

Changing Relationships: Nuns and Feminists in Montreal, 1890-1925*

by Marta DANYLEWYCZ**

Two distinct ways of seeing feminism in late nineteenth-century Quebec have emerged in recent years. The first examines the politics and organizational activities of Montreal's leading feminists and grounds them in the objective historical circumstances which created conditions favourable to their development. Unravelling the contradictions in the feminists' positions and highlighting the extensive opposition in clerical and political circles to the most innocuous of women's demands, it helps explain the weakness and the relative short life of the first surge of feminist activity in Montreal.¹ Pursuing a radically different course, the second approach begins with religious women, whose presence pervaded nineteenth-century Quebec society, and places them at the centre of the inquiry. According to its proponents, the impulse that in Protestant and secular cultures underlay the organization of women's work took the form of religious vocations in Quebec. There the Catholic Church played a dominant and inspirational role in education and social service. Francophone women who joined active (as opposed to contemplative) religious orders to work for the benefit of society behaved like lay women elsewhere who organized charitable work. The child-centred, family reinforcement objectives of many English-Canadian and American social feminists were items of abiding concern among sisters in Quebec. Nuns taught men and women their familial and social responsibilities. When that failed, they provided victims of poverty, ignorance, disease and delinquency with shelter and surrogate families. For some, convents offered a socially sanctioned alternative to marriage and motherhood as well as an escape from the loneliness and poverty that often accompanied spinsterhood. For a few women religious

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¹ Michèle JEAN, "Les Québécoises ont-elles une histoire?", in *Québécoises au 20^e siècle*, ed.: Michèle JEAN (Montréal: Éditions du Jour, 1974), pp. 13-36; Yolande PINARD, "Les débuts du mouvement des femmes", in *Les femmes dans la société québécoise*, eds: Marie LAVIGNE et Yolande PINARD (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1977), pp. 61-87; Yolande PINARD, "Le féminisme à Montréal au commencement du XX^e siècle, 1893-1920" (Thèse de maîtrise, Université du Québec à Montréal, 1976); Marie LAVIGNE, Yolande PINARD, Jennifer STODDART, "The Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste", in *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880-1920s*, ed.: Linda KEALEY (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979), pp. 71-87.

life also opened the door to a variety of occupational opportunities that women in other cultures strove to attain through the women's movement.²

The second interpretation adds religious women to the usual cast of characters in the history of feminism. What were their roles and how did their presence affect the balance between feminist and anti-feminist forces? Part of the answer lies in the longstanding nun-lay woman relationship which feminism modified, first to expand lay women's role as social activists, and later to win for them greater educational opportunity. By re-examining the circumstances that gave rise to the mobilization of women at the end of the nineteenth century, the creation in 1907 of the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste, the opening of the École d'enseignement supérieur pour les filles a year later, the mushrooming of women's study circles, and finally in 1923 the founding of the Institut de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil this paper traces the unfolding of the nun-lay woman relationship and highlights the ways it served feminism. At the same time, it shows how the relationship and the limits of co-operation between feminists and nuns were defined not only by the two parties involved but also by forces fighting against changes in the occupational and political status of women. Threatened by women's demands for equality and by their actual intellectual achievements, the Church hierarchy and its political allies tried to discourage nuns from sympathizing with feminists by suggesting that the interests of religion were at odds with women's emancipation. But before examining these themes, it is necessary to scan the activities of nuns and lay women on the eve of the feminist movement.

One-sixth of the 6,500 nuns working in the province of Quebec at the turn of the twentieth century ministered to the social needs of Montreal's growing female population.³ For instance, the Sisters of Miséricorde and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd gave refuge to unwed mothers. The Sisters of Providence and the Grey Nuns ran daycare centres for working mothers, boarding homes for the aged, taught primary schools and educated the blind and the deaf. As rural migration to Montreal intensified and industrial production and commerce in the city diversified, religious communities took on new responsibilities. In 1895, Sister Pelletier, a Grey Nun, opened Le Patronage d'Youville, where rural emigrants were given shelter as well as some training in domestic science. Responding to social change as well, the Congregation of Notre Dame and the Sisters of the Holy Name of Jesus and Mary in the 1880s added typing and stenography to the curriculum in their academies.⁴

² Micheline DUMONT-JOHNSON, "Les communautés religieuses et la condition féminine", *Recherches sociographiques*, XIX (janvier-avril 1978): 79-102; Marta DANY-LEWYCYZ, "Taking the Veil in Montreal, 1850-1920: An Alternative to Migration, Motherhood and Spinsterhood", paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, June 1978, London, Ontario; Danielle JUTEAU LEE, "Les religieuses du Québec: leur influence sur la vie professionnelle des femmes, 1908-1954", *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal*, 5 (Spring 1980): 29-33.

³ Bernard DENAULT, "Sociographie générale des communautés religieuses au Québec (1837-1970)", in Bernard DENAULT et Benoît LÉVESQUE, *Éléments pour une sociologie des communautés religieuses au Québec* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal; Sherbrooke: Les Presses de l'Université de Sherbrooke, 1975), pp. 15-117.

⁴ For a general survey of the work of female religious communities see *Le Diocèse de Montréal à la fin du 19^e siècle* (Montréal: Eusèbe Senécal, 1900).

Next to the powerful, dynamic, and well-organized religious communities, francophone lay women occupied a marginal place in social service. Theirs was a supportive role. With the exception of the enterprising handful who headed charitable associations and created half-way houses for the destitute and the needy, the majority participated in philanthropic activity as assistants to religious women. The buildup of religious forces in philanthropy was set in motion in the 1840s and 1850s during Mgr Ignace Bourget's administration. Committed to building a powerful Church, Bourget encouraged French religious communities, then under attack by the French state, to pull up their stakes and to migrate to Quebec. Several orders responded. Bourget nurtured religious vocations in Quebec as well, and coaxed lay women active in benevolence to place themselves and their work under his rule. After many years of caring for sick and homeless women, widow Émelie Tavernier-Gamelin took Mgr Bourget's advice and founded the Sisters of Providence. Similarly, Mme Rosalie Cadron-Jetté, who gave refuge to unwed mothers and shelter to abandoned infants, exchanged her lay apostolate for a religious vocation. She called herself and her newly established community the Sisters of Miséricorde.⁵

At times lay teachers and providers of charity took the initiative in forming religious communities and inadvertently strengthened clerical control in social service and education. Esther Blondin, a teacher and principal of a boarding school and former novice of the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame, used her administrative and pedagogical skills to form the Sisters of St Anne in 1850 just as a former student of the Congregation, Eulalie Durocher, had done seven years earlier in establishing the Sisters of the Holy Name of Jesus and Mary. Under less favourable circumstances in the remote region of Rimouski, the order of the Sisters of the Holy Rosary was founded in 1880. Louise Turgeon conceived and persistently built, despite Mgr Langevin's opposition, a community devoted to the education of rural children.⁶ At other times, insolvency sounded the knell of lay women's associations and facilitated religious control. Consider the case of the Montreal Orphanage. Founded in 1832 by the Ladies of Charity in the wake of the cholera epidemic that left many children parentless, it remained under their care for fifty years. In the 1880s mounting and seemingly unresolvable financial difficulties led to the resignation of

⁵ Élie J. AUCLAIR, *Histoire des Sœurs de Miséricorde de Montréal* (Montréal: Imprimerie des Sourds-Muets, 1928); Léon POULIOT, *Monseigneur Bourget et son temps*, 5 tomes, Tome 3, *Évêque de Montréal* (Montréal: Éd. Bellarmin, 1972): 63-73; and Tome 2, *Évêque de Montréal, première partie* (Montréal: Éd. Bellarmin, 1979): 86-109. For a corrective to Pouliot's interpretation of the role Mgr Bourget played in the establishment of women's religious communities see Marguerite JEAN, s.c.i.m., *Évolution des communautés religieuses de femmes au Canada de 1639 à nos jours* (Montréal: Fides, 1977), pp. 79-92. As yet little is known about the impact of Mgr Bourget's policy of encouraging the expansion of religious communities on lay activism. It remains to be seen whether he supported all types of Catholic charitable activities or whether, in building up the "clerical labour force", he consciously thwarted lay women's initiative in social service.

