Forging a New Space for Lay Male Piety: St. Vincent de Paul Societies in Urban Quebec and Ontario, 1846–1890

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The Saint Vincent de Paul Society, introduced to Canada in 1846, rapidly carved out a presence in the Catholic parishes and communities in Canada's leading colonial cities. An exclusively male lay organization, the SVP was first and foremost a devotional society, in which charity and assistance to the poor was but an adjunct to perfecting the piety of its members, appropriating a status and space usually assigned to the clergy. The virtues espoused by the SVP were also intended to justify the presence of male laity in the provision of charity, a sphere traditionally dominated by Catholic female religious orders. Through its charitable relief, accomplished through a system of home visits, the SVP was an important element not only in providing assistance to the urban poor, but in defining the boundaries and identities of Catholics in Victorian Canada's major cities.

Après son introduction au Canada en 1846, la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul s'est rapidement taillé une place dans les paroisses et les communautés catholiques des principales villes coloniales du Canada. Organisation laïque exclusivement masculine, la SVP était d'abord et avant tout une société pieuse dont la bienfaisance et l'aide aux indigents ne servaient qu'à parfaire la piété de ses membres, s'appropriant un statut et un espace habituellement réservés au clergé. Les vertus auxquelles se vouait la SVP avaient également pour but de justifier la présence d'hommes laïcs dans la prestation de la bienfaisance, une sphère traditionnellement dominée par les ordres religieux catholiques féminins. Par ses secours de bienfaisance, qu'elle prodiguait grâce à un système de visites à domicile, la SVP jouait un rôle important non seulement en venant en aide aux pauvres des villes, mais également en définissant les limites et les identités des catholiques des grandes villes du Canada de l'époque victorienne.

IN LATE 1849, George Edward Clerk, a Scottish Presbyterian convert to Roman Catholicism living in Montreal, recorded in his diary that he had "visited the Sainte-Madeleine [a Catholic women's refuge] and paid Mademoiselle Bissonet her weekly allowance. Today a poor Irish Lad called us for assistance. Helas! how little can we do to relieve one another's distress? All that I desire is to be able: 'to make my one totalness, the sum of human wretchedness' if I can do this for Christ's sake, I shall not have lived in vain."[1] Clerk's diary, in which he set forth in minute detail his attendance at church, his consultations with priests and nuns, and his charitable visits to the Montreal urban poor, provides considerable insight into the activities and concerns of a mid-nineteenth-century Catholic layman, although, it must be added, an especially zealous one. Especially before his marriage, on an average of three times per week, Clerk's activities took him to prisons, the Sainte-Madeleine women's refuge, and various homes in the working-class districts of Griffintown and the Quebec suburbs to distribute alms on behalf of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, of which he was a member. This association of Catholic laymen was, at one level, a new element in the Catholic charitable enterprise; in Clerk's case, it formed a central element of his sociability. Founded in France by Frédéric Ozanam and a number of youthful university men in 1833, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) had been introduced to Canada in Quebec City in 1846. By 1848, it had made its way to Montreal and by 1850 to Toronto, rapidly carving out a presence in the Catholic parishes and communities of Canada's leading colonial cities. Through its charitable relief, accomplished through a system of visits to the homes of the poor, the SVP was an important element not only in providing assistance to the urban poor, but in defining the boundaries and identities of Catholics in Victorian Canada's major cities.[2] More recently, historians have tied Catholic voluntary associations such as the SVP to the formulation of a particularly conservative (and oppressive) version of a "liberal order" characterized by a high degree of confessional control of institutions of public charity and education, coupled with a pattern of weak state involvement in the direct management of the terrain of "the social."[3] Indeed, the SVP, both in Western Europe and

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1 Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec à Montréal [hereafter BANQM], P701, Fonds George Edward Clerk, Box 3, Diaries, December 17, 1849. I thank Nancy Christie for sharing her research on Clerk's diary with me.

2 For a close analysis of the nature of the charitable activities of the SVP in Montreal, see Huguette Lapointe-Roy, *Charité bien ordonnée. Le premier réseau de lutte contre la pauvreté à Montréal au 19ᵉ siècle* (Montréal: Boréal, 1987), pp. 96–112, 244–248, 283–289. The activities of the Society in Toronto have been ably treated by Brian P. Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism: Lay Voluntary Associations and the Creation of an Irish-Catholic Community in Toronto, 1850–1895* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

3 See the recent impressive theoretical formulation by Jean-Marie Fecteau, *La Liberté du pauvre : crime et pauvreté au XIXᵉ siècle québécois* (Montréal: VLB Éditeur, 2004); for the role of the St. Vincent de

North America, was one of the principal agencies involved in a far-reaching transformation of nineteenth-century Catholic piety and social life,[4] a metamorphosis accomplished by literally honeycombing Victorian cities with a dense network of church-based voluntary associations. According to Hugh McLeod, the multiplication of these associations was "intended to champion the interests of Catholics as a body, and to meet the special needs, spiritual, economic, or recreational, of every identifiable group within the Catholic population."[5]

Rather than attempting to revise or offer an alternative to these interpretations, I investigate the ambiguities inherent in Clerk's encounter with the "Irish Lad," in which he placed priority not on relieving the misery of this impoverished youth or improving his moral condition through philanthropic intervention. Indeed, Clerk was adamant that he could do little for him. Rather, the dynamic of Clerk's description centred not on the mechanics or the result of his relationship with the recipient of charity, but on the influence such encounters and subsequent actions might have on improving his own spiritual state. Clearly, the practice of charity was but a spur to a more dedicated devotional life and the prospect of higher spiritual perfection. The coupling of devotion and charity by the SVP, which, we need reiterate, was an exclusively male lay association, opens a series of questions into the culture of mid-nineteenth-century Catholicism. Historical writing about Catholicism in this period has generally employed the term "ultramontanism," a rubric that at its core reads religious developments after 1820 in terms of a teleology

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Paul Society in this "liberal" framework, see Jean-Marie Fecteau and Éric Vaillancourt, "The Saint Vincent de Paul Society and the Catholic Charitable System in Quebec (1846–1921)" in Michael Gauvreau and Ollivier Hubert, eds., *The Churches and Social Order in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).

4 In the wake of the celebrated 1975 article by Emmet Larkin, this transformation has often been described as a "devotional revolution." Recent work in the past decade, among both anglophone and francophone Catholics, has downplayed the "revolutionary" nature of this cultural shift, describing it instead as a far longer process of "acculturation" and institutional consolidation. For the "devotional revolution" hypothesis, see Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850–75," *American Historical Review*, vol. 77 (1972); Louis Rousseau, "La conduite pascale dans la région montréalaise, 1831–1865 : un indice des mouvements de la ferveur religieuse" in Rolland Litalien, ed., *L'Église de Montréal : aperçus d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, 1836–1986* (Montreal: Fides, 1986), pp. 270–284, and "Crises, chocs et revitalisations culturelles dans le Québec du XIXe siècle" in Michel Lagrée, ed., *Chocs et ruptures en histoire religieuse (fin XVIIIe–XIXe siècles)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1998), pp. 51–69. For a view of the process as extended and non-revolutionary, taking place at varying speeds between 1840 and 1890, see (for English Canada) Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism* and (for Quebec) René Hardy, *Contrôle social et mutation de la culture religieuse au Québec (1830–1930)* (Montreal: Boréal, 1999); Christine Hudon *Prêtres et fidèles dans le diocèse de Saint-Hyacinthe, 1820–1875* (Sillery: Septentrion, 1996).

5 Hugh McLeod, "Building the 'Catholic Ghetto': Catholic Organisations, 1870–1914" in W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood, eds., *Voluntary Religion: Studies in Church History*, vol. 23 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 411.

directed towards religious conformity to clerical codes of piety and religious practice,[6] a process in which agency of the laity, particularly that of lay men, has been largely marginalized or absent. Most influential historical treatments of nineteenth-century Roman Catholicism have located the causes of transformation in the doctrines, piety, and expanding social and cultural authority of the Church in the agency of the clergy, an interpretation that implicitly excludes the laity, a constituency generally treated as rather passive recipients of the religious messages and strategies promulgated by the clergy.[7] The corollary to this interpretation holds that only after 1900 (and some historians would identify a later date of 1930) was the clerical institution compelled, by the necessity of dealing with intensifying social problems occasioned by rapid urbanization, to concede greater organizational initiative to the laity.[8]

Of equal significance, the claim articulated by an organized group of Catholic laymen like the SVP to a substantial role in defining the parameters of their religious lives and in establishing an initiative in the expanding Catholic preoccupation with social welfare clearly runs counter to two prevailing gendered assumptions both in nineteenth-century Catholicism itself and in the historiography. The first centred on the idea that the devotional life could only be fully experienced by those men and women who had been called to a religious vocation, either as priests or as members of a religious community. The spirituality of laymen and laywomen was always considered, at best, as of a secondary order to that of clerical celibates. Among historians, the tendency since the 1980s, based on the notion of "separate spheres," has been to attribute the rising success of Catholic devotions in the second half of the nineteenth century — and thus the social purchase of the ultramontane project itself — to the clergy's ability to cultivate the "natural" female attributes

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6 Whether one subscribes to the "devotional revolution" hypothesis or to its more incremental alternative, the historical teleology remains the same.

7 Recent historiography on Roman Catholicism in both francophone Quebec and English Canada has generally focused on the improved education and recruitment of the clergy and has intensively examined the social and cultural strategies of the church institution, considered to be exclusively dominated by clerical imperatives. See Philippe Sylvain and Nive Voisin, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois. Réveil et consolidation, 1840–1898* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1984); Hardy, *Contrôle social*; Hudon, *Prêtres et fidèles*, pp. 12–13; Clarke, *Piety and Nationalsim*, p. 3 (which argues that lay activism offered little challenge to ultramontane views of hierarchy in the Church).

