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A ‘divine mission’ to sanctify the laity: French mystic laywomen and the lay apostolate before Vatican II

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the ‘divine origins’ and aims of three associations promoting the apostolate of the laity in nineteenth and early twentieth-century France: the Association de prière et de pénitence; the Société des amis des pauvres; and the Foyers de charité. The founders were three mystic laywomen, Édith Royer, Thérèse Durnerin and Marthe Robin, respectively, who promoted apostolates of penance, catechesis and retreat. The article situates their associations within the history of the lay apostolate and discusses the two elements that best characterized them: the alleged ‘divine mission’ that inspired the founders and their aim to sanctify the laity. While encouraging the laity to achieve holiness in worldly life, they contributed to current Catholic concerns about lay sanctity and the lay apostolate advanced by Vatican II.

Introduction
The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) focused on the role of the laity in the mission of the Church, underlying the universal call to holiness. This call can be answered through the exercise of a lay apostolate.1 Traditionally, lay apostolate associations had taken the form of confraternities.2 With the rise of Catholic romanticism in the early nineteenth century, the aristocratic elite founded charity groups to counteract the secular social initiatives arising from the Enlightenment. Scholars dealing with the lay apostolate after the French Revolution have focused on well-known initiatives, such as the Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul3 and the Association catholique de la jeunesse française.4 They have also explored the emergence of the clerically driven movement known as Catholic Action during the early twentieth century, which came to monopolize the lay apostolate, giving rise to organizations such as the Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne.5 Catholic women’s associations also engaged in the lay apostolate, in particular regarding the areas that concerned them the most, such as female education and motherhood.6

Coinciding with the charismatic renewal of the late 1960s, new approaches to the lay apostolate were discussed during Vatican II.7 Many documents emerging from this Council, such as the Lumen gentium and the Apostolicam actuositatem, dealt with this
subject. Vatican II aimed to restore the spirit of communion and personal calling that characterized early Christianity. According to this view, engagement in the lay apostolate is not necessarily delegated by the ecclesiastical hierarchy: it is an individual’s response to God’s calling to engage in the Church’s mission. According to Vatican II, the priesthood or the taking of the veil were no longer the only ‘true Catholic’ vocations, as the laity were given the same rights and duties with respect to holiness as the Church hierarchy. Among other things, Vatican II hoped to provide the laity with ways to achieve sanctity within worldly life and to better integrate the flourishing number of Christian lay associations that had been founded over the preceding century.

Taking into account this evolution in the lay apostolate, this article explores the ‘divine origins’ and aims of three associations promoting the apostolate of the laity in nineteenth and early twentieth-century France (and elsewhere, after their international expansion). These were the Association de prière et de pénitence, founded in 1881 by Édith Royer; the Société des amis des pauvres, founded in 1890 by Thérèse Durnerin; and the Foyers de charité, founded in 1936 by Marthe Robin. The three founders were Catholic mystic laywomen, who encouraged the laity to pursue holiness in their daily life through the exercise of different apostolates: of penance, catechesis and retreat, respectively. Unlike other associations founded by Catholic women at the time, the aims and scope of the associations established by Royer, Durnerin and Robin concerned all the faithful and were not particularly related to their being female. As I hope to show, they were already focused on central elements of Vatican II, especially concerning the laity and their sanctification.

Unlike Robin’s Foyers de charité, the associations of Royer and Durnerin are absent from the history of the lay apostolate; however, they all belong to this history, despite their idiosyncrasies. What distinguishes these associations is that the founders allegedly received the mission from God. In this vein, Royer, Durnerin and Robin presented their associations as ‘supernatural work’, taking the form that the Lord had desired. The alleged ‘divine origin’ of their associations allowed them to be organized in new and unconventional ways; for example, the groups were not separated according to gender and they fostered horizontal leadership. Although some of their aims and activities bear resemblance to those of contemporary lay movements, their emphasis on the Christian vocation of the laity and its duty to pursue holiness is far more prominent. In their work, the social impact of the apostolate cannot be separated from this quest for sanctification, which appears to be the first and most important goal. In this vein, they clearly anticipated future concerns of the Catholic Church after Vatican II.

It is not surprising that Royer, Durnerin and Robin, originally three ‘powerless’ laywomen, founded their associations following an alleged divine mandate. In the patriarchal structure of the Roman Catholic Church, women have historically gained authority due to their capacity for mystical union and visions, rather than from holding office. According to feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray, mysticism was the sole domain in Western culture in which women were able to fully develop their own subjectivity. It is indeed true that mysticism has historically bestowed on women some sort of spiritual autonomy and leadership. Mystic women (religious and lay) have inspired new devotions and started their own associations. On a general note, it should be pointed out that the experience of the supernatural outside the Catholic Church has had similar effects on women. For example, histories of spiritualism and spiritism have shown that mediumship was an empowering tool for women. In addition to highlighting the mystical empowerment of Royer, Durnerin and Robin, this article emphasizes their lay status.
The Catholic Church gave laywomen a central role in combating secularization following the French Revolution. Acting as pious wives and mothers, they were asked to convert their husbands and children and safeguard the value of the Christian family. Some of these women were mystics who have since been canonized, such as the ‘holy mothers’ Anna Maria Taigi and Elisabetta Canori Mora. However, as Paula Kane rightly argued, the mystic laywomen of modernity were usually single and did not fit the Catholic ideal of lay femininity broadly represented by the devout housewife. Of the three women discussed here, only Royer was married (against her will) and had children.