⁶ Frédéric LANGEVIN, s.j., *Mère Marie Anne, Fondatrice de l'Institut des Sœurs de Ste Anne, 1809-1890: Esquisse biographique* (Montréal: n.p., 1935); Albert TESSIER, *Les Sœurs des Petites Écoles* (Rimouski: Maison-mère des Sœurs de Notre-Dame-du-Rosaire, 1962).

its managers, Elmire and Delphine Morin. With their departure, the orphanage was entrusted to the Grey Nuns.⁷

The domination of social services by the Church was favoured also by the half-hearted involvement of lay women in, or their intermittent absences from, charitable work. Disinterest, apathy, family commitments and child rearing, or simply the attitude among some middle-class women that "that hardest and most unpleasant task" of ministering to the poor could be left to the sisters, reinforced religious control.⁸

Just as all these personal and political factors seemed to guarantee religious hegemony in the social and educational sphere, lay women began voicing their discontent with their self- and socially imposed roles. They looked to the feminist movement, around which women in similar predicaments but under different political and religious systems were rallying. In 1893, *Le Coin du Feu*, a pioneering woman's magazine, took Quebec society by surprise by demanding "un regain du prestige de la femme".⁹ In addition to exploring ways in which women could improve their social and political status, Joséphine Dandurand, its editor, gave speeches to audiences of lay and religious women.¹⁰ In them she urged that a new, more equal relationship between the two be developed, denying that her services in benevolence were as an auxiliary and second-class participant. Readers of *Le Coin du Feu* shared and elaborated upon Dandurand's concerns. While nursing her youngest child, Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie, who became Montreal's leading feminist and a self-educated legal expert, mull-ed over the idea of transforming every woman's home into "un bureau d'affaires, un atelier, une étude, soit des professions libérales, de la science ou des arts".¹¹ Absolutely committed to her role as homemaker and mother, she nevertheless refused to be enslaved by it and to become "un être déformé, une créature manquée".¹² Single women also expressed the need for change. Robertine Barry, journalist, editor of *Le Journal de Françoise*, feminist, and later factory inspector, was the antithesis of the "spinster of yesteryear", the recluse who lived in the shadows of her parents or siblings. Donning a professional cloak, Barry championed the cause of women's emancipation and welcomed the political and social changes she believed would improve the condition of single women.¹³

⁷ Marie-Claire DAVELUY, *L'Orphelinat Catholique de Montréal* (Montréal: Éd. Albert Lévesque, 1933), pp. 17-128.

⁸ Thérèse CASGRAIN, *A Woman in a Man's World* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 17; for a glimpse of the life of one married woman see Mme F.-L. BÉRIQUE, *Quatre-vingts ans de souvenir: Histoire d'une famille* (Montréal: Éd. Bernard Valiquette, 1939), pp. 40-57.

⁹ "Ce que nous ne serons pas", *Le Coin du Feu*, 1, 1 (janvier 1893): 2.

¹⁰ See Joséphine Dandurand's speeches to nuns and lay women in Joséphine DANDURAND, "Le féminisme", in her *Nos travers* (Montréal: Beauchemin 1901), pp. 218-29; "Chronique", *Le Coin du Feu*, 2, 5 (mai 1893): 130.

¹¹ Archives de l'Institut de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil (hereafter AINDBC), Brouillons de lettres, Marie Gérin-Lajoie à Léonie Morel, juillet 1903.

¹² AINDBC, Marie GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Une pensée par jour (pages du journal de Maman, 1892-1898)", cahier manuscrit, 29 mars 1898.

¹³ FRANÇOISE, "Vieilles Filles", *Le Journal de Françoise*, 4, 13 (7 octobre 1905): 198-99; Robertine BARRY, *Chroniques du lundi* (Montréal: n.p. n.d.), pp. 318-22; for a biogra-

The overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, disease, unemployment and poverty that accompanied the transformation of Montreal from a commercial centre to a sprawling, industrial metropolis in the last decades of the nineteenth century threatened to tear apart the fragile social fabric. The prospect of urban decay and growing incidents of labour unrest alerted the middle and upper classes to social reform, forcing them to institute more extensive and effective methods of alleviating social distress. As changing material conditions led to new forms of public assistance, they opened avenues of action for women who felt constricted by their assigned sphere. Gérin-Lajoie, Barry and Dandurand, who were the first to voice publicly their discontent with prescribed roles, seized the opportunity provided by the vacuum of social reform.¹⁴ Their speeches popularized the plight of the working woman, called for protective legislation, demanded an improvement of working conditions, and proposed the creation of working women's associations. At the same time, to make good their commitment to help the poor and the exploited, they demanded greater political and legal rights for themselves. "Secourir les humbles, aller vers ceux qui jusqu'ici sont restés sans défense; se mettre au service des opprimés et donner par là une expression nouvelle à la charité"¹⁵ was possible only if women had the legal and political means at their disposal to implement and enforce social reform.

This process of politicization among the privileged few generated the formation of a feminist ideology. It also provoked a re-evaluation of the nun-lay woman relationship and the questioning of the former's dominance in charitable work. Gérin-Lajoie, Dandurand and Barry couched their arguments against the status quo and in favour of an equal partnership between lay women and nuns in religious terms. Just as their arguments for women's rights were marked by an appeal to justice and to the Christian message of salvation, their claims to reform and voluntary benevolence invoked the virtue of charity. As charity was central to the Church's social mission, so were women. Both, feminists contended, were the bread and breath of life.¹⁶ The idea that all women were naturally disposed to charitable work removed a barricade that in late nineteenth-century Quebec consigned lay women to a secondary place in philanthropic work.

phical sketch of Robertine Barry see Renée DES ORMES, *Robertine Barry en littérature: Française. Pionnière du journalisme au Canada 1863-1910* (Québec: L'Action Sociale, 1949).

¹⁴ In one of her first public statements Marie Gérin-Lajoie made the connection between feminism and changing material conditions. Mme GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Le mouvement féministe", in *The Annual Report of the National Council of Women of Canada* (Ottawa, 1896), p. 287. Recent studies of the feminist movement have taken their cue from nineteenth-century feminists and have shown how a resolve to remedy the ills of industrial capitalism and a realization that participation in reform required the expansion of existing roles spurred the formation of the feminist movement. PINARD, "Les débuts du mouvement des femmes", and LAVIGNE, PINARD and STODDART, "The Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste".

¹⁵ Marie GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Entre Nous", *La Bonne Parole*, 3, 12 (février 1916): 2.

¹⁶ Marie GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Fin d'année", *Le Journal de Française*, 2, 18-19 (19 décembre 1903): 234-35; FRANÇOISE, "La charité canadienne", *Le Journal de Française*, 5, 1 (7 avril 1906): 2-4.

It also invalidated and erased the distinctions that had evolved between lay and religious work. Regardless of one's vocation, ministering to the spiritual and corporal needs of society derived from the single source of charity, which all women shared.

This notion of a united women's front had significant implications. Not only did it strengthen the lay woman's self-esteem and confidence in her ability as a social guardian, it also gave her a sense of identity, a history, and a feeling of belonging to a long tradition of activism. Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie was convinced of the necessity of uniting lay and religious benevolence under the single banner of "l'initiative féminine", the underpinning of which was charity, and warned of the negative effects of such divisions:

Nous nous nuirions singulièrement les femmes quand nous parlons de nos œuvres, si nous en excluons celles des religieuses, et si nous voulions échapper aux mérites que leurs institutions font rejaillir sur tout notre sexe.¹⁷

She believed that defining women's work along "vocational lines" deprived French-Canadian women of a collective past and dulled their perception of their strengths and potentialities. Treating lay and religious women as separate entities, speaking of nuns and of their accomplishments in exclusively religious terms, negated the feminist impulse, that instinctive concern for, and identification with, the destitute and the needy, that united and led women to work for the betterment of humanity.

Women who shared Gérin-Lajoie's concerns and wanted to give women back their history searched the past, re-examining the lives of prominent religious women like Marguerite Bourgeoys, Marie de l'Incarnation, and Marguerite d'Youville from a feminist perspective. They used the achievements of Saints Gertrude, Roswintha and Hilda, famous abbesses of the past, and of the renowned medieval scholar St. Catherine, as double-edged swords to ward off the clerics' religious arguments for sexual discrimination and the self-styled experts on feminine psychology who depicted woman's nature as too delicate and too emotional to withstand the stress of political and professional life.¹⁸ By the same token they situated their political concerns in a tradition of Catholic feminism.