8 This interpretation was initially suggested by Jean Hamelin and Nicole Gagnon, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois. Le XXe siècle, tome 1, 1898–1940* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1984). Recent work on lay activism within Catholicism has focused on the post-1930 period. See, in particular, Louise Bienvenue, *Quand la jeunesse entre en scène. L'Action catholique avant la Révolution tranquille* (Montréal: Boréal, 2003); Lucie Piché, *Femmes et changement social au Québec : l'apport de la Jeunesse ouvrière catholique féminine, 1931–1966* (Ste-Foy: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2003); Michael Gauvreau, *The Catholic Origins of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, 1931–1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

of devotion and piety. Men were largely excluded from this process because facets of Victorian male culture proved impervious to clerical intervention.[9] Secondly, both in terms of nineteenth-century Catholic institutions and in historical literature itself, charity was seen as the purview of religious communities, and particularly as a female endeavour.[10] Historians have thus largely tended to dismiss the male devotional model proffered by the SVP, interpreting the blending of intense practical piety and charity as but an attempt to emulate the life of the religious orders, and, as such, a way of life that would hold little appeal for large numbers of mid-nineteenth-century male Catholics.[11]

However, the implantation of the SVP in Canadian cities in this period of supposedly intense institutional clericalization and feminization raises a number of perplexing questions. Was there a well-defined model of religious masculinity that gave laymen a certain independent status and authority within ultramontane Catholicism, or was the SVP's devotional discourse merely a structure of deference to the increasing power of the clergy? Did engagement of the SVP in the charitable enterprise offer a critique of established clerical and female dominance of this sphere of activity? Why would the clergy tolerate, and to some extent encourage, a strong current of lay activism in this key social sphere that was, after all, the lynchpin to their control of Catholic communities? I suggest that the discourse on manhood and masculinity elaborated by the SVP from the late 1840s to the 1880s, which insisted upon a partial lay appropriation of the terrain of "the social," actually aimed to widen the access of laymen to a culture of sanctity, despite the association's hierarchical and authoritarian structure. Secondly, I argue for a re-examination of this period as one of extreme clericalization, maintaining that many areas of the clergy's control remained contested, especially by largely independent

9 See, for example, Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840–1920* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), pp. 21–50; Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism*, pp. 62–96.

10 See the numerous studies of women's involvement in the Catholic charitable enterprise: Jan Noel, "Women and Social Welfare in the Montreal Region, 1800–1833: Preliminary Findings" in Elizabeth Gillan Muir and Marilyn Färdig Whitely, eds., *Changing Roles of Women within the Christian Church in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 261–283; Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil*; Lapointe-Roy, *Charité bien ordonnée*; Bettina Bradbury, "Mourir chrétiennement : la vie et la mort dans les établissements pour personnes âgées à Montréal au XIXe siècle," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1992), pp. 143–175; Janice Harvey, "Agency and Power in Child Charity: A Study of Two Montreal Child Charities, 1822–1900" in Jean-Marie Fecteau and Janice Harvey, eds., *La régulation sociale entre l'acteur et l'institution/ Agency and Institutions in Social Regulation: Towards an Understanding of their Interaction* (Ste-Foy: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2005), pp. 328–342.

11 Although Clarke considers the SVP a success in terms of the material provision it made to Toronto's Irish community, he argues that the association's discourse regarding male conduct was too "clerical" to attract large numbers of working-class men (*Piety and Nationalism*, p. 108).

male associations like the SVP, which provided an alternative site of reli-
gious authority. In addition, the SVP advanced and practised a model of
religious masculinity based on charitable endeavour outside the confines
of the home and promulgated a notion of masculinity that incorporated
the language of "devotion," "self-denial," and "affection," which the nine-
teenth century generally assigned to women or to a celibate clergy. That
Roman Catholicism — whose social and cultural authority enjoyed con-
siderable expansion in the industrial age — offered a legitimation of this
"hybrid" type of masculinity suggests the need to nuance overly hegemo-
nic historical treatments of masculinity that assign a predominantly secular
character to male standards of conduct, tend to universalize attributes of
manliness such as physical strength, self-reliance, bread-winning capacity,
and sexual performance, or largely consign religious masculinity to the
domestic sphere.[12]

Because it is mainly concerned with the cultural meanings behind the
charitable discourse articulated and diffused by the SVP, this study does
not claim to be a complete institutional history of the Society. The
nature of the sources imposes a further limitation, as they comprise pri-
marily minute books reflecting the views of the national and local
leaders of the SVP, printed tracts, speeches, and sermons outlining its
aims and requirements, and lists of the poor who were assisted by the
parish conferences, in some cases including the nature of the material pro-
vision. Of necessity, the bias therefore tilts towards the discourse of the
SVP leadership, except in those occasional instances of debate and conflict
where it is possible to ascertain directly the views and activities of ordinary
members. This study draws, in particular, upon recent scholarly treatments
of the Toronto and Montreal branches by Brian Clarke, Lucia Ferretti, and
Éric Vaillancourt respectively.[13] The latter two, in particular, have
thoroughly examined the expansion of the SVP in a number of settings
within urban Montreal and have carefully analysed the social composition
of both leadership and membership, work that is not replicated here. In

12 The influential work of John Tosh on masculinity has advanced these as major elements
    characterizing the emergence of masculinity during the period 1830–1914. See "Hegemonic
    Masculinity: The History of Gender" in Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann, and John Tosh, eds.,
    Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History (Manchester: University of
    Manchester Press, 2004), pp. 41–58; "Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800–
    1914," *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44 (April 2005), pp. 330–342; "Methodist Domesticity and
    Middle-class Masculinity in Nineteenth-century England" in John Tosh, ed., *Manliness and
    Masculinities in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005), pp. 149–169; and *A
    Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale
    University Press, 1999), pp. 29–39.
13 Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism*; Lucia Ferretti, *Entre voisins. La société paroissiale en milieu urbain :
    Saint-Pierre-Apôtre de Montréal, 1848–1930* (Montréal: Boréal, 1992); Vaillancourt, "La Société
    Saint-Vincent-de-Paul de Montréal. Reflet du dynamisme du laïcat catholique en matière
    d'assistance aux pauvres, 1848–1933" (thèse de doctorat, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2006).

Montreal the initiative of the episcopal hierarchy — in particular, the presence of Bishop Ignace Bourget — was a stronger factor than in other Catholic dioceses in giving an early impetus to the SVP.[14] It would be more difficult to argue, however, that Montreal constituted a "special case," beyond the fact that the SVP required intervention of the Bishop to operate on a terrain where, since the mid-seventeenth century, social assistance had been encompassed by the Sulpician Order and a number of its auxiliary charitable communities.[15]

The SVP traced its origins to a process of reconstitution and revitalization of Catholic devotional life that occurred both internationally and in the Canadian colonies during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. In Montreal, for example, older devotional confraternities such as Sainte-Famille, the Congrégation des Hommes, Adoration Perpétuelle, and the Bonne-Mort, which had existed from the era of New France, experienced an increase in numbers and benefited from more assiduous clerical intervention by the Sulpicians, who ran the parish of Montreal. However, as observed by Brigitte Caulier, this devotional impetus was strongly affected by gender, with the greatest expansion occurring among exclusively female associations or female branches of these pious societies, with male congregations unable to experience comparable growth during a period of rising religious fervour.[16] While ostensibly modelled upon a recovery of early modern Catholic devotional culture,[17] the SVP was, in fact, a new foundation erected upon quite different principles. Where the activity of the older societies was internal, given over entirely to the spiritual culture of their own members, the SVP sought to harness the devotional life to the practice of charitable visiting and giving, with the aim of improving both the material and religious

14 Vaillancourt argues that Bourget consciously and strategically allowed the laity a large part of the practical management of social assistance in the home, while insisting that institutional care of the poor should devolve to the clergy and religious personnel ("La Société Saint-Vincent-de-Paul de Montréal," pp. 5–6).

15 For the activities of the Sulpicians in the field of urban charity before 1840, see Jean-Marie Fecteau and Éric Vaillancourt, "La charité en ville" in Dominique Deslandres, John A. Dickinson, and Ollivier Hubert, eds., *Les Sulpiciens de Montréal. Une histoire de pouvoir et de discretion, 1657– 2007* (Montréal: Fides, 2007), pp. 241–267.

16 For lay devotional life in Montreal, see Brigitte Caulier, "Les confréries de dévotion traditionnelles et le réveil religieux à Montréal au XIXe siècle," *Études d'histoire religieuse*, vol. 53 (1986), p. 25.

17 The Society significantly took as its patron St. Vincent de Paul, a seventeenth-century French clergyman, active in charitable enterprises and in the improvement of the spiritual life of the French clergy and, in the 1650s, a major figure in directing the fortunes of the French state. The Society's self-presentation always sought to soft-peddle its novelty, claiming that it was but a revitalization of older Catholic devotional forms that had fallen into disuse. See, for example, Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto [hereafter ARCAT], St. Vincent de Paul Society, OC 12, MM03, Box 19, "Minute Books, St. Michael's Cathedral, Conference of Our Lady," Minute Book No. 2, August 7, 1853 – May 24, 1857; Minute Book No. 149, September 18, 1853.

circumstances of the urban poor. More significantly, however, while most of the older associations were clerical foundations in which the clergy, as spiritual directors, usually played a dominant role, the SVP most emphatically had its origins in the needs and aspirations of male Catholic laity. Founded in the wake of the Revolution of 1830 by a number of young Catholic intellectuals, the SVP directed its energies to reclaiming the urban poor of Paris for the Church, and it could be argued that this decision constituted a none-too-veiled critique of a royalist, aristocratic clergy whose lack of spiritual and social ministry was widening the gulf between the Church and the masses. The choice of patron saint, Vincent de Paul, was most telling. Although a cleric, Vincent de Paul's activities during the seventeenth century encompassed education, dedication to the poor, assiduous parish ministry, and the management of the French state as a key royal councillor during the minority of King Louis XIV, implicitly illustrating the necessity for close collaboration of Church (clerical) and royal (lay) power in bringing religion to the masses. More tellingly, this type of activist sanctity set forth an ideal of spiritual achievement, to which male laity could aspire, equal to that of the clergy and served notice that, henceforth, Catholic lay spirituality would energize both Church and society. Frédéric Ozanam, the French founder of the SVP, called upon the young Catholic men of his generation to "go over to the Barbarians, that is to go from the king's side, the government's side in 1815, to go to the people."[18] Here was nothing less than an assertion that laymen, not the clergy, formed a new spiritual vanguard supplying the energy to reorient Catholicism decisively away from its Ancien Régime moorings towards a new engagement with modern urban society.

When imported to Canada in the late 1840s, the SVP entered a Catholic culture in which, by comparison with France, the clergy exercised far more control over the devotional lives of lay people.[19] Despite attempts of the clergy to recuperate or constrain the association, the SVP was able to distinguish itself from its early modern counterparts or even the new devotional products of the "ultramontane" revival because it was always able to maintain lay control over its organizational structure, finances, and the definition of its own devotional and charitable priorities.[20] To be

18 Quoted in Fecteau and Vaillancourt, "The Saint Vincent de Paul Society and the Catholic Charitable System in Quebec," p. 221, n. 38.

