

11-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Cole-Arnal, Oscar (1994) "Radical Catholic Women in Modern Quebec: The Example of the Worker-Nuns," *Consensus*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol20/iss2/5>

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Radical Catholic Women in Modern Quebec: The Example of the Worker-Nuns

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Few would deny that there has been a virtual explosion in women's studies in the last few decades. This is no less true in the field of history. A full study could be made addressing the precise reasons for this phenomenal emergence, but that is not the purpose of this article. Suffice it to say that minority or marginalized groups have frequently not only been brutally oppressed historically but also actively suppressed. Their stories have been erased from the study and discourse of history. They have been treated with silence or, at best, with marginal references as if they were only observers rather than participants in the human drama. Today, in our country, these groups refuse to be silent. Aboriginal peoples, blacks and other minorities are finding their voice and rediscovering their significant history. Although a majority in terms of population, women have experienced both the oppression and suppression of a minority group. Moreover they have responded in similar fashion and are about the same process of speaking out and resurrecting a once submerged history.

Not surprisingly their voice has manifested itself in a variety of ways. There is debate within the women's movements and among women scholars as to what constitutes feminist thought and action. There is no unanimous agreement among women writers as to what advances the movement and what diverts or holds it back from significant gains. Some applaud female success in virtually all endeavours of life. Thus, an augmentation of women in the corporate hierarchy, in politics or in high paying professions is construed as a major advance. The promotion by the media of Kim Campbell for the leadership of the Progressive Conservatives is a case in point. While

some women, and men for that matter, cite this as a significant advance for females, others are more critical. These latter question, for example, why so much attention has been given to Campbell in contrast to Audrey McLaughlin, the head of the New Democrats. After all, they contend, McLaughlin was the first woman leader of a major federal party. Also feminist radicals and trade unionists often have scant sympathy for employers and managers even if these "bosses" are women.¹

The debate continues and will do so for the foreseeable future, but rather than attempting to resolve this conflict the article will examine only one facet of the debate: where do Catholic nuns fit in this polarity? And, more specifically, does the experience of Quebec's worker-nuns help shed light on this particular question? The issue of nuns and feminism in Quebec has already been addressed in an exemplary fashion by Marta Danylewycz in her article "Changing Relationships: Nuns and Feminists in Montreal, 1890-1925". Her choice is an excellent one. After all, pre-Quiet Revolution Quebec has the reputation of being a deeply Catholic society of the most traditional and patriarchal variety. As well, the province has a rich history of important female religious orders, some originating in Europe and others native to Quebec itself. By the turn of the twentieth century there were 6,500 nuns working in Quebec, and many of these were the major labouring force in the education, health and welfare professions. In many instances they ministered to the rural women who were pouring into Montreal and other urban centres in order to find work in nearby factories. For example, the Sisters of Miséricorde provided havens of refuge for unwed mothers, and the Grey Nuns, dating from New France, ran day-care centres for working mothers. This was all very acceptable in male-dominated Quebec. Single women, as nuns, were part of the patriarchal and hierarchical Catholic church in Quebec. Men ruled over them, and they were assigned the caring and nurturing tasks habitually reserved for women.² Thus, it could be argued that nuns represented the status quo. Instead of being a sign of progress, some might argue that they reinforced patriarchy in an already rigid society.

Such an assessment is enhanced when one contrasts these sisters with the rising feminist movement in francophone Quebec. Among its leaders were Joséphine Dandurand, the editor of the pioneer woman's magazine *Le Coin de Feu*, Robertine Barry, editor of *Le Journal de Françoise*, and Montreal's

chief feminist Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie. The entrée of these women into the wider world of politics was the urban social reform movement which drew its strength from the middle classes. In this context such women activists from the more privileged francophone classes began to challenge a system that divided nuns from lay women. Gérin-Lajoie sought to unite the two in what she called "the feminine initiative" which she defined in terms of a collective historical solidarity of women in terms of caring for the destitute and needy. Initially these women joined the anglophone-dominated National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC), but shortly thereafter they felt the need for specifically francophone organizations. One example was the female section of the Fédération Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society. Although these early efforts to form a nun-laywoman alliance were often slow and painstaking they did bear gradual fruit. The middle class feminists were patient, and over time cooperative efforts with nuns became increasingly common.³

This was especially true in the field of education where both nuns and lay québécoise feminists collaborated on common concerns. The most significant achievement of these efforts was the creation of the *École d'enseignement supérieur pour les filles* (1908). It was renamed the *Collège Marguerite Bourgeoys* in 1926. Particular avant-garde nuns were also instrumental in opening doors for francophone women to receive higher education. A certain Sister Saint-Anaclet is a most significant example. Through contacts with lay feminists and through diplomatic influence within her own order, she was able to manoeuvre the opening of this 1908 school. Its advanced curriculum included a wide range of subjects, many of which had been exclusive to male students in the past. Ironically the school's first graduate was Gérin-Lajoie's daughter Marie Gérin-Lajoie who managed to score higher than all her male competitors in the provincial exams. All this was accomplished in the face of much male and clerical resistance. Not surprisingly the resourceful and well-educated Marie followed in her mother's footsteps. To her belongs the distinction of bringing to Quebec the institution of modern social work. She had travelled to Europe to experience the most up-to-date forms of this discipline, and she took courses in social work at

Columbia University. By the fall of 1919 she was teaching related courses at her old alma mater. Interestingly enough her pioneering efforts were accomplished in a religious setting. In her own person she embodied the lay-nun progressive alliance. In 1923 she received papal permission to form a religious order of sisters geared toward social work and reform. Thus was born the Institut de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil, and Sister Marie Gérin-Lajoie was its director. The lay-nun alliance had become embodied in this new order, and in spite of continued resistance from the church's hierarchy, it moved cautiously in the direction advocated by its forebears. Today its nuns are involved actively in the world of radical and progressive social change. Danylewycz's article has shown quite well that some Quebec nuns have successfully linked their religious vocation with both feminist liberation and social change even in the midst of a highly traditional Quebec.⁴