The tendency to seek legitimacy for women's rights in religion and to ferret out names and incidents from the immediate and more distant past persisted well after lay women had established their hegemony in charitable work and social reform. The portrayal of nuns and holy women as fellow workers in the "secular city" and as exemplars of the as yet untapped potential of most women, spilled into pro-suffrage propaganda. Feminists mocked the ludicrous yet perversely powerful argument that voting would corrupt women by reminding their opponents that nuns routinely elected their superiors. If history has proven that nuns had not

¹⁷ GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Fin d'année", p. 233; she made the same point more poignantly in AINDBC, Marie Gérin-Lajoie à Léonie Morel, janvier 1903.

¹⁸ BARRY, *Chroniques du lundi*, p. 308; "Entre Nous: Le suffrage des femmes", *La Bonne Parole*, 11, 11 (novembre 1921): 3-4; YVONNE, "La condition privée de la femme", *Le Coin du Feu*, 11, 12 (décembre 1894): 359.

thereby lost their "ressemblance à leur pur modèle, la très Ste. Vierge"¹⁹ — a proposition no one dared question — then surely electing representatives to parliament and municipal governments would not debase lay women. Robertine Barry used a similar tactic when she wondered "ce que Nos Seigneurs les évêques auraient répondu à une députation féminine demandant à assister au concile qui s'est tenu dernièrement à Montréal"²⁰ in light of the fact that women had participated in the synods of the medieval Church. The implication of her musing was clear: women in the "Dark Ages" had been allowed a greater voice in the governing of the Church (and, in the medieval context, of society as well) than their lay counterparts in contemporary Quebec.

The feminists' interpretation of charity and women's history subverted the traditional norms denying lay women the right to a political and intellectual life while their organizational activity expanded the lay women's sphere of influence and over time integrated the religious women into a feminist praxis. In 1893 Dandurand, Gérin-Lajoie and Barry, with a handful of other bourgeois francophone women, joined the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC). In its Montreal local, they co-operated with Anglophones on a number of fronts. The actual battles they waged to win political rights for women and the reforms they sought to introduce in the work place provided francophone women with badly needed experience in social activism and apprenticeship in leadership. At the same time, wives and daughters of Quebec's leading politicians and financiers formed a women's section of the Association St-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal, a French-Canadian nationalist association. Although originally recruited to help raise funds for the building of a national monument, they soon expanded their mandate to educational matters.²¹ In 1906 they founded the École Ménagère de Montréal. For two years, Antoinette Gérin-Lajoie and Jeanne Anctil, subsidized by the women's section of the Association, studied domestic science in France and Switzerland. Upon their return, they became the school's first principals and trained many of the province's future domestic science teachers.²²

A decade of participation in the NCWC brought francophone women to the realization that a Catholic and French association was necessary to build support for women's rights in Quebec. The Council's brand of patriotism and such chauvinistic pronouncements by anglophone feminists as "I am English and Canadian, and as long as it is one and the same thing I will not have it separated", "it is because Canada is British that

¹⁹ "Notre Courrier", *La Bonne Parole*, 4, 3 (mai 1918): 14.

²⁰ BARRY, *Chroniques du lundi*, p. 308.

²¹ LAVIGNE, PINARD and STODDART, "The Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste", pp. 73-74.

²² The events leading up to the creation of the École ménagère were reported by Marie DE BEAUJEU in *Le Journal de Françoise*: "Les Écoles ménagères", 5, 9 (9 août 1906): 131-33; "La popularité des écoles ménagères", 5, 10 (18 août 1906): 151-53; "L'Utilité des écoles ménagères", 10, 11 (1^{er} septembre 1906): 166-68; for the cursory history of Montreal's École ménagère, see BÉRIQUE, *Quatre-vingts ans*, pp. 244-57.

I am so full of patriotism”²³ discomforted the French-speaking minority. No doubt these and similar remarks were on Gérin-Lajoie’s mind when justifying her disagreement with the Council’s position that unity among women was the overriding priority, she noted that “nos mœurs, nos idées, notre langue, tout est différent; notre race a une vraie personnalité qui lui permet d’être bonne camarade mais lui défend de s’assimiler”.²⁴ Despite its non-denominational orientation, the Protestant character of the NCWC presented another problem to Francophones. Although Dandurand and Gérin-Lajoie had no qualms about co-operating with women of other denominations, they knew they could not expect Catholic philanthropic associations to link up with the Council’s organizational network. Indeed, the Council drew no francophone association into its fold.

Although the formation in 1907 of the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste created an alternative to the National Council of Women and to the women’s section of the Association St-Jean-Baptiste politically it remained close to them. Organized and directed by francophone women, the Fédération rested on a foundation that fused the diverse influence and traditions to which lay women as activists had been exposed. Naming the Fédération in honour of Quebec’s patron saint situated the women’s rights campaigns and social reform in a French and Catholic context. Similarly, it seemed to indicate that the preoccupations of the women’s section of the Association St-Jean Baptiste were now those of the Fédération. A co-ordinating agency that consolidated and expanded ongoing efforts in charity, education and social service, the Fédération was modelled upon the National Council of Women’s organizational structure. Moreover, like its antecedent, the Fédération deliberately avoided the contentious issue of suffrage before firmly establishing a connection between social reform and women’s rights.²⁵ Finally, the Fédération formalized the nun-lay woman partnership as feminists had defined it and drew convents along with their ancillary institutions into its organizational structure. Over half of the twenty-two groups that affiliated with the Fédération were controlled by nuns. Although these groups, as all the others, retained their independence, they became eligible for, and over time dependent on, the monies the Fédération raised during its annual drives. The nuns who administered these charitable institutions automatically became members of the Fédération.²⁶

²³ *The Annual Report of the National Council of Women of Canada* (Ottawa, 1896), p. 80.

²⁴ AINDBC, Marie Gérin-Lajoie à M^{lle} Morel, 22 décembre 1905.

²⁵ LAVIGNE, PINARD and STODDART, “The Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste”, pp. 73-78; see the programme of the first congress and the discussions leading up to it: Archives Nationales du Québec à Montréal, “Extrait du livre de minutes de l’Exécutif de la Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste”, cahier n° 1, 19 octobre 1906 — 20 mai 1907.

²⁶ For a breakdown of the types of organizations that federated in 1907 see Micheline DUMONT-JOHNSON, “History of the Status of Women in the Province of Quebec”, in *Cultural Tradition and Political History of Women in Canada. Study no. 8* (Ottawa: Royal Commission on the Status of Women, 1971), p. 24; the first page of each issue of *La Bonne Parole*, which began publication in 1912, listed member organizations; see also Marie GÉRIN-LAJOIE’s discussion of the Fédération’s structure and purpose, *La Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste*, *L’École Sociale Populaire*, 5 (Montréal, 1911).

Teaching nuns, accompanied by their older students, and nuns representing the affiliated charitable institutions attended the annual congresses of the Fédération. Their presence did not pass unnoticed:

Parmi elles [participantes] figuraient un grand nombre de religieuses; leur présence faisait sentir les solides liens qui unissent dans des aspirations communes toutes les âmes de bonne volonté; il était touchant ce spectacle de laïques et de religieuses s'unissant dans des séances d'études pour se perfectionner dans la science de la charité et augmenter au sein de notre société la fécondité de leur apostolat.²⁷

At the plenary sessions during the early years of the Fédération's existence, however, they remained silent and spoke only through lay intermediaries.

