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Mothering to Worlds Old and New: Marie de l'Incarnation and Her "Children"

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MOTHERING TO WORLDS OLD AND NEW:
MARIE DE L'INCARNATION AND HER "CHILDREN"

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Ginger S. Hawkins
2001
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Ginger S. Hawkins

Approved, May 2001

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ABSTRACT

Marie de l’Incarnation (1599-1672), one of the first women religious to venture to New France, helped found the Ursuline convent in Quebec in 1639. She spent the rest of her life there and wrote thousands of letters to her friends and sponsors in France. Her most faithful correspondent was her son, Claude. Marie had abandoned Claude when he was eleven to join the Ursulines in Tours. Years later when she reached Canada, they began a long correspondence in which both tried to come to terms with the abandonment.

This thesis examines the specific context in which Marie’s interactions with the Indian students in the Quebec convent allowed her to find satisfaction with her spiritual life and to craft a new relationship with her son through their correspondence. The study explores, first, the religious environment that encouraged Marie to leave her son to relatives and join the religious life. It then moves to a discussion of how Marie found spiritual solace and comfort in her role as a nun once she immigrated to New France and was able to work with the Indians there. Finally, it examines how she crafted these experiences in her epistolary relationship with her son in order to come to terms with their relationship.

The story of Marie’s relationship with Claude is important because it illustrates how one woman confronted conflicting messages from her religion and society about gender and how she dealt with the consequences of the path she chose in response to these conflicts.
MOTHERING TO WORLDS OLD AND NEW:

MARIE DE L’INCARNATION AND HER “CHILDREN”
INTRODUCTION

The winter of 1650 was particularly harsh for the Ursuline Sisters of Quebec. The frigid Canadian winters had always challenged the Sisters because the shorter days brought many more Indian girls to the convent. These youths boarded with the Ursulines while their elders went on winter hunts. More bodies to clothe, more beds to be made, more mouths to feed – the Sisters worked harder during the winter, but they performed their added duties with delight at the chance to minister to the girls. Yet, of the three decades she spent in New France, the winter of 1650 would stand out in the mind of Marie de l’Incarnation. On December 30th that year, tragedy struck and threatened to end the Ursuline’s apostolic mission to the Indians. As the Sisters, their novices, and pensioners slept in the small, two-story convent that night, a fire from the evening’s activities accidentally went unextinguished and soon burned out of control. As flames consumed the wooden dwelling, the sleeping women and girls woke in alarm. They hurried to save themselves, and many were forced to jump half-dressed from second-story windows into the snow outside. Some did not even have time to grab shoes. Marie rushed to save the convent’s important documents that had been entrusted to her, and she threw them out the windows frantically. She paused momentarily in her bedroom and glanced at the papers where she recorded her spiritual practices that she had been collecting somewhat reluctantly at her son’s request, wondering whether to save them too. She hesitated, then resolved to leave it to the flames, and rushed out of the convent,
barely escaping with her life. Like the few times in years past when she destroyed her
diaries of spiritual musings out of shame, self-abnegation, or of fear that someone else
might read her intimate confessions, she once again left these pages to the flames. She
joined the other women and girls in the snow outside, praying and watching with their
neighbors as the house burned to the ground.¹

In the fire’s aftermath, some, including Marie’s son, believed that the Ursulines
should return to France. After all, one of the greatest obstacles the Ursulines faced in
gaining permission to go to New France was the Jesuit Father Paul Le Jeune’s fear that
they would not be able to support themselves and would become a burden on the people
of Quebec. Now, they were in a similar position because they had lost everything in the
fire and did not have the resources to rebuild. But Marie was determined to continue the
Ursuline mission. As she would write in her 1654 spiritual autobiography, which she
wrote to replace the one she lost in the blaze as the ensuing years in Canada gave her
more confidence, she almost immediately began plans to rebuild the convent: “An
interior voice told me that this project would fall to my lot and that I ought to begin it.”²

In the next year and a half, Marie summoned all her strength as Mother Superior to
initiate and supervise the convent’s reconstruction – an overwhelming task. For Marie,

¹ Marie de l’Incarnation, Correspondance, ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes, France, 1971), 412 – 19
(Marie de l’Incarnation to Claude Martin, Sept. 3, 1651), 421 – 24 (MI to CM, Sept. 13, 1651), 425 – 29
(MI to CM, Oct. – Nov. 1651); Word from New France: The Selected Letters of Marie de l’Incarnation,
1964), 161 – 64. The Autobiography is a translation of Marie’s La Relation de 1654 as found in the second
volume of Marie’s writings prepared by Dom Albert Jamet in Ecrits Spirituels et Historiques de Marie de
l’Incarnation. Claude Martin also included Marie’s Relation of 1654 in the Vie with some editorial
changes. He also included his own commentaries on each of the chapters.

² Autobiography, 166. See also Correspondance, 475 – 81 (MI to CM, Sept. 1, 1652); Word from
New France, 203 – 05.
however, the fire was just another test from God, a cross to bear that challenged the strength of the vocation that defined her life.³

Marie had borne several crosses in her life, but no fire, natural disaster, or threat of Iroquois attack could match Marie's greatest struggle: joining the Ursuline community in Tours, France in January 1631 and then creating a meaningful religious life for herself in New France, in a place where, for a few short decades, women religious were remarkably free to explore new roles for themselves. In response to a calling she had had since she was a young girl and to a dream she had soon after she was widowed, Marie joined the Sisters. To do so, she had to leave behind her son, Claude, eleven at the time, and this act caused her great pain. She carried the memory of the grievous event with her throughout her life, and during the early years as a nun in Tours, it left her in a state of doubt as to whether she had done the right thing. Claude was equally reflective, and much of his early correspondence with his mother shows signs of their efforts to come to terms with his abandonment.

Soon after immigrating to New France, however, Marie learned to draw upon this pain as a source of strength and religious conviction. The New World spiritually invigorated Marie, and she channeled her religious energies and her pain over her son and her unhappiness in her former religious practices into an apostolic vocation. As Claude entered the priesthood back in France and his future well being looked secure, Marie finally felt affirmed in the sacrifice she had made in abandoning him, and herself, to God and the religious life. Moreover, in ministering to the Indian girls of Canada, Marie acted as their surrogate mother and lived out her own need to express the maternal feelings that

³ Autobiography, 166 – 69.
she had abandoned with Claude. She also was finally able to find her true vocation in this duty, and it gave her spiritual satisfaction. Her work with the Indians was doubly beneficial to Marie. In her letters to Claude, she would tell him of her work, sometimes in a way that seems purposefully crafted to push him away and sometimes using the moral and obedient activities of her pupils as a model for the behavior she expected from him. As Claude drew near the end of his study for the priesthood, Marie reinvented her relationship with him. Once again through her writing—first letters and then the autobiography she wrote for him—she instructed him in spiritual matters and gave him advice as a religious, and she was finally able to reconcile her vocation and the religious atmosphere that encouraged it with her role as Claude’s mother. Marie’s epistolary relationship with Claude was no ordinary correspondence, then; it was a gradual process of coming to terms with herself as well as fulfilling her responsibilities to her son. The fire of 1650 had helped to clarify all of these feelings for Marie and, as we can see from the more confident tone of her post-1650 letters, in her resolve to bear the cross of the fire, she could realize these new goals. After so many struggles, she was not going to turn back.

Fortunately, Marie left many records that allow her story to be told. Writing consumed most of Marie’s free time in New France. In addition to her spiritual autobiography, she also wrote an estimated twenty thousand letters after she joined the Ursulines. After she died in 1672, her son set about collecting as many of her letters as he could find in order to tell the world of her piety, though he only found and published
just over two hundred of them. Even so, these documents provide historians with an interesting perspective on New France.

Although most historiography has been hagiographical, often the work of other religious who focus on her spiritual practices and writings, Marie's life has increasingly come under the focus of historians who, like Natalie Zemon Davis in *Women on the Margins*, focus on Marie in a search to know broadly what her story reveals about Canada, Counter-reformation France, and women religious in the seventeenth century. Other historians, such as Leslie Choquette in “‘Ces Amazones de Grand Dieu’: Women and Mission in Seventeenth-Century Canada” do not make Marie the center of their narrative but do draw upon her story as an illustration in a larger survey of seventeenth-century New France. Although these works often discuss Marie’s relationship with Claude, especially Davis’s biographical account, an important angle of their relationship remains to be explored at greater length: the specific context in which Marie’s interactions with the Indians in the Ursuline convent allowed her to rectify her dissatisfaction with her spiritual life and to come to terms with abandoning her son by crafting a new relationship with him through their correspondence. A look at this aspect of Marie’s life is the departure point for the present study. In an attempt to fill this gap, therefore, this thesis looks first at the religious environment that encouraged Marie to leave her son to relatives and join the religious life. It then moves to a discussion of how Marie found spiritual solace and comfort in her role as a nun once she immolated to New

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France and was able to work with the Indians. Finally, it examines how she crafted these experiences in her epistolary relationship with her son in order to come to terms with their relationship.

Only the New World environment and the possibilities that were open here to French women religious in the mid-seventeenth century provided healing to Marie’s sometimes torturous spiritual and emotional anxieties and gave outlet to her immense energy. Marie could not and did not achieve resolution to her doubts as a nun in the more closely cloistered world of France where she had no apostolic role. Nor could she have achieved the same resolution had she arrived in New France a few decades later as the declining Indian and rising French population brought the Ursulines into far less contact with the people to whom Marie desired to proselytize and the growth of the colony ensured the presence of a bishop who moved the women religious communities more closely to the rules of the Council of Trent and to their counterparts in France. It is difficult, therefore, to generalize from Marie’s experiences. Her life was hardly ordinary or reproducible for other women once the Church tightened its restrictions on the activities of women religious in Canada. The story of her relationship with Claude, nevertheless, is important because it illustrates an example of how one woman confronted conflicting messages from her religion and society about gender and how she dealt with the consequences of the path she chose in response to these conflicts.

