rapidly. Settling near Bkirki, in Harissa, where his order had a convent, he was hard at work by the summer of 1755. His lack of enthusiasm, however, hardly helped him succeed in his mission: on 19 July he informed the Propaganda that he was 62 years old and suffering from many ailments which he described in detail.⁹ He recorded the various episodes of his mission in a kind of diary. He says he was welcomed by the patriarch and by Jarmanus Saqr, but he realised that they resented the pope having chosen him instead of one of the many other illustrious candidates. He would indeed have difficult relations with the bishop of the monastery, whom he suspected of having evil intentions towards him and underhand manoeuvring. The friar claims that the bishop’s only goal was to enlarge the new foundation of 30 women and increase the number to 50.¹⁰

Fra Carlo Innocenzo notes with disapproval that the mother superior was held in great veneration, like someone who had already been canonised, and that many people from Bkirki sought to obtain relics or water she had blessed and gave the name of “Hindiyya” to their daughters at baptism. Having

heard Jarmanus Saqr and Ignatius Dyab call Hindiyya “saint”, he tried to persuade them not to do so. He also admonished Saqr for informing the mystic of her considerable reputation. When he discovered an inscription above the mother superior’s room indicating that she, together with the bishop, had founded the convent, he pointed out that this plaque could arouse a temptation of pride in her. He was told that it was impossible for her to sin in such a way.¹¹

Right at the beginning of his stay, on 30 July 1755, Catherine notified him that he should come to the convent to see Hindiyya in ecstasy. He found her in bed, motionless, her head on a large cushion with her face held in both hands. He called her name several times but got no response. He then shook her violently by the sleeve telling her to regain her senses but had no better result. Had the nuns heard about the arguments of the experts from Rome who had expressed doubts about the truth of her ecstasies? Catherine and her companions told Fra Carlo Innocenzo that this situation was frequent and that the only way to make her regain consciousness was to impose the formal precept of obedience. This he did and she immediately returned to her senses, thus conforming to the teaching of the theologians. Was it all staged in order to convince the new envoy from Rome of Hindiyya’s sanctity? In any case, he had no intention of being duped. On 22 August, when Jarmanus Saqr and Ignatius Dyab tried to persuade him to attend a concert of the angels in the convent, he refused.

The subject of ecstasy was never mentioned again to him, nor that of angelic melody. Mutual distrust developed very quickly. He considered himself to be the victim of intrigues. This may not have been a mere fruit of his imagination, for, during her interrogation of 22 August 1775, the fugitive nun Maryam Al-Mukarzal of Bayt Shabab confirmed that the delegate had been “seriously fooled”.¹²

Subject to doubting the nature of her “gift”, Hindiyya, according to her own testimony, had asked her “figure” for “the following visible signs: imprint your five holy wounds on the stupidest nun in this convent whose virtue is hardly visible and who knows nothing about spiritual matters”. So, during the Pentecost of 1755, just before Carlo Innocenzo’s arrival, the stigmata appeared on the body of the nun Mubaraka (Benedetta), of whom the mother superior was very fond at the time, while she was sleeping in her room.¹³ The appearance of miraculous wounds upon the poor nun undoubtedly corresponded to an essential event in the evolution of the community of Bkirki. For indeed, while divisions had already emerged among the nuns and suspicions had arisen when confronted with the unedifying, even criminal behaviour of Hindiyya and her companion Catherine, a new eruption of the supernatural served to reunite the group by reaffirming the mother superior’s charisma. According to Hindiyya, it was only after the appearance of the stigmata on Mubaraka’s body that she finally ceded to the repeated requests of her “figure” and that the “mystery

of union” could at last be fulfilled. She therefore crossed a psychological boundary which would reinforce her conviction of omnipotence. Some of her companions, who realised this, would distance themselves from her. The very fact that the figure considered to be Christ had agreed to place stigmata on Mubaraka’s body at Hindiyya’s request was a disturbing demonstration that Hindiyya was increasingly losing touch with reality. In the name of her “mystery of union” she was able not only to ignore general rules but also to impose her deluded will on the conscience of other nuns.¹⁴

The delegate examined the wounds on Sister Mubaraka in the company of a physician on 28 July 1755. Having removed the bandages in which she enveloped her feet and hands, he saw red marks, and on them some small purple wounds. He wanted to cover them with wax, to see if they were natural or supernatural, but Catherine, who was responsible for procuring the wax, said that none could be found. Jarmanus Saqr advised him to abandon his investigation in order to avoid rumours. On 28 August, when Sister Mubaraka complained of excessive pain, Carlo Innocenzo returned to examine her but only saw red marks with “small round vesicles filled with aqueous liquid”.¹⁵ If he expressed his suspicion about the authenticity of the phenomenon in his report to the Propaganda, he hardly pursued the investigation any further since he did not even insist on hearing the sister’s confession. A little more curiosity, insight or courage would perhaps have led him to discover that the nuns of the convent suspected a subterfuge.