There are a few possible explanations for this apparent lack of participation. Caroline Béique, one of the Fédération's founding members, suggested it was the timidity of nuns that kept them from the platform.²⁸ It is also possible that within the framework of the Fédération nuns saw themselves as back-benchers whose role was merely to support and at times advise the lay leadership. Reluctance to speak could have been provoked in part as well by the "paternal" advice of the clergy. Given its conservatism, it is not unreasonable to assume that the clergy deemed it improper for a veiled woman to address a public gathering. If indeed clerical intervention put a damper on participation, this would help explain the persistent contradiction between the nuns' apparent silence and their frequent assurances to Gérin-Lajoie of willingness to play an active role during the congresses.²⁹

Notwithstanding the behaviour of religious women at the congresses or their perceptions of their roles in the Fédération — important considerations but difficult to elaborate on the basis of available literature — communities did develop working relationships with its lay membership. The Grey Nuns, the Sisters of Providence, and the Sisters of Miséricorde are cases in point. Their crèches, half-way houses and orphanages came under the Fédération's umbrella. Their members frequently attended the educational meetings on childcare, hygiene and prenatal care organized by lay women. Similarly, the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame offered their premises for the Fédération's meetings and rallies and, as will be shown subsequently, worked closely and systematically with feminists and lay activists in creating new educational opportunities for women. When the Fédération launched a campaign in 1912 to reduce the staggering rate of infant mortality, the Grey Nuns helped in the distribution of pasteurized milk to poor families and operated milk stations in the neighbourhoods with the highest death rate. Individual nuns also supported the work of the Fédération by urging students and friends to join it, dis-

²⁷ "Chroniques des œuvres", *La Bonne Parole*, 5, 2-3 (avril 1917): 2.

²⁸ BÉIQUE, *Quatre-vingts ans*, p. 257.

²⁹ Archives Nationales du Québec à Montréal, "Extrait du livre de minutes de l'Exécutif de la Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste", cahier n° 1, 1^{er} mai 1909, et cahier n° 2, 2 mars 1912.

seminating its literature, and soliciting funds and subscriptions for its journal, *La Bonne Parole*.³⁰

Nuns and feminists combined forces on other issues of the day. The "domestic crisis", the shortage of properly trained domestics and the need for better and more efficient housekeeping, troubled both. Collectively they developed domestic science programmes and through them proselytized on proper mothering and efficient household management. Whether training in domestic science produced dependable servants for the households of the bourgeoisie and for the mother houses of the prosperous religious communities remains unclear. Nor is it certain that it raised the standard of mothering. In the long run, however, such training limited the educational opportunity of lower-class women and directed them into domestic occupations and low-paying factory work.³¹

The most sustained and far-reaching effort to unite feminists and nuns was the founding in 1908 of the *École d'enseignement supérieur pour les filles*, renamed *Le Collège Marguerite Bourgeoys* in 1926. Its creation demanded the co-operation of all who were committed to extending higher education to upper- and middle-class francophone women, and pitted nuns and feminists against priests and politicians who feared the consequences of change. The programme of the college and the study circle movement it spawned, in turn provided the *Fédération* with a means of influencing and training the next generation of feminists.

Le Coin du Feu, the first women's magazine, and *Chroniques de lundi*, Robertine Barry's weekly column in *La Patrie*, were the first to broach the issue of higher education for women. They monitored and reported the strides that women were making in the United States, Europe and the neighbouring provinces in Canada and juxtaposed them to the lack of commensurate progress in Quebec.³² Barry, Dandurand and Gérin-Lajoie, the most ardent campaigners for greater educational and professional opportunity, used a variety of methods to prod the consciousness of men. Like feminists elsewhere, they tried to awaken a sense of justice and fair play and expressed disdain for those who protected privilege and acquiesced to injustice. They vowed to bring about change and mocked men who feared competition from women. "Si la terreur de se voir égalés ou surpassés les inspirent, qu'ils nous permettent encore une fois de calmer

³⁰ For examples of nuns and lay women co-operating see *ibid.*, cahier n° 1, 11 avril 1907, cahier n° 2, 26 juin 1909, 2 mars 1912, cahier n° 3, 28 septembre 1912, 19 avril 1913, 13 décembre 1913; the Congregation of Notre Dame made the following remark about co-operation between the community and lay women: "Nous avons senti ensemble l'obligation de marcher la main dans la main avec toutes les œuvres catholiques et militantes." Archives des Sœurs de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame (hereafter ACND), *Annales de la Maison Mère*, 24, 5 (mai 1918): 615-16.

³¹ For a history of the école ménagère movement see BÉRIQUE, *Quatre-vingts ans*, pp. 244-64; Albert TESSIER, *Souvenirs en vrac* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1975); Albert TESSIER, "Les écoles ménagères au service du foyer", in *Québécoises*, ed.: JEAN, pp. 160-66.

³² BARRY, *Chroniques du lundi*, pp. 307-8; Joséphine DANDURAND, "Les Professions féminines", *Le Coin du Feu*, 4, 8 (août 1896): 224-25.

leurs larmes.”³³ Occasionally they invoked nationalistic pride and enlisted it in their barrage of assaults against educational inequality. They argued that sexual discrimination in education inhibited the French-Canadian middle class in its quest for leadership and prestige in Canada. Raising the spectre of inferiority, suggesting that there might be some validity to the slur that Quebec was backward, Gérin-Lajoie reminded her opponents that “chaque année à l'étranger et plus près de nous chez nos sœurs anglo-saxonnes une élite de femmes se forme, qui entraîne la race entière vers un idéal toujours plus élevé et des destinées plus hautes”.³⁴ She assumed that, regardless of their opinions on female education, most of her contemporaries associated education with progress. With half of the nation chained by reason of gender to ignorance, her verdict was that the French race would not fare well in the international arena.

Besides engaging in polemics, feminists took matters into their own hands whenever the opportunity presented itself. As part of her effort to raise the level of feminine participation in intellectual life, Dandurand convinced lay and religious teachers to encourage students to submit their essays to literary contests sponsored by the NCWC. Winning essays were printed in *Le Coin du Feu*. Similarly, through Dandurand's initiative, a book-lending system giving rural women access to library materials was organized, women were granted the right to sit on the council of the National Library, and in 1904 they were given permission to audit literature courses at Laval University.³⁵

Finally, feminists made overtures to nuns seeking their support and advice. Robertine Barry spoke to nuns first through her column in *La Patrie*, and after 1902 through *Le Journal de Françoise*, her bimonthly publication. Recalling the distant days when convents were “des pépinières de femmes érudites”, she urged nuns to revive the golden past by establishing women's classical colleges and raising the standards in their schools to equip young women with the skills necessary for work and university. She also hoped that greater occupational opportunity would accompany educational reform and specifically requested that nuns make room for lay women professors in their academies and institutions of higher learning.³⁶ A plethora of suggestions coming from other women filled the pages of

³³ Joséphine DANDURAND, “Les femmes savantes”, *Le Coin du Feu*, 4, 1 (janvier 1896): 4.

³⁴ Marie GÉRIN-LAJOIE, “De l'Enseignement Supérieur pour les Femmes”, *Le Journal de Françoise*, 4, 16 (18 novembre 1905): 246; Joséphine DANDURAND made the same point in “Culture intellectuelle” in her *Nos Travers*, p. 18.

³⁵ Mention of Joséphine Dandurand's activities was made in “Le Concours Littérature”, *Le Coin du Feu*, 4, 5 (mai 1896): 141; Joséphine DANDURAND, “Chronique — Un projet”, *Le Coin du Feu*, 4, 1 (janvier 1896): 404-5; Joséphine DANDURAND, “La Bibliothèque Publique”, *Le Journal de Françoise*, 1, 9 (26 juillet 1902): 98-99; at times it was simply noted that “Le prix que Mme Dandurand donne chaque année au Couvent de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame de cette ville pour la correction du langage a été gagné cette année par Mlle Jeannette d'Orsonnens”, *Le Coin du Feu*, 4, 7 (juillet 1896): 209.

³⁶ FRANÇOISE, “Les Jeunes Filles dans les bureaux”, *Le Journal de Françoise*, 2, 23 (21 février 1903): 269-70; FRANÇOISE, “Cours d'enseignement supérieur pour les jeunes filles”, *Le Journal de Françoise*, 7, 14 (17 octobre 1908): 218.