Francophone Catholic Women in the Working Class (1920-1960)

Danylewycz's demonstration of the emergence of lay and religious feminism in francophone and Catholic Quebec can be broadened and updated. In the period before and after the Quiet Revolution French-speaking Catholic women were increasingly involved in the province's political and social life, and quite often this participation embodied leadership roles. Once again the areas of concern included education and care and support for the marginalized. Moreover, like earlier models these women activists worked within existing church-mandated institutions that were habitually male-led. Nonetheless, there was a new and creative dimension not found among such pioneers as Dandurand, Barry, Sister St. Anaclet and Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie. Large numbers of lay female activists emerged from the working class to assume major roles in the proletarian organizations that were linked to the Quebec church. After all, the female presence at Quebec factories, in spite of traditional Catholic morality, was a formidable reality.⁵

Two particular movements which provided increased opportunity for female lay Catholic militancy were Christian trade unionism and specialized Catholic Action. In both instances could be found deeply conservative and traditional strains.

Emphases on social hierarchy, church authority, class cooperation and anti-communism were apparent in both groups, and the Quebec episcopate exercised power and influence through chaplains in both organizations. Consequently the traditional doctrines of patriarchy were strong as well. Nonetheless, the working class character of the groups ensured that the harsh realities of factory life and grim ghettos shaped the values and actions of both organizations. Further, the traditional patriarchal family model was undermined by the day-to-day exigencies of working class existence. In short, the profit-making agenda of the mass industrial system placed little value on either family tradition or stability. Hence women were forced into the factories either to support themselves or to provide necessary supplementary income for their families. For the investor or factory owner women were a virtual endless supply of cheap labour. In such a setting conservative Catholic values were reduced to a secondary concern.⁶

Thus, in such a context, female workers joined with their male counterparts to ameliorate their lot. The natural locus for such efforts was the trade union movement. Although many were involved with the American-based unions linked to the American Federation of Labor (AF of L), others joined the national Catholic trades called collectively the *Confédération des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada* (CTCC). Within these Catholic unions women workers faced numerous difficulties. The clerical and conservative social Catholic character of this federation served to curb any substantial equality between men and women within the organization. The notion of the female role as queen and mother in a pious patriarchal family permeated the union and its male leadership. Nonetheless, the CTCC was also aware that its female members faced the injustices of proletarian life just as much as male workers. Consequently the union applauded its women militants and their demands for change at the workplace. However, it was not until after the Second World War that the CTCC was ready to accept a substantial influx of women activists into key positions. In its growing maturity and militancy during the Duplessis years the CTCC made strides in its acceptance of a public female presence. Yolande Valois was the first woman to be elected as a union vice-president (1952), and in that same year the federation created a committee to deal with the role of women

at the workplace and in the union. Made up exclusively of women, this committee challenged the notion that married women should not be employed outside the home and advocated a position of equal pay for equal work. Women trade unionists of the CTCC ran courses for female workers, wrote regular columns for the union newspaper *Le Travail* and pressured the federation as a whole to move toward gender equality. Thus, by 1960, when the union abandoned its confessionalism to become the Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux (CSN), its women militants had laid the groundwork for the union's subsequent strides toward equality.⁷

In some respects Catholic female activists found greater opportunity for expression in the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique (JOC), the working class form of specialized Catholic Action. Founded in the early 1930s in Quebec, it adopted the values of its European progenitors. The notion of specialized Catholic Action was developed by a Belgian priest named Joseph Cardijn who realized that the industrial working class was impervious, even alien, to Catholic influence. Consequently, he developed a missionary model based on the principle of "like ministering to like". His efforts in the mid-1920s involved the creation of cell groups containing only Catholic youth from the working class guided by a sympathetic chaplain. These adolescents were assigned the task of being a Christian presence and witness among their own peers. Pope Pius XI adopted Cardijn's model with enthusiasm. This combination of grassroots activity and episcopal mandate constituted the essence of specialized Catholic Action. The first example of this approach was Cardijn's own working class model, and it was named the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne (JOC). Soon the movement spread to France, and within a decade its membership there had grown to around 65,000. By the early 1930s it had been planted in Quebec as well, but the name chosen there was the less inclusive Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique (JOC).⁸

The JOC was not an exclusively male organization. In fact, the first Quebec unit was a feminine one. In Europe and in Quebec there were both male and female Jociste cells, and in many instances young people from both genders met and worked together. Such a structure provided teen-age girls the opportunity to develop leadership skills and consciousness raising independent of the boys who met in separate groups. Such

autonomy created a space whereby young women could hone their leadership skills even though the society was decidedly patriarchal in character. In addition, when male and female Jocistes gathered together, there was more pressure from the young women to have a say in matters that concerned both groups. In spite of such relative egalitarianism, ambivalence abounded. The organization's chaplains were all men, and the JOC national executive, though not exclusively male, was dominated by those of the masculine gender. On the one hand, the JOC advocated for women at the workplace and were prepared to accept the female suffrage even over against the hierarchy's wishes. On the other hand, much JOC and chaplain energy was geared toward training young women in their "God-appointed" role as wives and mothers. In such a context it is not surprising that the JOC reacted in a contradictory fashion to the presence of women on the factory floor. Such ambivalence continued for several decades. In spite of massive change in post-war Quebec, the traditional view of womanhood was sustained in Jociste rhetoric and publications. Nonetheless, innovation was in the air. Women Jocistes refused to accept the status quo. By sheer numbers alone, around 80% of JOC membership throughout the 1950s, they were able to precipitate movement toward equality. Although they praised the vocation of marriage and motherhood, female Jocistes lauded the presence of their sisters in militant public life. They encouraged the entry of women into politics and insisted that female workers had key roles to play in the union movement. As well, a number of Jociste women were holding high profile positions within the organization. Denyse Gauthier stood out in that regard. Not only did she hold important official positions in the Quebec Catholic Action movement but also she worked for the international JOC in Brussels. In her adulthood she has remained an active leader in organizations committed to justice for the oppressed and marginalized.⁹

Impact of the Quiet Revolution and Beyond (1960–1990)