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The Catholic Counter-Reformation officially began in France in 1615, a half century after the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563) issued reforms to renew the Church and help defend its teachings against the growing Protestant Reformation. Although the French Assembly of the Clergy accepted the disciplines of the Council relatively late, a religious revival had already begun among the laity with the end of the Wars of Religion (1562 – 1598). The revival was especially strong among women of the upper classes, who had fared poorly during the conflict. These women found great spiritual renewal in the writings of Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila, whose works were translated into French soon after her death at the end of the sixteenth century and circulated widely in France. Teresa’s mysticism and writings grew out of the Spanish Counter-Reformation that began years before the French reforms. In 1601 several Spanish Carmelite nuns, whose order Teresa had reformed, arrived in Paris to establish a convent. Parisian noble women centered their devotional lives around this convent and joined the fervor to have Teresa canonized. As historian Elizabeth Rapley has concluded about the Carmelites’ influence, “From this time on, the Catholic Reformation in France, for all its clericalism and its
insistence on masculine authority, bore the distinct imprint of feminine spirituality.⁶

The Church would offer Teresa as a role model for women when she was finally canonized in 1622.

Feminine spiritual revival during the first half of the seventeenth century inspired hundreds of Catholic women to dream of moving from their traditional place in the Church’s contemplative life to a more active role. In the face of Protestant successes in France, many women felt called to the Church’s apostolate to help restore the faith. They envisioned a role for themselves as female catechists to help stop the flight of women to the reformed religions that drew so much strength from their female converts. As a result of their apostolic desires, Catholic women and their male supporters formed or invited many new female religious communities to France, including the teaching congregations of the Ursulines. The numbers of women taking the vows of religious life had remained relatively unchanged for generations in France, but by the mid-seventeenth century, these numbers increased dramatically. By the turn of the century, women religious outnumbered their male counterparts, reversing centuries of tradition.⁷

The clerical hierarchy was not well prepared to deal with the women (whose ranks had grown to include females from lower stratas) seeking to enter some form of

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⁶ Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal & Kingston, 1990), 5, 11 – 21. See also Henry Phillips, *Church and Culture in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge, 1997). For the life of Teresa of Avila and her influence in the Catholic Reformation, see Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, 1996), especially ch. 5 - 6. During Teresa’s life, however, she had caused great controversy with her writing and reforms to the Carmelite order. She was questioned and investigated by the Inquisition and had many outspoken opponents of her mystical writings who claimed that she was deluded and that her writings would mislead the women to whom they thought her writings were directed since she wrote in the vernacular. Much of this conflict lasted into the canonization process. Ahlgren concludes that Teresa “taught women more about the process of survival in the church than anything else.” (171)

religious life. The Church was particularly caught off guard by the calls women made to join the apostolate, a function women never traditionally served and one that conflicted with the Church’s understanding of the female role in its organization. The hierarchy tried to define women’s roles for the post-Tridentine Church and bring them in line with the stricter, medieval model. Although some women were eventually successful, all who hoped to play active roles, both within the convent and outside it, encountered resistance to their efforts. The Ursulines, for instance, saw their communities change greatly because of resistance they met. Originally founded in Italy in 1544, the first Ursulines lived in secular communities and were devoted to teaching and performing charitable works. After the Council of Trent reinforced strict clausura for religious, the Ursulines were forced to move their communities within cloistered convents. They kept only their active mission of teaching and so ran day schools for girls, most of which were free. Nonetheless, while these acts and restrictions might have dampered feminine aspirations to be apostles, women continued to enter the convents in large numbers. By the end of the seventeenth century, there were over ten thousand Ursulines in France.\footnote{Rapley, \textit{Dévotes}, 48 – 60. The Ursulines came to France in the second decade of the seventeenth century. Rapley is quick to point out that only after Church officials recognized the value of educating young girls, namely, keeping them out of the Protestant schools which were offering to educated them, did they allow the teaching orders to teach girls within their convents. Regarding those women who continued to perform charitable for the poor, by century’s end these women would also work out an agreement with the Church to be able to live as \textit{filles séculières} in communities that were not entirely secular but not subject to the same rules as nuns who had taken full religious vows.}

Although the Church did not anticipate how revival and re-envisioning their roles would drive women to religious communities, Catholic teaching on marriage and chastity only reinforced the movement. The Council of Trent reaffirmed the superiority of clerical over lay vocations. Since Protestants had taken a strong stance against religious celibacy and allowed their clergy to marry, Catholic leaders strengthened their mandate
for chaste religious. The Church also emphasized chastity as the highest form of life. Accompanying this elevation of chastity and celibacy implied that marriage should be the last of one’s options. Some historians argue that the Church did little to hide its distrust of the married state. Many women inferred from the Church’s teachings that their best course was to not marry in the first place. Some of the most widely read books on female piety advocated that women’s next best option was to resist remarriage if they were widowed and to devote their lives to charitable deeds. Many women who could afford to remain unwed took this advice and sought to use their religion as a temporary relief from marriage. Madeleine de la Peltrie, who would provide the monetary resources to found the Ursuline convent in Quebec, narrowly avoided remarriage when she was widowed, childless, at age twenty-two. Her family tried to stop her charitable activities, but she made a vow to devote her life to God.

So, too, Marie de l’Incarnation (born Marie Guyart) would come of age in this era of feminine spiritual revival, apostolic aspiration, and aversion to marriage. Marie responded to an inner voice, she later wrote, that called her to the religious life. After painful struggles, Marie entered the Ursuline convent in Tours when she was thirty, and it was from here that she would contact Madame de la Peltrie and offer to go with her to

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9 Ibid., 16 – 17.

found the convent in Quebec. Marie’s trials in responding to and fulfilling her vocation were not unlike those of her benefactor and hundreds of other French women. It was how Marie overcame these hardships and later used her grief to accomplish her work, however, that would distinguish her among the women religious of her generation.

Marie was born in 1599 in Tours, a town where people remembered well the Wars of Religion. Tours had been the provisional capital of France for part of the wars while the Catholic League held Paris, and the court had only removed to Paris five years before Marie was born. The Loire River townspeople had remained largely Catholic and were quite ardent in their Counter-Reformation renewal. Marie’s parents were members of the bourgeoisie; her father, un marchand boulanger, owned and ran a bakery. The fourth of eight children, Marie wrote in her spiritual autobiography that she had felt drawn to the religious life even as a small girl. When she was seven, Marie had a dream that Jesus kissed her and asked her to be His. While she would act upon her desire to become a nun only later in life, this dream was the first of several visions for Marie that would guide her spirituality.

When Marie was seventeen, her parents arranged a marriage for her to Claude Martin, a local silk maker. Silk making was one of the largest industries in Tours, and the marriage looked to be advantageous for the daughter of a baker. Although Marie had earlier entertained the idea of joining the Benedictine convent of Beaumont, it is unlikely that her parents could have afforded the necessary dowry for her to enter the well-

11 Correspondance, 70 – 71 (MI to Mdm. de la Peltrie, Nov. 1638); Word from New France, 53 – 55.
established order. Marie did not want to be married, but having no real alternative, she obeyed her father’s wishes. She would later write to her son that she had greatly loved his father, in part because the man had been so tolerant of her religious devotions, but Marie did not find happiness in marriage. She referred to her married life as the time of her “captivity” and said that while she was married, “I had heavy crosses to bear.” She did not elaborate on the sources of her unhappiness, except to say that married life kept her from devoting herself fully to God. Marriage was “a constant source of opposition to the realization of the desire of the Spirit to gain my heart and my affection for Himself.” Marie turned more and more to her faith for guidance, and it was during this period in her life that she began to act on her desire to be a nun. She quit reading pleasure books, visiting friends, or engaging in other “wasteful” leisure activities. She began to read books on piety and to attend Mass daily, much to the bewilderment of her neighbors who could not understand why such a young woman had retreated from the world.

Marie would have to suffer many ordeals when her husband died after only two years of marriage and left her a widow at age nineteen. Unlike many widows who could have then carried out their religious professions – such as Madame de la Peltrie, who was childless, or women whose children were already grown – Marie was left with an infant


13 Customarily in France, women were required to present dowries upon entering convents, as they were in effect giving themselves to the “divine Spouse,” a term Marie used repeatedly. The fees were necessary to help support the women during their lives, since upon entering the convent they renounced the right to inherit goods or property. Some of the newer orders were less strict about required dowries, like the early Ursuline communities whose memberships were composed in part of women from bourgeois and artisan families. By Marie’s time, she had to obtain special permission to enter the community without a dowry. See Rapley, Dévotes, 54, 59 – 60, 185 – 87.

son, also named Claude. Marie also had more temporal concerns in the aftermath of her husband’s death. His business was greatly in debt when he died, and Marie lost almost everything in a lawsuit filed against his estate soon after his death. Within the year, she would give up the remaining business and move in with her father. There she found solitude from the world. The death and the court case had been difficult for Marie at first. But, as she would later write in her autobiography, she eventually became thankful that she had no one but God left in her heart, presumably not even her son. Now she could devote herself to being God’s servant. She carried on the religious practices that she had begun while she was married, but still without the guidance of a spiritual director. She was determined to resist remarriage and instead devoted herself to chastity, poverty, and obedience – taking the vows of a nun’s life before she received a habit.

In the immediate years after she was widowed, Marie’s spiritual life would begin to evolve rapidly, and she began to understand what it would mean to become a religious. One day as Marie was about town on some errand, she had a powerful religious vision. She saw herself immersed in the blood of Christ, shed for human salvation, and she became profoundly aware of the weight of human sin upon the world. Shocked, when she came to herself, she found that she was outside the chapel of the Feuillant Fathers. She ran inside and made a full confession in the middle of the church to Dom François de

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16 Ibid., 11 - 16. Her mother had died one month after Marie’s husband. Soon after her husband’s death, Marie sent Claude to stay with a wet nurse. Although not a normal practice among the bourgeoisie, Davis speculates that perhaps Marie had lost her milk during her grief. Davis, *Women on the Margins*, 66.