Barry's magazine as well. One contributor gave teaching communities the example of the innovative and avant-garde nun, Mme Marie du Sacré Cœur, who had opened a women's Catholic college in France.³⁷ As the issue dragged on, Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie dispensed with subtle hints and asked bluntly:

Pourquoi une de nos maisons religieuses ne remplirait-elle pas auprès de Laval les fonctions des sœurs de Notre-Dame de Namur auprès de l'université de Washington? Pourquoi l'une d'entre elles ne consentirait-elle pas à suivre après le pensionnat la jeune fille studieuse que le monde ne prend pas toute entière? L'Église a toujours soutenu que l'éducation était sienne, dans ce pays d'ailleurs, que n'a-t-elle pas fait pour cette sainte cause?³⁸

Besides goading nuns through the press, feminists also regularly discussed educational matters with them. The diary of Sister St Anaclet, the assistant to the superior general in the 1890s and superior general from 1903 to 1912 of the Congregation of Notre Dame, indicates that Gérin-Lajoie had her community in mind when she asked embarrassing questions and published an outline of a tentative college curriculum in *Le Journal de Française*. In May 1897 a delegation of lay women met with Sister St Anaclet and her companion Sister St Olivine to discuss higher education. The next day Sister St Anaclet recorded that Ernestine Marchand, the convent's student and Dandurand's relative, "est venue et a répété de bonnes impressions que Mme Dandurand a emportées de sa visite".³⁹ The favourable impression she and her colleague made on their visitors seemed to matter. Moreover, Ernestine Marchand's comment to Sister St Anaclet suggests that no major differences on the question of female education divided the lay women and these two sisters. According to Sister St Anaclet, Gérin-Lajoie also dropped in regularly on her own, at times to check on her daughter's progress in school as well as to remind teaching sisters of her intention to send her daughter to college, if not in Quebec then in the United States or Europe. Other visits were occasioned by Gérin-Lajoie's decision to write a handbook on civil law. Before publishing the text, she solicited Sister St Anaclet's advice, and the two spent hours discussing the manuscript.⁴⁰ In 1902, when *Le Traité de Droit Usuel* came off the press, the community requested that Gérin-Lajoie teach law to its older students. Finally, when plans for the founding of the École Ména-gère de Montréal were underway, Caroline Béique, Marie Thibodeau and Marie de Beaujeu, who were instrumental in its establishment, met with Sister St Anaclet on a regular basis.⁴¹

The extent to which Sister St Anaclet supported the aspirations of her lay visitors is difficult to determine because of her discretion, which was part of a religious woman's ethos. But brief incidental remarks in the

³⁷ Marie GLOBENSKY PRÉVOST, "Une Contemporaine d'Élite", *Le Journal de Française*, 2, 17 (5 décembre 1903): 218-19.

³⁸ Marie GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "De l'Enseignement Supérieur pour les Femmes", *Le Journal de Française*, 4, 15 (4 novembre 1905): 227-30, and 4, 16 (18 novembre 1905): 244-46.

³⁹ ACND, Journal de Mère St. Anaclet, 1894-1912, 5 cahiers manuscrits, cahier n° 2, 22 et 23 mai 1897.

⁴⁰ Ibid., cahier n° 2, 14 et 28 janvier, 13 février 1902.

⁴¹ Ibid., cahier n° 4, 22 mars, 3 juin 1905, 17 avril 1906.

diary suggest that moments of unspoken rapport existed between the hostess and her guests. Hearing one of Gérin-Lajoie's lectures, she exclaimed: "quelle femme". Having read a text that degraded women, she simply wrote: "Toute réserve faite de notre [women's] dignité, n'est-ce pas ça l'histoire du chien?"⁴² More important, during and a few years prior to her administration, a coterie of the Congregation's sisters headed by Sister St Anne Marie were negotiating with Mgr Bruchési, the archbishop of Montreal, for a women's college.

Sister St Anne Marie, the oldest daughter of Guillaume Bengle and Philomène Pion-Lafontaine and the niece of Sister St Luce, a powerful and highly regarded member of the community, joined the Congregation in 1879. After an inauspicious beginning as a teaching sister in Sherbrooke, she returned to the mother-house in Montreal. There, as a teacher in Mont Ste Marie, one of the most prestigious boarding schools offering a complete programme in elementary and secondary education, she proved to be an exceptionally talented pedagogue and administrator. In 1897 she became the school's assistant principal and six years later its principal.⁴³ Sympathetic to feminist concerns, Sister St Anne Marie began to lay the groundwork for a women's college in the 1890s. Quietly, with the moral support of abbé Henri Gauthier, the community's chaplain, and that of the Congregation's governing council, she introduced philosophy, chemistry and law into Mont Ste Marie's high-school curriculum. In order to prepare teaching sisters for their future task as college teachers, she founded a chair of literary studies and asked Laval University professors to become its visiting lecturers. Corresponding with academics in Europe, she studied literature under their direction. In 1913, she passed the *licence en philosophie*, which qualified her as a college professor.⁴⁴

Reactions in the community to Sister St Anne Marie's initiative were mixed. Nuns with close ties to feminists were supportive and hoped that "son exemple ne reste pas stérile". Others were outraged by her "modernism" and applauded the efforts of the clergy to hold back the tide of change.⁴⁵ But, as in all major educational decisions involving religious communities, the fate of the college rested in the bishop's hands. Mgr Bruchési, who had impressed Gérin-Lajoie during her discussions with him about the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste as favourably disposed to women's concerns,⁴⁶ in this instance behaved most indecisively, one day agreeing with Sister St Anne Marie's proposal and the next suggesting that implementing it was premature. For years the waltz continued. Bru-

⁴² *Ibid.*, cahier n° 4, 14 janvier 1907, et cahier n° 1, 8 mars 1896.

⁴³ *À la mémoire de Mère Ste. Anne Marie, Maîtresse Générale des Études de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame* (Montréal: Arbour et Dupont, 1938), pp. 1-30.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-36; Sœur Lucienne PLANTE, c.n.d., "La fondation de l'enseignement classique féminin au Québec" (Thèse de maîtrise, Université Laval, 1968), pp. 29-35.

⁴⁵ The official organ of the community congratulated Sister St Anne Marie in *Annales de la Maison Mère*, 19 (juin 1913): 120-21. At the same time there were sisters who disagreed with the changes she had introduced. PLANTE, "La fondation", pp. 50-52.

⁴⁶ AINDBC, Marie Gérin-Lajoie à Léonie Morel, 25 avril 1904; BÉRIQUE, *Quarante ans*, pp. 228-29.

chési's hesitation, however, ended abruptly. In April 1908 *La Patrie* announced that two Montreal journalists, Eva Circé Côté and Gaétane de Montreuil (Marie-Georgina Bélanger's pseudonym), were opening a *lycée* for girls on St Denis Street.⁴⁷ The "audacity" of these women did not sit well with the clergy. Not only did it show that some women had the courage to take matters into their own hands, but it also drove a wedge into the clerical monopoly of secondary and higher education in the province. It created an alternative to the collegiate system of higher education in Quebec and opened the possibility of graduating women into English and American universities. Intending to sabotage the *lycée*, Mgr Bruchési hastily approved Sister St Anne Marie's long-standing proposal. In turn, Sister St Anne Marie notified Montreal society through *La Semaine religieuse* that a women's college administered by the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame and affiliated to Laval University would be opening in September 1908. That fall, over forty students registered. Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie's daughter, Marie J. was one of them.⁴⁸

Given the circumstances under which approval was granted, the right to equal educational opportunity and access to professions still had to be won. As higher education became a possibility for a privileged few, various attempts were made to introduce new discriminatory measures and to reinforce existing ones. In his keynote address at the college's opening ceremony, Mgr Dauth, the vice-rector of Laval University, stressed that limitations must be imposed on women's scholarly pursuits:

Livrer trop largement les jeunes filles aux études abstraites, ne pas savoir leur doser prudemment la science selon la nature et la mesure de leur esprit, ne pas les immuniser contre le sot orgueil ou le vertige ... c'est les jeter en dehors de leur sphère et les engager dans une voie funeste, ... c'est en faire non plus les compagnes généreuses et dévouées de l'homme, mais les rivales encombrantes et dans tous les cas incompressibles.⁴⁹

Women's greater susceptibility to pride and their preordained social roles as companions rather than men's rivals dictated an approach to education that differed from the one employed in male colleges. While Dauth restricted his remarks on women's education to generalities, some of his colleagues entered into specifics. Appalled by Sister St Anne Marie's decision to adopt intact the programme used in male colleges, they questioned the validity of her choice and urged that she replace the masculine subjects of chemistry, physics, and even philosophy with "les matières féminines". Although Sister St Anne Marie remained steadfast in her decision to give women a *bona fide* college education, she still had to compromise her stance by scheduling a series of extra-academic activities like piano recitals, poetry readings, and afternoon teas. These "feminine activities" were

⁴⁷ PLANTE, "La fondation", pp. 57-60; FRANÇOISE, "Un Lycée de Jeunes Filles", *Le Journal de Françoise*, 7, 6 (20 juin 1908): 92.