Since the Quiet Revolution modern feminism has become a commonplace on the Quebec scene. This is not to say that the women's movements view the current situation without serious

criticism and continual struggle. Indeed for Quebec feminists the battle for equality goes on. This is no less true among Catholic female activists. Nonetheless, significant strides have been made, and this is no less true for the province's Catholics. The uphill struggle of proletarian Catholic women in earlier decades bore much fruit in the context of both Quebec's Quiet Revolution and the substantive Catholic reforms embodied in the Second Vatican Council. Both events dovetailed in the momentous Dumont Commission in the early 1970s where the Quebec church embarked on its own road to reform. In that project the hierarchy mandated a committee of twelve to study the province's church in order to develop a blueprint of renovation. The group was lay dominated, and three of its members were women.¹⁰

In this more open social context Catholic working class women made significant strides toward gender equality as well. Much change had occurred in those Catholic organizations dedicated to justice for the labouring classes. This was especially true in the trade union movements. The old CTCC dropped its confessional status in 1960 when it became the *Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux* (CSN), and the former Catholic teachers' organization, the CIC, became the militant trade union it is today, namely the *Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec* (CEQ). In both organizations women's issues and women leaders have achieved a high-profile status. The prominent role played by CSN vice-president Monique Simard in union and public life for almost two decades is the most obvious example of this. Simard has been a vocal feminist as well as a militant trade unionist, and along with other CSN female activists, she has been instrumental in utilizing the CSN's Committee for the Condition of Women to promote programmes designed to increase female representation at all levels of union life. As well, the committee strives to sensitize the membership and society about women's issues and struggles for total equality at the workplace and in Quebec at large.¹¹ More progress has been apparent in the teachers' union which has had a significantly higher proportion of female members. Like the CSN, the CEQ has given notable attention to a combination of working class and feminist issues. However, in contradistinction to the CSN, it is the only major Quebec union federation to have a woman as president. In 1990 Lorraine Pagé was at the helm in that union.¹²

To be sure neither of these unions is specifically Catholic any longer. Indeed, Monique Simard is consciously outside of the Christian tradition. Nonetheless, both organizations had Catholic roots, and that heritage has its continuing impact, albeit a subtle one. As well, many CSN and CEQ women militants remain conscious and practising Catholics. By way of contrast the JOC and its adult counterpart, the Mouvement des Travailleurs/Travailleuses Chrétiens (MTC), have kept their Christian identity. The ministry of "like to like" has been retained, and the organizations' commitment to justice for and solidarity with the working class has remained a constant. However, the mid-1960s witnessed a crisis in specialized Catholic Action which manifested itself as a clash between lay militants and the hierarchy. The movements survived and achieved a greater autonomy from ecclesiastical officials. In the 1970s both the JOC and the MTC became notably more radical. One expression of this was the growth of active feminism within the ranks of these two movements. This was especially true for the MTC. In recent years the organization's ranks have been predominantly female, and that shift in membership has produced a movement decidedly more overt about feminist issues. More women leaders are present in the organization, and women's concerns are given high priority in MTC activities.¹³

The Worker-Nuns (1970-1990)

This context of a more secular Quebec and a renovated Catholicism could not leave the province's nuns unaffected. After all, female religious orders in Quebec had carried much of the load for decades in the province's health, education and welfare infrastructure. Nuns had performed extensively as teachers, nurses, social workers and over-all "care givers". The ambiguity embodied by female undertaking of such services is apparent. On the one hand, it was an arena where women exercised leadership and experienced relative autonomy. On the other hand, this reality was an extension of traditional female roles within a male-dominated society. In short, the massive activity of nuns in pre-Quiet Revolution Quebec did not challenge directly the traditional Catholic patriarchal society of Quebec. Nonetheless, as Danylewycz pointed out so effectively, Montreal's francophone nuns and feminists had created an alliance whereby the women's movement was able to progress, albeit slowly and under great duress. This combined with similar

advancement in Catholic working class organizations laid the groundwork for developments after the Quiet Revolution and Vatican II. Such a broader context forced Quebec's nuns, as well as freed them, to find new and more creative ways to form links with lay women in the broader society. Not surprisingly a number of them identified with movements dedicated to the liberation of the poor and oppressed within the province's urban ghettos. Sisters, experienced in such work, identified with numerous projects both Catholic and radical in the Quebec of the 1970s and 1980s. Petites Soeurs de Jésus were among those Catholics in Hull who were organizing a grassroots diocese oriented toward the poorer urban residents of that city. Radical Capuchins were gathering regularly in their *reseau* (network) for mutual reflection and support concerning militant projects of which they were a part. Meeting with them were also a number of nuns.¹⁴

The worker-nuns are an integral part of this sector of radical sisters committed to a just transformation of Quebec society. There were only a handful of these, and although they formed an alliance with both priests and religious brothers who toiled full-time, the working sisters remained autonomous save for their links to their own orders. It was to be expected that most of these nuns came from the Petite Soeur tradition whose history and spirituality were linked in living solidarity with the global poor. The Petites Soeurs de Jésus (Little Sisters of Jesus) and the Petites Frères de Jésus (Little Brothers of Jesus) are inspired by a similar spirituality which has roots in the African pilgrimage of Charles de Foucauld. Out of an experience of God, Foucauld went to live the life of a solitary Christian among the Muslims of North Africa. His existence was simple, even poor, and it was his concern to be an embodiment of Jesus' love for the marginalized by living among them. His mission was not to preach and to convert. Rather it was to live a life of service as an incarnation of Jesus incognito among the natives of Sahara Africa. His life of solitude began in 1886 in France, and by 1889 he had discovered that this life must also be one of poverty and solidarity with the poor through the medium of manual labour. A spiritual basis for worker-priests and worker-nuns was thus in its early stages of formation. Soon he was in Africa living out his Trappist radicalism. There he remained until his martyrdom in 1916. The

tradition he established inspired others to take up where he left off. More recently, Frère René Voillaume has coordinated the witness of the Petits Frères and Petites Soeurs around the world.¹⁵