18 The Feuillant Fathers symbolized how the Counter-Reformation spirit had affected men’s religious orders. They were one of the many new male orders that appeared at the time. They had recently split from the Cistercian order. Davis, *Women on the Margins*, 67.
St. Bernard. He told Marie to come back the next day, and immediately afterwards, he became her spiritual director. Dom François and, more so, his successor Dom Raymond de St. Bernard began to instruct her prayer life and suggest books for her to read. They also granted her permission to engage in corporal mortification – wearing hair shirts and lashing herself as penance, a common practice among those who believed it would bring them humility and favor in God’s eyes. Marie realized later the fortune of finding a director in Dom Raymond, for “if our Lord had not sent me this help through His servant, I would have rendered myself useless for all good.”¹⁹ Before this point, Marie had kept her spiritual feelings to herself. She had no circle of friends among whom she felt comfortable discussing such matters. The priests to whom she normally confessed were parish priests who directed confessions formulaically. She did not even know the role of spiritual director could exist beyond this routine question-and-answer session. Moreover, she thought in “ignorance” that one ought to deal with God alone about matters of the soul. Now, as God had shown her a new way to worship with Dom Raymond’s help, her understanding of religious matters and her spiritual life expanded greatly.²⁰

During the next ten years, Marie would prepare herself to join a religious community, and she waited for a signal from God that her time had come. She spent her days working for her brother-in-law’s wagoner business, but she occupied her free time with her devotions. (Marie had since moved into the home of her older sister to work for her brother-in-law, whose trade benefited greatly from Marie’s business acumen, in


²⁰ Ibid.
return for her and her son's upkeep.) She also devoted herself to acts of charity and read many of the spiritual books that were driving spiritual renewal among the women of the upper classes in France: Teresa of Avila's mystical works and François de Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life* that urged widows to remain chaste and unmarried.

These books enlightened her, and soon after reading them she made a resolve to take a vow of chastity and poverty. She had already been living a meager and chaste life, but these pledges prepared her for the formal vows of religious life in the future. The pledge of chastity for Marie was exceptionally important, as it was for many of the women who were attracted to religious orders in seventeenth-century France. The Church placed so much emphasis on chastity as the source of virtue, relying on the example of the Virgin Mary, that many married women believed themselves inferior and incapable of piety. When Marie spoke to Dom François about the importance of chastity in her life, "He listened to me in regard to this vow and tested me in various ways for three months; after that he permitted me to make a vow of perpetual chastity.... Our Lord granted me great graces through this sacrifice, powerfully strengthening me to withstand the pressure put upon me to remarry, a state of life from which the Divine Goodness had freed me."22

Although Marie had made up her mind and lived for the day when she would take the veil, she felt torn about what would happen to young Claude when she left. She wanted to stay with him and teach him how to love and serve God. She wanted to wait as long as she could so that Claude would be old enough to make his way easier. After all, he had no means of support for himself since he was still a young boy. She was deeply

21 Ibid., 12–23.

22 Ibid., 19, 29–39, 53, 59, 64; *Vie de Marie de l'Incarnation*, 163.
troubled that she would leave him to ruin and that her conscience would not be able to bear this weight. But Marie’s troubles would always be followed by fear – fear that God would reproach her for doubting His plan and for believing that He would not provide for her son. The hindsight of thirty years would give Marie the perspective to look back and conclude that “the devil pushed me hard on this point.” God would provide for Claude, she had decided, and her doubts were only manifestations of the devil’s attempts to keep her fulfilling her role as God’s servant. 23

Marie continued periodically to worry about this matter, but she would try to find confidence in God’s comforts: “This vocation followed me everywhere and I spoke to my Divine Spouse about it in my most intimate conversation with Him. He let me know that its realization would surely come to pass. This certitude gave me confidence and peace during the time of the delay, which was only because of my son.”24 At the time when her faith was strongest and she was convinced that God would provide, Marie could wait until he called her. At other times, however, she felt all confidence drain from her soul and this despair caused her more grief than even her doubts about leaving Claude. She would have preferred to die in these times rather than remain in the world: “Ah, chaste Spouse, bring this about or else take away my life, for it is a martyrdom for me in diverse ways. Thou dost will that I possess this good and that I do not die, but in spite of this Thou art pleased to defer my possessing it! I love Thy divine good pleasure; but even so,


I know not why, I languish. It is Thou who makest me suffer so!"²⁵ In her greatest periods of anguish, Marie felt that God had truly abandoned her.

As Marie described in the writings of her later years, she spoke only of her vocation and doubts to Dom Raymond. He tried to assure her that God would provide for Claude. As she felt her time drawing closer, she also felt God return to her: "After having received the above assurance my soul abided in very great peace and certainty, although I didn’t know what means our Lord would make use of to withdraw me from the world nor to what religious community He would call me. All would have to come from his providence."²⁶ She waited for that providence to show her the way.

Marie believed that God’s sign finally came to her in the form of another woman, Françoise de St. Bernard who was elected prioress of the Ursuline convent in Tours in 1630. Dom Raymond had told Marie’s story to this woman some time before when Françoise was sub-prioress. Upon assuming the role of prioress, Françoise, because she was touched by Marie’s piety, sent for her and invited Marie to become part of the Ursuline community. Dom Raymond had also arranged this plan with the archbishop of Tours, who granted Marie permission to enter the convent without providing a dowry for herself. In truth, Dom Raymond had been working for a while to help Marie enter religious life, first trying to gain a position for her with the Feuillatines (the sister organization of his order) and later encouraging her to look to the Carmelites. But Marie, because she enjoyed the active life of charity work, desired to be an Ursuline because the

²⁵ Ibid., 68.

order “was established to help souls, a thing to which I was powerfully attracted.” After Marie made clear her preference, Dom Raymond later contacted Françoise.27

Marie was ready for God to give her a sign. She had been expecting to act soon, for she heard an interior voice tell her, “make haste, for it is time; there is nothing more for you to do in the world.”28 She knew the religious work she was doing in this period – praying and performing charitable acts in the hospitals of Tours – would only be temporary solution to her desires until that time she could become a nun. Now she needed only to make her final break with the world outside the convent walls. Dom Raymond also soon after helped Marie gain consent from her sister and brother-in-law because he was also their spiritual advisor, and he made them promise to take care of Claude. Still, Marie encountered strong opposition from them, not the least of which was due to the great boost Marie’s business skills gave to the wagoner business. Marie was still worried about Claude, from whom all of these transactions were kept secret, but at least now that he would be provided for, she felt much more comfortable with the arrangement: “I loved my son very dearly; it was leaving him that really constituted my sacrifice. But since God willed it so, I freely closed my eyes to it all and committed the whole thing to His providence.” 29

Marie was not alone in abandoning her son so that she could become a nun. Other widowed mothers, inspired by François de Sales’s book and others that urged widows to join convents, had taken similar paths in abandoning the world. While these

27 Ibid., 69 – 70. Oury, Marie de l’Incarnation, 144 – 45.

28 Quote from Autobiography, 69 – 70; Vie, 155 – 63, 166.

29 Ibid., 71 – 72.
women could take their daughters with them, the sons had to be left with family members. Some historians have hypothesized that Marie may have heard the widely circulated account of widow Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot, to whom Sales was director. Frémyot entered religious life in 1610, but to do so had to leave her son with his grandfather. When it was time for her to leave, the son threw himself in his mother’s path and she had to step over his body to exit the grandfather’s home. Similar occurrences where women placed God above their families made popular stories. Women often held up the example of Marie Hallé as proof that God, and especially the Virgin Mary, would take care of children while their mothers were employed in holy affairs. Marie Hallé left her small children, all under the age of four, asleep one morning when she went to attend a prayer meeting of the Confrérie de la Sainte-Famille. She returned home later that morning to find them all awake and clothed. The story held that a mysterious woman dressed in white had taken care of the children while their mother was away. Marie de l’Incarnation would place this same faith in the Virgin to be mother to Claude in her stead.  

Still, Marie’s immediate pain over her decision to leave Claude did not end with her resolve. In fact, it was only just beginning. As the day approached when Marie was to leave, Claude sensed that something was wrong, and he ran away. Marie had everyone look for him, and when he was finally found three days later, she was on the point of desperation. All who knew her, with the exception of her director and Mother Françoise, accused her of being selfish and viewed Claude’s disappearance as an evident sign that

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30 Davis, Women on the Margins, 73; Allan Greer, The People of New France (Toronto, 1997); Autobiography, 73; Vie de Marie de l’Incarnation, 170 – 79.
God did not want her to become a nun. They attacked her on all sides. She felt as though her soul had been ripped from her body.\footnote{Autobiography, 72 – 73.}

Claude surely felt the same way. After Marie's death, he compared his abandonment to the plight of the biblical Isaac. Claude had come to understand that just as God had told Abraham to sacrifice his son in order to test the father's faith, he also told Marie to sacrifice Claude, albeit in a different sense. As God intervened to spare Isaac's life, he also intervened for Claude. Claude took more than forty years to write about and conceptualize his abandonment in this way. As an eleven year old boy at the time his mother left, however, he was desperately confused, as he wrote years later in the introduction to his mother's letters. The day she was to leave, Marie told Claude of her plans. She asked for his blessing, telling him that they were lucky God had chosen them both to make such a sacrifice. He cried in response that he would never see her again, but she reassured him that he could ask for her at the grill where the nuns received visitors. He could see her whenever he desired because the Ursuline house was in the neighborhood where he was to live with Marie's sister. Appeased, Claude gave his consent. He accompanied Marie to the convent, weeping bitterly. At the door, immediately before she left, he asked her for a kiss. She denied him. As she would later explain to him, from the time he was two and she knew that she would enter the religious life, she had purposely kept her distance from him: no embraces, no caresses, and she kept him for showing the same kinds of affection to her. She thought that when they did part, this restraint would make the separation easier. It did not. Marie was in agony, but
she did not let Claude see her emotions. She entered the convent and threw herself at the feet of Mother Françoise de St. Bernard.32

Marie took refuge in her role as novice in the Ursuline community. She found peace there from the great confusion that had marked her last few days in the secular world. But Claude was not ready to give her up. Encouraged and accompanied by his school friends, the boys traveled to the convent one day shortly after Marie began her new life and demanded that Claude’s mother be given back to him. The boys’ shouts could be heard throughout the convent and their activity sparked confusion among the nuns. Marie did not understand what was happening at first, but soon, above all the other cries, she could hear Claude’s voice: “Give me back my mother!” Claude visited the convent a number of times on his quest. Sometimes he came during Mass, other times he would enter the visitor’s parlor. Every time the other nuns heard his cries, they wept in compassion. They would send Marie to console Claude. Marie was terrified that the community of nuns, moved by Claude’s entreaties, would eventually send her back to her family. Yet, Marie found relief before too long. Soon after these episodes, Dom Raymond arranged a place for Claude in a Jesuit school in Rennes, and the boy left Tours.33 Marie was left in peace for the meantime, but she and Claude would spend the next twenty-five years coming to terms with their separation.