⁴⁸ Sœur ST STANISLAS DE JÉSUS, c.n.d., "L'enseignement classique féminin en notre province", in *Québécoises*, ed.: JEAN, pp. 169-70.

⁴⁹ ACND, *L'Annuaire de l'École d'enseignement supérieur pour les filles* (Montréal: Imprimerie Congrégation de Notre-Dame, 1910), pp. 95-96.

meant to placate her critics who insisted women could not withstand the strain of uninterrupted intellectual work.⁵⁰

Further proof of discrimination was the lack of public support for the college. Its students were obliged to wage campaigns to convince French-Canadian society of the social merits of an educated female population, and Sister St Anne Marie had to rely on her ingenuity, the community's financial backing, and students' fees to keep the college afloat. None of the politicians or members of the Church hierarchy, who attended the school's annual assemblies and spoke so eloquently and adamantly about restricting women's educational experience to what was relevant to marriage and mothering, offered it financial support. In the final analysis, this miserly attitude compared to their generosity toward the developing domestic science programmes underscored the lack of support for higher education for women.⁵¹

Sister St Anne Marie's unflinching commitment may have guaranteed her students an equal education but like the more strident attempts by feminists, it was not enough to win women recognition for the fruits of their labour. A conspiracy of silence enveloped women's academic achievements. No mention was made of the fact that Marie J. Gérin-Lajoie, the first graduate of the *École d'enseignement supérieur*, came ahead of all her male competitors in provincial exams. In fact, Laval University hushed up this and similar "compromising incidents".⁵² It was unacceptable to have women, whose right to higher education was still being contested, outsmarting those who were allegedly superior to them. Uncharacteristically, the press overlooked these peculiar developments. On the other hand, it reported in great detail harangues levelled at "les femmes savantes", to say nothing of its critical coverage of feminist activities. Instead of projecting a more accurate and nuanced image of the changing roles of women, newspaper discussions of the *École d'enseignement supérieur* persisted in defining educated women either as gentle, self-effacing, knowledgeable "sans prétension" and, thereby, conforming to the ideal, or as haughty, desexed imitators of men, representing its opposite.⁵³

⁵⁰ PLANTE, "La fondation", pp. 50-53; interview with Florence Fernet-Martel, one of the first graduates of the college and a close friend of many sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame, 4 March 1980.

⁵¹ ACND, "Annales de l'École d'enseignement supérieur pour les filles", 1 (1908); ST STANISLAS DE JÉSUS, "L'enseignement classique", p. 173; former students of the *École d'enseignement supérieur* promoted higher education for women by conducting surveys and writing articles in its favour: Georgette LE MOYNE, "Entre Nous", *La Bonne Parole*, 7, 1 (mars 1919): 1-2; Marie J. GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Entre Nous — La femme et l'université", *La Bonne Parole*, 8, 3 (mars 1920): 1-2; Mme A. LESAGE-DÉROME, "Rapport du Congrès d'avril 1921: L'enseignement secondaire et la formation des classes dirigeantes", *La Bonne Parole*, 10, 9 (septembre 1922): 11-12.

⁵² Sœur STE MADELEINE DES ANGES, c.n.d., *Sœur Ste Théophanie c.n.d., 1875-1948* (Montréal: Imprimerie Congrégation de Notre-Dame, 1949), p. 41; PLANTE, "La fondation", p. 106; Sœur Lucienne PLANTE, "L'Enseignement classique chez les Sœurs de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame, 1908-1971" (Thèse de doctorat, Université Laval, 1971), pp. 285-86.

⁵³ Clippings of articles about college graduates can be found in "Annales de l'École d'enseignement supérieur", 5 (1912-13). See Henri BOURASSA's articles in *Le Devoir*, 22, 28 janvier, 7 avril, 7 mai 1913, 11 septembre 1917, 28 mars 1918.

Finally and more significantly, there was the concerted and combined effort of clerical and political forces to keep women out of the professions. More successful than the attempts to restrict women's educational opportunity, it exploited the vulnerability of nuns and sought to create divisions between them and lay women. From the day the college opened its door to its many convocations, collegiate women were told that their degrees, regardless of merit did not entitle them to the rights they bestowed on men. Women were not to undertake professional training in medicine, law, pharmacy and accounting. In turn, Sister St Anne Marie was instructed to keep her students in line and led to believe that, if they dared challenge the prescribed norms, she would lose her college. "Si vous voulez tuer le collège", was her answer to students who expressed interest in the forbidden professions.⁵⁴ In 1924, when Marthe Pellard, the first graduate to break with tradition, applied for medical training, Sister St Anne Marie apologized and expressed regret to the Laval administrators: "Daignez me permettre de vous faire part du regret que j'ai éprouvé en apprenant que l'une de nos élèves de l'École d'enseignement supérieur avait été admise à suivre les cours du médecine."⁵⁵ Instead of applause, consternation greeted Marthe Pellard's academic success.

Although Sister St Anne Marie had to tailor her response to the demands of feminists and to the ambitions of her students to accommodate the will of her male religious superiors, it is unlikely that she and the lay women who sought her support envisioned the consequences of educational and economic equality in the ways men did.⁵⁶ For feminists it meant giving women the opportunity to realize their intellectual and economic potential and a chance to contribute to society's welfare. In the minds of the male French-Canadian élite, women assuming "des fonctions lucratives jusqu'ici dévolues aux hommes"⁵⁷ conjured up images of women replacing men, patriarchal institutions crumbling, families disintegrating and women postponing or rejecting marriage altogether. Many years later, abbé Lionel Groulx, who taught history at the École d'enseignement supérieur and who had questioned the wisdom of Sister St Anne Marie's position on women's education, confessed that "on craignait que la femme n'acceptât plus le mariage et la famille une fois ses études universitaires terminées."⁵⁸ If for many men the elimination of sexual discrimination in the university and the workplace posed a threat to the social order, for the clergy in particular it spelled an added disaster, that of stem-

⁵⁴ Interview with Florence Fernet-Martel, 4 March 1980.

⁵⁵ ACND, "Annales de l'École d'enseignement supérieur", 16 (1923-24).

⁵⁶ Feminists sensed that fear of competition drove men to deny women equal rights. AINDBC, Marie Gérin-Lajoie à Léonie Morel, 2 mai 1902; Robertine BARRY made a similar observation in *Chroniques du lundi*, p. 307.

⁵⁷ Marie GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Le Travail chez la Femme", *Le Coin du Feu*, 1, 3 (mars 1893): 67-68. Incidentally Henri Bourassa used the same expression, "des fonctions lucratives jusqu'ici dévolues aux hommes", in one of his vitriolic attacks on feminism: quoted in Marie LAVIGNE and Jennifer STODDART, "Women's Work in Montreal at the Beginning of the Century", in *Women in Canada*, ed.: Marylee STEPHENSON (Toronto: General Publishing, 1977), p. 142.

⁵⁸ Quoted in PLANTE, "La fondation", p. 53.

ming the tide of religious vocations. Behind clerical confidence that Divine Providence was solely responsible for the many vocations in Quebec may well have lurked the suspicion that, with greater economic opportunities available to them, women might be less inclined to take the veil. Alphonse Pelletier, lawyer, Senator, Lieutenant-Governor and an adversary of women's rights, raised that very point to show the positive side of discrimination. In a letter to a sister of the Congregation of Notre Dame justifying his opposition to women practising law, he articulated the fears that the clergy might have been ashamed to admit openly:

Je crois plus que jamais que l'usage consacré, dans la province de Québec, au moins, de n'admettre que des hommes au Barreau est très sage, car s'il était permis à celles que l'on qualifie bien à tort de sexe faible, de pénétrer dans le temple de Themis, les communautés religieuses perdraient d'excellents sujets et ces pauvres avocats auraient à lutter contre des rivales qui les éclipseraient très souvent, et il est fort probable que vous [his correspondent] et ma chère Mère Pantaleon [his niece] auriez manqué votre vocation à la vie religieuse pour entrer au Barreau.⁵⁹

The "loss" of vocations among women would not only deplete the ranks of religious communities; it would also undermine the Church's dominance in social and educational affairs. A large female religious population was a pre-condition for clerical control and influence in society. Nuns provided the services upon which the hierarchy built a powerful Church. If the trend were reversed and there were few or no nuns to mediate between the hierarchy and the faithful, the Church would lose its control to lay voluntary or state organizations.