Of the roughly fifty people associated with the network of Quebec worker-priests and worker-nuns, twelve were women. These totals represent both lay and religious with only slightly over half being priests, lay brothers or nuns. Only about half the women were worker-nuns, with three being Petites Soeurs and one of them belong to an order with a parallel spirituality. For these Little Sisters manual labour was already part of their tradition. During the heyday of the French worker-priest movement it was Petites Soeurs in France who became the first worker-nuns.¹⁶ One such pioneer had this to say about her factory life:

The longing of the Little Sisters is that their co-workers might discover one day that Jesus is present among them. Till then the Little Sisters must be present to God in the name of these brothers and sisters from whom they have already learned so much about the dignity of manual work. And when they see their co-workers' patience in front of long hours of work, their keen understanding of human suffering and the simplicity of their concrete acts of brotherly [sic] love, the Little Sisters realize how much they still have to learn.¹⁷

That tradition of living and working among factory toilers was undertaken by Quebec's Petites Soeurs as well. The inspiration to do so was linked consciously to the values of their order. Petite Soeur Stephanie felt called to "the religious life" while still an adolescent, and even then she "had wished to live among the poor". For Petite Soeur Claude that moment came later—when she was a young woman living in a working class neighbourhood. There a team of priest activists inspired her to enter the religious life. She describes the Petite Soeur vocation as "sharing the life of the poorest" while also living a contemplative existence. Sister Stephanie echoed the same values. She called her journey a reality of "living with (*être avec*)", indeed, "above all, with the poor and the most deprived". Further, she underscored the incarnational character of this vocation. She called it a community testimony in that the Little Sisters lived in small family groups of three to five sisters. Invariably they lived in "the popular [poorer] neighbourhoods, in humble housing, right with our neighbours, and

the doors are always open". In her particular setting of a Montreal ghetto, she and her sisters are involved in a number of activities. They serve a progressive missionary parish in their district, they belong to *quartier* cooperatives, and they work with their neighbours in the militant community organizations known as *groupes populaires*. Above all, they make themselves available to their neighbours at any time of the day or night. By so doing they partake intimately in the joys and sorrows of their immediate environment. Their kitchen table is a public gathering characterized by the sharing of food, dialogue, personal concerns and planning for just social change. For her part, Petite Soeur Claude ministers among the elderly poor across the Saint Lawrence River in Longueuil.¹⁸

Manual toil, under adverse conditions, is part of this wider ministry of the Petites Soeurs. For three years Sister Claude worked in a factory as part of her religious vocation. There she toiled a forty-hour week from 7:30 in the morning to 4:30 in the afternoon. It was assembly-line labour, during which she packed boxes for hour after hour at minimum wages. The pace was relentless, she confessed. "Always—quick, quick, quick! Speed is of the essence" due to the priority of "production". In spite of this, she formed links of solidarity with the young women who were her co-workers. She noted, with a touch of irony, that although the workforce was female, "the boss was always a man". Little Sister Claude was experiencing the gender character of industrial production that was the lot of underpaid exploited women labourers in Quebec throughout the century. Little Sister Stephanie experienced similar realities in her work life. After five years among the aboriginal peoples of James Bay (1963–1968) she moved to Montreal where she has lived ever since. First she worked in a hospital kitchen, and from there she found a job for several months at a printing firm. Later she toiled briefly at a small business where she undertook laundry work. Her last full-time employment was in a shoe factory where she ran a machine in an assembly line. She found the work difficult and monotonous, and like Soeur Claude, she received minimum wages. Nonetheless, in tune with Petite Soeur spirituality, she embraced this toil as intrinsic to her vocation. "It is a very exceptional place of encounter with the workers male and female," she stated. "By doing the same work, by sustaining the same difficulties during the same

hours, that creates a solidarity, a friendship.” Today she is the director of her tiny family of four. One works full-time, the other three part-time. They are always at the call of their neighbours, yet they remain contemplative, devoted to a life of prayer. For Quebec’s Petites Soeurs theirs is a very specific calling. “The heart of our gift,” affirms Little Sister Stephanie, “is to ‘be with’ (*être avec*), to follow Jesus who is poor among the poor.”¹⁹

Sister Marie-Paule Lebrun is the facilitator (*animatrice*) of a small group of nuns living in a tiny house in Montreal. Her order the Petites Soeurs de l’Assomption shares significant similarities with the Petites Soeurs de Jésus. Sister Lebrun’s community is older, tracing its origins to Paris in 1865. Under the influence of its founders, Étienne Pernet and Antoinette Fage, the order adopted a family structure as a form whereby the church might bear an effective witness among the poor who were created by the industrial revolution. These Little Sisters believe that “the cries of God and the cries of the poor shape us, provoke us to speak of Jesus Christ through our very lives, to be joyous witnesses of the God of tenderness who saves in weakness and in poverty.” In a more straightforward fashion the order’s 1983 Rule described its mission in this way:

We are sent as always to the poor and to the workers... Every aspect of our religious and apostolic life bears this imprint: in our prayer, in our life together as an apostolic community, in our manner of being present (*être présent*), in our work we express that we are poor among the poor in mission with Jesus Christ.