19 I owe this insight to conversations with my colleague, Brigitte Caulier, whose work on devotional associations discerns significant differences between Catholic lay associations in France and Quebec. See Brigitte Caulier, "Bâtir l'Amérique des dévots. Les confréries de dévotion montréalaises depuis le régime français," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, vol. 46, no. 1 (Summer 1992), pp. 45–66.

20 Caulier notes that, in general, the clergy were willing to accord somewhat greater autonomy to male devotional associations than to their female counterparts, but that this was most evident in control over the admission of new members ("Les confréries de dévotion," pp. 32–33).

sure, the clergy did have a presence as chaplains and spiritual directors, and leaders of the SVP always sought episcopal approval before launching any charitable initiatives. However, parish priests seem not to have been in evidence at the weekly meetings of the SVP parish conferences,[21] where the day-to-day management of the Society occurred, in marked contrast to women's parish sodalities and confraternities or even to the parish vestry, in which clerical control was far more exacting and intrusive.[22] In both Quebec City and Toronto, the impetus to found local SVP societies clearly originated with laymen; only in Montreal did the local bishop, Ignace Bourget, take a direct hand.[23] The conditions prevailing in the mid-nineteenth-century colonial urban environment, with its concentrations of poverty, occasional visitations of epidemics such as cholera and typhus, and the relative paucity of organized clerical resources, served to mitigate the ultramontane drive towards clericalization. Church authorities in larger cities were willing to concede a wider scope of action to lay associations like the SVP. By contrast, the SVP found it difficult to secure a foothold in rural districts, where parish clergy were reserved and suspicious about a lay association, not under their direct control, whose stated aim was to intervene in a field of social endeavour — provision of charity — traditionally organized by the clergy. The tendency among many rural and small-town clergy was to dismiss the efforts of the SVP as useless because, in their estimation "charitable people were already helping the poor."[24]

Historians of Catholicism have generally focused upon the contribution of the SVP to the transition in the nineteenth-century understanding of

21 The organizational structure of the St. Vincent de Paul Society was hierarchical, the basic units being the "Conference" linked to the local parish, which met weekly; the "Particular Council," a city-wide body that grouped a number of parish conferences and met quarterly; the "Superior Council," organized on a national basis; and the "General Council," seated in Paris, which controlled the aggregation of new conferences.

22 Caulier, "Les confréries de dévotion," pp. 32–33, notes that by the 1840s women's associations had lost whatever lay autonomy they had once possessed. See also Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism*, pp. 62–96.

23 The SVP in Quebec City was launched in 1846 by Dr. Joseph Painchaud, who had encountered the Society while a medical student in Paris. In Toronto, the association was founded in 1850 by George Manly Muir, clerk of the provincial legislature, who had joined the SVP in Quebec City in 1849. In Montreal, Bishop Bourget's lead was conditioned by the severe cholera epidemic of 1847. See *Noces d'or de la Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul à Québec, 1846–1896* (Quebec: Primeau & Kirouac, 1897), p. 330; ARCAT, St. Vincent de Paul Society, OC12, H101, Box 1, Sister Josephine Dionne, "George-Manly Muir: Instigator and Apostle"; Lapointe-Roy, *Charité bien ordonnée*, p. 96.

24 Hudon, *Prêtres et fidèles*, p. 352. As late as 1887, Charles Bellemare of St. Boniface parish, Shawinigan, in the Diocese of Trois-Rivières, observed that his town did not have a St. Vincent de Paul Society, as in Montreal, as all charitable giving was organized on a purely *ad hoc* basis through periodic collections. See Nadine-Josette Chaline, René Hardy, and Jean Roy, eds., *La Normandie et le Québec vus du presbytère* (Rouen: Les Publications de l'Université de Rouen, no. 120, 1987), p. 48.

poverty and to its management of the charitable enterprise. However, it should be remembered that the self-perception and emphasis of the SVP stood at considerable variance with the later historiography of the movement. What was constantly reiterated in regulations, admonitions, and accounts of its activity was that it was first and foremost a devotional society, in which charity and assistance to the poor was but an adjunct, or at best a means, to perfecting the piety of the members of the Society, which always took priority over the provision of material assistance or relief. Defining the SVP as "un mouvement de piété chrétienne,"[25] the 1855 edition of the *Règlement de la Société de Saint Vincent de Paul* carefully stipulated that the aims of the conferences were four-fold. Taking pride of place was the injunction to maintain "ses membres, par des exemples et des conseils mutuels, dans la pratique d'une vie chrétienne,"[26] followed by visiting the poor in their homes to give them the consolations of both religion and relief. Thirdly, the Society urged an educative aim for its members, which encompassed school patronage (providing assistance to furnish an elementary education for poor children) and the distribution of moral and religious books.[27] What undergirded the Vincentian religious vision was less the character of the social relationship between members of the Society and the poor, but that forged among members of the Society as they attended to the solemn duty of mutual uplift, which centred strictly upon piety and punctilious attention to religious obligations. Addressing the Particular Council of Quebec in 1864, Father Thomas-Aimé Chandonnet declared that the practice of Catholic charity was the product of two orders of good, the spiritual and the material, and exhorted his audience to remember that "le spirituel, le moral, prévalent toujours sur le matériel, sur le physique."[28] Only by giving full weight to the overweening emphasis placed by the SVP discourse upon mutual perfection of a Christian devotional life we can make sense of Chandonnet's insistence that "Charité bien ordonnée commence par soi-même." His injunction to members was to remember that they were Vincentians, above all, for themselves, and that only by attending to their own faith first could they contribute to its nurture in those they visited.[29]

   This devotional priority, however, was not unanimously accepted by all members of the Society. A good deal of the disharmony that affected the

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25 *Règlement de la Société de S. Vincent de Paul, et Indulgences accordées par les Souverains-Pontifs [. . .] tant aux membres qu'aux bienfaiteurs de la Société* [extract from the *Manuel de la Société de St. Vincent de Paul*] (Paris, 1855), pp. 5–6.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

28 Rév. Thomas-Aimé Chandonnet, *Discours prononcés à Notre-Dame de Québec au Triduum de la Société de St-Vincent-de-Paul, les 21, 22 et 23 décembre 1863* (Quebec: Léger Brousseau, 1864), p. 21.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

relations among parish conferences, city "particular councils," and the superior council revolved around the proper balance that ought to prevail between the cultivation of members' piety and provision for the poor. In theory, of course, these elements were viewed as intertwined and mutually reinforcing, so much so that some historians have mistakenly assumed that SVP members considered poverty "holy" and that the poor would redeem society as a whole.[30] In reality, however, although holiness was vertical, it proceeded from the lives of the Society's members to the poor, not the reverse. According to major figures in the Society like George Manly Muir, attention to the cultivation of devotional life enabled SVP members to develop a bond of fellow-feeling with the poor that firmly distinguished Catholic charity from what he deprecated as Protestant philanthropy.[31] A display of charitable energy alone was thus not sufficient recommendation for membership in the SVP. As firmly stated in 1878 by the Toronto branch of the Society, "The fact that a man is always ready to give for charitable purposes, or that he is generally well esteemed, is not of itself, a sufficient qualification for membership. He must be willing to observe the rules, and his chief aim on entering should be his own spiritual advancement and the edification of others; secondary to this, the practice of charity, by relieving the necessitous."[32] Leaders of the Society viewed the potential for conflict between devotional priorities and charitable practices as ever-present and deserving of stern censure. Consider the complaint of Maurice O'Sullivan, president of Hamilton's Conference of Our Lady, to George Manly Muir, then president-general of the SVP in Canada, in 1868. O'Sullivan, an iron moulder intent on enforcing the letter of the Society's rules, explained that "our members in many Instances place more importance on giving Food to the Body than on procuring Aliment for the Soul and this contrary to the express teaching of the Rules." Anticipating Muir's rejoinder that he was exerting insufficient authority over his confreres, O'Sullivan absolved himself by claiming that he had attempted to arrest what he termed "this Pernicious error," but "no sooner is it smothered in one quarter than it smoulders for a little and breaks out afresh in another with still greater folly."[33] What emerges from the exchange is that, for O'Sullivan, the

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30 Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism*, pp. 101–102.

31 Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec, Québec [hereafter BANQQ], P437, Fonds Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul [hereafter SSVP], Box 101, Particular Council of St. Patrick, Quebec, Correspondence 1852–1856, George Manly Muir to President of Conference of St. Patrick, May 6, 1852.

32 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 25, Particular Council of Toronto, *Report of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Toronto* (Toronto: Tribune Office, 1878), p. 8.

33 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 22, Particular Council of Hamilton, Maurice O'Sullivan to G. M. Muir, August 3, 1868.

Society's role in alleviating misery was in fact detracting from its spiritual purpose, to the detriment of the devotional spirit of SVP members.