In France and elsewhere in Europe, mystic laywomen such as Royer, Durnerin and Robin represented the expiatory victim spirituality that was dominant at the time, encompassing Catholic doctrines such as vicarious suffering, the *imitatio Christi* and the reparation of the Sacred Heart. Without isolating themselves from worldly life, these mystics embraced their role as ‘victim souls’ and suffered voluntarily – through illness, penance and the pain of the Holy Wounds – to contribute to Christ’s reparatory mission and re-Christianize the nation. In his book, *Mystique et féminité*, Jacques Maître documented more than 30 cases of mystic laywomen incarnating this profile in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century France. Of those, only five became founders of a religious organization, including Royer, Durnerin and Robin, whose aim was to sanctify the laity, while the other two mystics founded communities of religious sisters.

The following presents the three associations they initiated, examining the ‘divine mission’ that was allegedly behind their founding, and describing the different kinds of apostolate vocation (of penance, catechesis and retreat) proposed to the laity for their sanctification. A history of these associations allows us to trace the evolution of the lay apostolate during modernity: from the traditional confraternities, the new charity societies and Catholic Action, to the charismatic communities founded after Vatican II. As I hope to show, central elements addressed by the Second Council, such as ways to pursue holiness in daily life, are already present in their initiatives (Figure 1).

The apostolate of penance: Édith Royer

Lay apostolates have existed since early Christianity, usually organized under the form of confraternities. Their focus was on charity, devotion and the promotion of pious values. In the Middle Ages, the foundation of third orders, for which the members did not take vows (such as the Franciscan tertiaries), offered yet another form of religious engagement for the laity. Many tertiaries took part in confraternities, which were widely spread during the era. The community spirit of these organizations declined with their ecclesiastical institutionalization after the Council of Trent, when they were brought under the control of bishops. Following the French Revolution, the decree of 18 August 1792 abolished confraternities and congregations, confiscating and selling their premises. With its re-establishment during the Bourbon Restoration, the clergy favoured those who worked under the sign of the Sacred Heart because they incarnated the need to expiate the anti-Catholic actions perpetrated after the Revolution. This spirit of reparation was later reinforced with events such as the Paris Commune, which probably influenced the ‘divine mission’ received by Édith Royer (1841–1924) – née Challan-Belval and known as Madame Royer.

In the 1870s, coinciding with the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the start of the anti-clerical Third Republic, the Lord supposedly transmitted the rules of a new association to Royer: the Association de prière et de pénitence (Association of Prayer and Penance). Royer’s father had been a student at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. He and his wife had five children: two boys and three girls. At the age of six, Édith was already attracted to the religious life and made a vow of chastity. However, when she was nineteen, she received a marriage proposal from Charles Royer, a jurist, and her parents insisted she abandon her vow and marry him. They took her to a priest, who assessed her and proclaimed that she had not been called by God. In 1863, she gave birth to a girl named Louise and had three more daughters over the coming years. Her husband died in 1883, and she also suffered the death of two daughters in the early twentieth century. Her family life was frequently affected by her repressed religious vocation and her mystical experiences. As she felt guilty for marrying and betraying her vow, Royer began to practise penance to make reparation for her ‘sin’. Her mortification included fasting, depriving herself of sleep and wearing a belt with nails. Sometimes she felt strangely ill, from which she was allegedly only able to recover through disciplinary penitence. Madame Royer’s devotees considered her to be a ‘victim soul’ for the Lord. Jesus allegedly rewarded her with revelations from the Sacred Heart and with the stigmata – the wounds remained invisible, but the pain never abandoned her. In 1920, at 80 years of age, she was admitted to the convent of the Bernardines in Saint-Rémy, founded on one of her properties. However, before taking her vows she broke her femur. Being too old to hope for a cure, she decided not to join the convent and become a burden, and it is said that she suffered from great pain until her death in 1924.