Much later, Warda Badran, having barely survived the martyrdom that killed her sister Nasima, would testify that she had guessed it had been a ruse. First of all, she said, Mubaraka did not exemplify the virtues which should normally accompany the privilege of the imprint of divine wounds. Secondly, Nasima had once seen the nun place a poisonous plant called *mal’a* on her feet. She had confided her doubts to Ignatius Dyab who threatened her and demanded that she keep silent. But since the red marks left by the poultices were unconvincing, Mubaraka had to open the wounds on Fridays so that they would bleed. Warda claimed to have seen the lancet she kept for this use.¹⁶ Neither the Badran sisters nor the other sceptical nuns of the convent had the opportunity to confide their disbelief to the delegate. After his departure Mubaraka continued to display her stigmata for many years until Hindiyya and Catherine got tired of her and subjected her to the ill treatment which perhaps led to her death.

Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo had been sent to Bkirki primarily to serve as Hindiyya’s confessor and spiritual director. Prompted by Ignatius Dyab and another monk from the convent to listen outside confession to Hindiyya’s speeches concerning the passions, the wounds and other inspirational topics, he reluctantly agreed but was met with the mystic’s refusal. A few days later, however, she sent for him to clear her conscience independently of the sacrament. She had two things to tell him. The first was that she did not understand the Arabic he spoke. The second was that she was ashamed to reveal her passions and temptations to him because she did not trust him.

Since she was going to claim that she could not understand him, he decided to prove she was lying. He wrote some spiritual lectures in Arabic and asked her to read them. She glanced at them but soon got bored and returned them saying it was unnecessary for him to write them since she found the same things in books by writers such as Rodríguez and Diego Stella. A dialogue between the director and the penitent was clearly impossible. On 15 October he realised that Hindiyya and Jarmanus wanted to provoke his departure, claiming that he spoke an Arabic which was incomprehensible to those who confessed to him.

Finally, he could never administer the sacrament of penance to the mystic. He had badgered her for two months in order to obtain her confession, but she had always replied that she did not need to make it because her conscience was clean and she had no faith in him. He suspected Jarmanus Saqr of continuing to hear her confession in secret, in defiance of the Roman prohibition.¹⁷

When Carlo Innocenzo suggested that Hindiyya again confess a sin which had already been absolved so that he could hear her confession, she replied that “By the grace of the Lord, she had never offended God during her lifetime”. He then explained to her how dangerous such an assertion was. Deeply offended, she replied: “Are you saying you do not believe me? By the grace of the Lord, I do not lie”. On 24 December when he returned to hear her confession and Hindiyya as usual replied that she did not need it, she asked him “a mischievous question”: could she accuse herself of sins that she had not committed?¹⁸

He lost heart and feared being misunderstood in Rome. He wrote to the Propaganda on 10 January 1756 to let them know that his task seemed useless and that he felt his presence in Lebanon to be superfluous. There was also the problem of his upkeep at the convent of Harissa, for which he requested an annual allowance. He was already thinking of leaving, but the bishop, he said, did not want him to leave for fear of the trouble his departure might cause. He went to see his penitent one last time on 6 February. When asked to reveal her conscience she gave him the usual answer. He then granted her the right to confess to whomever she pleased, blessed her, and went his way. On 10 February he wrote from Sidon to say that he was ill and had left Harissa in order to be cured.¹⁹

We have already seen how, ever since her childhood, it had taken Hindiyya a long time to trust her confessors before gaining an influence over them. This time Fra Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo did not succumb to her charisma, and was rejected, as Fr Gueynard had been before him. She had successfully overcome the indictment in Rome and the interrogations of Fra Desiderio di Casabasciana. She had foiled the attacks of her enemies and had succeeded after seven years of ordeals in mobilising the Christian and Muslim authorities of the mountain in her favour. She had even held in check a papal brief directed against her and the congregation of the

Sacred Heart. The inner tribulations that these successive trials caused her ultimately resulted in her conviction that her direct union with “the figure” (Christ) could prove her right, even against the pope and the cardinals of the Propaganda. Her *Mystery of Union*, written after these events, bears the mark of the conflicts she had traversed. In this text, addressing herself to the “figure” who had appeared to her in a vision and who seemed to be “Jesus of Nazareth”, she tells him:

I know, despite my weakness and my limited intelligence, that those who obey the direction of the priests please you. Yet I was told by a hieromonk and a priest that the Holy Congregation had decided that I had been duped, that the devil had appeared to me and it was he who deceived me. . . .

