

# THE MONASTERY OF ST. BENEDICT OF CÁSTRIS AS A SPACE OF ASSERTION AND POWER: FROM THE *MYSTIC MARRIAGE* TO *MUSICAL PRAXIS*<sup>94</sup>

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## Abstract

The life in contemplative female communities was characterized by the ideal of purity fostered in the monasteries and based on the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, reinforced by the cloistered life. Especially from the Council of Trent, in Portugal as in Europe, its compliance underlines the paradigms of virtue: the religious woman should be unique in patience, humility, mortification, piety and charity. In this environment, increasingly demanding since the late Middle Ages, betting on valorization of spirituality (based on prayer and silence, in asceticism and liberation of the soul), the leadership capacity of some nuns or, by the other side, the artistic expressions of music, singing or writing, became special, demonstrating the power or the creative liberation in the female monastic universe, as it happened in the Cistercian monastery of St. Benedict of Cástris (Évora, Portugal), whose peculiarities are presented here compared to other cloistered women houses.

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**Keywords:** Évora, Cistercian female monasteries, Council of Trent, Musical *praxis*

## **Introduction**

Feminine monasteries dedicated to contemplative life flourished in Catholic Europe, between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Due to its detachment from worldly life and complete dedication to God with the purpose of achieving salvation for all society, the monastic model was very attractive for more than one reason. Primarily, we have the importance of religion and social recognition of the whole clergy at the time, two characteristics that generated numerous genuine callings for nun. Secondly, we have pragmatic issues related to social, economic and political strategies. For the families of a higher social status, the placement of some of their daughters in convents guaranteed, on one hand, the latter's chastity and the intercession, on their behalf and of their relatives, with God, while on the other hand, it increased the value of the ones available at the "matrimonial market" of alliances amongst the same social group. Moreover, families with increasing political or economic importance tried not only to imitate the behaviour of the most prestigious ones, but also to establish connections with these and be present, by lawful right, in the same spaces and worlds.

These convents possessed two identity features: perpetual seclusion, since the profession of vows until death, and religious life (an exemplary one, preferably), indissociable from the vows of poverty, obedience and chastity.

## **I.**

### **Seclusion, a model of life and power**

From the moment a young lady was accepted into a convent to become a nun, and after negotiations between her family and the convent's authorities pertaining the entry dowry and successor rights, she lived in seclusion, which meant she wasn't allowed to leave the premises. Physical separation from the other inhabitants of the surrounding village or city was assured not only by the high walls and window bars that prevented looking from the outside, but also through the enforcement of a severe policy of access conditions by outsiders along with prohibitions and severe punishments applied to the nuns who broke the rules of seclusion. By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, following the ruling of the Council of Trent, the latter became mandatory in all feminine monastic houses of every Order.

For too long, it was believed that feminine religious life in seclusion meant an absolute rupture between the nuns consecrated to the service of God, in conjunction with the convent's remaining community, and the people, ways of living, matters and practices of a secular life to which they

had belonged until professing. It would be like living a collective hermit life or being buried alive. Fortunately, and thanks to emergent studies, this wrong idea, devoid of historical, theological, social or logical fundamentation, has been abandoned in the last few years while current historiography has been getting closer to what we believe was the concept of “seclusion” from those days: the delimitation of a partial, restrict and well-defined space amidst the architectural ensemble of the monastery’s buildings, and not a complete and insurmountable barrier which started right behind the entrance doors and which would sever all the links with the exterior, namely with the nuns’ families and society.