This combination of the contemplative life and identification with the working poor is reminiscent of the vocation of the Petites Soeurs de Jésus.²⁰

In Quebec the Petites Soeurs de l’Assomption live out this mandate in a number of ways. They are active militants with the *groupes populaires*, and Soeur Lebrun is one of them. She worked with the particularly active group in the proletarian *quartier* of Saint Henri, and this led her to more direct political involvement. She joined the municipal reform organization, and by the mid-1970s she was sympathetic to the changes represented by the Parti Québécois. Also, she and her order were increasingly conscious of feminist issues. One leaflet of the community put it this way: “We have become conscious of the new recognition of values that women bring to the world

and to the church.” After condemning a world dominated “by military and economic exploitation”, the document went on to state that “we believe that women can have a truly positive influence in bringing to birth *a more just world which affirms life*” (emphasis theirs). In light of this the Petites Soeurs de l’Assomption pledged to reflect and act on these realities with other women among whom they lived. These efforts were directed along two lines: “1. to recognize in a better fashion the feminist currents of our country” and “2. to deepen these feminist values in terms of justice and peace.”²¹

Sister Lebrun carried this conscious feminism into her work environment. In fact, in Quebec, she was the sole member of her order to undertake full-time factory toil. Her place of employment was a Coleco factory “in the heart of one of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Montreal”. Of its 700 employees, about 400 were youth between the ages of 16 and 25, ideal clients for minimum wages. Even a ten-year veteran on Coleco’s shopfloor made only \$0.10 above that minimum. As well, the majority of the workers were women, and the majority of overseers were men. Labour conditions were dirty and dangerous, and seasonal layoffs involved habitually about 200 people. Ironically, the best-selling item manufactured by this American-based toy corporation was the much-heralded “cabbage-patch kid”.²²

Soeur Lebrun decided to enter this factory to intensify her identity with the working-class women of her Saint-Henri neighbourhood. “The desire to undertake factory work was born in the context of meeting with our women’s collective,” she stated. In this consciousness-raising setting, she recalled that one woman had told her that it was impossible “to understand that factory setting without living it”. Sister Lebrun took these words seriously by getting a job at the very factory where these other women toiled. There for eleven years she helped assemble “cabbage-patch” dolls on an assembly line, an experience she described as “very perturbing, very degrading”. The foremen were aggressive and cruel, pushing the workers to the limits of their endurance. Only three women knew she was a nun, and she asked them not to reveal her religious identity. By the time people did discover that a nun was in their midst, she had already been accepted as “a worker among the workers”. “I found intense solidarity among the women at the

factory," was her fundamental reminiscence. For her, this solidarity involved militancy as well as work. She expressed this by her union membership in the Fédération des Travailleurs du Québec (FTQ), and by her activities in the worker-priest, worker-nun *réseau* known as le Groupe PRROQ (Prêtres, religieux et religieuses ouvrier[ère]s du Québec). In the FTQ she refused to accept any leadership because she wanted to remain on the shopfloor with the other women. Upon reflection Soeur Lebrun has developed a critical stance toward her years at Coleco. In no respect has she repudiated the "*être avec*" mode of witness embodied in the worker-nun approach. However, she does wish that she had been more militant. She feels that her ecclesiastical environment prevented her from seeing the full reality of "class struggle". On this matter she concluded wistfully: "I regret that we were not more radical in our choices, in the way we spoke out and in our actions with the workers." Marie-Paule Lebrun represents, along with her order, that combination of feminist and working-class militancy found among lay proletarian Catholic women of her epoch. In the broader socio-historic context she is a product of a growing female and Catholic working-class consciousness as well as the earlier alliance of middle-class feminists and nuns.²³

This reality was echoed to an even greater extent in the labouring experience of Sister Dolorès Léger. Marie-Paule Lebrun had experienced the Depression and all its poverty. For her part, Soeur Léger came from an economically secure rural family, a family with a mother who was a schoolteacher. Her upbringing was traditionally religious but, at the same time, joyous rather than severe. At age eleven she decided to embrace the religious life. The order she chose was the Soeurs Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil, the very order which emerged from the earlier alliance of nuns and middle-class feminists, the order created by Marie Gérin-Lajoie. Sister Léger is very conscious of her order's heritage and is herself a trained social worker. In fact, the larger portion of her life as a nun has been spent in social work-related fields involving educational and family activities. Throughout the years Léger made a decision, along with her religious peers, to meet as a reflection and consciousness-raising team (*équipe*). This group of sisters from the Institut met weekly for twelve years in a popular Montreal neighbourhood. Even before that she was part of a similar group in Sherbrooke. In the Groupe STOP she met with men and women

from different religious orders "in order to share resources and reflect together on the social and political dimensions" she and the others encountered in Quebec. She recalled that the group "had a more critical and prophetic perspective of the church" than most other ecclesiastical bodies. These experiences sowed the seeds that led Soeur Léger eventually into full-time factory toil.²⁴

More immediately, her decision to labour at the side of workers was the growing conviction that her social worker activities kept her too separate from those she was called upon to serve. In particular, she was appalled at the extravagance of the Christmas festivities held by the Granby school board. She felt that it was scandalous to throw such parties since it was working class taxpayers who were inadvertently paying the bills for such excess. Sadly she concluded: "I came to understand that our social politics were not made for the poor but were made to oppress the poor." Thus, in the name of solidarity, she met with members of her religious community in order to enlist their support for her decision to enter the world of the factory. "I wished no longer to be from the bourgeois class which oppresses others," she stated. "Rather I wanted to be with the working class. I wanted to live its culture, to be with them [sic], in the midst of their work milieu." With the endorsement of her sisters and the direct inspiration of Marie-Paule Lebrun's Caleco experience, Dolorès Léger entered the Esmond Mills at Granby in the summer of 1978.²⁵

Esmond Mills was a subsidiary of Dominion Textiles which concentrated on the production of bedcovers, draperies and sheets. There Soeur Léger worked on the assembly line that fabricated the bedcovers. At first she toiled during the day shift but was transferred later to the night shift which began at 11:00 p.m. and ended at 7:00 a.m. The daylight period was dominated by middle-aged workers (ages 40 to 62) whereas the night shift consisted largely of youth (ages 18 to 25). She found the shopfloor noisy, dirty and oppressive, and rapid production took priority over people's needs. Soon she discovered the labouring reality of job insecurity. Her minimum wages were barely sufficient for her needs, and a layoff threw her into the crisis of poverty. Like so many of her toiling sisters and brothers she sought other work. Fortunately she found it at Barcana Forms, a small workshop which employed ten people

in the construction of store mannequins and assorted objects. The work conditions were not ideal, to her mind, but they were not as grim as she had experienced at Esmond Mills.²⁶