In her visions, Royer saw Jesus standing on a rock, with his arms spread out and his radiant heart in the middle of his chest. This image has become part of the Sacred Heart devotion. Initially, the revelations were rather vague, but they began to become more concrete around 1875, when the construction of the basilica of the Sacred Heart started. At that time, Royer also witnessed the apparition of Marguerite-Marie Alacoque, who allegedly gave her more information about the association. The mission of the associates would be to work for the triumph of the Church and repair the sins against religion.
through the practice of penance that characterized Royer’s mysticism. According to the revelations, the association would address the clergy and the religious communities, as well as the laity, including children and the sick, but would require different levels of engagement with respect to the embracing of penance. Royer feared that an emphasis on the apostolate of penance would frighten the laity; however, the Lord allegedly reassured her that the laity did not need to practise extreme mortifications such as fasting. For example, children might forego their dessert rather than the whole meal, thus adapting the degree of self-punishment to daily life.\(^{24}\)

The Bishop of Dijon believed in Royer’s revelations and established an ecclesiastical inquiry in 1880, which lasted six months. The report approved the revelations and concluded that there was an accord between Royer’s mysticism and her divine mission, which they linked to the work of Marguerite-Marie Alacoque.\(^{25}\) The Association de prière et de pénitence thus obtained the canonical status of a confraternity. In 1881, following the approval of Pope Leo XIII, the main office was located in the basilica of the Sacred Heart in Montmartre. At that time, the association had 120,000 adherents. The only mandatory rule for members was to devote a day to penance, either once a week, once every two weeks or once a month. ‘On this day’, the rules stipulate, ‘the Associates impose upon themselves, to the extent that their health, position and obedience will allow them, some constructive penances, and they will offer their suffering, work and ordeals especially to the Heart of Jesus’.\(^{26}\)

The Archbishop of Paris approved the rules in 1894 and also became a member, choosing Wednesday as his day of penitence. In the same year, the Holy See elevated the association to the canonical status of ‘Universal Archconfraternity’, having achieved 600,000 members worldwide (today there are more than one million). In 1899, Leo XIII consecrated every human being to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which certainly favoured the expansion of Royer’s association.\(^{27}\) At the beginning of the twentieth century, it became especially popular in Canada, mainly in Québec, where an Assumptionist nun had imported the apostolate of penance, after having corresponded with Madame Royer for several years.\(^{28}\)

Several publications, distributed by the commission that examined Royer’s revelations, also contributed to the spread of the movement. Leaflets containing the aims and rules of the Association were included in journals such as La Semaine religieuse. They insisted that what distinguished the association from other initiatives promoting the apostolate of penance was that ‘it has been requested and organized by the Lord himself’, who had chosen a ‘saintly soul’ for his mission, turning her into a ‘confidant of the Sacred Heart’.\(^{29}\) The name of Édith Royer was not revealed, in compliance with the request of the Bishop of Dijon, who attempted to avoid religious enthusiasm for a living person. It thus appears that the majority of the adherents only knew about the founder 20 years after her death, when the first biographies appeared in the mid-1940s.\(^{30}\)

In comparison to the associations that will be examined below, Royer’s foundation may appear less unconventional and innovative, especially for taking the traditional form of a confraternity – the form chosen by the Church, rather than Royer. As we will see, although confraternities continued to be popular in the nineteenth century, the laity involved in them did not achieve the level of independence and self-initiative found in the work of Durnerin and Robin. Indeed, confraternities were very much linked to the parishes and dioceses that approved them and hosted their offices, sometimes becoming a mere
branch of the religious congregation. As shown above, the Association de prière et de pénitence was in many ways promoted and controlled by the clergy, while Royer’s power over it relied on the divine revelations she received. What was original about the revelations was that many exclusively addressed the laity, encouraging them to engage in the apostolate of penance to work for their sanctification (see the section ‘Sanctifying the laity before Vatican II’). It was through these ‘divine messages’ that Royer was able to alleviate Catholic concerns about the laity at the time.

The apostolate of catechesis: Thérèse Durnerin

Along with confraternities, new groups of lay apostolates were born following the romantic Catholic revival of the early nineteenth century. Their aim was to create ‘Catholic citizens’ and evangelize society by means of charitable activities, thereby counterbalancing philanthropy and other kinds of secular social action arising from the Enlightenment. This was the case for the renowned Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul, which today has almost one million adherents worldwide. The Blessed Frédéric Ozanam founded this originally all-male charitable society in 1833 with a group of fellow students from the Sorbonne. They wanted to show that the Catholic faith still appealed to young men, especially within the elite. Their charitable activities consisted of house visits in deprived Parisian neighbourhoods and the Île-de-France countryside. In Europe, the founding of this society was followed by other youth associations devoted to Christian service, such as the YMCA (London, 1844). These groups only multiplied after the revolutions of 1848. Recognizing the popularity of these movements, the Catholic Church attempted to ensure they were close allies. Pope Leo XIII understood the willingness of the laity to contribute to the Church mission, and in the Sapientiae Christianae (1890) he insisted that the laity should propagate Christian teachings according to their own means – for example, by promoting the catechism or helping to empower those who favoured Catholicism.