32 Ibid., 72 – 73; Vie de Marie de l’Incarnation, 170 – 79; Oury, Marie de l’Incarnation, 142 – 43. Much of this account comes from Marie’s first attempt at writing a spiritual autobiography in 1633, at the behest of her spiritual director at the time, Jesuit Father Georges de la Haye. Other details come from Claude’s comments upon Marie’s relation in the Vie. The story Marie tells in the Relation of 1654 focuses more on the resistance that her father gave her. It is a much more reserved account. For example, she says simply, “Dom Raymond gave me over to Reverend Mother St. Bernard, who received me with a very special charity.” (73)

33 Vie de Marie de l’Incarnation, 183 – 88.
CHAPTER TWO

A Living Fire:
Marie’s Apostolic Call to New France

The feminine spiritual revival that swept Counter-Reformation France and drew thousands of women to the convents created new challenges for the Catholic hierarchy by the mid-seventeenth century. The many women who took habits or joined secular societies with the intent of catechizing the poor and proselytizing to Protestants – like Vincent de Paul’s Filles de la Charité – acted on the belief that the Church would appreciate their apostolic endeavors. Instead, partly in reaction to the women who tested the boundaries with which the Church was comfortable, the French clerical authority rewarded the women with Tridentine reforms that strengthened clausura to its pre-Reformation levels. The Ursuline order developed as a secular organization, but by mid-century they were generally forced to cloister themselves completely or disband, and secular societies struggled to retain their religious status and organizational integrity.34

Subdued though not entirely extinguished, the desire to mobilize a female apostolate lived on in the minds of many women and some men such as Vincent de Paul. As women of religious orders retreated to the convent walls, many sought out another outlet for their apostolic spirit. The embers of their earlier aspirations needed only one catalyst to re-ignite the women’s fervor. In 1635 that stimulus came in the form of Father

Paul Le Jeune's annual relation of the Jesuit mission in New France. Since the early 1630s, Le Jeune had received letters from women and entire congregations who offered their services to help the Jesuit mission. Le Jeune, however, was concerned that no financial sponsor had come forth to pay for the women's voyage and lodging and to provide them with an annual income. Without a benefactor or wealthy resources like those that supported the Jesuit mission, the women religious would be a burden upon the habitants of the struggling colony, who would have to lodge and feed the sisters unless their order secured a pension. Eventually realizing that the Jesuits' mission was hindered by the absence of a female order that could work intimately with Indian women in ways that the Jesuits could not – a necessity in these matrilineal societies – Le Jeune recounted the wishes of his correspondents and proposed: "Will not some brave lady be found who will give a Passport to these Amazons of the great God, endowing them with a House in which to praise and serve his divine Majesty in this other world? I cannot persuade myself that our Lord will not dispose some one to this act."35

Although Le Jeune included with this plea a warning about the poverty and dangers that awaited in Canada, a subject he also had treated in previous relations, perhaps in an effort to discourage all but the strongest women from dreams of serving the mission, his cautionary tone had quite the opposite effect. Instead of gently dissuading

35 Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791...73 vols. (Cleveland: 1896-1901), 7:261. The missions in France were first coordinated by the Franciscan Recollects beginning in 1615, although some Jesuits were present after 1625. The Recollects were ineffective at attracting converts, however, and when Canada was restored to France in 1632 after a three-year occupation by the English, the Jesuits returned alone to take over the missions. For an account of the Jesuit work in New France, see James Axtell, The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America (New York, 1985), esp. ch. 3 – 6; and Marcel Trudel, The Beginnings of New France, 1524-1663, trans. Patricia Claxton (Toronto, 1973), ch. 17.
women, Le Jeune's words encouraged numerous women to write to him, pleading to be considered if a sponsor for a female mission could be found. To work with the prospective converts from the Indian nations of New France seemed a perfect opportunity for women to realize the ambition that the clausura reforms had crushed. Here the Jesuits offered a way for women both to adhere to the spirit of clausura and to act as apostles by providing services in their house to the Indians. Le Jeune was baffled by the women's reaction, though also inspired, as he wrote in the next year's relation: "The Carmelites are all on fire; the Ursulines are filled with zeal; the Nuns of the Visitation have no words significant enough to show their ardor; those of Nostre Dame implore permission to share in the sufferings which must be undergone among these Peoples; and the Hospitalieres insist that they be brought over here next year."  

Le Jeune had learned well in the intervening year the persistence of female apostolic aspirations.

Marie de l'Incarnation was one of the zealous Ursulines about whom le Jeune spoke. She sent him at least one letter, in 1636, expressing her desire to go to Canada. She wrote him that she thought God was looking with a favorable eye upon Le Jeune's plan to bring women to New France. She added that if it were the will of God for her to participate in this enterprise, there would be no earthly impediment that could keep her from it.  

Le Jeune was impressed and respected this and other demonstrations of piety. He believed that the women were divinely inspired: "Nature has no breath sacred enough to light these fires; these flames arise from a fire all divine, from an increate and living

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Fortunately for the women who eventually made the journey to Canada, Le Jeune did not have to try to temper their enthusiasm for long. Because he had publicly appealed for support, he had little trouble finding a benefactor who would endow the female religious establishment that he envisaged for Canada. Le Jeune's call inspired Marie-Madeleine de Chauvigny de la Peltrie, a young, wealthy widow to fund the project. Marie de l'Incarnation was the first woman religious whom Madame de la Peltrie contacted. The two met each other through Jesuit Father Antoine Poncet de la Rivière, who, learning of Madame de la Peltrie's plan to build a school for Indian girls, gave her Marie's name; he knew of Marie's vocation because he was a regular correspondent of hers after her son became his pupil. (Marie's family sent Claude to Jesuit boarding school in Orléans soon after Marie joined the Ursulines.) Soon after Madame de la Peltrie and Father Poncet contacted Marie about the trip, she began to see the plans to their completion after receiving permission from her superior. By 1639, the entourage of Madame de la Peltrie, Marie de l'Incarnation, three other Ursulines and a lay woman was ready to embark for Canada.

Unlike others who just might have been swept up in the spirit of an age and the

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38 Thwaites, Jesuit Relations, 8:237-39.


Interestingly, Madame de la Peltrie wished to go to New France for a reason similar to the one that drew Marie de l'Incarnation to the convent – she wished, as a young widow, to avoid remarriage. She had to
excitement of the moment, Marie’s desire to go to Canada was a near obsession for four long years, during which time she could think of little else. Marie’s resolve to find a way to New France commenced and was sustained by a series of mystic visions she had about the land – visions not unlike the ones that finally directed her to the convent in 1631. She experienced the first vision of Canada in late 1634. She described later that she saw herself in a far off land, called there by the apostolic spirit. She felt this calling regularly thereafter while saying her prayers and realized she had become fixated on Canada. She could not stop herself from concentrating her prayers and meditations on the land: "In spirit I visited all parts of the world, but Canada was the place of my abode and my country. My spirit was far distant from the place where my body was, and this separation caused my body much suffering because even when taking my meals I was traversing in spirit the country of the savages in order to work for their conversion and help the preachers of the Gospel."41 Although she could not imagine at this point that she would ever actually journey in body as in spirit to New France, “seeing that I was a religious leading a life of seclusion in a monastery,” she did feel that “God in His goodness had placed me in this holy house as in a place of refuge until such time as He should dispose of me according to His designs.”42 Until that plan was revealed, she felt her prayers could help the mission and she had the other sisters offer special prayers for the mission. In confusion about how to continue, Marie wrote in a frenzy to her former spiritual director, Dom Raymond de Saint Bernard, about her desire: at least nine letters survive from a two-month period in 1635. Approximately one year later, she worked up the

decieve her family to undertake her project and retain her independence. See Thwaites, Jesuit Relations, 16:9-11.

41 Autobiography, 100.
courage to talk to others about her vocation and wrote Le Jeune.\textsuperscript{43}

At the root of Marie's enthusiasm for New France and the reason it possessed her every thoughts was that Marie was unhappy in Tours. Although she was relieved to live in the secular world no longer, to avoid remarriage, and to dedicate her life to worship, she still had many burdens and was unsatisfied. As historian Natalie Zemon Davis has succinctly summarized Marie's problems: "The truth was that an enclosed Ursuline convent in Tours was too small a world for the religious energy of Marie Guyart and for her daring."\textsuperscript{44} Marie was unchallenged, both in terms of her abilities and her spirituality. She sincerely hoped that Tours was only a temporary refuge and that God had greater plans in store for her.

The most easily identified source of Marie's discomfort was that her companions in the early years, the other novices and newly-professed nuns with whom she had to spend most of her time, were much younger than she was. Marie, age thirty-two upon joining the community, was twice as old as the next oldest novice. The girls probably had little in common with a woman of Marie's worldly experience as wife, mother, and business manager.\textsuperscript{45} To make matters worse, Marie also lacked friends with whom she could identify on a spiritual level. Ironically, Marie's search for spiritual guidance was actually hindered by joining the Ursulines. Shortly after she entered the convent, Dom

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 97, 94.

\textsuperscript{43} Correspondance 24-47. (MI to Dom Raymond de Saint Bernard, 20 March 1635; April 1635; 5 April 1635; 19 April 1635; 26 April 1635; 3 May 1635; 3 May (?) 1635; 6 May 1635; and 13 May 1635). See also Correspondance, 60-61 (MI to Paul Le Jeune, March-April 1636).