In this work milieu Soeur Léger was increasingly radicalized. She noted the cruelty of the bosses, their attempts to pressure workers to spy on each other and their creation of an atmosphere of fear through threatened layoffs. Further, she added, "The boss speaks to us and treats us as children." For her, the only response to such injustice was worker solidarity. In its most simple form it was the building of comradeship through daily acts of kindness and mutuality. On a broader scale it involved brief wildcat strikes, direct small-group confrontations with the bosses and long-term trade union activity. Léger was involved directly in all these efforts. In the union Sister Léger was an active militant, but she was decidedly unhappy with her Centrale des Syndicats Démocratiques (CSD) local. She felt that both this local and the CSD at large were "company unions" in their mentality and behaviour. "The union is more on the side of the employer than it is on the side of the employees", was her judgment. Nonetheless, she remained in the organization, joining with other militants to give it a more radical direction.²⁷

Sister Léger formed links with other Catholic radical groups as well, and most of these had a consciously working class context. There she reflected with others on their pro-labour activities and on the church issues they felt were crucial for their respective vocations. Two of these networks were the Mouvement des Travailleurs Chrétiens (MTC) and the PRROQ, the body that gathered together worker-priests and worker-religious. In these *équipes* she and the other sisters insisted that due consideration be given to women's reality in the working class milieu. "We wished to be recognized," she affirmed, and it was she and the other worker-nuns who were responsible for the fact that the PRROQ title included specific reference to the *religieuses* (nuns). For her the feminist dimension was an essential ingredient of working class justice which required very specific articulation and action. She carried this conviction into her political activities as well. In the Parti Québécois she was a leading voice in its committee of women's concerns. Behind all of this was Sister Léger's fundamental Christian commitment to justice, equality and solidarity for and with the oppressed.

She put it this way: "For me, the bottom line is to work for the liberation and development of the working class. This is the programme (*projet*) of Jesus Christ."²⁸

The worker-nuns of Quebec were small in number, but their experience was a significant testimony in many respects. They were one example among many which demonstrated that Catholic Christianity has the capacity to identify with working class concerns. More specifically these nuns reflect important dimensions of the feminist debate. On the one hand, they are part of a larger body of feminist and Catholic working class radicals who have been an important element of Quebec history for over half a century. On the other hand, they are a continuation of the feminist-nun alliance which came to fruition in Montreal in the 1920s. In the last analysis, they represent a specific type of feminism which is in sharp contrast to that sector of the women's movement which reflects the model of corporate and professional success. Instead their feminism is grounded in that liberation theology which identifies with the poor and oppressed. The worker-nuns are liberationists because they identify with crushed and marginalized workers, and they are feminist liberationists because they remind us by their words and life that the poorest among the poor are women.

[The author wishes to thank Anna Hemmendinger for her helpful suggestions on the need to incorporate women's experience within the broader framework of history.]

Notes

- ¹ This first type of feminism is reflected in a number of women's magazines, notably *Chatelaine*. In the field of history a significant example would be the monumental three-volume work edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller called *Women and Religion in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982 and 1983). Certainly Dr. Ruether is justifiably well-known for her radical struggles for justice, not only with women but also with all minorities. Nonetheless, these collections of articles and primary documents attempt to encompass the entire range of female religious experience in America. This is a commendable and much-needed work, but in the process a number of figures have been included who represent traditional and even conservative positions. In contrast, I cite a number of feminist examples from the Canadian left-wing and labour press: "Ask Women if the

- recession is over," *Canadian Dimension*, March-April, 1993, 3; Judy Fudge, "NAC for Change," *This Magazine*, Jan.-Feb., 1993, 8-9; and Lori Walker, "How Do You Treat Your Secretary? An Open Letter to Academic Feminists from a Female University Worker in B.C.," *Our Times*, Sept., 1992, 8. Many other examples from within this debate could be cited, but such would take us beyond the purpose of this article.
- 2 Marta Danylewycz, "Changing Relationships: Nuns and Feminists in Montreal, 1890-1925," in Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff (eds.), *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History*, Vol. 2 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987) 122-125. Trofimenkoff provides superb descriptions of the role of women in modern Quebec in her seminal *The Dream of Nation: A Social and Intellectual History of Quebec* (Toronto: Gage, 1983) 184-199.
 - 3 Danylewycz, "Nuns and Feminists," 126-131; Trofimenkoff, *Dream*, 185-191.
 - 4 Danylewycz, "Nuns and Feminists," 131-143; Trofimenkoff, *Dream*, 191. The definitive work on Marie Gérin-Lajoie is the biography by Hélène Pelletier-Baillargeon, *Marie Gérin-Lajoie: De mère en fille, la cause des femmes* (Montréal: Boréal, 1985).
 - 5 For materials dealing with the importance of women in Quebec factory work, see Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "'Weaving It Together': Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950," in Prentice, *Neglected Majority*, 160-173.
 - 6 Trofimenkoff, *Dream*, 235; Brandt, "Weaving It Together," 167; Alison Prentice, et al., *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) 234-235.
 - 7 For traditional patriarchal values in the early CTCC, see Abbé Lucien Valois, "L'Idéal de la famille chrétienne," *Vie Syndicale* (hereafter referred to as *VS*), juillet 1941, 5; "Le Foyer—le tact et le charme d'une hôtesse," *VS*, mai 1933, 9; "Le Foyer—politesse et indulgence," *VS*, juillet 1933, 9; "Le Travail féminin," *VS*, sept. 1934, 5; and Alfred Charpentier, "Le Travail féminin dans nos usines de guerre," *Relations*, mai 1942, 128-130. Examples of CTCC advocacy for women in the union's early decades include: "Le Syndicalisme et la femme," *Le Travail* (hereafter referred to as *LT*), jan. 1943, 6 and "Le Syndicat féminin du Québec réclame de salaire minimum," *VS*, avril 1935, 10. For more details on this issue, see Nadia Fahmy-Eid and Lucie Piché, *Si le travail m'était conté... autrement* (Montréal: CSN, 1987) 50-51. For the post-World War II period, see Francine Barry, *Le Travail de la femme au Québec* (Sillery, Quebec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1980) 50-52; Fahmy-Eid and Piché, *Si le travail*, 80-87; Mona-Josée Gagnon, "Women in the Trade-Union Movement in Quebec," in Michael D. Behiels (ed.), *Quebec Since 1945* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1987) 160-162. For primary documentation, consult: Yvette Baumans, "La Mère de famille doit-elle limiter ses activités au foyer?" *LT*, 27 jan.