He replied angrily:

I glory in my justice and its efficacy that directs my anger against souls swollen with pride. Dressed in lamb’s clothing, they lead my sheep astray through the error of their pride. They sow scandal in humble hearts. Did I say you should obey the priests against my sacred will and my love acting in my infinite humility?²⁰

Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo may not have been the right person to conduct Hindiyya back to reason and “regulated” devotion. He had undoubtedly proved tactless, awkward and excessively suspicious from the beginning of his difficult mission, and was later pusillanimous and insufficiently tenacious. Nevertheless, the precise facts that he relates in the account of his mission, which are confirmed by the later testimony of the nuns who escaped from the convent and by the “revelations” of the mystic herself, express a constant concern with Hindiyya’s psychological state and the perverse folly that had already emerged at Bkirki. The mother superior appears to have been above almost any authority, any legal recourse, and any sense of guilt. She seems to have been living a paranoid lie, interpreting the signs of reality as acts of aggression directed towards herself. The acceptance of her “mystery of union”, after the imprint of the stigmata on the body of Sister Mubarak, must have persuaded her that no matter what she did she could not offend God. The attitude of her entourage further reinforced her state of folly and contributed to its theatrical manifestations. Her companion Catherine, who was constantly interfering, prevented Carlo Innocenzo from speaking with any other nuns during his entire stay. The bishop Jarmanus Saqr, who was supposed to direct Hindiyya, appears to have feared anything that could be detrimental to the prosperity of the convent and the rise of the new religious order, without unduly burdening himself with theological considerations or thoughts of ecclesiastical discipline. On the contrary - he had encouraged his charge to accept the “mystery of union” and to remain stuck in her megalomania.²¹

Curiously enough Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo’s damning report and the admission of the failure of his mission did not elicit any interest in Rome.

The bureaucracy of the Propaganda either considered the “Hindiyya case” to be resolved or it felt it should be buried in indifference and oblivion. New developments in the affair are unlikely to have reached the ears of Benedict XIV.²² Moreover, at about this time the onslaughts of “impiety” against religion and of the secular state against the prerogatives of the Church, as well as contradictory aspirations in individuals torn between faith and reason, led the head of Catholicism to revise his views on “regulated devotion”, “regulated sanctity” and “superstition”. Pope Clement XIII, who succeeded Benedict XIV in 1758, would embody the split between the papacy and the Enlightenment. This was the first movement of intransigent reaction dictated by his religious principles and was accompanied at the same time by a renewal of piety based on the “heart”, feeling and emotion, which was repugnant both to the Jansenists and the “*philosophes*”. The new pope would respond to urgent requests to formalise worship of the Sacred Heart by according a feast day with its own mass and services to the Kingdom of Poland, to the order of the Visitation, and to the Roman congregation of St Theodore in 1765.²³

It is therefore hardly surprising that in 1759, probably unaware of his predecessor’s decisions and the documents that lay dormant in the archives of the Propaganda, Clement XIII granted many indulgences to Hindiyya, to the monks and nuns of Bkirki, as well as to visitors of the convent. In 1768 Cardinal Corsini granted a plenary indulgence to all who entered the confraternity of the Sacred Heart intended for the laity which had just been established. They could benefit from it on the day they became members, provided that they were truly repentant, that they confessed and that they took communion.²⁴ The Roman authorities consequently had no objections to make about Hindiyya’s reputation which was accompanied by the expansion of the cult of the Sacred Heart among the Maronites. Once again, it was only when disputes arose among the Maronites themselves, leading them to make appeals to the cardinals of the Propaganda, that the Roman authorities took a new interest in Hindiyya, her convent and the archival material they had neglected.