Indeed, a frequent complaint, particularly in the larger urban centres of Montreal and Toronto, where poverty was most rife, was that the "rules," and specifically the priority placed on devotion and religious practice, were not being observed because the Society was giving far too much attention to the effective organization and provision of relief. Commenting on the situation that prevailed in Montreal in 1855, Muir, who had been charged by the superior council to investigate irregularities within the Particular Council of Montreal, observed that, although the SVP had rendered a "profusion" of assistance to the poor, the Montreal Conferences, despite having existed for nearly seven years, had not yet held a general communion or a retreat,[34] two mandatory spiritual exercises mentioned in the Society's rules. Worse, Muir found that members in two of the largest city conferences, where most of the poverty was concentrated, had flatly refused to adopt the distinctive mark of the SVP, the practice of regular home visiting. More troubling still, where systematic home visits had been instituted, most members had lost sight of the overarching aim of attending to the religious edification of poor families and were acting purely out of philanthropic motives in that they considered "l'aumône matérielle comme la fin de leurs travaux, au lieu d'y voir seulement le moyen d'atteindre cette fin."[35] Muir, a particularly zealous convert to Roman Catholicism from Anglicanism, was always particularly insistent upon rigorous observance of the Society's rules as, in his estimation, it was the quality of the devotional element that distinguished Catholic from Protestant charitable practices. Writing in 1852, Muir was adamant that the mark of a Vincentian was not charitable giving, but rather a willingness to attend meetings, observe the rules, and participate in a culture of spiritual improvement. Otherwise, any claim to be acting in a true spirit of Catholic charity — which he defined as fellow-feeling with the poor — would ring hollow. Moreover, only the regular cultivation of the devotional life enabled Vincentians to develop the level of emotional sympathy that established the type of personal contact with the poor that would lay the groundwork for a spiritual reformation of the urban masses. "Could we," asked Muir, "say in such an event that we are true sons of Saint Vincent of Paul — that we are imbued with the Catholic Principle of charity — that we love the Poor and feel for their sufferings and their sickness, for their hunger and their cold — that we believe them to be members of Jesus Christ? I answer unhesitatingly — No! — our charity is a mere semblance, a passing movement of pity — an impulse — a

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34 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 1, George Manly Muir to Augustin Gauthier, December 24, 1855.
35 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 1, Muir to Gauthier, December 7, 1855.

deception — it may be Philanthropy — but it is not charity — It avails but little to the poor, and as little to ourselves."[36]

Both nineteenth-century Vincentians and subsequent historians placed heavy weight upon the distinctive nature of the outdoor relief practised by the Society — the system of home visiting — as fostering a sympathetic bond with the poor. Within the framework of Catholic charity, which is usually associated with visible institutions such as hospitals, asylums, refuges, and reformatories managed by male and female religious orders, the home visit, which appeared to bridge the gap between rich and poor, stood as a seemingly novel element. Of course, members of women's religious communities had, as an ancillary to institutional charity, undertaken home visiting long before the formation of the SVP. However, these visits were often undertaken in a heavy-handed religious way, accompanied with pressing moral exhortations that, in the estimation of SVP activists, tended to alienate the poor by merely consolidating the old relationship of "guardian and ward" in which the nuns relayed the moral authority of the Church. In addition, there was the added difficulty that extra-institutional contact between members of religious orders and the poor might weaken the "cloistered" character of these orders, whose distinctive quality was separation from, rather than engagement with, the secular world.[37]

Viewed from this perspective, the charitable practices of the SVP were constructed less in reference to the management of the poor than to assert the legitimacy of male lay initiative in a sphere of activity that had historically been reserved to the clergy, and especially to female religious orders and female Catholic laity. Certainly, the official position of the SVP was articulated entirely within the hierarchical priorities of ultramontanism, which enjoined the subservience of the laity to the clergy. The 1855 *Règlement* reminded Vincentians that, in relation to the clergy, they were "que des laïques, et, pour la plupart, des jeunes gens, sans mission pour enseigner les autres," and thus were enjoined to obey ecclesiastical superiors and especially to consult local clergy before engaging in any charitable activity.[38] As explained by George Manly Muir in 1869, the clergy were "the judges appointed by the Church in regard to all Associations and matters pertaining to Charity and Morals," and no local organization of the SVP could exist without the approbation of the Bishop and the Parish Priest. "To argue the contrary," Muir advised his confreres, "is to proclaim Liberal and Reforming Principles ... and to

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36 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 101, Particular Council of St. Patrick, Quebec, Correspondence, 1852–1856, G. M. Muir to President of the Conference of St. Patrick, May 6, 1852.

37 Fecteau and Vaillancourt, "The Saint Vincent de Paul Society and the Catholic Charitable System in Quebec," pp. 206, 209–210.

38 *Règlement*, p. 17.

defy the Church, to whom we owe our very existence as a Catholic Society.... For a Catholic there is not such a thing as Independence of the Church and her appointed Ministers."[39] However, it is necessary to read between the lines of Muir's absolute insistence on obedience. It should be reiterated that the founding of the SVP involved an assertion of equality between clergy and laity in the charitable enterprise; even in the more clerically dominated Catholic atmosphere of Canada, where charitable institutions were under clerical control, the SVP was insistent that such foundations owed as much to lay support and activism as to clerical initiative. "Where," proclaimed one confrere, "would all the Religious and Educational Institutions, and the Hospitals of Quebec, the Seminary, the Ursulines, the St. Roch's Convent, the Hotel Dieu and the other Establishments ... be, were it not for the endowment of the Kings of France and the Donations and Legacies of Private Individuals in France and Canada."[40]

The Society functioned amidst a constellation of mid-Victorian societies dedicated to both self-improvement and social reform. There has been a tendency among historians of nineteenth-century Catholicism to compare it with these associations and to judge it a relative failure because it did not, particularly in Toronto, attract working-class men, largely because it only offered its members a type of piety modelled upon the lives of the clergy and did not provide either entertainment or more "secular" techniques of improvement such as lectures or education.[41] More recently, historians interested in the emergence of a "liberal order" in the period after 1840 have identified the expansion of voluntary associations as a key terrain for the propagation of values of individualism, thrift, self-reliance, regularity, temperance, and self-control that were essential to sustaining the "liberal" project.[42] However, it should be noted that

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39 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 25, Particular Council of Hamilton, Muir to John Irwin, president, Our Lady of Hamilton Conference, June 21, 1869.

40 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 101, 1870.

41 See especially Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism*, pp. 97–98.

42 Major theoretical statements of the "liberal order" hypothesis include Ian McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 81, no. 4 (December 2000), pp. 617–645; and, in a more rigorous and nuanced fashion, Fecteau, *La liberté du pauvre*. For a suggestive overview of the relationship of nineteenth-century voluntary associations to the shaping of both liberal state and society, see Jean-Marie Fecteau, "État et associationisme au XIXe siècle québécois. Éléments pour une problématique des rapports État/société dans la transition au capitalisme" in Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-nineteenth-century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 134–162. For recent theoretical overviews questioning the chronology and the nature of the emerging market society and liberal values, see R. W. Sandwell, "The Limits of Liberalism: The Liberal Reconnaissance and the History of the Family in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 84, no. 3 (September 2003), pp. 423–450; Nancy Christie, "Introduction: Interrogating the Conjugal Family" in Nancy Christie and Michael

historical interpretations of the emerging "liberal order," which focus on the era of the 1840s as key to the formulation of liberal values, have dealt mainly with the relationship between upper levels of the state and the emerging institutional culture of voluntarism,[43] paying less attention to the discourses and practices within the associations by which ordinary people would have more directly experienced the emerging ideology of liberalism. Although the Vincentians certainly subscribed to the quintessential "liberal" values of regularity, order, and personal discipline, these, arguably, had their roots in a devotional religious sensibility that was both pre-liberal and pre-modern. As well, the Society's construction of a model of lay sanctity founded upon the dynamic between piety and charitable endeavour distanced the SVP at one remove from what historians have defined as an emerging "liberal order" based upon a rising tide of individualism, voluntarism, and self-help. Indeed, the SVP consciously demarcated itself from other voluntary societies more firmly anchored in a nineteenth-century system of values in that it did not aim at a wide base of social recruitment and deliberately sought to limit numbers by fostering what was, at least in theory, a very strenuous devotional culture among its members. Through its rigid insistence upon hierarchy and authority within the Society, the SVP most emphatically did not conceive of itself as a structure initiating men into a Victorian culture of civic participation.

An insistence that the SVP was the preserve of an active and committed spiritual elite was evident from the inception of the movement in Canada. Praising the reorganization of the Quebec City conferences on a "narrower basis," Adolphe Baudon, the French president-general, overtly stated, "It is better ... to be fewer in number, to be reduced to one third of the active members, if necessary, and to count in the bosom of the Society earnest and devoted members only."[44] The concept of mutual benefit, in which members contributed and received accident, sickness, funeral, or unemployment benefits, was entirely foreign to the Vincentian self-perception: the rules governing the formation of the Society in Quebec City overtly stated that no member could receive

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Gauvreau, eds., *Mapping the Margins: The Family and Social Discipline in Canada, 1700–1975* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), pp. 3–24, and "Families, Private Life, and the Emergence of Liberalism in Canada" (paper delivered to "Canada on Display" conference, Frost Centre, Trent University, April 13–14, 2007).

43 See especially Fecteau, "État et associationisme." An exception to this historiographical tendency is Darren Ferry, *Uniting in Measures of Common Good: The Construction of Liberal Identities in Central Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), who provides a thorough examination of the culture and discourse of a number of voluntary associations that spanned the period 1840–1890.

44 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 1, Adolphe Baudon, president-general, Paris, to President, Superior Council of Canada, June 8, 1853.

assistance from the association.[45] In practice, this barred unskilled workers and domestic servants, two classes within the Victorian city likely to experience periodic unemployment, from membership. More significantly, the requirements for regular attendance at meetings, the obligation to engage in home visits, and the personal financial demands placed upon SVP members were exacting, so much so that a number of local conferences frequently complained of "tepidity" among their members in terms of both attendance and level of financial contribution.[46] The process of becoming a member was hedged with many restrictions and, one suspects, involved a system of informal "background checks" before an individual was even proposed for admission. Unlike other voluntary associations, the presidents of the parish conferences enjoyed permanent office and nearly autocratic authority over their members, provided they did not offend any of the clergy or be found morally delinquent.[47] Writing in 1853 to his Toronto confrere W. J. Macdonnell, George Manly Muir observed that the Society's constitution contained no limitation on the duration of the president's term; these officers were "expected to retain the charge so long as they are useful to their conferes and to the poor: but should not be placed in an unusually painful position."[48] For Muir, the compelling reason behind this permanent presidency was an anti-democratic one. Frequent elections, from his perspective, "would introduce a love of change and democratic Ideas by destroying the respect due to those in office."[49] It would be fair to conclude that, in terms of its constitution, the Vincentian model was not the ambient Victorian culture of liberal voluntarism, but the traditional structure of the Roman Catholic episcopacy, in which bishops held office for life. The key to the president's authority was the personal control he exerted over the admission of new members. Again, Muir criticized the more free-wheeling arrangements prevailing in Montreal, in which the conference

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45 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 101, "Conférence Notre-Dame de Québec, 12 nov. 1846 à 29 janv. 1847," meeting of December 4, 1846.

46 BANQ, P437, SSVP, Box 22, Particular Council of Hamilton, John Quinn to G. M. Muir, November 26, 1869; Box 1, G. M. Muir to Augustin Gauthier, December 24, 1855 (in which Muir noted that conferences in the Society in Montreal levelled a fine of "six sous" on absentees from weekly meetings); Box 21, Particular Council of Ottawa Correspondence, Richardson to Hamel, November 20, 1887; ARCAT, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Box 1, OC12 H101, "Twenty-third General Meeting," March 5, 1865.