In the same year that Leo XIII made this claim, Thérèse Durnerin (1848–1905), from Paris, founded the Société des amis des pauvres (Society of Friends of the Poor), an apostolic lay society that aimed to convert poor and working-class families to Catholicism through the catechism. After the death of her father, a physician, in 1868, she started suffering from health problems that forced her to live in seclusion for a decade. During the 1870s, she lived through famine and the bombardment of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War, and she had also witnessed the killing of clergymen during the Paris Commune. Due to such traumatic experiences, she became an expiatory ‘victim soul’ for the sins of France. She joined the Third Order of Saint Francis and started developing an interest in popular stigmatized laywomen in France. In 1890, she visited Marie-Julie Jahenny (1850–1941) from La Fraudais and two years later, after some insistence, she met Marie-Louise Nerbollier (1859–1908) in Diémoz. She witnessed the ‘Friday agonies’ of these stigmatics with other curious people and devotees. Durnerin would repeat these visits over the years, in combination with her pilgrimages to Marian apparition sites such as Lourdes and Tilly. Around 1894, she finally received the stigmata, as promised by Jesus. However, the wounds were invisible, and her stigmatization remained unknown to almost everyone. In relation to her mysticism, she only became publicly renowned for allegedly writing the booklet, L’Hostie et le prêtre (The Host and the Priest), in one night in 1888 ‘while in ecstasy’, aiming to promote the devotion of the
Eucharist. At the time, the Eucharist movement was extremely popular and encouraged frequent communion among the laity. The booklet would have five editions, with approximately 200,000 copies sold around the world. Its popularity was such that even Thérèse of Lisieux made her novices recite one of Durnerin’s Eucharistic prayers.37

Shortly before the founding of the Société des amis des pauvres, Durnerin allegedly received ‘divine revelations’ urging her to devote herself to ‘the association’; although, she ignored what form this supposed association would take. At the time that she received the revelations, she had been bedridden for a decade due to health problems. However, during Pentecost in 1890, the Lord allegedly told her to abandon her seclusion and, with the help of her sister, to receive the sacraments at the church. From that moment, she felt ‘resurrected’ and understood that the aim of the new association would be to catechize the poor. Having recovered from her ailments, Durnerin convinced other women to join her. Wearing the ‘lay habit’, they began to visit ‘irreligious’ working-class families in their homes and instruct their children in the catechism, believing that by converting the children they might also convert the parents. They extended the catechism to other sites in Paris, such as asylums and the Petite Roquette, a boys’ prison.38 Soon, the husbands of the first adherents also began to collaborate in the Society. In 1891, after a year of success, Durnerin described her association in a letter to her spiritual father:

It is supernatural work, with a particular form chosen by the Lord, with new means not yet practised […] The small Société des Amis des pauvres consists of men and women who catechize the poor, the ignorant, and especially those who are lost […] Our goal is to insinuate ourselves among the people and to conceal, under our secular garments, an apostle’s soul that can enlighten the corrupted multitude.39

Although she admitted to having drawn inspiration from her father and brother, who were members of the Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul, Durnerin insisted her foundation was a work of God. In 1895, she drafted a Constitution for the Society, which the Archbishop of Paris, Guillaume Dubois, approved in 1921. Subsequently, the Society distinguished between three groups of adherents: (1) ‘the truly religious souls under the laic garment’, named ‘servants of Jesus’, who instructed the poor and the working class in the catechism; (2) those people (religious and lay) who helped the Society in other ways – for example, through donations; and (3) the ‘assistants’ of the servants of Jesus, who collaborated through contemplative practices, such as prayer and penance.40

The ‘servants of Jesus’ did not pay a membership fee and met every two weeks to discuss apostolic activities. Among other things, Durnerin encouraged them to wait outside secular schools and instruct children in the catechism. She also gave them a manual she had written to help them catechize ‘ordinary’ people. They devoted themselves to the Society’s mission according to the time they could afford and their disposition. For example, those who had full-time jobs could only teach the catechism on Sundays, when working-class families were more likely to be available. In addition to the ‘servants of Jesus’, Durnerin ensured the collaboration of religious communities and churches in Paris, who granted use of their premises for the ‘evangelization centres’ of the Society. In 1896, around 2,000 poor and working-class families attended the centres to prepare their catechism or for baptism. Within three years, the Society confirmed it had baptized 674 people (including 34 Protestants and 2 Muslims), fostered dozens of first communions, confirmations and extreme unctions, and redressed 1,000 ‘illegitimate unions’ through Catholic marriage.41
Durnerin devoted herself to the Society until her death in 1905, by which time she already had a reputation for sanctity, with several miracles attributed to her intercession. In France, 1905 is renowned for the passage of the law concerning the separation of Church and State. This event led the clergy to attach even more importance to the role of the laity in the Christian mission. Continuing Leo XIII’s work, Pope Pius X encouraged the creation of Catholic lay groups to fight the ‘new enemies’ of religion; namely, communism, anarchism and national-socialism. He was behind the organization of the Catholic Action movement, a ‘religious army’ of lay apostles who, acting under the banner ‘to restore all things in Christ’, and with the guidance of experienced priests, including bishops, were called on to re-Christianize society – especially the working class, where it was believed that the above-mentioned ‘enemies’ were more prominent.