- 1956, 6; Renée Geoffroy, "La Femme mariée à l'usine," *LT*, 4 fév. 1953, 6; "Plus de femmes au travail," *LT*, 8 jan. 1960, 2; "Les Travailleuses ont-elles des problèmes différents de ceux des ouvriers syndiqués?," *LT*, 5 août 1955, 6; Renée Geoffroy, "Le Syndicalisme et les travailleuses," *LT*, 29 juillet 1955, 6; "Émancipation de la femme et le syndicalisme," *LT*, 18 jan. 1952, 6; Renée Geoffroy, "à leurs femmes ou au syndicalisme?," *LT*, 27 fév. 1953, 6; Renée Geoffroy, "Quands les femmes font du syndicalisme," *LT*, 20 mai 1955, 6; Renée Geoffroy, "A travail égal, salaire égal," *LT*, 4 mars 1955, 6; Jeanne Dansereau, "Les Femmes veulent prendre une part active au prochain congrès," *LT*, 27 août 1954, 6; "Un programme pour les femmes syndiquées," *LT*, 18 juin 1954, 6; Renée Geoffroy, "Les Travailleuses et le congrès de la CTCC," *LT*, 19 août 1955, 6 and Renée Geoffroy, "Un plan d'action pour les femmes syndiquées," *LT*, 12 août 1955, 6.
- 8 For some historical background for the JOC, both in Europe and in Quebec, see William Bosworth, *Catholicism and Crisis in Modern France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962) 97–121; Oscar L. Arnal, *Ambivalent Alliance* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985) 137–138, 148–149; Oscar L. Arnal, *Priests in Working-Class Blue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 27–31; Oscar L. Arnal, "Toward a Lay Apostolate of the Workers," *Catholic Historical Review*, LXXIII/2 (April 1987) 211–227; Pierre Pierrard, Michel Lounay and Rolande Trempe, *La J.O.C.: Regards d'historiens* (Paris: Éditions Ouvrières, 1984); "Le Dixième anniversaire de la J.O.C. Canadienne," *Journée d'études sacerdotales*, 1942, 1–9 in JOC Archives at the Archives Nationales du Québec à Montréal; Nive Voisine, *Histoire de l'Église catholique au Québec (1608–1970)* (Montréal: Fides, 1971) 68; and Gabriel Clément, *Histoire de l'action catholique au Canada français* (Montréal: Fides, 1972) 11–76.
- 9 Claire Dutrisac, "La Femme dans l'après-guerre," *Front Ouvrier* (hereafter called *FO*), 21 avril 1945, 4; Gracia Gaudet, "Voterons-nous, Mesdames?," *FO*, 2 juin 1945, 4; "La Plaie du jour," *Jeunesse Ouvrière* (hereafter called *JO*), oct. 1942, 4; "Un angoissant problème," *JO*, juillet 1942, 4; "Que fera-t-elle???" *JO*, juillet 1938, 1; "Qu'est-ce qu'une maman?" *JO*, mai 1941, 1; "La Chronique féminine," *JO*, déc. 1939-Jan. 1940, 17; Gabrielle Lafrenière, active Jociste in the early years, interview granted to the author, Longueuil, 29 June 1988; "La famille," *Action Catholique Ouvrière* (Hereafter referred to as *ACO*) IV/10 (nov. 1954) 406–416; "La Modestie du Vêtement," *ACO*, VI/6 (juin-juillet 1956) 234–237; "Foyer menacé," *JO*, mars 1961, 12–13; "Les Femmes sont décidées," *FO*, 22 nov. 1947, 10–11; "Les Femmes au 'front'," *FO*, 16 oct. 1948, 4; Denyse Guevin, "Les Filles des 'zeros' en politique," *JO*, oct.-nov. 1962, 5; "La Femme mariée doit-elle travailler," *JO*, avril 1963, 14; "Le Travail de la femme mariée," *JO*, fév. 1962, 12; "Le Syndicalisme, c'est aussi pour les femmes," *FO*, 1 sept. 1951, 3, 14; "La Femme et la vie," *FO*, 29 avril 1950, 12; "Une

Canadienne au bureau international de la J.O.C.," *JO*, déc. 1961, 1, 8; Denyse Gauthier, interview granted to the author, Montreal, 14 June 1989.