Thus the history of the first women's college, the fate of its graduates, and the reactions of Sister St Anne Marie to her students' career choices unfolded within the parameters of a patriarchal society whose protectors interpreted changes in women's economic and political roles in apocalyptic terms. Yet ways were found to circumvent the power of patriarchs. Their advice on the importance of being "male's companions" went unheeded. Half of the *École d'enseignement supérieur's* graduates never married. Many went into religious communities, combining a vocation with professional life. Others had taken Robertine Barry's requiem to yesterday's spinster to heart and staked "a place in the sun" for themselves. Few were as bold as Marthe Pellard, the first woman doctor certified in Quebec. The majority of graduates carved new niches for themselves in the world of feminine occupations. They became librarians, researchers, social workers, and full-time employees of women's associations and governmental agencies.⁶⁰

On another level the extra-curricular activities of the college brought feminists and collegiate women in close contact with one another, opening

⁵⁹ ACND, Correspondence, No. 19, A. P. Pelletier à Sœur Ste Henriette, 18 novembre 1903.

⁶⁰ PLANTE, "La fondation", p. 89, established that only fifty percent of those who graduated between 1912 and 1926 married. Her study also provides information on the careers of the college's graduates. ST STANISLAS DE JÉSUS, "L'enseignement classique", p. 171, reported that as of February 1954 only 676 out of the 1,494 women who graduated from women's colleges between 1912 and 1953 were married.

yet another avenue to the co-operation between nuns and feminists. The founding members of the Fédération were interested in developing and expanding the organization's educational and social service components, as well as in finding an effective method of recruitment into its ranks.⁶¹ The programme of the Cercle Notre Dame satisfied both needs. Founded in 1909 by the students of the École d'enseignement supérieur, its purpose was to enhance women's intellectual and social development. Its members met fortnightly to discuss and analyse selected topics in literature, history and the arts, or to study solutions to problems generated by urbanization and industrialization. At times, books were abandoned in order to gain first-hand knowledge of poverty. Circle members visited with, and offered their services to, the poor as teachers, mothers' helpers, and counsellors.⁶²

Encouragement from Sister St Anne Marie, the group's honorary president, and from the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste ensured the circle's survival, turning it into a permanent feature of the college. Collegiate women assisted by the Fédération promoted the creation of other study circles around which young women could organize "à acquérir une formation intellectuelle et sociale".⁶³ The idea of young women banding together to study and work took hold, and within a span of five years ten study circles were in operation. By 1916 nine of these circles federated into La Fédération des cercles d'études canadiennes-françaises. Like the women of the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste, activists drawn to the circles united to centralize and co-ordinate their work. Unity, it was hoped, would facilitate growth and further the organizational movement.⁶⁴

Between 1909 and 1925 the study circles stimulated a tremendous amount of research and discussion about the working class, infant mortality, poverty, education and trade unionism. The findings and the recommendations of the federated circles were reported in *La Bonne Parole*. To combat the ills of capitalism and to help those most affected by them, the study circles outlined a threefold approach: the promotion of popular education in the form of literacy courses, home visits and preaching of Catholic social doctrine from the pulpit and the press; the organization of working women into trade unions and professional organizations and the creation of mutual aid societies; and, in the last resort, state inter-

⁶¹ The programme of the Fédération's first congress covered the following issues: educational responsibility of mothers, domestic science education, condition of working women, protecting the morality of working women, preparing young girls for work. Archives Nationales du Québec à Montréal, "Extrait du livre de minutes de l'Exécutif de la Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste", cahier n° 1, 26-30 mai 1907; see also BÉTIQUE, *Quatre-vingts ans*, pp. 232-35; FRANÇOISE, "Le Congrès Féminin", *Le Journal de Française*, 6, 6 (15 juin 1907): 89-90.

⁶² For details of the circle's activities see reports in "Annales de l'École d'enseignement supérieur", 1-16 (1909-25).

⁶³ Marie J. GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Rapport de la journée d'études", *La Bonne Parole*, 10, 6 (juin 1922): 11.

⁶⁴ Georgette LE MOYNE, "Journée d'études", *La Bonne Parole*, 3, 2 (juin 1920): 3-5; Georgette LE MOYNE, "Les Cercles d'Études", *La Bonne Parole*, 8, 6 (juin 1920): 13-15; "Annales de l'École d'enseignement supérieur", 8 (1915-16).

vention to curb "les vices de notre organisation économique".⁶⁵ In other words, the study circles proposed a combination of social reform, moral regeneration and self-help.

Through their involvement in popular education, women's associations and unions, the publication of *La Bonne Parole*, and participation in *semaines sociales* (annual meetings devoted to a study of social problems), the study circles brought to bear on French-Canadian society the full current of Catholic social doctrine. More important perhaps, they, and particularly the Cercle Notre Dame, prepared the second generation of lay activists for leadership roles in the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste. Like the preceding one, this generation consisted primarily of upper-and middle-class women⁶⁶ whose aim was to expand the role of lay women in society. Some became full-time workers for the Fédération and sat on its central committee, others edited *La Bonne Parole*; some joined the Comité de suffrage provincial in 1921, and when it was disbanded, participated in the Ligue des droits de la femme, founded in 1928, others opened settlement houses for the poor and displaced.⁶⁷ The second generation altered the nature of social service in Quebec, transforming it from voluntary to professional work. While this evolution took years to complete, the recognition that charity alone would not overcome poverty and urban decay, and a concomitant adoption of a scientific approach to social problems made it inevitable.⁶⁸

A key figure in the professionalization of social work was Marie J. Gérin-Lajoie. Finishing her studies at the École d'enseignement supérieur, she travelled to France to study methods used there to organize and distribute relief. A few years later she moved to New York City to take an intensive course in social work at Columbia University. In the fall of 1919 she taught sociology and social work at the École d'enseignement supérieur, and in the years that followed developed a full programme of

⁶⁵ Marie J. GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Nos Raisons d'Agir", *La Bonne Parole*, 10, 10 (octobre 1922): 3; "Rapport du Cercle Notre-Dame", *La Bonne Parole*, 10, 4 (avril 1922): 13; "Rapport du Comité Central", *La Bonne Parole*, 10, 6 (juin 1922): 12-13; "Pour les Cercles d'Études", *La Bonne Parole*, 11, 4 (avril 1923): 12-13; for an explanation of the study circles' purpose and an examination of their activities see Marie J. GÉRIN-LAJOIE, *Les Cercles d'Études Féminins*, L'École Sociale Populaire, 52 (Montréal, 1916).

⁶⁶ The social background of 77 of the 125 women who graduated between 1911 and 1926 from l'École d'enseignement supérieur has been established by PLANTE, "La fondation", pp. 136-37. Their fathers' occupations were: accountant (3), businessman (25), civil servant (7), doctor (7), engineer (1), farmer (2), industrialist (4), insurance salesman (2), journalist (1), lawyer (6), hotel keeper (1), notary (15), plumber (1), school superintendent (1), travel agent (1).

⁶⁷ Among the regular contributors to *La Bonne Parole* were M. J. Gérin-Lajoie, Yvonne Charette, Georgette Le Moyne, Irène Lesage, Evaline Zappa, all graduates of the École d'enseignement supérieur. Georgette Le Moyne, Jeanne Baril, Aline Sénécal and M. J. Gérin-Lajoie were members of the Fédération's central committee; Florence Fernet worked for the passage of women's suffrage in Quebec; Georgette Le Moyne was a member of the Ligue des droits de la femme and accompanied Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie on her pro-suffrage mission to Rome.

⁶⁸ As M. J. GÉRIN-LAJOIE stated it in *La Bonne Parole*: "Les Femmes à la Semaine Sociale", 8, 9 (septembre 1920): 3; "Nos Raisons d'Agir", 10, 10 (octobre 1922): 3; "Comment une Oeuvre de Charité devient Sociale", 10, 12 (décembre 1922): 3.

study which the School of Social Work, established in 1931, adopted.⁶⁹ In the early 1920s she founded an order known as the Institut de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil, once again reaffirming the strong links between Quebec social feminism and religious life.