47 One instance of the former occurred in Hamilton in 1869, when Maurice O'Sullivan, otherwise a very efficient and zealous conference president, resigned because of an open disagreement with the diocesan Vicar-General; in Ottawa, Mr. O'Meara, president of the Ottawa Conference, although described as "generous," was removed "pour des faits contre la Morale Publique." See BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 20, G. M. Muir to M. le chevalier J. C. Taché, October 20, 1874.

48 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 21, Particular Council of Toronto, 1850–1854, G. M. Muir to W. J. Macdonnell, March 28, 1853.

49 *Ibid.*

president was consulted about candidates for admission and the candidacy was made public at the same meeting. This, argued Muir, had the effect of bringing men of dubious quality into the Society. Far better, he observed, to follow the practice prevailing in Quebec City, in which the consent of the president was only given "que lorsqu'il est bien renseigné sur les qualifications du candidat."[50] The standard prevailing in Toronto required that the names of all candidates be submitted to the president before their admission was even discussed; if he suspected that there was any cause for not proceeding further, the president would cross out the name of the candidate and return the paper to the sponsor "sans s'expliquer davantage."[51]

From the perspective of religious practice, the SVP set a higher standard for personal devotion and moral conduct than was evident even in Catholic temperance societies and other pious confraternities, indicating to Catholic men that membership in the Society was not about reclaiming backsliders or bringing the devotional lives of members into conformity with clerical standards. Writing to George Manly Muir in 1867, Maurice O'Sullivan of Hamilton informed him that "there are very singular notions about our Society here it caused me very much trouble but I think I have nearly disabused the members of it. They think that habitual drunkards by joining the conference will become sober & indeed many more Public Scandals and Women married to such men helped in the supplications." O'Sullivan proclaimed his adherence to Vincentian regulations by denying the applications of any such individuals who presented themselves and further expressed his decision to bar Catholic men known to frequent such unreformed locales of male sociability as balls, dances, gambling, and cock-fighting; even attending parties during Lent could be cited as a reason to be refused admission to the Society.[52] Muir's ringing endorsement was couched in the following terms, confirming O'Sullivan's principle of exclusion on the grounds that such amusements were generally venues for drunkenness and the wasting of a family's property:

> A rough and tumble Catholic is likely to do much more harm than good to the Conference, by his loose example, as a member. The strength and vitality of a conference consists in the good and exemplary conduct of its members, though few in numbers as Catholics and good subjects, obeying the Laws of

50 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 1, Muir to Augustin Gauthier, December 24, 1855. The Ottawa Conference adopted a similar practice, requiring that a new member be proposed three times before actually being admitted.

51 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 21, Particular Council of Toronto, n.d.

52 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 22, Particular Council of Hamilton, Maurice O'Sullivan to G. M. Muir, August 22, 1867.

the Church and their country rather than in a large aggregate of men [which] may look imposing to certain outsiders.[53]

Muir, by this point president of the Superior Council of the Society in Canada, was quick to squelch the idea that the moral standards of the SVP were impossibly high. "It is not required," he stated in 1867, "that a man be as pure and as edifying as a canonised Saint; but he must openly attend to his duties as a Catholic." Muir was most concerned that only what he termed "practical Christians" be considered for membership — by this he meant only those men who regularly attended upon the sacraments.[54]

While it might be possible to read into this an attempt by Vincentians to articulate a class-based critique of nineteenth-century male sociability that would have naturally alienated most working-class male Catholics, it would not be fair to conclude that the SVP was a middle-class society. Local case studies of Toronto and the "working-class" Montreal parish of St-Pierre-Apôtre undertaken, respectively, by Brian Clarke and Lucia Ferretti reveals an over-representation of the better-off elements among parish activists who normally provided the membership of associations such as the St. Vincent de Paul. Based upon an analysis of office-holders, Ferretti argues that, between 1870 and 1914, parish associations were the focus of aspirations for notability and social promotion among a group of small shopkeepers, commercial agents and employees, and more stable artisans, who eagerly backed the activities of the Oblate missionaries who served the parish of St-Pierre. Her portrait of the parish SVP reveals it as especially elitist, as it emphatically under-represented the unskilled workers who made up the vast majority of the parish's population.[55] For Toronto, Clarke advances the view that both the leadership and membership of the SVP was distinctly middle-class in character.[56]

However, a number of other considerations balance these findings. First, although the standards of morality and religious practice were far more demanding than in other Victorian urban associations, the devotional ideal espoused by the SVP was theoretically open to all Catholic men. Other local studies have suggested a more cross-class character in the membership of the SVP. Indeed, a recent study of the Society's activities in Montreal, undertaken by Éric Vaillancourt, notes that, outside the circle of office-holders, who tended to be drawn from parish notables,

53 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 22, Particular Council of Hamilton, Muir to O'Sullivan, August 19, 1868.

54 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 22, Particular Council of Hamilton, Muir to Maurice O'Sullivan, August 26, 1868. See also Box 25, Particular Council of Toronto, *Report of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Toronto*, pp. 7–8.

55 Ferretti, *Entre voisins*, pp. 115–120, 140.

56 Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism*, pp. 103–107.

the majority of the membership was drawn from the lower ranks of Montreal society. In the parish conferences outside the city centre, workers, in particular the semi-skilled and unskilled, carved out a strong presence in the SVP. Indeed, in an analysis of applications for membership to the Society between 1858 and 1925, Vaillancourt concludes that those from semi-skilled and unskilled workers outnumbered those from small shopkeepers, manufacturers, and businessmen.[57] Qualitative evidence tends to confirm the cross-class character of the Society in Montreal, which boasted the largest SVP membership in Canada.[58] The numerical dominance of working-class members in many of the local conferences was illustrated in 1855 by the complaint of George Manly Muir that the problem afflicting many parish societies was that there was no one qualified to fill the positions of secretary or treasurer. In Muir's estimation, most of the members were "de braves et généreux ouvriers dont l'instruction ne s'étend pas jusque là." The relative lack of members with sufficient education, he observed, was actually hampering the expansion of the SVP because, without qualified persons to act as officers, conferences could not be subdivided to meet local needs.[59] When St. Mary's Conference was formed in Hamilton in 1866, all the officers and members were drawn almost entirely from the ranks of skilled workers, with a strong representation of moulders and machinists.[60] The rather anomalous situation in Toronto, in which both office-holders and members were almost exclusively drawn from the ranks of the middle and lower-middle classes, can be explained less as a reflection of the Vincentian social ideology as by the ethnic composition of the Catholic leadership of Toronto in 1850. The SVP reflected the dominance of longer-established Scottish and Irish members, who expressed highly pejorative attitudes to recently arrived and impoverished working-class Irish, comprising in the post-1850 period the bulk of the city's Catholic population.

What is clear is that Vincentians were not particularly concerned about the class nature of their society. Indeed, like most voluntary associations formed between 1830 and 1880, the SVP attracted men from a wide spectrum of occupational profiles, so much so that it would be difficult to label it unambiguously "middle-class." However, Vincentians worried far more about one central issue that affected the composition of the Society and the wider Catholic public's perception of it: a perceived and persistent inability to attract young men to active membership in the association.

57 Vaillancourt, "La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul de Montréal," pp. 152, 158, 79–81.
58 *Ibid.*, p. 105. Vaillancourt calculates that, by 1930, Montreal had 100 parish conferences and over 2,500 members.
59 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 1, Muir to Augustin Gauthier, December 24, 1855.
60 The conference contained one "grocerer" and one policeman out of 19 members. See BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 22, Particular Council of Hamilton, Correspondence, "Copy of the Minutes St. Mary's Conference Basement Chapel, after Sunday Mass July30th 1866."

This shortcoming was ironic, because the SVP always vaunted the fact that its French founders were young men full of youthful generosity and high spirits. The Vincentian banner, declared Father Chandonnet in 1864, had been hoisted "non pas par une société d'hommes mûris par l'âge, livrés à la retraite, à la prière et au silence [...] non, non, elle a été arborée par des jeunes gens du monde [...] sans autre mission que celle de chrétiens, catholiques, mais catholiques éclairés et sincères."[61] Military metaphors likely to prove attractive to male youth predominated, likening the Vincentian fraternity to a kind of military brotherhood, a "garde d'honneur" in the forefront of rechristianization.[62] The reality, at least in the Catholic parishes of Victorian Canada's leading cities, was quite different. The Society's leaders were unanimous in their observation that "très peu de Jeunes Gens font partie de la Société."[63] The heavy regimen of prayer and devotional exercises, and the absence of a culture of self-improvement in the form of educational lectures or entertainment,[64] would scarcely have commended the Society to young men, especially when other Catholic voluntary associations competed by offering these amenities. Monetary demands upon individual Vincentians to be constantly contributing to the conference's poor fund would also have proved beyond the means of unmarried younger men, whose savings were intended, first and foremost, to marriage and establishing a family. However, the SVP was hardly unique in this respect, and the reluctance of young men to join its ranks was, in fact, typical of the attitude of unmarried men towards all churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, and their organizations. The Vincentian example reinforces the conclusions of recent social historians of religion that the central fault-line in nineteenth-century church life occurred not around class, but around the variables of gender and age,[65] with the participation of young, unmarried men

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61 Chandonnet, *Discours*, p. 25.

62 *Notice historique sur la Société St. Vincent de Paul* (Quebec: J. T. Brousseau, 1860), p. 4; Chandonnet, *Discours*, p. 26.

63 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 1, Muir to Gauthier, December 24, 1855; Box 22, Particular Council of Hamilton, O'Sullivan to Muir, February 17, 1869; Box 25, Particular Council of Toronto, *Report of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Toronto*; ARCAT, St. Vincent de Paul Society, OC12 H101, "Twenty-fifth General Meeting, St. Paul's Church, Sunday, 10 Dec. 1865."

64 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 20, Particular Council of Ottawa, Rivet to Hamel, March 27, 1863.

65 There is a growing Canadian and international literature that reinforces this conclusion. For industrial Britain, see S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organization and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire, 1870–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). For Canada, see Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion and Leisure in Late-nineteenth-century Small-town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Nancy Christie, "Young Men and the Creation of Civic Christianity in Urban Methodist Churches," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vol. 17 (2006), pp. 79–105; Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *Churches and their Peoples in Canada, 1840–1965* (Toronto: University of

a perennial problem for both clergy and promoters of religious voluntary associations.