\textsuperscript{45} Autobiography, 83.
Raymond, her spiritual director for the past dozen years, was transferred to another parish, and she lacked a supportive replacement for some time. Her spiritual suffering was consoled when she came under the tutelage of Jesuit Father Georges de la Haye, who visited the Jesuit house in Tours frequently, but this was only after Marie suffered through a two-year bout of depression. This period convinced her so thoroughly of the importance for women religious to correspond with like-minded spiritual directors that later in life this theme would run continuously throughout Marie’s correspondence with her female confidantes.\textsuperscript{46}

Eventually Marie found some relief as she assumed greater responsibility in the community. She took on the role of submistress of the novices in the winter of 1634-1635 and taught doctrine two or three times a week. She held this post for three years and then assumed the post of director of the convent’s boarding school. Ultimately, however, Marie was uninspired by her French pupils, who brought little consolation to her spiritual dismay.\textsuperscript{47} Marie was also unhappy because she was still plagued by the abandonment of her son. She was torn, especially during the episodes when he, and sometimes his classmates, would call outside the convent doors. She felt both guilty and angry at God for demanding such a painful sacrifice of her. Yet, she also felt relieved to be at the convent away from the problems she had faced as a lay woman. Although Marie wrote her spiritual autobiography about this period as if she knew things would work out, she was hardly sure at the time, and her words betray her pain and confusion. While she did not understand how Claude could miss her so much, especially because she had prepared

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 86-88.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 90-93; 116-17.
him for her departure since his birth, in a rare unguarded moment of truth in her later writings she admitted that she knew no one could replace her as his mother; no one can care for children with the same tenderness as a mother, she testified.48

Because Marie could not find religious life satisfying in Tours, it pained her even more to have struggled and made so many sacrifices to become a nun. If she were able to go to Canada where she knew women were needed in the missions, she would feel as if she had made the right choice and she would be able to see the progress she was making for her faith – a progress that was difficult to measure in Tours because her service consisted of instructing her fellow nuns and running a boarding school. When a young half-French, half-Indian girl arrived at the convent to be educated in 1635-1636, Marie was probably all the more eager for Canada. Two Jesuits who frequented the convent’s parlor, including her new spiritual advisor, spoke frequently of the trials of the mission and kept Marie informed of the news from New France, piquing her curiosity even further.49

Marie’s fervor for Canada only subsided when another Jesuit, Michel Salin, ridiculed Marie’s aspirations. Churchmen were divided about the issue of women’s roles overseas, and Salin sided with the faction that thought women should stay out of the missions entirely. After Salin chastised her, Marie stopped speaking of New France, but she continued to read the Jesuit relations in secrecy. She sank into a misery that lasted until 1637 when, during her correspondence with Father Poncet (who at this time did not know about her disposition), he began to speak of his plans to go to New France the

48 Ibid., 76.

49 Correspondance, 61-63 n. (MI to Paul Le Jeune, S.J., March-April 1636).
following year and she felt she could confide in him her desires. Not long afterwards, Poncet invited Marie to go to New France on behalf of Madame de la Peltrie.  

Marie was ecstatic. She could hardly believe that her mystic vision of New France was coming true. Nonetheless, happiness was elusive as Marie would have to face more obstacles before she could leave. Her sister, to whom Claude’s supervision had been entrusted, tried to stop Marie from leaving France and went so far as to hire a lawyer and contact the archbishop of Tours. Marie was afraid that she might have to stay in Tours. She was numb from the misery of the thought: “I found myself devoid of feeling in leaving the sisters, my relative, friends, and France itself. It seemed that my spirit departed before I did, such was its longing to be in that place to which His Divine Majesty was calling it.” At the end, her sister’s efforts were to no avail; both civil and ecclesiastical authorities said she was free to go. It is from Claude’s later recollection of the event that we know about the most difficult part of this trial: Marie’s sister refused to continue Claude’s stipend if she were to go to Canada. Marie explained her voyage to Claude (when he found her group as it passed through Orléans where he was studying on the way to the embarkation point) – in a scene that resembled the day when she first abandoned him – saying that she once again was giving up Claude to God’s mercy and to her faith.  

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50 Autobiography, 105-07.  
51 Ibid., 117-18.  
52 La Vie de la Vénérable Marie de l’Incarnation...ed. Claude Martin (Solesmes[1677], 1981), 374-76.
When Marie and the other women who were to be her companions in this experiment landed in Canada in the late summer of 1639, they were delighted. Their voyage had been difficult. Marie wrote home that they had a rocky journey and were nearly shipwrecked. Moreover, the journey had to have been uncomfortable for the Ursulines because for the first time since they had joined their French convents they were not restricted by convent walls; they could hardly keep clausura practices aboard the tiny vessels, and Marie recalled that it was a "painful thing for sisters to be outside of their cloister."\(^{53}\) The women also must have been excited to chart new territory for the women of the Church. Under this pressure and excitement, it is no wonder that when the party landed and was shown around Quebec, they cried in joy to see Indians in the Jesuit chapel praying. The women embraced the Indians and kissed them so much that the natives were quite startled.\(^{54}\) For Marie, this moment was the denouement of all her anxiety and frustration. As she wrote one of her brothers upon arrival, speaking of the perilous journey and her struggles up to this point, "Is not all this, I say, enough to make us forget our crosses and our weariness, had they been a thousand times greater than they were?"\(^{55}\)

Marie found such delight in the Indian girls and women because ministering to them would give her life purpose. Her relationship with the natives – though never a

\(^{53}\) Autobiography, 119. It would have been strange for lay people to see sisters outside of the cloister, too. Claude Martin remarked upon seeing his mother in Orléans as she prepared for the voyage to Canada that he was shocked to see the nuns out of their element, Vie de Marie de l’Incarnation, 375.

\(^{54}\) Thwaites, Jesuit Relations, 16:20.

relation of equality, and one often targeted toward Frenchifying the Indian women—filled a void in Marie’s life and gave her confidence. The arrangement allowed Marie to grow as a person and to come to terms with herself, her vocation, and her relation to Claude. Through her letters, and spiritual autobiography, we can witness this transformation. Truly for Marie the Indians were the "treasure we had come to seek."\textsuperscript{56}

Once the Ursulines were settled, the Jesuits immediately gave them a handful of Indian pupils, along with a few French girls. The first Indian students came from the few Algonquian-speaking peoples among whom the Jesuits had made great inroads: the Micmacs, Abenakis, Algonquins, and Montagnais. Marie at once set herself to learning Algonquin while a different sister took up Huron, the language of another people whom the Jesuits had set up missions nearby.\textsuperscript{57} As the Jesuits strengthened their ties with these groups, they would convince Indian converts or catechumens to send their daughters to the Ursulines, and by 1641 the Ursulines had forty-eight pupils. At the convent, the nuns’ main task was to school the Indian and French girls in the basics of the Catholic faith and help prepare the Indians for baptism and their first communions. The schooling of French girls differed little from the tasks that Marie performed in Tours, but the work with the Indian girls was revolutionary in that it gave the nuns a direct role in the work of the missions. The Ursulines’ lessons also supported the work of the mission in a way that made itself felt in the larger Indian societies, because once the Indian girls reached adulthood, they returned to their communities and spread the Christian message to other natives. In addition, the convent also opened its parlor to any Indian who desired a hot meal of sagamité, a charity that fed many during the lean months of the year. Marie

\textsuperscript{56} Autobiography, 126.
estimated that in 1641 the nuns had fed more than eight hundred people.\textsuperscript{58} The women felt glad to help the Indians however they could, especially when it came to caring for the ill. Within weeks of their arrival, an epidemic of smallpox broke out. Marie and her companions were so glad to take care of the sick and dying that they did not mind the threat of disease to themselves or the closeness of death, especially if the nuns and priests could baptize the dying Indians before they succumbed to the disease.\textsuperscript{59}

The Canadian landscape made life in the small settlement harsh: long winters, frequent periods of little food, and crude dwellings. Yet the privations of the colony appealed to Marie’s belief in the benefit of physical mortification, which she had practiced earlier in life. She had often felt during her time as a nun in France that her physical life was too easy after she gave up her hair shirt and self-flagellation. Canada remedied that: "This greatly renewed the fervor of my vocation as well as my attraction, through a complete abandonment of myself, to suffer and to do whatever our Lord would wish of me in this new abode and manner of life different from that of our monasteries in France as far as poverty and frugality were concerned, but not any different from the standpoint of regularity and religious observance." She would even have preferred more severe conditions, thinking sometimes the women were too well off for Canada, "where I

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 127, 189n; Davis, Women on the Margins, 86.


\textsuperscript{59} Autobiography, 126-27.
myself expected to have for all lodging only a cabin made of bark.” It was the challenge to survive while doing God’s work that fulfilled her. She even wished sometimes that her mortification would extend to martyrdom, and she sometimes discussed this with her correspondents.60

Because life was so austere, the women felt that the Indians needed them, even though the Indians got along well for centuries without European intervention. The French were bringing faith to an unchristianized people and also were providing for the Indians’ physical needs – feeding and lodging them and caring for them during sickness. In New France there were hardly enough Ursulines to fill these duties, and the house was often filled with natives to capacity.61 The Ursulines believed not only that the girls needed their spiritual guidance but also that the girls benefited from other types of instruction the nuns imparted to them. Often times, the nuns actually preferred to teach skills that could gently mold the Indian girls to adopt some practices of French culture that the nuns believed would be of use to them once their schooling was complete. For instance, the nuns taught the girls embroidery or how to play musical instruments and to read and write, as well as basic lessons in manners and "a thousand other little skills."62 The nuns could also caution against Indian practices that they felt would be harmful in the lives of their converts, such as the common practice of pre-marital sex in many Indian societies. Often they grumbled at native practices they did not understand and delighted at frenchifying the girls. For example, when the Indian girls arrived at the convent, they came covered in bear grease, a technique their parents had learned would help insulate

60 Ibid., 128; Word from New France, 76-77.
61 Autobiography, 129.
them against the winter cold. The Ursulines did not accommodate this native practice and would immediately bathe the girls. In fact, the nuns vied with each other over who would wash away the girls’ Indianness to prepare them for study in the convent. Marie wrote that those nuns who were deprived of the duty “consider themselves undeserving of it and dwell in humility.”

Marie and the other Sisters dedicated themselves to their work, even to the point of martyrdom because they knew the importance the missions had for the Catholic Church. Not only had the Jesuits’, and now Ursulines’, efforts given the Church an advantage over Protestant evangelists in northeastern North America, they helped create spiritual renewal in the Church, which the women themselves felt intensely. They believed that the Indians needed them, but they recognized that the Church also benefited from the Indians’ attention. Marie commented upon the power of her students to rejuvenate the faith of their instructors. In a letter to Paul Le Jeune, Marie praised two Indian pupils who were exemplary models of virtue and faith. And in note after note, Marie recounted the purity and inner grace of her girls. She told stories of their intelligence and skill at memorizing the Catholic catechism and prayers because she recognized the instructive potency that their example could have upon the faithful: “They dwell in the fervour of the first Christians of the Church. One could not see souls purer or more zealous in observing God’s law. I am full of wondering admiration when I see them submissive as children to those that instruct them.”

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62 *Word from New France*, 73.
63 Ibid., 75.
64 *Correspondance*, 91.
65 *Word from New France*, 84, 71, 72.
also helped reorient the view of the nuns away from the internal distractions that disrupted life at the center of the convent. Marie, as superior and the authority in the convent, was often in a position that put her at odds with the other nuns. During these grievous bouts, Marie would look to the Indian students' care as a way to distract herself from the problem at hand.