After Durnerin’s death, clergymen such as Henri-Marie Hamez, an admirer, promoted the expansion of the Société des amis des pauvres to other French towns, as well as into Belgium, and Brussels in particular. However, once the clergy had taken control of the Society it was dispossessed of its original horizontal and lay leadership. The clergy’s approach was more hierarchical and drew inspiration from the then booming Catholic Action movement. If during Durnerin’s lifetime the adherents discussed their apostolic activities and had a laywoman as a leader, after Durnerin’s passing, the ‘servants of Jesus’ were assigned a spiritual director (a priest), who led the reunions and gave them lessons on religion before they began to catechize the poor. In France, this evolution coincided with the interest of Catholic Action in the matters of Catechism and evangelization and the training of the lay, central to Durnerin’s foundation. A propaganda booklet produced by the Society dating from 1932 presented Durnerin as a pioneer of the movement: ‘Can we not say that Thérèse was also a precursor of Catholic Action, in its tendencies and new form?’ Perhaps because it lost part of its roots, there is now no trace of the Société des amis des pauvres.

The apostolate of retreat: Marthe Robin

The 1930s were the heyday of Catholic Action. Organized under the form of gendered youth and adult groups, it came to monopolize past and present forms of the lay apostolate. In France, the Vicar General of Grenoble, Émile Guerry, contributed to defining the nature of Catholic Action in his book, L’Action catholique, textes pontifiés (1936), which was a great success. In it he described Catholic Action as a social apostolate, as defined by Pius X, but also as a spiritual apostolate aiming to sanctify oneself and others. Guerry also discussed the autonomy of the laity, who, under the guidance of the clergy could become more conscious of their religious identity, as well as their contribution to the Church’s mission. For Guerry, engagement in this mission represented a form of emancipation for the laity. The most prominent group of Catholic Action in France was the Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne, a branch of the Association catholique de la jeunesse française, founded in 1886 by a French Legitimist and acting under the motto, ‘Piety-study-action’. These movements pleased the Vatican in their fostering of public involvement in the re-establishment of religious practices in politics and education. Women also took part in the movement. On the French side, we find groups such as the Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne féminine and the Ligue patrotique des françaises, founded in 1902 as a female branch of the political party Action libérale populaire. Its members were
aristocratic women who defended gender differences; for example, they were opposed to women’s right to vote and argued that a woman’s place was in the home, which they considered the main site of their apostolate. In this vein, they followed the mission that the Catholic Church accorded to laywomen after the French Revolution, when they were called on to act as pious mothers to preserve the Christian family. 

When, in 1933, Marthe Robin (1902–1981) received the ‘divine mission’ to found an association named Foyers de charité, in which men and women would undertake spiritual retreats, nothing indicated that her ‘vision’ would anticipate the future of the lay apostolate outside Catholic Action. Born in the small village of Châteauneuf-de-Galaure (Drôme), Robin never left the family farmhouse in which she had been raised. At the age of 16, she became very ill, and unexplained ailments forced her to remain in bed. Paralysis, anorexia, insomnia and comatose episodes succeeded one another. It is said that Robin remained bedridden for 50 years without eating or sleeping. In 1925, the Virgin and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux allegedly communicated her expiatory mission in atonement for the sins of humankind. In October 1930, stigmata appeared on her flesh for the first time. From then on, she relived the Passion every Thursday evening and Friday morning. In 1948, most of the Holy Wounds became invisible, and the crown of thorns and tears of blood became apparent from time to time. Due to these prodigious events, thousands of people from France and abroad came to meet her. The visitors were a mix of pious believers who worshiped her as a ‘living saint’, and sceptics attempting to debunk the supernatural by proving fraud or providing a medical diagnosis, usually of hysteria. As the Virgin had allegedly told her, Robin’s suffering increased at the end of her life and she could barely talk or receive any visitors. After her death on 6 February 1981, her reputation for sanctity continued to grow. Hundreds of pilgrims still continue to visit her house every year, which today is a living museum.

The revelations Robin received after 1933 were transcribed and constituted the founding document of the Foyers de charité. In them, the Lord allegedly described to Robin how he envisioned the retreat houses or foyers:

I want it to be a radiant home of light, charity and love – the exclusive centre of great spiritual resurrection, after the material defeat of the people and their satanic errors – the invigorating oasis for souls of good will, for anxious and discouraged souls, for hardened and sceptical sinners... the house of my Heart open to all.