Indeed, a close reading of the discourse on the moral and spiritual qualities of the ideal Vincentian reinforces the idea that the aim of the association was not so much to reform or exclude the male working-class poor, but, by establishing an exalted standard of religious observance and piety, to assert a claim that male Catholic laity who met these standards could, in fact, achieve a type of sanctity reserved only for the clergy. While the argument might be advanced that the promotion of such a model of piety for laymen signified the declining position of Catholic laity in relation to the clergy during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, it could also be claimed that this constituted an appropriation, by a relatively independent group of male laity, of a status and social space usually assigned to the clergy. The corollary, of course, was that this level of sanctity entitled them to a degree of freedom from clerical control and to social and cultural leadership within the Catholic community. As outlined in the 1855 *Règlement*, the Vincentian virtues could be enumerated as follows: self-denial, Christian prudence, an active love of one's neighbour, zeal for the salvation of souls, gentleness in both character and speech, and, above all, a spirit of brotherliness.[66] It is not coincidental that these virtues were similar to those assigned to the Roman Catholic clergy, a fact noted by historians who have argued that this would have reduced the SVP's social constituency.[67] Hagiographic treatments of leading Vincentians, from Ozanam the founder to Canadian worthies like Dr. Joseph Painchaud, Augustin Gauthier, Jean-Charles Chabot, and the ubiquitous George Manly Muir, all insist upon their common spirit of self-denial in advancing the cause of the Catholic faith. It should also be observed that many of these lay activists had intended upon pursuing clerical careers, but chose to work in the world. Rather than viewing their prominent positions in the SVP as compensation for a failed clerical vocation, they clearly considered their lives as laymen and their achievements on behalf of the Church and the poor of far more religious value than had they entered the priesthood.[68] In a period usually characterized as one of advancing clericalization of Catholic culture, a Catholic discourse that assumed

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Toronto Press, forthcoming), especially chap. 2; Hannah Lane, "Methodist Church Members, Lay Leaders, and Socio-economic Position in Mid-nineteenth-century St. Stephen, New Brunswick" (PhD thesis, University of New Brunswick, 2005).

66 *Règlement 1855*, p. 8.

67 See, in particular, Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism*, p. 108.

68 See, for example, *Noces d'or de la Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul à Québec*, Appendice F, "Notices biographiques": "Le Docteur Joseph Painchaud, Fondateur de la Société au Canada," pp. 330–331; "L'honorable Jean Chabot, premier président de la Conférence de Notre-Dame et du Conseil Particulier de Québec," pp. 354–355; "Monsieur Augustin Gauthier, premier président du Conseil Supérieur du Canada," pp. 357–358; "M. George-Manly Muir," pp. 362–363. See also Pierre

laymen could have access to superior devotional quality and entitlement to act in a sphere of clerical endeavour merits closer study.

However, it is also noteworthy that these virtues, which included feminine qualities of gentleness, were claimed by a lay society of men whose rules did not enjoin celibacy and were advanced particularly to justify the presence of male laity in the field of charitable provision, a sphere in which Catholic female religious orders had traditionally enjoyed a very strong presence. This conflation of male and female attributes in the Vincentian discourse suggests the need to refine and nuance models of nineteenth-century masculinity. Drawn for the most part from the Protestant culture of industrial Britain, these models have posited first that, for the vast majority of men who were not clerics, male culture was a largely secular standard that had increasingly little reference to religion, and secondly that it was constructed in deliberate opposition to a devotional culture that emphasized piety and interiority.[69] In this historical paradigm, the only legitimate social and cultural terrain of interaction between religious practices and male culture was the domestic sphere of the home.[70] Victorian charity, however, differed from the workplace and the home in that it provided institutional and culturally legitimate sites for alternative or competing models of masculinity that placed a higher value on fraternity and intimacy, both with fellow-labourers and with the poor, than upon the conventional virtues of competition and self-reliance. In its most extreme manifestation, the late-Victorian settlement houses of London, male charitable workers experimented with new conceptions of masculine subjectivity that posited an explicit "hermaphrodite" set of qualities — gentleness, self-denial, and the practice of celibacy — by which middle-class men hoped to bridge the increasing gulf between the classes in the industrial metropolis.[71] Although rejecting celibacy as a fundamental attribute of their devotional culture, Vincentians certainly subscribed to the anti-revolutionary notion of fraternity espoused by transatlantic charitable endeavours.[72]

However, for Vincentians, these male qualities, encompassed in the ideal of fraternity, were not designed to alter the urban social order. Significantly, "self-denial" was defined not in the material sense of divesting oneself of earthly possessions, but in terms of deference to the rules and hierarchy of the Society. Those who held strongly to their own opinions, declared

Chauveau, fils, *Frédéric Ozanam, Sa Vie et Ses Oeuvres* (Montréal: C. O. Beauchemin et Fils, 1887), p. vi.

69 Tosh, "Masculinities in an Industrializing Society," p. 335.

70 Tosh, *A Man's Place* and "Methodist Domesticity and Middle-class Masculinity."

71 See the highly stimulating work by Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 259, 261, 273.

72 *Ibid.* p. 228.

the *Règlement*, were frequently disdainful of the opinions of others, and "le mépris de ses frères, loin d'unir, engendre la division." Vincentians were thus required to acquiesce to the views of their confreres and not to feel thwarted when their own views were not endorsed by the conference as a whole.[73] Individual self-expression through advocacy and discussion was firmly rebuked: members must bow at all times to the collective needs of the Society, defined, of course, by the rather autocratic powers vested in the conference presidents. Like a number of other male voluntary associations, the SVP proclaimed an "apolitical" stance, seeking to bar all political discussion and controversy from its meetings, reiterating that "ceux qui veulent se tenir unis et exercer un ministère de charité doivent-ils s'abstenir de se préoccuper des affections politiques qui poussent les partis contre les autres, d'agiter entre eux les questions irritantes qui divisent le monde."[74] In the first instance, this evoking of a resemblance between the SVP and the vision of unity and order that supposedly prevailed within "traditional" institution of the Roman Catholic Church derived from the frustration of the French founders of the Society with the highly charged university student culture of Paris during the late 1820s and 1830s, in which discussion was seen to hamper practical initiatives to benefit the urban poor. "Our Society," proclaimed the Toronto Particular Council, "is a *working*, not a *talking* body; a Conference, notwithstanding its name, is not a school for debate, and gentlemen who want to exercise their forensic abilities for the edification of an admiring audience will, on becoming members, find themselves completely out of their sphere."[75] However, in the context of male culture in mid-nineteenth-century Victorian cities, the posture of apoliticism, coupled with the authoritarian constitution governing the movement, firmly placed the Vincentians in the conservative camp.[76] In particular, the SVP functioned as a key social organization that offered male laity some independence from the clergy while inoculating them against the contagion of republican and egalitarian ideas, and especially against those "secret" societies condemned by church authorities.[77]

73 *Règlement*, p. 8.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

75 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 25, Particular Council of Toronto, *Report of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Toronto*, p. 8.

76 The Vincentians were not alone in affirming the "apolitical" and even anti-political stance of their association, for this was a common thread that ran through the culture of associational life in Victorian Canada and powerfully contributed to the spread of a "liberal-tory" view of social relations and political economy. For this interpretation, see Darren Ferry, *Uniting on Measures of Common Ground: The Construction of Liberal Identities in Central Canada, 1830–1900* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008).

77 For the competition between the Catholic clergy and secret and republican Irish nationalist societies in Toronto, see Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism*, pp. 152–223. Clarke seems, however, unaware of the political implications of the Vincentian constitution and the prohibitions surrounding political discussion.

The ideal of "self-denial" referred not only to the Vincentian sociability, however, but also to the Society's claim that devotional sanctity fostered a bond of fellow-feeling with the poor. Moreover, it was precisely here that the virtues claimed by the Society enunciated an implicit, yet powerful critique of the practices of the clergy and especially the female religious orders in the sphere of charitable provision. Avoiding contention with one's confreres was, in fact, training for dealing with the poor, a contact that, according to the Society's rules, had to proceed upon a basis of harmony and respect. "Nous éviterons tout esprit de contention avec les pauvres," stated the *Règlement*, and it advised home visitors not to be offended if the recipients of charity resisted friendly persuasion towards a more assiduous religious practice. Vincentians were advised especially to avoid any heavy-handed methods that sought to influence the poor through "autorité" or "commandement,"[78] a none-too-veiled reference to the way in which parish clergy and members of religious orders would have used their hierarchical clerical status to require religious conformity. In contrast to the clergy, who exercised a visible ministry and whose activity was associated with material institutions, the hallmark of the true Vincentian was the avoidance of publicity in accomplishing charitable acts.[79] The fact of doing good was, of itself, a more powerful method of gaining the trust of the poor, and it was expected that "par l'aumône corporelle nous préparons les voies à l'aumône spirituelle."[80] One should not take at face value the Vincentian view that they treated the poor "kindly" or in a spirit of brotherliness; as we shall see below, their attitudes were in fact infused with a deep suspicion of the urban poor. It is in fact difficult to escape the conclusion that the discourse existed not to frame the relationship between the Vincentians and the poor they assisted, but to elaborate a hierarchy of merit that placed members of the Society above both the clergy and especially religious women who had hitherto been active in the sphere of home visiting. The implications were clear: in the provision of material assistance and in the task of Catholicizing the poor, lay values and practices were superior, both from the point of view of cultivating spirituality and from the pragmatic perspective of efficiency.

Not surprisingly, then, relations between the SVP and the clergy were often tense, and a relatively independent lay association that put its emphasis on devotional sanctity and activity on behalf of the poor was quick to denounce anything that either smacked of clerical critique of what it considered its own exalted virtues or trenched upon its financial

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78 *Règlement*, p. 9.

79 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 21, Particular Council of Toronto, 1850–1854, George Manly Muir to M. Bilodeau, Corresponding Secretary of the Council of Canada, November 16, 1850.