The most important reason Marie felt the Indian girls to be a treasure was that they gave her an outlet for her maternal tendencies. Marie even once confided to Le Jeune that the Ursulines seemed to her sometimes to act more like the native girls' mothers than their biological parents; the girls, she related, did not even cry when the parents left them at the convent because they were so eager to live with the sisters. She intimated to another correspondent, "When we are finished [praying], I could not express the caresses they [the Indian pupils] give us, a thing they never do with their natural mothers." Marie was delighted to think that these girls loved the nuns as their mothers. She valued their affection much more because she realized that it was a great sacrifice for girls born in the "liberty of the woods" to cloister themselves with the sisters. Marie cared for the Indian girls with more tenderness than she cared for her own child. She was inconsolable when the girls became sick and when the enemy Iroquois attacked former pupils and their families. Furthermore, she was forlorn when any duties took her away from teaching the students. She suffered through her duties as superior for the first six years in Canada, a job that left her little time to minister and made her jealous of the other

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66 Correspondance, 91.
67 Word from New France, 74.
68 Ibid., 109-10.
nuns’ time with the girls, “because there is nothing so honorable in Canada than to have some neophytes to instruct.”

After all her struggles in deciding to become a nun and then as a sister in Tours, Marie finally found a remedy to her spiritual ennui in the midst of the exciting pace of the missions, acting as apostle and leading the nuns. She was now more confident than ever with her life’s decisions and her vocation as Canada altered nuns’ role in the Church. The Indian girls provided her with the outlet that she needed for her tremendous energy. Over three decades, she would find that confidence grow more steady and her life more peaceful. Only her son would bring her worries, and only then for a few years before her newfound life in Canada allowed her to reinvent their relationship. Therefore, considering the change that she felt her spirit undergo in Canada, it is not surprising the protest she gave when circumstances threatened to send the Ursulines back to France.

When Claude informed her in 1659 that the superiors of the order in France were thinking of recalling the women from Quebec because of the threat of Iroquois attack, Marie was alarmed, “May God preserve us from such a calamity! If we did not leave after our fire and all our other losses, we shall not leave for the Iroquois, unless all the country does or a superior obliges us to do so.” She implored Claude to plead with the mothers to allow the nuns to remain at Quebec. Another time, when Madame de la Peltrie left the convent and took all her possessions to minister to the Indians at Montreal, the Quebec sisters were left with few financial resources. They narrowly avoided having

\[69\text{ Autobiography, 129, 138, 138 n27, 147, 152; Quote from Correspondance, 266, 243, 265. Marie held the post of superior twice more, including the years following the fire that destroyed the convent in 1650.}\]
to return to France.\textsuperscript{70} Just as she had resolved to remain in Canada after the convent burned, Marie faced these two crises with the same resolve. She needed her Indian students, and she felt they needed her.

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Word from New France}, 238, 114-16, 257.
CHAPTER THREE

Coming to Terms with Motherhood
and Children in New France

The solace Marie found in ministering to the Indians helped her redefine her spiritual practices and vocation in the Church. Through the confidence she gained as one of Le Jeune’s “Amazons of the Great God,” she believed that she had made the right choices during the most difficult periods of her life: when she left her son to become a nun and when she left him with an uncertain future eight years later to go to New France. As Marie spent the last thirty years of her life in Canada, she would come to use that assurance to confront the consequences of those decisions, which were always on her mind. In her epistolary relationship with her son, she crafted her experiences in the New World in such a way that she could come to terms with their relationship and encourage him to do the same.71

Marie had many occasions to smooth over the past with Claude. Although she sometimes wrote two hundred brief letters a day when her responsibilities as superior required it, her son was her closest and most frequent personal correspondent. The fishing vessels and ships carrying furs back to Europe in late summer and early autumn never left port without a packet of her letters to family and friends back home. Similarly,

71 Paul Le Jeune employed this term to refer to the women who wanted to become missionaries in Canada. Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610-1791... 73 vols. (Cleveland: 1896-1901), 7:260.
they seldom arrived at Quebec without at least some news from Claude. Like any transatlantic endeavor, however, their communication was subject to shipwrecks, delays, and losses. Marie often had to remind Claude of these perils when he complained of not receiving her letters. She, too, sometimes suffered from the same anxiety when the ships’ arrival left her empty-handed: in one instance she feared Claude had been lost to an epidemic that Marie learned from the ships’ crews had swept France.  

Marie’s correspondence with Claude is marked by distinct stages that reflect their growing understanding and acceptance of one another. Understandably, considering the perilous situation in which she left her son in France, their earliest exchanges were marred by difficulty. Claude was left to the mercy of his Jesuit educators in the absence of his aunt’s financial support. Marie could have called on several noble women from Paris and Versailles, with whom she had conversed about her impending voyage, to furnish Claude with an appointment or financial means. She decided not to do so, however, for fear that if Claude were advanced in the world by these methods, his “soul would be in danger of being lost.” Although her journey and after her arrival in Canada, Marie worried about Claude’s situation. When the next season’s ships arrived without word from her son, she was furious, fearing that he had allowed himself to grow lazy and negligent; how could she feel comfortable with her decision to go do God’s work in Canada when her son acted thus? In a chastising letter that Marie sent Claude at the earliest opportunity in the fall of 1640, she said as much and chided him that he was

\[\text{72 See, for example, Correspondance de Marie de l'Incarnation, Ursuline (1599-1672), ed. Dom Guy Oury (Solesmes: 1971), 119-20 (MI to Claude Martin, 1 September 1643); also, Word from New France: The Selected Letters of Marie de l'Incarnation, ed. and trans. Joyce Marshall (Toronto, 1967), 270.}\]

\[\text{73 Word from New France, 92.}\]
too old for such childish behavior.  

Imagine Marie’s shock, then, when the next year she not only heard from Claude but also learned that he planned to take up the religious life. Early in 1641, Claude was accepted into the Benedictine order of St. Maur at Vendôme. Marie did not try to contain her enthusiasm in the reply, saying it “showed me what I had hoped for you and even more than all my hopes, since his goodness has placed you in such a holy Order, one I infinitely honour and esteem.” She even told him at one point that she had never received greater consolation from any piece of news in her life. Marie was relieved most obviously because she knew Claude’s well-being was secure. More important to her, Marie once again had confidence in the mystic visions that led her to the convent and promised her that divine providence would look after her son. She felt her life was finally unfolding as predicted. So assured was she that she put the question to Claude, “You have been abandoned by your mother and your kinsmen—has not this abandonment been advantageous to you?”

For Marie, this rhetorical question had double meaning. Literally speaking, she wanted Claude to answer in the affirmative and to be glad that they had both been called to the service of the Church and had embraced that vocation even against great odds. On a deeper level, Marie also wanted Claude to envision their relationship as she now viewed it: biologically they were mother and son, but of greater significance to her, they were now sister and brother in their faith and service. It was this new arrangement that made Marie rejoice. Claude, however, did not accept his mother’s abandonment as a

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74 *Correspondance*, 115-16; *Word from New France*, 382 n. Not surprising, Claude did not include this letter in the collections of his Marie’s writing that he published after her death.

75 *Word from New France*, 91, 119.
great boon. It would be much later before he could close that chapter in his mind, much less give thanks for the path by which he took up holy orders. In part, Claude had difficulty because Marie in her letters did not share the intimacy of feelings that he desired. The desire to know Marie’s interior disposition and understand the spiritual gifts that drove her to give up everything occupied him throughout the correspondence. To Claude’s displeasure, Marie carefully kept her distance on these matters, at least until 1654 when she sent Claude the spiritual autobiography he had been requesting (because he thought such instruction would help better direct him in his religious practices) since his earliest years with the Benedictines. In the intervening years, their correspondence was categorized by a firm resolve on Marie’s part to remain aloof while Claude pled and begged for more. Marie acted in a guarded and defensive manner from the beginning, even in the same letter that told Claude of the joy she felt when she learned he was to become a priest. Marie, though she told him joyfully that they now had the chance for a new relationship, also let him know that it would be limited by the physical distance between them – an apt metaphor for the emotional distance she wished to maintain as well. In an early letter, speaking of her need to join the convent in Tours as revealed to her in her visions and encouraged by her spiritual director, Marie commented that she would not write Claude a letter about her decision to follow through with the vision’s message for fear that someone else might read it. Unless he could bridge the physical distance by traveling to New France, an unlikely feat as a Benedictine, Marie would not describe the motives behind her action, hindering an emotional bond because it would prevent Claude from ever fully understanding why his mother abandoned him.

Keeping Claude at arm’s length both physically and emotionally was not an
uncommon practice for Marie. After all, she began preparing her son for her eventual abandonment once she felt the convent’s call by denying him caresses and other outward displays of motherly love. Yet Marie was hardly heartless in this matter; it brought her pain too. She felt it a necessary grief of emotional denial to mirror her practice of physical asceticism and to break the ties that held her to the world. It was a similar motive that would cause her to wish martyrdom upon herself and her son at the hands of the Iroquois later in life. Despite the ocean that separated them and Marie’s concerns about the privacy of their correspondence, she did go to great lengths to begin a new life with Claude — one focused on their spiritual bond and their mutual experiences as members of religious orders, a relationship she felt had potential to surpass any bond they had before known. We can see evidence of Marie’s efforts to redefine her relationship to Claude in this way in the earliest stages of their letters. She delighted in closing an early letter to him: “Preserve the consolation you have in being a servant of God and in my also being his servant — the most noble of all ranks and the one we should most love. Let us dwell in Jesus and see one another in him.” In the summer of 1644 she went a step further in building this bond by telling him that now she knew when he prayed, she would say her prayers at the same time so that they were praying together. She concluded that God was merciful to allow her to partake in so holy a congregation,

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76 Marie wrote repeatedly about how she wished to be martyred for Christ in the missions, but she felt that she was too unworthy to receive such a gift. When Claude wrote her that he wished to come to Canada, also, to be a missionary, Marie told him that she wished he would be able to come to Canada to say mass in the “lands of the infidels” and to be martyred. *Word from New France*, 120-21. Marie was familiar with martyrdom. A number of the priests and converts she knew were killed at the hands of the Iroquois, including the nuns’ confessor Father Vignal. See also Allan Greer, “Colonial Saints: Gender, Race, and Hagiography in New France,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 57 (2000): 323-48.