According to the revelations, the Foyers de charité would especially address the Catholic laity living and working in the worldly life, including adolescents and children. They would undertake five-day spiritual retreats at the foyers, where they would share their material possessions and engage in silent prayer with the help of a preacher named ‘the Father’ of the foyer. Initially, only priests exercised this function. The first was Father Finet, who believed in Robin’s mission and helped establish the society in 1936. Finet considered that the preacher’s aim was to offer a kind of ‘elementary theology class’ to the laity, which was of a superior level than the catechism, and within the format of the spiritual retreat. Until 1981, the year of Robin’s death, he preached at an average of nine to twelve retreats each year. Today, laypeople can also preach and
become ‘the Father’ of a foyer, which reaffirms the importance given to the laity in the Church’s mission.59

The first retreat house of the Foyers de charité was in a rudimentary building (a remodelled school) in Robin’s village. It became especially popular during the German occupation, when it offered spiritual and moral relief to fugitive families. Initially, the retreats were divided according to gender, with husbands and wives sleeping in different rooms. However, within a short time, the retreats allowed the genders to mix. Moreover, with the expansion of the building of the first foyer between 1940 and 1948, Robin planned to unite married couples in the same bed to celebrate the ‘sacrament of marriage’ – a decision that some priests thought was inspired by the devil.60 The mistrust of some clergymen, who doubted that men, women and priests should share the same roof, obliged Father Finet to clarify the mission of the Foyers de charité, explaining that it was a group of laypeople who, under the guidance of a priest, followed the example of the first Christians and united in a community of fraternal love and charity, sharing their spiritual, intellectual and material possessions. In this way, they were able to renew their baptism and confirmation and bring Christian values to the world.61

The Foyers de charité anticipated current forms of the lay apostolate which, in France, are represented by the ‘communautés nouvelles’. These communities (sometimes called ‘micro-Christianities’) emerged following the Catholic charismatic renewal of the late 1960s, which finds its origins in Protestant charismatic movements such as Pentecostalism.62 Community life is very important in these groups, while individual and autonomous apostolate is encouraged. Coinciding with the charismatic renewal, the Foyers de charité expanded internationally due to the initiatives of lay and religious missionaries, with the number of retreat houses worldwide reaching 76.63 Although Vatican II welcomed and encouraged the charismatic renewal, the French episcopate remained a supporter of the Catholic Action and was less enthusiastic. According to Olivier Landron, until the 1980s, the relationship between groups such as the Foyers de charité and Catholic Action were limited and conflictual. The Catholic Action movement accused charismatic communities of withdrawing in prayer and avoiding engagement in political and social issues.64

Because the Foyers de charité were ‘new’, it was a long time before they were attributed canonical status. Initially, they were considered a ‘secular institution’, which Robin rejected. Things began to change after Vatican II, with the creation of the Pontifical Council of the Laity to promote the lay apostolate. The appeal for canonical status also benefited from the 1983 Code of Canon Law. In 1986, five years after Robin’s death, the Catholic Church officially acknowledged the Foyers de charité as an ‘Association of the faithful’ promoting Christian teachings.65

Sanctifying the laity before Vatican II

One concern advanced by Vatican II regarded the way to achieve sanctity in worldly life. The Lumen gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, discusses the universal call to holiness and the role of the laity in ‘the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven’.66 Two years after Vatican II, Pope Paul VI, speaking to the lay community at a conference, announced: ‘you are not hermits who have withdrawn from the world in order to devote yourselves to God. It is in the world and in its activity that you must
sanctify yourselves’. The lay apostolate thus appears as a path to holiness, as described in the *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity). This decree aimed to guide the laity in their Christian service, especially regarding evangelization and sanctification.

The associations founded by Robin, Durnerin and Royer placed an emphasis on the universal duty and right to holiness. This concern is also found in other movements of the lay apostolate that defended the transformative role of their activities in the re-Christianization of society, such as Catholic Action or charity-oriented groups. Historically, a religious model based on monastic ideals dominated canonization. Following this model, if the laity wanted to pursue holiness, they had to isolate themselves from the world. Lay saints are in a clear minority, with the majority of them being martyrs from the early Christian era. Hence the need, advanced by Vatican II, to find models of lay sanctity in contemporary and worldly life. It is no coincidence that Royer, Durnerin and Robin were concerned with sanctifying the laity. After all, they had to create opportunities for themselves. Having experienced the union with God as laypeople, they felt more connected to the Christian virtues of everyday life and hoped to show that – charismata notwithstanding – holiness may also take a more ordinary path.

In the above-mentioned associations, the goal of sanctifying oneself was explicitly expressed in the rules and promotional leaflets. Pursuing holiness was presented as a personal realization that would above all be achieved from within. The retreats at the Foyers de charité aimed to stimulate an ‘internal transformation’, while the apostolate of penance of the Association de prière et de pénitence required ‘interior’ rather than ‘exterior’ work. Even in Durnerin’s society, which was more action-oriented than the other two, sanctification was deemed to be an ‘internal affair’. According to the rules of the Société des amis des pauvres (written in 1895), the first goal is: ‘To sanctify its active members [the lay ‘servants of Jesus’], intensifying their interior life, as a necessary condition for their apostolate to be truly fruitful.’ In other words, without pursuing holiness ‘internally’, one could not provide good Christian service. This idea is also present in the rules of Royer’s association (approved in 1894), where it is argued that if the laity is able to practise penance ‘discreetly’, daily life will become ‘an abundant source of holiness and, among those around us, the most effective apostolate’. Thus, the exercise of the lay apostolate cannot be separated from the personal pursuit of holiness, which is the main goal.