After being admitted into the convent, for the period of a full year (the so-called “novitiate”) and along with other novices, a young lady had to get fully acquainted with all the requirements for becoming a nun. This happened in spaces separated from the ones allotted for seclusion and under the supervision of a teacher (a nun appointed for this position for a period of three years, due to the superior acknowledgement of her competence, exemplary life, mature age and good physical condition). They had to learn about: the Christian doctrine; the identity Rule of the spiritual family they were joining (Order of St. Claire, Order of Cistercians, Order of St. Dominic, Order of St. Benedict, Order of St. Augustine...); the continuous practice of prayer and obedience, humiliation, silence, meditation, chastity, poverty, frugality, piety, charity, community life, service to others, mortification of the body; the reading and writing of texts; and musical execution, sometimes solely by singing (in its plainsong variant), other times by playing instruments (organ, harp, viola), adding to what many of these novices had already learned at their parents’ houses.

At the end of these demanding twelve months of learning, the novice could only become a nun, by making the public profession of living as a religious nun and in seclusion, following the perpetual solemn vows of obedience, chastity and poverty, if all the following formal requirements simultaneously existed according to this exact verification sequence: first, the existence of true will in becoming a nun; second, the celebration of the final registrar contract and the delivery of her dowry; third, the approval in an oral examination, made by two nuns, of her knowledge and preparation pertaining the prayers and chants of the Divine Office (a.k.a. Liturgy of the Hours) and her understanding of the Rule; fourth, the written consent of the monastery’s masculine guardian (someone in charge of the same Order or the bishop); fifth, the novice’s public oral presentation of the Christian doctrine to the community gathered in the refectory; sixth, the collection of the majority of secret votes favourable to her profession, by all the nuns with full capacity to state their positions, under the supervision of the friar in charge.

The profession was the solemn symbolic moment of “entering the religion”, which implied the new nun’s rejection of worldly values by replacing them with the ones of the Rule of her new family, the sisters of that Congregation or Order. Her hair was cut close to the head, marking her rejection of vanity, and it was covered with a white cloth which symbolized purity and chastity, similar to the one which had covered her hair since the beginning of the novitiate. Over that white cloth, they would place the black veil, which would stay there forever, symbolizing the penitence that would mark her life from then on, and which would be permanently associated to the path of humbleness and obedience that she would take towards her personal and spiritual improvement. Some monasteries had created specific rites, such as an additional oath of profession or a mystical marriage between the novice and Christ, when she entered the novitiate. These were always celebrated with chants by the monastic community and, sometimes, accompanied by musicians specifically hired by the novice’s relatives.

From the day of the profession, the length of service of a nun started being recorded for purposes of seniority, which was indispensable for the performance of several duties related to the proper functioning of community life. Those related to education and schooling (of novices or younger girls, students and interns), to the surveillance of behaviours pertaining the access to the exterior (doors, window bars, foundling wheel, inner and outer parlour, stockrooms, pantries, yards), and to dealing with outsiders (confessors, preachers, other religious men, beadle, doctor, barber-surgeon, surgeon, delivery boys, relatives), could only be appointed by the Abbess or Mother-Superior, or elected by the nuns with voting capacity, amongst the nuns with a confirmed flawless life, of a certain age and with a certain (variable) number of profession years. Justifiably, similar requirements were needed for the main positions of each house, namely for Abbess and Mother-Superior, who were elected every three years. It was frequent for the formation of internal groups (named “factions” or “parties”) to happen, in order to support a certain candidate against others and, many times, these were connected to powerful relatives or clergymen, in a clear example of how valued and desired was power, both inside and outside of the monasteries of consecrated women.

### **Musical practice and affirmation**

By affirmation, we are no longer referring to the power of command, but to the confirmation of a personal gift (or even of an acknowledged competence of a particular monastery due to the presence of one or more highly valued executants), when analysing the appreciation for certain spiritual, intellectual or artistic practices inside the convents of that period. It is recognised that all these practices actively contribute to the service and

proximity to God through the exaltation of Its works, namely through the beauty and creative capacity of the human creature, the usage of their gifts, the service to others, the useful occupation of the hands, the liberation and elevation of the spirit of those who perform these activities and of those who enjoy them. We are referring to the so-called edifying reading and to writing, to the numerous and appreciated manual arts (also known as “monastic arts”), to theatre and to music. We are going to focus on the latter, as the amount of books and data collected, referring to such art at the Monastery of St. Benedict of Cástris, in Évora, of the Autonomous Congregation of Alcobaça of the Order of Cistercians, is remarkable.