The indifference with which the Propaganda greeted Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo’s report may also be explained by the fact that, in the meantime, other serious problems had arisen in the Maronite *ta’ifa*, submerging the Roman offices and relegating the case of the mystic to the back burner. Ever since 1752 the nagging conflict that had pitted “Aleppines” against “Mountain dwellers” within the order of Lebanese Monks had been rekindled. In 1753, while Desiderio di Casabasciana was in Lebanon, a general assembly that had been convened in Luwayza was violently interrupted by thirty monks armed with sticks belonging to the “party” of *baladis*. In 1754 the order was split in two despite the efforts of Rome and the patriarch to maintain its unity and discipline. Monasteries were stormed by a faction of monks supported by their relatives (*ahl*) and some of the notables. At the same time both sides

appealed to the pope and the Propaganda to assert their respective rights. In 1755 the patriarch Sim'an 'Awwad, who had unsuccessfully cast a ban on the "people of the mountain", had to admit his inability to obtain the submission and reconciliation of the monks. Some of the Maronite bishops had aligned themselves with the *baladis* and had allowed them to celebrate mass despite the pontifical proscription. Without real authority over the monasteries, and paralysed by the political power that supported the dissidents, the aged prelate, exhausted and probably exasperated by the intrigues of the Aleppines, renounced his efforts to implement the uncompromising decisions of Rome concerning the "people of the mountain". He attempted a compromise with them in the course of 1755.²⁵

But just after Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo had left Bkirki to go to Sidon the death of the patriarch was announced on 12 February 1756. His successor would be Tubya Al-Khazin, who, as we have seen, had already run for office in 1743 during the previous elections which Benedict XIV had cancelled. He himself was from the order of Lebanese Monks. In the conflict between the "people of the mountain" and the Aleppines, he tended to side with the latter, but did not hesitate to switch sides on occasion. He had weakened the authority of the patriarch 'Awwad with his manoeuvres, notably by seeking support from Mulhim, the emir of the Druzes. He had thus obtained the designation of patriarchal vicar (*waki*), apparently without the consent of Sim'an 'Awwad. Finally, once elected, Tubya Al-Khazin sent the bishop Arsanyus 'Abd Al-Ahad to request his confirmation in Rome, with certificates from twelve bishops, Khazin and Hubaysh sheikhs, stating that his election had been legitimate.²⁶ The services of the Propaganda, however, had received evidence to the contrary, notably from Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo, who had espoused the cause of his opponents and had presented the newly elected official in the darkest light. Above all, the friar denounced the collusion of the Aleppines with Tubya. The new patriarch was said to have encouraged this faction of monks to take over three monasteries, driving away the "people of the mountain" in exchange for financial support. In the end the Propaganda decided on 18 March 1757 to accept the election of Tubya. The summary of the meeting of cardinals of 9 May 1757 states that Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo, in favouring the "people of the mountain" against the Aleppines and the new patriarch, had grossly exaggerated the charges made against them and overstepped his authority. This ruling is unlikely to have encouraged the Propaganda to give serious attention to the report the delegate had sent concerning his mission to Bkirki.²⁷

Tubya Al-Khazin appears to have been the advocate of the Aleppines at the time. Barely had he been elected than he adopted an uncompromising attitude toward the *baladis*, determined to force them into submission and thinking he could count on Rome, where his predecessor's efforts to find a compromise with them had not been appreciated.²⁸ Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo, who had withdrawn to the Franciscan convent of Sidon, was

badgered by both parties to choose a side. It was rumoured that he had received letters from the Propaganda, destined for the deceased patriarch, which demanded that unity be maintained in the order of Lebanese Monks and severe sanctions be imposed on the leaders of the *baladis*. The *baladi* leaders did all they could to dissuade him from giving this correspondence to the new patriarch, while the Aleppines tried to convince him otherwise. Fra Carlo Innocenzo was perhaps most concerned with providing for the future of Latin missionaries in the East. It is also possible that the negative experience of his mission to Bkirki had led him to espouse the cause of “the people of the mountain” against the new patriarch and the Aleppines. The superior of the latter mentions his “simple character”, and finds him “foolish” (*ghashim*) and “inconsistent” (*mutaqallab*). He had supposedly allowed himself to be taken in by the Jesuit François-Xavier Royde and the Capuchin Gabriel, the superiors in Sidon, as well as by the *baladis*. These could count on very strong support in the town, including the *khuri* Ilyas Sa’ad Al-Maruni and the *tarjuman* Yusuf. On the other hand, the *khawajas* Yusuf and Mansur, from the Jamati family, who would later be among the most fanatical adherents of Hindiyya’s “mystery of union”, figured among the “friends” of the Aleppines.²⁹