As described above, this goal could be achieved through contemplative spiritual practices such as penance and retreats, as well as charity, the promotion of the catechesis and other transformative activities. Robin, Royer and Durnerin ensured that those lay men and women exercising the proposed apostolate were aware that they were pursuing holiness. For example, on joining Royer’s association, one had to acknowledge that ‘penance is one of the most important remedies proposed by God for our sanctification’. Likewise, it is stated that people should come to the Foyers de charité ‘to be edified, to learn and to sanctify oneself’. Father Finet’s preaching especially reflected on the saintly vocation of the apostles, which was said to ‘concern everyone’, and was the way to answer God’s calling in daily life.

In each foundation, the means of sanctification were adapted to the constraints faced by the laity. As mentioned above, in Royer’s association, penance was adapted to the status and physical conditions of each member, who might embrace penance only once a
month. Concerning this mandatory day of penance, the rules of the Association de prière et de pénitence distinguished between priests and other Church members, as well as between adults and children. While, according to Royer’s revelations, it was expected that the clergy and the religious communities would embrace penitence more strenuously, the laity were asked to at least learn to ‘love’ penance and forego special treats. According to the rules, family and professional life provided ‘the occasion for a multitude of daily sacrifices’. In return, the Lord would allegedly not only grant the laity ‘spiritual graces’ but also ‘earthly’ blessings, such as peace and unity in the family.

Similarly, in the Société des amis des pauvres, the lay ‘servants of Jesus’ did not take vows. However, it was understood that in order to sanctify themselves they would pursue as much as possible the virtues linked to Christian vows. In 1895, Durnerin attempted to organize a retreat with the first 14 adherents, for the symbolic consecration of the members, but the majority were unable to leave their jobs and family duties. As a consequence, Durnerin only asked them to devote an hour a day to the adoration of the Sacred Sacrament, and to seclude themselves more than usual for one week. Durnerin thus demonstrated that she understood the challenges the laity faced in their quest for holiness.

Finally, the Foyers de charité helped the laity to listen to ‘God’s personal calling’. Robin had a prominent role in this, with those participating in the retreat at Châteauneuf able to visit her in her bedroom and ask for advice. Her interlocutors allegedly benefited from her gift of divination and cardiognosis (‘knowledge of the heart’). Many people deemed Robin’s advice ‘prophetic’ and felt edified in her presence. Visits always concluded with a joint prayer. Robin’s advice and Father Finet’s preaching endeavoured to awaken the vocation of the laity and help them find their place within the Church’s mission. In this vein, the foyers contributed to the idea emphasized at Vatican II that there is a ‘common calling’ and that the laity is responsible and able to answer it in their daily apostolate.

In addition to offering adapted means of sanctification to the laity, Royer, Durnerin and Robin functioned as models of lay sanctity in the eyes of their peers – from the perspective of the Church, Robin was the only one of the three with an open cause for canonization, and she was declared Venerable in 2014. To become models of lay sanctity, they exercised the apostolate their associations promoted. Royer, a wife and mother of four children, embraced penance in her daily life and thus provided other lay men and women with an example of how to exercise this kind of apostolate outside convent walls. Likewise, Durnerin was just another ‘servant of Jesus’ working alongside other Society members to catechize the poor, seeking to sanctify herself within worldly life. In this way, all three made clear that their mysticism and divine gifts were secondary to pursuing holiness. Even Robin, who was mainly regarded as a saint for her reliving of the Passion, offered a model of lay sanctity independent of her charismata.

The priests and theologians who supported the Foyers de charité took great care to emphasize this activity. According to Bernard Peyrous, Robin ‘invites us not to participate in her mystical states but to follow her in her love of Jesus’. For Raymond Peyret, Robin was a model of holiness because ‘she does not look for God in the clouds. She finds Him through serving others’. According to Jacques Pagnoux, the Foyers de charité showed the faithful ‘the extraordinary grace of our baptism, the importance of ecclesial communion, the greatness and exigency of community life’. In his words, ‘Marthe opened this way of holiness to us’.
Conclusions

Two elements stand out in the initiatives of Royer, Durnerin and Robin: the alleged ‘divine mission’ that inspired them and their aim to sanctify the laity. These two elements are closely linked to the dual status of the founders as mystics and laywomen. In the Roman Catholic Church, preaching and clerical training are reserved for men. To achieve a status of religious importance, women (religious and lay) must follow less orthodox paths. Mysticisms have empowered women in ways that ecclesiastical authorities have rarely been able to restrain. The ‘divine revelations’ that Royer, Durnerin and Robin received were determinant in the founding of their associations. The three women insisted that they were only the messengers and executers of ‘God’s will’. With the exception of Durnerin, an ecclesiastical and medical commission examined both Royer (in 1880–1881) and Robin (in 1942) following their revelations. In both cases, these commissions acknowledged the women’s mystical experiences and approved their mission.85