Marie J. Gérin-Lajoie's vocation was inseparable from a commitment to feminism, particularly to that strand of the movement which connected activism to reform, education and social work. Although her vocation took root during a retreat in 1911, it germinated slowly. Gérin-Lajoie studied, travelled, lectured, and worked on the central committee of the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste. In the summers of 1919 and 1921 she retreated with a group of friends who shared her concerns into the country to live communally and to experiment with self-organized religious life. In the peace and quiet of the Laurentians, "la journée se passait à de petits travaux, à des lectures, à des promenades. Le Chapelet se disait en commun et la prière le soir."⁷⁰ In the meantime, she approached religious communities already involved in social service and missionary work with the hope that at least one would be flexible enough to accept women like her, desiring to take vows of chastity and poverty but reluctant to adhere to the strict and often restrictive rules of convent life. The purpose of this peculiar group of nuns would be to ensure the stability of the recently formulated feminist projects. "Et qu'y aurait-il de plus désirable que ces personnes fussent des religieuses?" Gérin-Lajoie asked. Bound by chastity, "les inévitables obligations familiales", the lot of most women, would not dampen their zeal and dedication. When all attempts to find a community "assez souple pour aider aux œuvres nouvelles" failed, she requested the archbishop's permission to found a community of her own.⁷¹ Papal approbation came in 1923, but enclosed was also the stipulation that Marie J. Gérin-Lajoie forfeit some of her unorthodox ideas about religious life. The notion of purging it of all its excessive paraphernalia was unacceptable to the Church hierarchy and, as a matter of fact, probably equally unpalatable to many religious women as well. All the externals of religious life, the fastidiously tailored habit, the daily routine, even the cloister, provided the added measure of control over the lives of religious women. Working on the assumption that "virtue" and "zeal" were sufficient to religious life, Marie J. Gérin-Lajoie had hoped to eliminate the cumbersome habit worn by nuns, to de-institutionalize the noviciate by allowing novices to spend part of the trial period at home, and to give professed nuns the option of residing in a traditional type of community or in a small collective near their places of work. Rome did permit minor modifications to religious convention: greater freedom of travel, the right to keep one's family name, and the adoption of a simple habit.⁷²

⁶⁹ Marcienne PROULX, "L'Action sociale de Marie Gérin-Lajoie, 1910-1925" (Mémoire de maîtrise en théologie, Université de Sherbrooke, 1975), pp. 25-100.

⁷⁰ J. GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Premières Gerbes" manuscrit, p. 3.

⁷¹ AINDBC, M. J. GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Premières Gerbes", manuscrit, p. 3.

⁷² AINDBC, Lettres adressées à une religieuse auxiliaire, mai, septembre 1920; AINDBC, M. J. GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Mon itinéraire", manuscrit, 1915-16.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 1-8.

Once the community was established, Mgr Gauthier, Mgr Bruchési's successor, tried imposing further restrictions. In 1927 the Institut de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil was told to cease collaborating with *La Bonne Parole*. Shortly afterward, presumably under pressure, Mgr Gauthier modified his position, allowing nuns to assist anonymously in the publication of the journal. Caught in the middle of the rancorous debate on suffrage and women's rights, Gauthier felt uncomfortable with a community so closely affiliated to the pro-suffrage side. This at least was how Marie J. Gérin-Lajoie in a letter to her mother interpreted the archbishop's behaviour: "Ce qu'il veut avant tout c'est qu'il n'y ait ni fusion ni confusion aux yeux du public et que nous ne soyons pas engagés même de loin dans la question que tu sais."⁷³ Hence Mgr Gauthier defined the limits of co-operation between nuns and feminists: in social reform and charity it was acceptable, in suffrage absolutely inadmissible.

The Institut de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil grew out of the nun-lay woman relationship that feminists had forged in the early years of the movement and used to win for lay women a place in reform and the right to higher education. From the outset its founder declared her intention to reinforce that partnership and to use it to the advantage of lay women. Her insistence that the aim of the Institut was to support lay women, "non les remplacer, les aider et non les dispenser d'agir, les conseiller et non leur enlever toute initiative",⁷⁴ described the type of relationship her mother, Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie, Joséphine Dandurand and Robertine Barry had striven to create in the early days of the feminist movement. While the Grey Nuns, the Sisters of Providence, the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame and the other communities that participated in the social and educational programmes of the Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste implicitly accepted the lay woman as a partner, the Institut de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil was the first explicitly created to enhance the work of lay women and to ensure that the programmes the Fédération had undertaken would come to fruition. Marie J. Gérin-Lajoie and the young women who joined her in the 1920s and 1930s worked on the executive of the Fédération, ran the social service office of l'Hôpital Ste-Justine, founded by Marie Lacoste-Gérin-Lajoie's sister Justine Lacoste-Beaubien, contributed regularly to *La Bonne Parole*, promoted the study of sociology, and encouraged female participation in the study circles.⁷⁵

Under the impetus of the feminist movement the nun-lay women relationship travelled a considerable ideological distance. Throughout the nineteenth century and indeed as far back as New France lay and religious women had been involved in a symbiotic relationship. The former relied on the nuns' educational and charitable services and beseeched their

⁷³ Quoted in Evelyne BISSONNETTE PAQUETTE et Johanne CLOUTIER BOUCHER, "Le suffrage féminin", in "La glace est rompue. État de recherche sur la vie de Marie Lacoste Gérin-Lajoie", Jennifer STODDART et al. (1973), p. 103.

⁷⁴ S. M. GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Notre rôle d'auxiliaire d'action catholique", *La Bonne Parole*, 20, 10 (novembre 1932): 1-2; Albertine FERLAND-ANGER, "L'Institut de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil", *La Bonne Parole*, 11, 5 (mai 1923): 3.

⁷⁵ GÉRIN-LAJOIE, "Premières Gerbes", pp. 11-29.

prayer and support at times of personal crisis. In turn, nuns depended on the lay women's recognition for survival and counted on their support and moral assistance. As Joséphine Dandurand put it, "en effet, que peuvent ces institutions sans le secours, les avis, et le concours des femmes du monde?"⁷⁶ But it was only in the late nineteenth century, when women throughout North America and Europe began demanding greater autonomy, that the social consequences of that relationship were grasped. Quebec's reliance on services nuns provided placed lay women at a political disadvantage. The work of nuns went "exclusivement au profit de l'idée religieuse"⁷⁷ undercutting "l'initiative féminine" that underlay their activism. This blinded women to their own strength, and deprived them of a sense of individual and collective accomplishment. Conversely, in a society ruled by men it served to enhance male prestige and perpetuated male tyranny. The underside of the battle for political and economic equality in late nineteenth century, therefore, had to be the burgeoning of lay charitable work, in essence, the conscious restructuring of the longstanding nun-lay woman relationship. In broad historical terms, this meant the undoing of the marginalization of lay women and the undermining of Mgr Bourget's legacy in social service and education. The Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste, the École d'enseignement supérieur and the Institut de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil were landmarks in that process which terminated in the overt commitment of a small group of nuns to many of the goals of social feminism.

RÉSUMÉ.

Le mouvement féministe québécois à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle s'est distingué par sa détermination à intégrer l'œuvre et l'héritage des religieuses aux aspirations des laïques et à entraîner des institutions dirigées par les religieuses dans le réseau du féminisme. Cet article fait valoir les liens entre féministes et religieuses au sein de la première organisation de femmes francophones, la Fédération Nationale St-Jean-Baptiste, le premier collège pour les filles au Québec, l'École d'enseignement supérieur pour les filles, et une communauté religieuse gagnée aux objectifs du féminisme social, l'Institut de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil. Ces rapports et les limites d'une telle coopération n'étaient pas seulement définis par les parties en cause mais aussi par les forces qui s'opposaient au changement du statut de la femme sur les plans politique et professionnel.

⁷⁶ Joséphine DANDURAND, "Chronique", *Le Coin du Feu*, 11, 5 (mai 1894): 130; *La Première Étape d'une fondation canadienne* (Montréal: Messenger, 1929), pp. 9-11, 14.

⁷⁷ AINDBC, Marie Gérin-Lajoie à M^{lle} Morel, janvier 1903.