Within the cloisters, convents were not spared the clashes that divided the *ta’ifa*. In a letter to the pope, Sim’an ‘Awwad said that the party that was hostile towards him, meddled in the nuns’ affairs, and encouraged them to rebel. When the bishop who headed the convent of Hrash died, the patriarch had appointed Arsanyus ‘Abd Al-Ahad, an Aleppine monk and former superior of the order, to replace him and lead the sisters. The nuns, however, encouraged by Tubya Al-Khazin, asked for a young confessor from the order of Lebanese Monks, and, getting no satisfaction from the patriarch, appealed to the secular authorities and Emir Mulhim in person in order to have their request granted.³⁰ In Bkirki Hindiyya, sobbing in distress, had repeated rumours to Fra Carlo Desiderio according to which he had come to destroy the convent and send the nuns back to their homes, thus jeopardizing the influx of alms and vocations.³¹ Jarmanus Saqr and Ignatius Dyab were closely associated with the clan of the Aleppines, of which they had been active members. For their part, however, the nuns would be divided, each one choosing the side where she had maintained ties of solidarity and kinship. So the fear of seeing women from good families from the mountain attempt a coup against Hindiyya and the Aleppine women with the support of their *ahl* may not have been entirely groundless. When she was interrogated in 1775 Maryam Al-Mukarzal dated from approximately 1755 the beginning of the persecutions against the “women from the mountain” inside the convent.³²

Yet the reality of the nun’s lives behind the bars of the cloister would remain hidden for a long time. After the visit of Carlo Innocenzo di Cuneo, Bkirki, while continuing to prosper, would close in on itself, sinking slowly

and silently into a tragedy. The attenuated rumours would not leak out until 1769. It would still take until 1775 and the investigation of a new delegate from Rome for tongues to be loosened and gradually reveal the horror in which many sisters of the community had lived for many years. In 1763, when the apostolic ablegate Arnould Bossu (who had been sent to the East to take care of various affairs among the Maronites and Melkites), visited the convent of Bkirki, “conducted by the nun who had given rise to so many rumours in the mountain and elsewhere”, he noted nothing peculiar, but gave a positive opinion of the bishop, Jarmanus Saqr.³³

On 21 September 1768 Arsanyus Dyab, a monk from the Sacred Heart, wrote to the Propaganda to announce Saqr’s death. Having died during the meeting of a synod of the Maronite Church in Ghusta in the presence of the Custodian of the Holy Land, Luigi di Bastia, a delegate from the Holy See, was entitled to a solemn funeral with the full participation of the clergy. Care was taken to orchestrate the deceased prelate’s reputation of sanctity. In his letter Arsanyus Dyab reports that, after Saqr breathed his last, a sign from God appeared on his body, for “his face was radiant with joy, almost laughing”. Moreover, two sisters who were covered with his clothes were cured by a miracle. A detailed report, kept in the Maronite Patriarchate, describes the terrible disease, followed by the miraculous cure, of Sister Khudu’ (Humility) Bint Al-Qishani from Aleppo who suffered from a “consumptive fever” which had seemed incurable to the three doctors who had examined her. It was Hindiyya who suggested to the sick woman that she confide in the late bishop. As in the traditional rite of incubation, he appeared to her on the night of 12-13 October 1768 and breathed on the face of Sister Khudu’ who woke the next day feeling healed.³⁴

The high esteem of the convent of the Sacred Heart and its mother superior was not, however, universally shared even at the time. A malicious list of eighteen accusations against the Maronites, probably composed by a Melkite in 1770, thus said they “persist in publishing the sanctity of the nun Hindiyya”, that they had divulged some feigned miracles, and that they treated as enemies all those who did not readily believe in them.³⁵

True to the criticism that Fra Isidoro Mancini had made of the constitutions of the order of the Sacred Heart, the congregation evaded control by the ordinary. Everything was settled behind closed doors, between the immutable mother superior, her favourites, and the bishop who lived in the convent. The order was therefore hidden from any exterior gaze and provided the public with an edifying image that misrepresented the realities of everyday life behind the bars of the cloister. A paranoid mythology around the mystery of Hindiyya’s union, which was shared by part of her entourage, could be constructed within the shelter of the area reserved for consecrated women. It seems that by 1755 all the elements were in place to transform the convent of the Sacred Heart, gradually and secretly, into a Hell on earth.