It is remarkable that Robin and Royer’s foundations still exist today, while Durnerin’s persisted for 30 years after her death. In addition, all of them expanded internationally, attracting thousands of people – more than one million in the case of the Association de prière et de pénitence. Although these women do not appear to have envisaged their international success, their ‘divine mission’ addressed all the faithful and, in this vein, was not restricted by nationality, gender or social status. This suggests that they well understood the problems Catholicism faced in their time and beyond France, and found an innovative way to engage both priests and the laity in the Church’s mission. In this regard, it would be interesting to study the adaptation of the foundations abroad, especially in the case of Robin and Royer, where the associations expanded outside Europe.86

Given their status as laywomen, it is probable that none of the three associations would have existed as we know them if they had not been the alleged work of God. This aspect was a great facilitator, allowing their initiatives to obtain certain privileges and foster unconventional forms of organization; for example, this assisted the Association de prière et de pénitence in establishing its head office in the basilica of the Sacred Heart; it encouraged horizontal leadership and mixed gender groups in the Société des amis des pauvres; and it allowed married couples to share the same bed and live under the same roof as a priest in the retreat houses of the Foyers de charité. While the majority of works initiated by Catholic laywomen at the time focused on realms associated with their gender (i.e. family and female education),87 the associations founded by Royer, Durnerin and Robin, as ‘divine missions’ that transcended gender differences, were not specifically related to their female condition.

If womanhood did not play a significant role in defining the aims and scope of their work, their lay status certainly did. Just as Royer, Durnerin and Robin acted autonomously to sanctify themselves in their daily life, they encouraged the laity to do the same. They all became role models for the apostolate they promoted. Royer was extremely disciplined in her embrace of penance; Durnerin’s involvement in catechizing the poor continued until her death; and Robin lived in a permanent retreat in her bedroom. In this way, they were able to offer models of lay sanctity distinct from their mysticism, and to demonstrate that holiness is a right and duty that concerns everyone. Thus, they anticipated the debates and outcomes of Vatican II, where an autonomous lay apostolate and a universal call to holiness became fundamental issues.
Notes


24. The ecclesiastical report concerning Madame Royer’s revelations can be found in the Archives of the diocese of Dijon, ‘Rapport de Madame Royer à Mgr Le Nordez, évêque de Dijon, mai 1899’. A transcribed copy of this report, among others, can be found in: Despiney, Madame Royer, 75–91.

35. On Jahenny see, e.g. Andrea Graus, ‘A Visit to Remember: Stigmata and Celebrity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century’, *Cultural and Social History* 14, no. 1 (2017): 55–72. Archival material on these stigmatics can be found in: Archives Historiques du Diocèse de Nantes, Fonds Marie-Julie Jahenny, 5F2; and Archives Diocésaines de Lyon, dossier Marie-Louise Nerbollier, I.1911.
36. Henri-Marie Hamez. *Une hostie vivante. Thérèse Durnerin, fondatrice de la Société des Amis des Pauvres (1848–1905)* (Bar-le-Duc: Impr. Saint-Paul, 1908), 420–45. In his books, Father Hamez cites the letters by Durnerin, but without giving any archival reference. I assume the letters were in his possession, as he was a friend of the founder, thereby we can circumvent the question of whether they were deposited in an archive.
39. Ibid., 59–69.
40. Ibid., 108–10.
47. *La Société des Amis des Pauvres*, 11.


57. There is archival material on Marthe Robin in the diocese of Valence, collected by her family and the Foyers de charité and included in the dossier for her cause for canonization. The dossier is being examined in Rome and the diocese does not want to share the material while the cause is open.

58. Clément, Pour entrer chez Marthe, 278.


61. Ibid., 252.


63. Today, Africa has the highest number of Foyers (28), followed by Europe (24, with 11 of those in France). See: Marthe Robin (Lyon: L’Alouette, 1981); Peyrous, Vie de Marthe Robin, 253–55.

64. Landron, Les communautés nouvelles, 456.


66. Lumen gentium, 31.


68. Ibid., 19.

69. Peyret, Marthe Robin, 183.

70. Ruy, Un message du Sacré-Cœur, 29.

71. La Société des Amis des Pauvres, 15–16, emphasis in the original.


73. Contemporary leaflet of the Association de prière et pénitence.

74. Cited in Clément, Pour entrer chez Marthe, 278.

75. Peyrous, Vie de Marthe Robin, 152.
76. Despiney, Madame Royer, 121.
77. Ruy, Un message du Sacré-Cœur, 30.
78. Despiney, Madame Royer, 144.
79. Lavaille, Thérèse Durnerin, 251.
82. Peyrous, Vie de Marthe Robin, 435.
83. Peyret, Marthe Robin, 192.
85. Despiney, Madame Royer, 75–91; Peyrous, Vie de Marthe Robin, 179–82.
86. Despiney has touched a little upon the development of Royer’s association in America: Despiney, Madame Royer, 119–23.
87. See literature cited in note 6.

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