80 *Règlement*, p. 10.

independence. Muir himself had been at the centre of controversy in the early 1850s as the SVP sought to establish itself in Montreal, where it competed with female religious orders that already possessed well-organized systems of charitable visiting. Commenting on the "imprudence" of the Sœurs de la Providence, who also had a rival structure of home visits, Muir was particularly incensed that these nuns had dared question the Vincentian "spirit of self-abnegation and charity." This, concluded Muir, was "tellement dans l'esprit de l'orgueilleux Protestantisme" that it could only damage the fledgling Society.[81] Vincentians were quick to complain of clergy who fostered ethnic rivalry within local societies[82] or who evinced little interest in ministering to unfortunates in prisons and hospitals. In cities such as Ottawa, where clergy and religious orders were few in number, leaders of the local SVP proclaimed a superior virtue based on the fact that much of the charitable activity had devolved to them, stating that it was only "par le travaille [sic] des bons membres actifs et zélés que notre belle société se procure les moyens d'aider le pauvre; le clergé, les communautés peuvent seulement procurer des pauvres à secourir."[83]

Even so powerful a clericalizer as Bishop Bourget was unable to bring the SVP to heel when it came to the Society's financial independence and internal control of its own regulations. In 1863, Bourget attempted to centralize Catholic charity in Montreal by proposing that the SVP remit the donations it received from members and subscribers to female religious communities to purchase relief for the poor. Raphael Bellemare, the president of the Montreal Particular Council, politely but firmly declined, stating that, were Bourget's proposal to be adopted, "certainly the poor would lose nothing, but what of the ardour of the visitors? . . . Do you feel that the members will continue their residential visits to the poor with the same assiduousness and the same charity when all they can offer is a moral consolation and the promise of a recommendation for admission to a house of refuge?" For Bellemare, the very character of the Society was at stake, as he insisted that "the condition on which the conferences live or die, is visiting the poor in their homes."[84] Because the SVP was a key element in the Catholic charitable system and could in fact compete with parish clergy and religious orders on the

81 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 21, Particular Council of Toronto, 1850–1854, Muir to unnamed correspondent (Privée), December 10, 1850.
82 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 20, Particular Council of Ottawa, J. C. Taché to G. M. Muir, October 22, 1874; ARCAT, St. Vincent de Paul Society, OC12 MM03, Box 19, July 14, 1889.
83 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 20, Particular Council of Ottawa, Pierre Rivet to G. M. Muir, May 1869, and "Rapport de M. le Président," 1864.
84 Minutes of the special meeting of October 25, 1863, of the Particular Council, quoted in Fecteau and Vaillancourt, "The Saint Vincent de Paul Society and the Catholic Charitable System in Quebec," p. 211.

terrain of the devotional life, senior clergy were reluctant to antagonize the local societies. Father Thomas Chandonnet's series of sermons took as its starting point the independence of the SVP, affirming that, while it was fundamentally Catholic, it in fact owed very little to the clergy, being "spécialement laique : laique dans son origine, laique dans sa fondation, laique dans sa constitution, laique dans ses membres, dans son esprit, dans ses évolutions, dans ses allures." Inviting the confreres to engage in a "croisade de charité," Chandonnet advanced as part of the attraction of the Vincentian way of life, especially for young men, that they would not be subject to the minute interference of priests. "Le clergé," he declared, "vous laisse le champ vaste, avec la sainte liberté du bien."[85]

Certainly, it would be difficult to read the motives of the SVP prior to the 1880s as promoting "liberal" values, in which charitable organizations engaged in increasingly intrusive interventions to recast the conduct of the poor in the direction of greater individualism and self-help. The 1855 *Règlement* captured the equipoise between nineteenth-century liberal values and older models of charity when it urged members not to be ashamed to "donner des aumônes modiques," an indication that many SVP members did not themselves subscribe to the liberal principle of lesser eligibility. The very modest nature of relief was aimed to remind the poor to be more provident; with this goal, the purpose of the SVP was to present them with "une existence soutenue par les secours de la charité comme bien précaire; nous les porterons à s'ingénier pour gagner eux-mêmes leurs vie; nous les indiquerons des moyens de travail, nous les aiderons à en obtenir."[86] However, the *Règlement* also firmly endorsed older notions that poverty was "une des conditions de notre existence" and hence could not be eradicated or reformed.[87]

A constant emphasis on "affectionate" dealings with the poor and winning their confidence ran through the SVP discourse. In 1878, the Toronto Particular Council enjoined the visitors:

> Deal kindly with the poor and sympathise with them in their various afflictions, they should always treat them with due respect and refrain from unnecessary questions. If compelled to find fault … let it be done in a modest and temperate manner, so that reproof may appear to proceed solely from a sense of duty, and a deep interest in the welfare of those addressed. The children should be induced to go to school, to say their daily prayers, and attend Mass and other offices of the Church.[88]

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85 Chandonnet, *Discours*, pp. 26–27.

86 *Règlement*, p. 24.

87 *Ibid.*

88 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 25, Particular Council of Toronto, *Report of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Toronto.*

The evocation of "affection" — a virtue associated with women — as a means of influencing the religious conduct of the poor was a signal of the claims of male laity to appropriate the place of women's religious communities in outdoor relief for the poor, but also indicated the SVP's conviction that winning the trust of the poor through a system of constant personal contact was the sure means to rechristianizing the urban masses. Thus, when the president of the Particular Council of Ottawa advanced the claim, "On traite les pauvres avec affection et on s'occupe de leur conduite et surtout de leur conduite religieuse,"[89] he was in fact contrasting the SVP's far more *laissez-faire* approach to the rather intrusive methods of the clergy for exercising religious control over the poor. While the aim of both the lay association and the clergy was the religious improvement of the poor, the clergy's approach explicitly linked the provision of charity to moral reformation and the performance of religious duties. For example, the parish priest of Notre-Dame parish in Quebec City established stringent criteria for relief, insisting that recipients produce a ticket of confession, take the temperance pledge, practise their religion, go to confession, send their children to school, present, on a monthly basis, a certificate of confession both for themselves and their spouses, and, finally, inform the priest if they knew of anyone on assistance who was begging or selling relief provisions. Failure to inform on one's neighbours was grounds for being struck off the parish relief rolls.[90] By comparison, the SVP's approach appears benign and non-invasive. In 1846, the Notre-Dame Conference of Quebec City, in a deliberate departure from the measures of the parish curé, declared that "l'aumône matérielle ne devrait pas être une condition de l'accomplissement des devoirs religieux."[91] A similar view was advanced at greater length by the Montreal branch of the Society, which declared that "our Society aids the poor because they are poor and without any condition or ulterior motives; that it assists them of course with a Christian intention and in the hope of making them more Christian, but it does not demand of any of them in any way a sacrifice of their convictions and certainly not the superficial practice of religion."[92] Friendly persuasion, rather than a rigorist calculus that linked material reward to the performance of religious duty,

89 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 20, Particular Council of Ottawa, "Réponses de M. le Président, 1864."

90 Hardy, *Contrôle social*, p. 89. In Montreal, the male and female visitors who acted on behalf of the Sulpicians asked a similar set of questions regarding tickets of confession, assiduity in attending the reading of the *prône*, and any other sources of relief assistance. See Lapointe-Roy, *Charité bien ordonnée*, p. 230.

91 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 101, "Conférence de Notre-Dame de Québec, 12 nov. 1846 à 29 janv. 1847," meeting of December 4, 1846.

92 "De la visite des pauvres," *Bulletin de la Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, vol. 11, no. 121 (January 1859), p. 7, quoted in Fecteau and Vaillancourt, "The Saint Vincent de Paul Society and the Catholic Charitable System in Quebec," p. 212.

characterized the Vincentian method. Indeed, the emphasis of their inter-
vention fell less on adults than on children, and much of the visiting was
directed to induce Catholic parents to send their children to catechism
and Catholic schools to initiate them into a regular practice of the sacra-
ments.[93] In their desire to use charity as a more kindly form of religious
persuasion, the lay circles of the SVP seem to have imbibed the more opti-
mistic "ultramontane" religious culture earlier than some of the urban
clergy, who remained tied to more punitive attitudes that tightly linked
relief to religious and moral conduct.

The SVP's mode of treating the poor opens a further ambiguity that has
divided historians. Were the home visits a deliberate strategy to "reform"
the urban poor, in terms of both their economic and religious values, or
did the Society in fact operate out of an older system of early modern
assumptions that assumed that poverty was "natural" and that the aim
of charitable relief was not ultimately to eradicate it, but to contribute
to the salvation of wealthy Christians?[94] The rules of the Society empha-
sized, primarily, that visitors should "deal kindly with the poor and sym-
pathise with them in their various afflictions, they should always treat
them with respect and refrain from unnecessary questions."[95] However, it
would be difficult to read into the Vincentian pronouncements the pres-
ence of a kindly attitude towards the poor that differed from other mid-
Victorian charities. Indeed, the 1855 *Règlement* warned Vincentians to
beware of the poor in large cities who were "industrieux à déguiser les
ressources qu'ils peuvent avoir par eux-mêmes et à appeler ainsi sur eux
une attention et des secours qui doivent être partagés avec d'autres"
and advised them not to take the declarations of the poor at face
value.[96] Charles Robertson, a Toronto SVP activist, complained that the
poor "lie terribly," a statement that earned the ridicule of the more
worldly-wise George Manly Muir, who retorted, "A very few visits by
any one puts that truth beyond a cavil in his mind."[97] Home visiting was
governed by a complicated set of rules, in which individual conference

93 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 21, Conference of Our Lady of Toronto, Summary Statement, November
    10, 1850–May 1, 1851; Box 101, "Conférence de Notre-Dame de Québec, 12 nov. 1846 à 29 janv.
    1847," meeting of November 26, 1846.

94 For the "reformist" perspective, see Fecteau and Vaillancourt, "The Saint Vincent de Paul Society
    and the Catholic Charitable System in Quebec," which places the Society firmly within an
    emerging "liberal" order, arguing that "[t]he visit was less undertaken personally and individually
    but rather for an organization and within a framework that was much closer to an exchange or an
    exercise of a social duty" (p. 207). For the view that the SVP was more linked to an older
    Catholic view of charity, see Clarke, *Piety and Nationalism*, pp. 101–102.

95 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 25, Particular Council of Toronto, *Report of the Society of St. Vincent de
    Paul, Toronto*.

96 *Règlement*, p. 23.

97 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 21, Particular Council of Toronto, 1850–1854, G. M. Muir to Thomas
    Devine, March 8, 1852, and Charles Robertson to My Dear Confrère, March 1, 1852.

members would propose poor families for adoption. Before families received assistance, their circumstances would be investigated by a committee appointed by the conference president, which did not include the initial sponsor. If adopted, a family would then be visited by two members named by the president; ideally, members who were not the regular visitors would undertake periodic follow-up visits.[98] The Toronto SVP advised its visitors "not to make their calls habitually at a fixed hour, but to vary the time so that families may not be prepared or 'got up' for their reception."[99] In practice, then, the discourse enjoining "kindly" treatment of the urban poor was balanced by a more severe set of priorities that appeared to be designed to keep scheming and undeserving poor from abusing the SVP's relief provisions.

However, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that these rules, at least in part, were intended less to enforce an ongoing management of the conduct of the poor than to monitor the charitable habits of SVP confreres, and in particular to ensure that well-disposed but credulous SVP visitors would not be put upon by the wily recipients of charity. Maurice O'Sullivan, president of Hamilton's Conference of Our Lady, informed George Manly Muir that much of his time was taken up ensuring that the poor did not use "any undue Influence through any of the members to obtain or rather extort from the Conference that which in their opinion they have no right to grant."[100] In fact, O'Sullivan was referring to a particularly flagrant situation that had developed in Hamilton, in which the SVP had received two elderly sisters, one blind and one deaf, as "legacy" from the expiring St. Mary's Ladies' Benevolent Society. At first, all seemed well, as the two poor women were regularly visited by the SVP and provided with rent, wood, and groceries. O'Sullivan was then horrified to learn that, in a case before the City Magistrate, the landlord for the two old women swore that "the one with eye sight was a notorious & habitual Drunkard and both together were a scandal and an annoyance." On enquiry, O'Sullivan found that his own confreres, the SVP visitors, were aiding and abetting this conduct to the extent that, on one occasion, they had to enter the house through the window to remove the drunken sister so that "the blind one outside could enter the door" and had "lied without blushing to the Conference." O'Sullivan felt constrained not only to strike the sisters from the Society's relief rolls, but also to inform their Confessor, the parish priest, who barred

98 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 20, Particular Council of Ottawa, M. Richer, président, Conférence d'Ottawa, to Augustin Gauthier, président, Conseil de Québec, 1864; Box 101, "Conférence de Notre-Dame de Québec, 12 nov. 1846 à 29 janv. 1847," meeting of November 26, 1846.

99 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 25, *Report of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Toronto*.

100 BANQQ, P437, SSVP, Box 22, Particular Council of Hamilton, Maurice O'Sullivan to G. M. Muir, August 3, 1868.

them from taking communion. As for the delinquent visitors, O'Sullivan decided to expel them from the Society.[101] In this case, the flagrantly disorderly character of the sisters, as well as the deleterious public implications of their association with the SVP, motivated O'Sullivan to discipline both the elderly women and his own confreres.

By the mid-1880s, Vincentian attitudes both to the sociability of Society members and towards the poor had taken on a more unambiguously "liberal" and voluntarist cast. Symptomatic of this shift was an 1884 English-language pamphlet expatiating on the life of the Society's patron saint, Vincent de Paul. No longer was he praised as simply a devoted servant of the poor; St. Vincent's virtues were also typified by "the spirit of order and arrangement"[102] that devised relief schemes to obviate that bugbear of the late-Victorian middle classes, indiscriminate charity. St. Vincent now occupied a firm place within a set of Catholic attitudes that placed a priority on moral and social reformation of the urban poor. In 1890, the president of the Particular Council of Montreal signalled the abandonment of lingering "traditional" notions of relief by stating unambiguously that the goal of the Society was now the "réforme" of the lives of the urban poor.[103] Given the tight relationship that prevailed between the practice of charity and devotion, the permeation of "liberal" attitudes towards the treatment of poverty could not but have an effect on the attitude of many Vincentians towards the demanding regime of Catholic piety. Within the local conferences, there were demands for changing both the overweening emphasis on devotional piety and the structure of Vincentian sociability: in 1887, the Ottawa Conference of St. Patrick formed the first Junior Conference, an American import, in an effort to address that perennial difficulty, the problem of youth recruitment.[104] Other conferences seemed intent on a closer engagement with the culture of self-improvement, announcing a programme of evening lectures that even included contributions by "Mr. Pope, Sir John A. Macdonald's former secretary" on political subjects that would have been anathema to the SVP's founders and early promoters.[105]

However, at the same moment that the Society began to take on the characteristics of the ambient culture of liberal voluntarism, that culture entered a decline, as the social message of self-improvement and the

101 *Ibid.*
102 *Sketch of the Life of St. Vincent de Paul and Origins of the Society of the Same Name* (Toronto: The Irish Canadian, 1884), pp. 3–4.
103 *Question du Travail devant la Société de St-Vincent-de-Paul de Montréal : allocution du Président du Conseil particulier à l'assemblée générale du 20 avril 1890* (Montreal: Eusèbe Sénécal, 1890), p. 5.
104 BANQQ, P437, Box 21, Particular Council of Ottawa, Richardson to Hamel, November 28, 1887.
105 BANQQ, P437, Box 21, Particular Council of Ottawa, John Gorman, President, Particular Council of Ottawa, to Edward Foley, December 18, 1891.

aspirations of the Victorian voluntary associations to bridge the classes were severely challenged by the conflicts attendant on the consolidation of industrial capitalism.[106] The social institutions evolved within Roman Catholicism were not immune from this far-reaching cultural transformation. With voices both within and outside the Roman Catholic Church urging a more critical attitude to *laissez-faire* capitalism and greater attention to the relations between capital and labour, Vincentians felt compelled to demonstrate that their system of visiting was, in effect, the best school of "économie sociale."[107] However, the 1890 pronouncement of the president of the Particular Council of Montreal on the labour question, delivered just before the reformist encyclical of Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*, elaborated a hard-edged, anti-labour position that quickly fell out of step with new developments in Catholic social thinking. Despite the confidence of the Montreal Council's president that the SVP would become "la plus utile agent" in solving the "question sociale,"[108] the Society was unable to replicate the success that it had enjoyed in the middle decades of the nineteenth century in defining a space for Catholic laymen in the forefront of new liberal thinking in Quebec. Indeed, because the Society remained mired in a culture of sociability that eschewed discussion, the SVP was unable to become the forum for the elaboration of ideas for the reform of capitalism. It was precisely here that, beginning in the late 1880s, the clergy was finally able to displace Catholic laymen from a central role in the management of modern social problems. Symptomatic of this shift was the decision taken in 1882 by the Quebec City Particular Council to surrender the foothold it had acquired in institutional management, by turning over its school patronage and the education of working-class youth to a French religious order, the Religieux de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul.[109] From the perspective of Roman Catholicism, the consolidation of industrial capitalism broke the earlier ultramontane urban equipoise in which, despite the rising prestige of the clergy, male laity had enjoyed significant social initiative. Between 1880 and 1930, in terms of the direct management of social assistance and education, the Church was able to recruit and deploy a veritable army of religious orders whose numbers grew faster than both the parish clergy and the general population. As Jean Hamelin has noted, between 1901 and 1930, the population of Quebec grew 72 per cent, but the clergy (both "secular" and "regular") grew 102 per cent. However, the growth of male religious orders was

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106 For the decline of voluntary associations, see Ferry, *On Common Ground*, conclusion.

107 *Les Noces d'or de la Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul à Montréal* (Montreal: Esuèbe Sénécal, 1884), p. 37; *Question du Travail*.

108 *Question du Travail*, p. 5.

109 On this development, see Caroline Lantagne, "Les patronages des Religieux de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul : lieu de formation religieuse en milieu ouvrier, 1935–1955," *Études d'histoire religieuse*, vol. 67 (2001), pp. 227–237.

even more striking in this period: where the "secular" parish clergy increased by 92 per cent, the "regulars" who belonged to orders like the Jesuits, Dominicans, and Oblates grew 145 per cent and were particularly active in serving large urban parishes in Montreal. Given these increases, the ratio of clergy to the Catholic population, which stood at 1:680 in 1901, attained the figure of 1:576 in 1931. When the numbers of women in religious orders are factored into the equation, this ratio achieved the impressive level of 1:97,[110] certainly one of the most favourable among any industrialized Catholic societies. A significant and growing number of both male clergy and female religious were engaged in social action and education. Of even greater importance to understanding the process of clericalization is the fact that both "secular" clergy and religious orders claimed access to an international body of social theory and an increasingly professional expertise in their ability to identify and manage social problems.[111] Through their control of an expanding network of classical colleges, this expert clergy, who had a near-monopoly on the new social Catholicism forged in France and Belgium, were able to elaborate new structures of youth sociability that successfully linked the social question and the national question[112] through a method that the devotional culture of the SVP had significantly failed to accommodate: study and discussion. In so doing, institutional Catholicism, like its Protestant counterpart, was able to enlarge the social space that it occupied in the early-twentieth-century city.[113] The clergy, who dominated the field of social endeavour through their command of sociology and youth activism, were able to forge a new, clericalized culture of male lay activism around the analysis

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110 Hamelin and Gagnon, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois*, pp. 122–123, 126–127, 129, 137.

111 A significantly understudied terrain of the social history of Catholicism has been the effect of the eruption of these religious orders onto the early twentieth-century landscape. For an exploration of the impact of early-twentieth-century Catholic "doctrinal sociology" on the development of social thinking and the formation of the discipline of sociology in Quebec, see Jean-Philippe Warren, *L'engagement sociologique : la tradition sociologique du Québec francophone, 1886–1955* (Montreal: Boréal, 2003). See also Jean Gould, "La genèse d'une modernisation bureaucratique" in Stéphane Kelly, ed., *Les idées mènent le Québec. Essais sur une sensibilité historique* (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2003), pp. 145–174.

112 On this development, see Bienvenue, *Quand la jeunesse entre en scène*, p. 31; Jean-Philippe Warren, "La découverte de la 'question sociale' : sociologie et mouvements d'action jeunesse candiens-français," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, vol. 55, no. 4 (Spring 2002), pp. 539–572.

113 A process lamented by Fecteau in *La liberté du pauvre*, p. 328. For an analysis of the parallel "clericalization" of English Canadian society through the Protestant churches' development of a systematic control over social thinking and networks of social assistance, see Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900–1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); for the beginnings of "clericalization" within Canadian Protestantism, see Christie, "Young Men and the Creation of Civic Christianity in Urban Methodist Churches." I thank Ollivier Hubert for first drawing my attention to the similar histories of clericalizaion that characterized both Quebec and English Canada.

of class relations that was not effectively challenged until the late 1930s. The paradox that ultramontanism, a brand of Catholicism ineluctably associated with a dominant clerical hierarchy, effectively left more openings for an independent male lay culture than the "progressive" social Catholicism of the early twentieth century bids Canadian historians to problematize more directly the social and cultural clericalization of Canadian society that made the churches significant actors in the new urban landscape.