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## Clerical sisters and feminine priests

### Gender constructions among Catholic missionaries in the Nordic Countries in the era of Ultramontanism

Werner, Yvonne Maria

2016

*Document Version:*  
Annan version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Werner, Y. M. (2016). *Clerical sisters and feminine priests: Gender constructions among Catholic missionaries in the Nordic Countries in the era of Ultramontanism*. Abstract från Tradition is the new radical, Lund, Sverige.

*Total number of authors:*  
1

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

## **Clerical sisters and feminine priests – gender constructions among Catholic missionaries in the Nordic Countries in the era of Ultramontanism**

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Up to the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, which led to a theological reorientation within the Catholic Church, Catholicism was not only a religion; it was also a worldview with clearly political aims. This was due to the breakthrough of the Ultramontane movement in the mid-nineteenth century, which contributed to a renewal of Counter-Reformation confessionality and led to an upswing for Catholic missionary work across the world. Catholicism thus evolved into a counter-culture with clearly anti-modern traits, characterised by a strict hierarchical order, a broad popular footing, and triumphalism. The religious were to the fore of this Catholic system, and monastic life was regarded as the most accomplished expression of Catholic piety.

The Catholic missionary offensive started in the mid-nineteenth century was also aimed at the Nordic countries where, protected by the liberalised religious legislation, a network of parishes and missions with schools, hospitals, and other social institutions was built up. In Denmark, where full religious freedom was introduced as early as in 1849, the Catholic missionary activities were especially successful.

Catholic orders and congregations played a significant role in this missionary work. Male religious often took over responsibility for parishes, whereas the female religious mainly dedicated themselves to education, health care, and other social work. Most of these religious institutes were female congregations, and at the beginning of the 1930s, there were more than 1.300 Catholic sisters working in Scandinavia.

These religious had professed to live according to the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, which meant that they lived in a religious community and were subject to a specific rule, marked by religious virtues. The belonging to a religious order, the 'estate of perfection', in many ways transcended socially constructed gender differences as well as the subordinate role of woman stressed by the classic theology of Creation.

The leading female congregation was the Sisters of St Joseph, a French religious institute, which was founded at the beginning of the nineteenth century and whose motherhouse was in

the town of Chambéry in Savoy. At the beginning of the twentieth century these female religious ran fifteen hospitals, twenty-three schools, among them five French girls' schools, and a seminary for woman teachers in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, with further expansion on the cards. In the 1930s, there were some eight hundred St. Joseph Sisters working in Scandinavia, most of them in Denmark.

Among the male orders, the *Societas Iesu*, the Jesuits, was predominant. The Jesuits, who were the most fervent defenders of Ultramontane confessionalism, held a dominant position in the Swedish and Danish Catholic mission. They belonged to the German Jesuit province, and their activities in the Nordic countries had been initiated as a consequence of the culture war, the Kulturkampf, raging in Germany in the 1870s. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Jesuits had five residences in Denmark and Sweden, as well as a Jesuit college in Ordrup, outside Copenhagen.

I will use these two orders as an example to illustrate the Catholic gender ideals and constructions as they appear in the Scandinavian countries. My source material consists to a great part of correspondence between the missionaries at work in Scandinavia and their local superiors and the Roman Congregation of Mission, the Propaganda Fide. This correspondence deals primarily with missionary activities, problems, and strategies, but it also reflects ideals, visions, and identities.

A starting point for my research has been the theory of a feminisation of Christianity in the nineteenth century, which runs counter to the concept of re-confessionalisation of society that according to other researchers characterises the period. The feminisation theory, which has the position of a master narrative in modern research on religion and gender, is based on the contemporary middle class liberal view of religion as a private matter related to the female sphere and where Christianity virtues were thus linked to femininity.

**The Sisters of Saint Joseph** played a significant role in the Catholic missionary activity in Scandinavia, and together with the clergy and representatives of other Catholic orders and congregations, they served as “parish builders”. Their apostolate was concentrated in two areas: education and health care. For the first twenty years, the sisters focused primarily on teaching; later, they devoted considerable resources to developing their health care work. These activities were not ends in themselves but part of the Catholic Church’s missionary work and supported by Catholic missionary organisations.

Some of the sister's schools developed into French girls' schools, specialising in languages, particularly French, and the humanities. The majority of the pupils were fee-paying Protestants, while many of the Catholic children were accepted without payment. These schools were especially successful in Denmark, where the 1855 law on private schooling gave parents the right to decide themselves upon their children's education.

Catholic schools were in many ways successful tools for missionary work, but Catholic health care proved to be an even more effective missionary instrument. In 1875, the St Joseph Sisters opened their first hospital, the Saint Joseph Hospital in Copenhagen, which was later extended and developed to become one of the leading hospitals in the Danish capital. The vast majority of the patients were Protestant, and the Catholic parish that grew up in the area consisted to a great part of converts, who had met the Catholic faith in the sisters' hospital.

The St Joseph Sisters established hospitals all over Denmark, and also expanded their health care activities in Norway. These Catholic hospitals had many distinctive features. Firstly, the sisters themselves owned the hospitals, which meant that the management consisted of trained nurses, not of doctors as in state hospitals and private hospitals connected to the deaconess institutes. Doctors were thus subordinate to the mother superior and her staff. Secondly, the spiritual dimension of health care was prominent, which meant the interweaving of prayer and spiritual exercises with medical treatment and nursing care.

The spiritual life and work of the St Joseph Sisters were governed by the congregation's rule, with its many regulations and detailed instructions for daily life. In the novitiate, the sisters received practical training in the congregation's social, educational, or nursing outreach. Yet, the emphasis was on religious and ascetic formation. The rituals of consecration and the taking of vows signified the different steps towards full membership of the congregation. The habit, which had a symbolic function, was further an indication of ecclesiastical status. It showed that the wearer belonged to the "estate of perfection", and accordingly was pledged to live a Christian life in a more radical way.