At Cástris, the number of singers and *tangedoras* (instrument players) is easily confirmed after the records of their dowries, which were inexistent or much smaller than the others. The Council of Trent, which dramatically renewed the Catholic world around the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, made of the delivery in advance of an individual dowry to the religious house, chosen by the postulant or her relatives, a *sine qua non* condition to her admittance. The only exception to this practise was the acknowledgment by the house of the relevance of services rendered or to render by the candidate or by next of kin. Following this same logic, the Council recommended the exemption of dowry for the musicians, allowing each community to decide case by case if they could, or would, dispense with it or, at least, decrease it. The community of St. Benedict of Cástris assumed as essential the prerogative of being able to count among its members with young ladies that could perpetuate the function of music and chant and, as a result of its dowry policy, managed to attract many girls who were mainly from the region around the monastery.

During one hour per day, nuns taught plainsong to novices and newly- professed nuns. The organ, the mandatory musical instrument at convents in those days, required special skills; therefore, and if needed, a superior authorisation allowed for executants from outside the convent to go there and teach how to play it, along with other instruments. They could be relatives of the nuns and novices, and could be paid or not. In account books, there are records of several payments related to the musical practice of the community (which will be addressed in another presentation in this colloquium).

Besides its daily use in mass and in other divine offices, at this monastery, music and chants were also heard in internal processions (e.g. solemn moments or other celebrations whose joyfulness varied according to the event), in holy days, at requiem masses (yearly or *in memoriam* of late nuns), at the ceremonies of the Abbess’ election, at the novices’ admission and profession ceremonies, and also as entertainment, during sacred theatrical events. On the way to the refectory, they sang psalms, blessings

and memorialisations. It should be highlighted that, during masses, the simplicity of the hymns and the silence during the most important part, the Eucharist, symbolised the purity and sanctity of the nuns, of which the plainsong was a reflex.

With or without musical instruments, chant and even dance were normally practiced at Cástris, before being forbidden in the dormitories, in the infirmary (unless some sick nun wanted to listen to someone sing), and in the balcony by the Choir, on which they were performed by maids, during the liturgical ceremonies of the nuns. The prohibition did not spread to other locations. As they were specific to the religious life inside the walls of the convent, they were kept away from the window bars and from the outer parlours, where relatives were welcomed and where the secular and monastic worlds touched each other.

### **Conclusion**

The power exerted inside a feminine monastic community, like the one of St. Benedict of Cástris in Évora, is a direct consequence of the conjugation of one of the identity features of religious profession - *obedience* - with the specific way of living of these communities – *seclusion*. The latter – *feminine religious seclusion* -, which was experienced between the Council of Trent and the Enlightenment period, has increasingly been revealed and understood as connected to the concept of “permeability” (in what pertains communication between the monastery and the exterior), with clear rules, and more widely linked to the concept of “negotiation”(power of nuns over their private and family spheres, besides the one they undeniably exert inside their own monastery and, sometimes, within their Order or Congregation).

As the relations of power and government inside the monastery and in the surrounding society are permeable, so is the affirmation and worth of some nuns and of the religious community itself, which also occur inside and outside the monastery’s walls, resulting from the appreciation of musical executions by nuns or by expert laymen. For pedagogical or entertainment reasons, direct relatives of the nuns entered Cástris to teach chant, organ and other instruments, while local or neighbour executants participated in the festivities dedicated to the reformer saint of the Order, St. Bernard, which happened in August. They played while horsemen performed in bullfights which took place in the monastery’s yard.

In this way, we open our horizons to a better understanding of what was to live in “seclusion” and to the great importance that was given to music as an aid, not only in daily spiritual life, in daily masses and with the Divine Office, but also during festive occasions, as a companion for life.

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