77 *Word from New France*, 120-21.
adding it was a great remedy that God had given her in return for her suffering.\textsuperscript{78}

Marie hoped that Claude would also be eager to pursue this course of exchange. She spent much time in early letters assuring him of her sincere gratitude at his joining the Benedictines and of her enthusiasm for their unique situation.\textsuperscript{79} In short order, Claude was eager to fill his new position as his mother’s confidant. He sought to learn all he could from her about her spiritual life in a direct effort to understand what drew Marie to the convent and to New France. Marie believed these subjects were too intimate to confide to paper. She preferred to write of news from Quebec and the missions. Claude, thus unsatisfied, began in 1643 a long campaign soliciting Marie to bequeath him at her death any papers that she wrote for herself in which she included spiritual prayers or musings. To the first requests Marie responded only that if obedience permitted she would do so. However, once, when Marie felt herself within death’s reach during a long illness in the winter of 1646-1647 she gave the few papers she had to Mother Marie de Saint-Joseph so that the woman would burn them if Marie died. The other nun said that instead she would send the papers to Claude, not knowing of his entreaties but on the grounds that he was Marie’s closest relative.\textsuperscript{80}

Claude’s requests for her papers often exasperated Marie because she did not understand his adamant tone. She replied to one plea with confusion in 1647: “As for my papers, what are they? I have but few, my very dear son, for I do not take the time to write of such matters as you think.” In his defense, she did pique his curiosity by telling him about certain spiritual matters, “I cannot confide to this paper but would gladly speak

\textsuperscript{78} Correspondance, 206-09.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 227-30.
into your ear,” knowing as a monk with the Benedictines, a contemplative and not
apostolic order, he would not be allowed to come to New France. 81  Perhaps recognizing
her part in encouraging him, and in an effort to understand his requests and wishes, she
also included in her letters some brief spiritual discourses.  She was trying to soothe him:
“Since my writings console you and you wish to have them, if I have but a notebook I
shall write upon it that it should be sent to you.” 82

Marie therefore played a delicate balancing act with her words and promises. She
desired, first, to assure and please her son and, second, make him acknowledge the new
focus of their relationship along with ceasing his demands for explanation of her
abandonment. Marie’s task was difficult; more often than not, Claude tipped the scales in
such a direction that Marie struggled to retain her composure. For example, some years
later, Marie once more promised Claude her papers, qualifying that she was only giving
him this satisfaction so that he would no longer make complaints that she did not give
him enough affection, for her heart was so tender that she could not withstand his pleas.
Yet, she warned repeatedly that though these promises were meant to console him, he
nevertheless should look for comfort in his relationship with God. She reinforced her
message in subsequent letters, closing them with such phrases as “Let us visit each other
in Jesus.” 83

In spite of the concessions Marie granted, she was still uncomfortable writing
about her mystical visions or details of her inner life. She closely guarded the few papers

80 Word from New France, 120, 164.
81 Ibid., 91.
82 Ibid., 164.; Correspondance, 318.
83 Correspondance, 314, 343, 384.
she had begun reluctantly to compile at Claude’s request shortly before the convent fire of 1650. Out of fear that someone else might stumble upon them if she tried to save them along with the convent documents, Marie left her own letters to burn in the nuns’ house. When she explained this reasoning to Claude, she implicitly criticized her forwardness of writing about these matters and retreated to her former position that she would prefer to discuss these topics face to face. Claude was understandably disappointed, and it is no coincidence that he advocated the Ursulines’ return to France when he replied to the news about the blaze.

Marie was quick to put her son in his place. She was “very little concerned with the judgements of men, which are often very far from the judgements of the One we should glorify with our obedience”; only if God willed it, not man alone, would the nuns leave their divine mission.84 Claude did not understand, she argued, the terrible consequences that would ensue if the convent was not rebuilt: the struggling colonists would have been discouraged immeasurably; the French girls would turn into brutes, she thought; and worst of all, the Indian girls would have no women to minister to them.85 Marie’s passionate defense of the Ursulines’ work in New France widened a rift between Claude and her that had been forming for some time. A misunderstanding in 1652 about a letter Marie wrote to another correspondent brought to the fore Claude’s hurt and frustration over not receiving Marie’s papers. Convinced that his mother’s affection was fleeting, he sent off an accusatory message to which she could only respond, “If I had

84 Word from New France, 206.

85 Ibid., 203-04.
some thing against you I would tell it to you frankly and candidly.”

Claude’s anxiety continued to grow during these years as his desperate attempts to form any kind of intimate bond with his mother seemed to fail, despite some small gestures Marie made toward him. Her decision to let the papers burn was understandable, since the nuns would be shuffled between temporary lodgings until a new house was built. Moreover, Marie’s letters increasingly included spiritual directions and accounts of her prayer life. It was probable that her normal epistles would continue to approach the discussion Claude wished. It is only when we focus on the other subjects in the correspondence in these years that we can approximate why Marie’s gestures seemed empty to Claude. Marie’s favorite theme in all her letters was how delightful the nuns found their Indian pupils. It was no secret to those who received notes from Marie that working with the Indian girls transformed the role of women religious in the Church and brought the nuns fulfillment they had never before experienced. Marie’s acquaintances rarely received letters, especially in the 1640s, that in some way did not laud the Indian converts’ virtue and piety or express sentiments such as “Is this not delightful in girls born in barbarism?” Because the Indian pupils inspired renewed faith in their converters, most of the nuns preferred to work with native students. Marie only seldom mentions the many French boarders the convent hosted, except to say that the rough life in Canada had made the young colonists “more learned in several dangerous matters than those of France. Thirty girls give us more work in the boarding-

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86 Correspondance, 475.

87 Word from New France, 126.
Claude, so needy and unsure of his mother's affection and still trying to understand why she abandoned him, must have been extremely jealous of the attention Marie lavished on her Indian "children," as she sometimes referred to them. Imagine how her stories would have struck his injured psyche: the tales of the nuns who competed over who would bathe the girls; the accounts of how happy the small girls were to live and study with the nuns; the physical affections the women lavished on the girls; and descriptions of the girls' intelligence, piety, and humility. Whereas he did not know and desired greatly to learn how his own mother reacted when she separated herself from him upon entering the convent, he was probably distressed when Marie described at great length how sorrowful the nuns were when the girls' parents took them away, the Iroquois captured them, or disease ravaged them. Most important, he must have been devastated when Marie confided to him that when teaching she sometimes felt she had almost sinned in loving it too much.89

Although nearly all of Claude's words to his mother have been lost, her responses nevertheless include summaries of the letters to which she was responding, and we can gauge some of Claude's reactions in this way. In the early years Claude acted interested in her tales of the Indians, but Marie knew he had mixed feelings. He once questioned her veracity, asking if the Indians were really as perfect as she told him. Furthermore, though he told Marie that he prayed with zeal for her pupils, she doubted his sincerity. She confronted him: "Do you tell me the truth, my dear son? It seems to me that you do

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88 Ibid., 335.
89 Correspondance, 227-30.
not tell me all that you have in your heart.”\textsuperscript{90} She knew he had unresolved feelings about her care for the Indians and her role as their teacher and provider in the convent.

Rather than refrain from delicate subjects, however, Marie repeatedly continued to speak of them. Her purpose was two-fold. First, she could use the accounts of the young Indians to inspire similar displays of virtue in her son. Second, she crafted them to distance herself from Claude's demands of her and to shape their relationship according to the boundaries she wanted to establish. The best example of Marie's awareness of the power of her words is a letter she wrote to Claude in the winter of 1650 just before the convent burned. One passage is of particular importance. In it, she described the torturous martyrdom of one of her godsons: “One of them, for love of whom I write this note, was especially marked by zeal and fervour. He was twenty-two years old or thereabouts and was my spiritual son, loving me as much as or more than his mother. He was in very terrible torture for three days and three nights, in derision of the Faith, which he confessed in a loud voice till his last breath.” While this example was intended to illustrate the bravery and the piety of her “spiritual son,” Marie added a later passage that illustrates her second purpose: “Have I not, in your opinion, a good son? ... He was a perfectly formed young man and extremely modest, but I praise him only for his fidelity. Ah if I were told as much of you, my very dear son, how could I express the joy this would bring me? But these signal favours are not in the province of our election.”\textsuperscript{91} Marie closed her letter by saying Claude was the dearest person in the world to her, but this salutation barely seems to temper her other words. She wanted Claude to redirect his

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 295. \textit{Word from New France}, 132.

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Word from New France}, 187.
gaze to God and his faith, like her spiritual son, instead of concentrating upon the earthly and emotional sacrifice he had to make as a youth. She wanted him to be grateful that he had been called to relinquish his mother to her vocational calling and to rejoice that they could now live as spiritual brother and sister, upon which the Church placed greater importance.

But Claude’s pleas over time for her to write a spiritual autobiography that would discuss her state when she decided to become a nun finally exhausted Marie. He maintained that because she abandoned him as a child, thus denying him any further instruction as his mother, particularly in religious matters, it was wrong for her to deny him such lessons now, especially since they both belonged to God. He told her after the fire that in his state, she could not refuse him without injustice and harshness. It was the latter argument that struck Marie: “I confess to you that this second blow has touched me, and that since my heart received it, I felt forced to speak with you about several points of spirituality in my letters. But they were not that which you hoped for.” He believed, and with good reason, that Marie had been reserved in what she did allow herself to write. But now “finally pressed by your reasons, and overcome by your prayers, I have communicated your desire to my spiritual director.” Her director responded that if she did not write the autobiography on her own accord, he would order her to do it. Fortunately for Claude, Marie finally felt inspired by the Holy Spirit to undertake the task.92 Once the immediate needs of the nuns had been secured — Marie was again serving as superior — she began to plan the spiritual autobiography that she would write for him. The process of rebuilding after the convent fire had given Marie strength and

92 Correspondance, 525-27.
resolve that she had not known before. She was ready to take upon herself the difficult labor of writing about her most intimate memories.93

Marie completed and sent her relation to Claude in the summer of 1654. In it she wrote in great detail about her decision to abandon him and become a nun, that episode Claude most wanted to understand. With the account Marie sent a note introducing it and telling him that she had mortified herself in sending the autobiography to him. She told him in a later note that she had written it with pain and répugnance, which can be translated in English as “repugnance” or “reluctance,” both apt words to describe Marie’s emotions. She told him she was “ordered” to write it because her director believed it would be good for both of them.94 That summer she also revisited a question she first asked when she learned he joined the priesthood: “You have thus won so much in losing me, and my abandonment has been useful to you.” She asked him if it were not true that “according to the promise of our Lord we were compensated a hundred fold in this life, without speaking of the eternal compensations that we hope for in heaven.”95 If it required sharing her autobiography with Claude to make him answer her question in the affirmative, she would do it, no matter the pain.