The St Joseph Sisters' communities in the Nordic countries consisted partly of foreign sisters sent by the motherhouse in Chambéry, and partly of Scandinavian sisters. In comparison with the Lutheran deaconesses, the female Catholic orders and congregations were led at all levels, from the top down, by the sisters themselves, and this female hierarchy was endorsed and approved by the Catholic Church's highest authority. True, the female congregations were subject to stricter control than were their male counterparts, but interestingly the motivation for this was not a lack of confidence in the competence of women's leadership, but a fear that the female superiors might develop an excessively autocratic style of administration.

The two Nordic provinces of the Chambéry congregation operated as large organisations, with the sisters themselves in charge. They thus held a position that the woman's emancipation movement aspired to attain. From a Nordic point of view, the Catholic woman religious represented an alien culture that in essential matters conflicted with prevailing Protestant gender norms, which in accordance with the Lutheran household ideology strongly emphasised the reproductive and domestic duties of women and her subordination to her husband. Marriage was given prominence while lifelong and celibate monastic life was condemned as unnatural and unethical. The Catholic sisters, in other words, represented an alternative to both the Lutheran domestic ideology and to the liberal women's movement with its emancipatory ideals.

Now we move on to **the Jesuits**, who settled down in Denmark and Sweden in the wake of the culture war in Germany in the 1870s. In a Nordic perspective, the Jesuits were by tradition viewed as the ultimate representatives of the 'Catholic peril', and of all the evil that customarily was associated with Catholicism. It is therefore interesting to note that it was the Jesuits who attracted most converts, and the Jesuit boy's school in Ordrup outside Copenhagen was attended by a large number of Protestant pupils. The Jesuit residence in Ordrup also served as a training institute, a kind of novitiate, for future Jesuits.

The ministry of the Jesuits in Scandinavia was concentrated in Copenhagen, Ordrup, and Århus in Denmark, and in Stockholm and Gothenburg in Sweden. The Jesuit Sacred Heart church in Copenhagen was the centre of a flourishing parish, and since it was extra territorial, the Jesuits had no administrative work and could thus concentrate on pastoral care, instructions converts, writing, and liturgy. In this church the most magnificent religious services were performed. In Sweden, the Jesuits took over the pastoral care of the St Eugenia's parish in Stockholm, and later of the Catholic parishes in Gothenburg.

In the analysed correspondence, the Jesuit order appears both as a homosocial male community, with latitude for humour and comradeship, and as a tightly organised, religious fighting organisation marked by strict obedience and a powerful sense of duty. The reports to Rome from the Jesuit residences in Scandinavia usually begin with a statement that the order's rules and regulations are followed to the letter, followed by an account of edifying examples and measures taken to cope with deviations from the order's norms. Failings in obedience and hierarchical subordination are a recurrent subjects in the reports and regarded as the greatest failings, whereas obedience, piety and prayer are accentuated as ideals of virtue.

Yet, also qualities such as creativity, organisational skills, and an ability to act, are stressed in the reports and instructions. However, the more 'passive' virtues of humility, piety, self-

abnegation, and above all obedience were regarded as far superior, and thus the ideal expression of Jesuit identity and manhood. In the middle-class, liberal discourse, these kind of ‘passive’ virtues were associated with women.

In the publications of the Scandinavian Jesuits, the importance of religious virtues associated with worship, attending mass, and receiving the sacraments is very much emphasised. Female saints are described as equally courageous and heroic as the male ones – and inversely the male saints are described as being as pious and humble as the female. At the same time the male primacy is stressed, and woman’s subordination is described as a natural obligation, and a prerequisite for man’s ability to realise his full manhood. This is reflected also in the reports concerning the relations to and conflicts with women religious. In several articles the holiness, high dignity, and the exclusively male character of Catholic priesthood is emphasised, and celibacy and male ‘virginity’ is highlighted as a foundation for clerical manhood.

Previous research has showed that the ‘ultramontanisation’ of Catholic culture contributed to give the Catholic concept of manhood a weak and gentle touch that was contradictory to the prevailing secular masculinity ideals. My study has partially confirmed this. Monastic life with its emphasis on religious virtues such as humility, obedience, piety and self-sacrifice served as a model. In the analysed correspondence also more active characteristics more in line with the bourgeois liberal masculinity concepts are pointed out. These characteristics are, however, not ascribed any value in itself but are part of a religious context, where religious virtues are regarded as superior.

The picture of the ideal male religious that appears here in many ways opposes the contemporary bourgeois manly ideal, which emphasised the fight for independence and autonomy, whereas virtues such as humility, self-sacrifice, and subordination were associated with woman.

#### **And now some conclusions:**

Religious virtues were seen as transgender and universally human and on the whole, no distinction is made between male and female religiosity. The monastic spirituality served as a model for both men and women, and the female saints, which usually were members of religious institutes, were described as being as heroic as their male counterparts. But even if the belonging to religious orders, the ‘estate of perfection’, transcended socially constructed gender differences, and women religious undoubtedly had a great influence on the mission work, it was nevertheless only men who held the power- and norm-generating positions. Within this hierarchy, nuns exercised influence through men, and not by virtue of their own authority.

According to the Christian theology of Creation, man represents the human being as such, and the woman is seen as his subordinate companion. This theologically motivated subordination of women is also found in liturgical life, where not only the priesthood but also the liturgical functions that did not require clerical ordination were reserved for men. Yet, the Virgin Mary was highlighted as a model for all believers and her devotion, humility and self-sacrificing attitude is portrayed as the epitome of the new humanity in Christ.