- 10 Commission d'étude sur les laïcs et l'église, *L'Église du Québec: un héritage, un projet*, Vol. 0 (Montréal: Fides, 1971) 7. For an overview of the transition of Quebec and its francophone Catholic church from a more traditional to a more modern society, see Gregory Baum, *The Church in Quebec* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1991) 15-47. Too much cannot be made of the presence of three women on the Dumont Commission. I cite it as one example of the increased role of women at the decision-making level of the church's life not as data supporting a reality of gender equality. In short, it is a tentative move in that direction and, as such, was unthinkable in the church decades earlier.
- 11 Jacques Rouillard, *Histoire de la CSN, 1921-1981* (Montréal: Boréal, 1981) 177-180; Jacques Rouillard, *Histoire du Syndicalisme Québécois* (Montréal: Boréal, 1989) 221-226, 345-346, 356-370; Henri Lamoureux, "50 ans au service," *Mouvements* (hereafter referred to as *Mv*), mars-avril 1986, 20-24; "Aux origines de la CEQ," *Ligne Directe* (hereafter referred to as *LD*), Mars-avril 1974, 1-8; Fahmy-Eid and Piché, *Si le travail*, 80-103; Monique Simard, interview granted to the author, 1 June 1990; reports of the Comité de la condition féminine: *La Lutte des femmes*, 1981, 1-65; *Les Femmes à la CSN*, c. 1982, 1-104; *10 ans de lutte*, 1984, 1-106 and "On vit pas d'amour..." 1986, 1-99. See also, *Lorsqu'il s'agit de mieux vivre ensemble: une politique contre le harcèlement sexuel* (Montréal: CSN, 1988) 1-29 and *Les Travailleuses et l'accès à la syndicalisation* (Montréal: CSN, 1980s).
- 12 "Un Comité de la condition féminine," *LD*, fév. 1974) 8-9; "Dossier: La Lutte des femmes," *Mv*, hiver 1984, 18-32; Martine D'Amours, "La concentration..." *Syndicalisme*, cahier spécial, *Le Devoir*, 3 mai 1990, 5.
- 13 For the struggle between the hierarchy and Catholic Action and the subsequent history of specialized Catholic Action, see Jean Hamelin, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois: Le XXe siècle*, Vol. 2: *De 1940 à nos jours* (Montréal: Boréal, 1984) 223-227, 322-328; *La Crise de l'Action Catholique au Canada*, 1-8 in JOC Archives; and Claude Ryan, "La Crise de l'Action Catholique," *Le Devoir*, 25 oct. 1966. For feminist material in the MTC, see "8 mars 1988," *Option Ouvrière* (hereafter referred to as *OO*) fév. 1988, 1; "Femmes de la classe ouvrière," *OO*, special issue, 1982, 1-43; "La Lutte des femmes, combat de tous les travailleurs," *Présence Chrétienne* (hereafter referred to as *PC*), juin 1978, 1-19; "L'Engagement de la femme," *PC*, sept. 1969, 2-3; and "Fête internationale de la femme," *PC*, mars-avril 1975, 1-4. The increased consciousness and militancy of feminist members in the MTC was confirmed in great detail when I interviewed the following MTC leaders: Diane Levasseur (17 May 1988) and Nicole Brunet (19 August 1988), both in Montreal.

- 14 For the Hull story, see Roger Poirier, *Qui a volé la rue principale?* (Montréal: Éditions Départ, 1986) especially 24–27; Roger Poirier and Isidore Ostiguy, “Histoire de notre cheminement pastoral,” *Prêtres et Laïcs* XIX/10 (déc. 1969) 553–558; and the following interviews: Mgr. Paul-Émile Charbonneau, first bishop of Gatineau-Hull, Montreal, 24 June 1988 and Roger Poirier, Oblate father and Hull community organizer, Montreal, 17 June 1988. The *réseau* of radical Capuchins, along with the nuns who joined them, is described by the Capuchin worker-priest Benoît Fortin in “L’Esprit qui nous conduit,” in Léon Gahier, *Avec François d’Assise, Frères et Soeurs au coeur d’un peuple* (printed by the Capuchins, n.d.) 53–63. Fortin also described this network when I interviewed him in Montreal on 13 May 1988.
- 15 The life and spiritual values of Charles de Foucauld and the Petit(e)s Frères/Soeurs can be found in the following works: Jean-François Six, *Vie de Charles de Foucauld* (Paris: Seuil, 1962); Jean-François Six, *Charles de Foucauld aujourd’hui* (Paris: Seuil, 1966); René Voillaume, *Au coeur des masses*, Vol. 1–2 (Paris: Cerf, 1969); and Richard Ledoux, *La Pauvreté évangélique* (Montréal: 1980s) in the private papers of Petite Soeur Stephanie, Montreal.
- 16 “Liste Alphabétique de tous les prêtres, religieux, religieuses,” août 1984, 1p. in Guy Boulanger, Montreal work-priest, private papers; Little Sisters of Jesus, *Fraternity News*, 1979, 21–23, in Petite Soeur Stephanie, private papers. Petite Soeur Claude, interview given to the author, Longueuil, 18 May 1988.
- 17 *Fraternity News*, 23.
- 18 Petite Soeur Stephanie, interview granted to the author, Montreal, 25 May 1988; Petite Soeur Claude interview.
- 19 Petites Soeurs Claude and Stephanie interviews.
- 20 Soeur Marie-Paule Lebrun, interview granted to the author, Montreal, 24 May 1988; “Refaire un peuple de Dieu,” 1, leaflet in *Choisis la Vie*, published by the Chapitre Général of the Petites Soeurs de l’Assomption, 1987; *Règle de vie: Constitution et Normes complémentaires*, Petites Soeurs de l’Assomption, 1983, in private papers, Soeur Marie-Paule Lebrun.
- 21 Lebrun interview; “Les Femmes,” *Choisis la vie*, 1–2.
- 22 Lebrun interview; “L’Usine Coleco,” *Dossiers “Vie Ouvrière”*, XXIV/–82 (fév. 1974) 115–116.
- 23 *Ibid.* The PRROQ printed a brochure describing the life and values of its members (1982). It is called: *Le Groupe PRROQ, le monde ouvrier et l’Église*. Its militants described their experience in these words: “Among the motives of our *présence* (italics mine) at work, there is the desire to cross the distance which exists between the church and the working class world. This working class life that we want to share includes toil but also *quartier* life, indeed all the conditions of life which are characteristic of the working class world. This deepening of the exigencies of our faith, this concrete solidarity with the smallest

and most exploited leads us more and more to share in the destiny of the manual labourers" (1).

- 24 Soeur Dolorès Léger, interview granted to the author, Saint- Jérôme, 6 June 1988; Dolorès Léger, "Curriculum Vitae," 1-7 in Dolorès Léger, private papers.
- 25 Léger interview; "Curriculum Vitae," 3; "Un Nouveau milieu de travail," *Télé-Communication*, 13 nov. 1978, #275, 2 in Léger papers.
- 26 Léger interview; Dolorès Léger, "Témoignage du vécu en usine..." for *l'Entraide Missionnaire*, 1 juillet 1982, 1-2 and "La Solidarité Ouvrière," 1-3, both in Léger private papers; and "Un Nouveau Milieu," 4-6.
- 27 Léger interview; "Témoignage," 3-4; "Solidarité Ouvrière," 4-11.
- 28 Léger interview; "Solidarité Ouvrière," 3-4; "Témoignage," 3-7 (quote from p. 6).