Her pain, too, was real. In the next few years, Marie acted in ways that suggest she was indeed mortified to bare her soul. In her subsequent letters to Claude, Marie

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93 Ibid., 514-21.

94 Ibid., 525-29, 548.
seems more self-conscious than she had in the past, as if she were unsure of Claude’s reaction to the relation. Her insecurity also might have spawned from Claude’s newfound reticence in 1655 and 1666; in both of these years, his correspondence virtually stopped, and Marie had to criticize him for not writing often enough, even suggesting that he was lazy. In addition to her sensitivities, Marie had to defend the convent’s decision to remain in the New World despite the threat of the Iroquois. Worse, she soon also had to justify the Ursulines’ place in Canada. Claude had thrown at her the rumor he heard in the mid-1650s that the Ursulines were “useless” in Canada. Marie retorted curtly, “My very dear son, what we accomplish in this new Church is seen by God and not by men; our enclosure covers all, and it is difficult to speak of what one does not see.” She then offered proof of the efficacy of the nuns’ teaching, enumerating their charitable deeds and counting the numbers of girls the women had brought to baptism. She blamed the rumor on the editors of the Jesuit relations in France who struck out passages praising the many deeds of the Ursuline sisters. She was upset at Claude’s insinuation, especially now that he had her autobiography and knew how much being in New France meant to her.

Gradually, however, as the years passed, the tone of Marie and Claude’s correspondence changed. The disagreements faded and Marie no longer felt uncomfortable with Claude possessing her autobiography. In fact, she began to delight in discussing spiritual issues with him because she broke the barrier of her earlier

95 Ibid., 527.

96 Ibid., 562-66, 571-73.

97 Word from New France 336-7; Word from New France 254. It is not clear where rumor began, but perhaps it was spawned by the unresolved tension in France about women religious participating in the missions. Likewise, it is not clear what Marie meant about the editors of the Jesuit Relations because she did not elaborate.
embarrassment and need for privacy. She said to him as early as 1663, "I take a singular pleasure conversing with you about these spiritual matters according to the questions that you have asked me." She was sad on days when time slipped away from her before she had a chance to write him. Consequently, during the 1660s and afterwards until her death in 1672, her letters were chiefly spiritual. Marie, of course, still included news from the missions and Quebec, but even after the Iroquois threat subsided in the late 1650s, the news was not very promising because the Jesuits faced great problems. Disease and warfare had also taken their toll on the native populations near the French settlements, and the Jesuit fathers were forced to search further north and west for students among groups of Indians with whom they had little contact in the first decades of their endeavors. Marie spoke of another grave difficulty for the missions: the liquor trade that not only frustrated Jesuit attempts to attract converts but also distracted natives who had been devoted adherents of the Christian faith. With such depressing information to relay, it is no surprise that she preferred to talk of other subjects.

Marie tried to focus on tales of bravery and valor among the Christian Indians, but she herself was having less and less contact with the Indians. The number of native boarders in the convent declined by the early 1660s, in part because so many of the Algonquian-speaking peoples and Hurons who passed through the convent doors succumbed to disease — whooping cough killed many of the students at the convent in 1661, for example — or had been persecuted by the Iroquois. The convent was increasingly unable to support the number of boarders it had sheltered in earlier years as

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98 Correspondance, 716; also see the entirely spiritual letters on pp. 609-11; 658-61; 744-49.
well. The order was simply growing too poor to support the sisters, much less pupils. During the hostilities with the Iroquois, the convent had to donate its extra provisions to the French soldiers sent to guard the colonists. The order was slow to recover from this blow and even had to return some of the French boarders to their parents.\textsuperscript{100} Although the Ursulines kept close watch over the new Iroquois girls that the fathers brought to the convent (in exchange for their parents’ promises that the missionaries would come to no harm while proselytizing in their country), the nuns had to turn down seven Algonquin boarders, much to Marie’s great regret.\textsuperscript{101}

Marie’s growing friendship and understanding with Claude gave her great consolation during these difficult times. In return, Marie now freely shared with him her thoughts about how sad she was when she abandoned him and the spiritual difficulties she faced until she came to Canada and was absorbed in the hundreds of chores that occupied the nuns’ days. She discussed at length her sorrow at hearing Claude’s cries outside the convent walls, but she continued to maintain that she was able to stay strong because her mystical visions revealed that Claude would be safe.\textsuperscript{102} Marie was grateful not only that her visions had proven true and they both had been able to serve God but also, unexpectedly, that they had been able to create a new spiritual bond through their correspondence.\textsuperscript{103}

Claude was also pleased with how he had come to terms with his mother and had grown into the relationship as Marie’s spiritual brother. This came in no small part

\textsuperscript{100} Correspondance, 592; Word from New France, 218, 233-34, 265, 273.

\textsuperscript{101} Word from New France, 335.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 349-50.

\textsuperscript{103} Correspondance, 797-98.
because during these later years, he no longer doubted whether his mother cared more for
him or for her Indian students. It was obvious by the 1660s that Marie’s enthusiasm for
the French missions had declined somewhat. Though she did not doubt the righteousness
of the missions, she held conflicting opinions about their overall success, especially
regarding the influence of the Ursulines. Life in the convent with the Indian pupils was
no longer perfect, as it had seemed to her in her first decade in Canada; the great strides
of the early years were over. Most of the Indian girls at the convent in the mid-to-late
1660s were there against their will, such as the Iroquois youth, or were there, unhappy,
for a temporary spell. Marie described these later students as “birds of passage” who
“remain with us only until they are sad, a thing the Savage nature cannot suffer; the
moment they become sad, their parents take them away lest they die.” Many others did
not wait for their parents to retrieve them; they flew from the convent themselves, scaling
the palisade walls to go find their parents.104

Marie, looking back on nearly three decades of work, had come to a conclusion
about the legacy of the Ursulines: “It is a very difficult thing, not to say impossible, to
make the little Savages French or civilized. We have more experience of this than anyone
else, and we have observed that of a hundred that have passed through our hands we have
scarcely civilized one. We find docility and intelligence in these girls but, when we are
least expecting it, they clamber over our wall and go off to run with their kinsmen in the
woods, finding more to please them there than in all the amenities of our French
houses.”105 The nuns’ larger aspirations, those beyond catechizing the girls, had not been

104 Word from New France, 336.
105 Ibid., 341.
realized to great effect. She did not know to what end their efforts would all come because, Marie spoke frankly in another letter, “since the many years that we have been established in this country, we have been able to civilize only seven or eight, who had been Frenchified.”

But Marie was still satisfied by her life’s work because the Ursulines had helped many native girls prepare for the Christian faith. The labor that Marie performed toward this goal helped her find meaning in her role as a woman religious and led her to believe that her personal sacrifices were small prices to pay to be able to work directly in the missions and to touch the souls of her pupils. She found in Canada the confidence and strength to confront her son, come to terms with his abandonment, and craft a new bond with him, an accomplishment that probably would have gone unrealized had she remained in France. Time had healed their wounds with unexpected grace. When she asked Claude once more in 1669 while reflecting on her abandonment and the ensuing forty years (perhaps sensing that she was near the end of her life as she was seventy), “Have you not obtained a boon thereby that cannot be appraised?” This time she was confident that they both could finally answer in the affirmative.

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106 Correspondance, 828-29.

107 Word from New France, 349.
CONCLUSION

Marie de l’Incarnation was not a typical mother in either the Old World or New. Other women in Counter-Reformation France found themselves drawn as strongly as she was to the religious life, but few sacrificed more than Marie to take up the Church’s vows. In committing to the life of a nun she was trying to make sense out of her calling and the Counter-Reformation’s confusing message about motherhood, female piety, and women’s place in the Church. It would take more than ten years before Marie felt that she had made the right choice in becoming a nun, despite her personal agony and conflicting signs from the Church about the duties of women religious. Marie accomplished this inner peace by transferring her motherhood to her Indian students and forging a new relationship with her son.

Because they helped nurture the Indian boarders and gave them physical sustenance, Marie and the other nuns felt themselves mothers to these girls. The Christian rudiments and spiritual practices that Marie taught the girls in the missions’ early years cemented this maternal bond in her mind. In becoming a mother to her Indian students and preparing them for baptism, Marie felt a sense of purpose in her life and gained confidence in her decision to become a nun. For the first time she also felt physical motherhood to be pleasurable. Unlike her delight at bathing, clothing, and feeding Indian girls, Marie had not let herself find joy in doing these things for Claude because she knew from the time he was an infant that she would have to abandon him to
fulfill her vocation. For the same reason, she never lavished affection on her son nor permitted herself to feel close to him. Allowing herself to bond with the Indians in this way helped heal some of Marie’s wounds from abandoning her child. It was for these New World children, whom she imagined needed her far more than her own child, that she had made such a great sacrifice in leaving France and the opportunities for Claude to see and speak to her like he did at the convent in Tours.

Marie did not hesitate to inform Claude that he shared his mother with her Indian children. In the early years of their correspondence, Marie would use this line to admonish Claude when he pressed her to explain his abandonment; she would argue that the Indians needed her more than he did and that her new children were models of piety that he would do well to emulate. Although Marie tried to create a new relationship with Claude in which the focus would be on their role as sister and brother religious, Claude was not receptive to losing his identity as his mother’s son and desired for her to discuss at length her decision to abandon him. Only after Marie found the confidence to write her spiritual autobiography in 1654 could they put the abandonment behind them and focus upon the spiritual beliefs and practices that they shared.

Marie had been trying to pen a cathartic account in 1650 when fire engulfed the convent, but she left the papers to burn rather than have them fall into anyone but Claude’s hands. Although she had spent much time in writing them and knew that allowing them to be destroyed would prolong her reconciliation with her son, she was not discouraged. It was not the only thing she had relinquished to the fire of religious life – she made many sacrifices in choosing her path in life. From the ashes she would construct a life that gave her meaning and fulfillment in a narrow window of time where
women religious could act as apostles in the New World. And though after this fire (as with her earlier sacrifices) Claude would not immediately understand Marie’s reasoning, over time he would come to acknowledge his mother’s choices and accept being her spiritual son.


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