HUMAN REMAINS & VIOLENCE

Against the sacred body: the processing of remains in Catholic circles

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Abstract

In the Catholic areas of Europe, the human remains (both their bones and the fabrics they touched) of persons considered to have been exceptional are usually stored for transformation into relics. The production and the reproduction of the object-relic takes place within monasteries and is carried out firstly on the material level. In this article I intend to present in detail, from an anthropological standpoint, the practices used to process such remains, the role of the social actors involved and the political-ecclesiastical dynamics connected with them. Owing to obvious difficulties in accessing enclosed communities, such practices are usually overlooked in historiographical and ethno-anthropological analyses, while they should instead be considered the most important moment in the lengthy process intended to give form and meaning to remains, with a view to their exhibition and use in ritual.

Key words: human remains, relics, production of relics, shrines, monasticism, sacred objects

Introduction

In the Catholic areas of Europe, the human remains – the bones of the body or the fabrics that came into contact with it – of persons deemed to have been exceptional can be stored by the diocesan curiae (including the Vicariate of the city of Rome), by religious orders[1] and by individual communities. Preserving the remains of a person – very often a founder or a prominent figure – represents an attempt by a group to identify with a particular model of behaviour, which the group recognises as possessing a positive significance with which it intends to conform. These are particular objects, recognised as possessing a prodigious, extra-human power that, if channelled and used in specific ways, is capable of interceding in human life or in individual areas of the everyday. Such objects are a patrimony of items that form a system. They refer, as Michel Albaric says, to an 'epistemology of the religious material object'.[2] For the social actors involved, these remains are considered sacred and are commonly called relics, but they cannot yet be used in official devotional

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practices. Before they can be used for this purpose, they must be processed in the cloister by nuns who are experts in doing so.[3]

The production and reproduction of the object-relic is carried out firstly on the material level. In this article I intend to present in detail, from an anthropological standpoint, the practices used to process remains recognised as special, the role of the social actors involved and the political-ecclesiastical dynamics connected with them. Owing to obvious difficulties in accessing enclosed communities, these practices are usually overlooked in historiographical and ethno-anthropological analyses, while they should instead be considered the most important moment in the lengthy process intended to give form and meaning to remains, with a view to their exhibition and use in ritual.

Before proceeding, some methodological clarification is required. The thoughts presented here spring from a long-term ethnographic study on devotional objects in enclosed communities and on the day-to-day life of nuns, undertaken over the last twenty years in Carmelite and Augustinian monasteries in Italy and France. Regular visits to some monasteries[4] were followed by immersive stays as a postulant in others.[5] As is made clear in the Code of Canon Law, a postulant is an individual who, after having expressed the desire to enter a religious Order, undergoes a trial period, known as postulancy.[6] During this phase, before deciding whether to embark upon an actual novitiate, the person spends a short amount of time, usually one or two months, experiencing life inside a convent or monastery. Because I wanted to enter the cloister for research purposes rather than due to any spiritual-religious aspiration, this was the only mode of access granted me by the local bishops and the monastic hierarchies. It ensured no disruption of everyday life in the monasteries and no invasive questions, enquiries or observations, which were all aspects dealt with only later from the outside.[7] I was able to enter into the dynamics of everyday life and of regular close contact, which revealed to me a monastic system regarding objects that was unexpected and novel. To be able to write about my experience, considering the delicacy of some topics dealt with and the intrusion in communal situations, I had to guarantee the anonymity of the monasteries that hosted me and those that I regularly visited, as well as that of the individual nuns I met. In this sense I found myself in unexplored, unmapped territory, with all the methodological difficulties that working in enclosed communities involves.[8]

Processing the remains of a dead body

The processing of remains (both bone and fabric) of persons acknowledged to be blesseds or saints consists of a set of actions aimed at cleaning, fragmenting and placing them inside shrines[9] or reliquaries. The nuns who 'invent' and direct the procedures are to be considered as figures who mediate with the extra-human. On an analytical level, therefore, it would be opportune to distinguish between the object-remains, consisting in residual pieces of fabric and bone (often shattered, dirty and deteriorated) and the object-relic, a *composite object* born from the ordered integration of *remains* with decorative-exhibitional elements such as reliquaries, shrines, cushions, pieces of card and other kinds of accessories. Fully

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Figure 1 Preparation of work table (Author's photo).

understanding the value of the object-relic requires setting it within a process of *transformation*, from bodily matter to an instrument intended for use or an important, sophisticated, symbolised object, utilisable in practices of veneration. There is great interest in the distinction created between these two types of objects, i.e. those that are not processed (the remains) and those that are (the relics). The former are part of the category of objects that Gian Paolo Gri defines as 'unfinished'.[10] They occupy the lowest level in the matter of attributing meaning and symbolic value and acquire their full identity only when they are processed.

To understand what transforming remains into relics means in a concrete sense, let us examine in detail the different stages of processing, looking at fabric remains first. The procedure begins with the preparation of the worktable. An aspect I shall return to later, the nun places on the table either a cloth or a sheet and sets down the fragment of fabric, the shrine and the implements: scissors, tweezers, a needle and thread, glue, a little pot of sealing wax and the monastery stamp (Figure 1). The act of placing the cloth on the table, carried out with extreme care, is considered indispensable for the success of the process and acquires a strong symbolic value. Firstly, this avoids the remains coming into direct contact with the surrounding environment, and secondly, it prevents the loss of particles of fabric resulting from fragmenting because it means that they can be recovered at the end of the procedures. When the nuns have finished, they shake the cloth over the box of remains or over a corner of the instrument container. These materials, considered to be of exceptional value, must be protected, must not become lost and should not be brought near objects in everyday use. Sometimes, the nuns also put an additional sheet of paper between the cloth and the table, with the aim of further protecting the remains from any

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undesired contact. If a small particle does accidentally fall to the floor, they react with specific gestures: they pick it up, kiss it and put it back in place. In this case, the kiss, a traditional act of respect, is understood as a moment of devotion. Each object used by the nuns refers to a set of signs and meanings. These acts of protection are aimed at creating an ordered, isolated symbolic space, separated as far as possible from the sensible world.

The reason for this separation from the surrounding environment is interesting: it is feared that contact with everyday objects may result in some sort of reduction or deterioration in the quality of the extra-human power believed to be inherent to the remains. This is why the nuns follow a series of rules about hygiene, notions of dirt, classification of substances and behaviours to avoid. The British anthropologist Mary Douglas refers to the concept of 'contamination', which makes it possible to understand the boundaries established to keep separate what she calls the spheres of the pure and the impure, a concept traceable to Durkheim's dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. As Douglas notes, these two spheres are a way of controlling the actions of individuals and reflect a broader discourse on the social order as a whole.[11]

Once the table has been prepared, it is the turn of the shrine. This is opened and decorated with a coloured fabric, with a small piece of card bearing the name of the saint or the blessed adorned with geometric or floral patterns (Figure 2). In the case of large reliquaries, the remains are placed on cushions or embroidered fabric. The decoration and ornamentation of the shrine or reliquary is itself considered to be a delicate matter. It is not only about recognising the uniqueness of the remains, but also valorising them in the most appropriate way, 'tastefully' as the nuns often say. They work for specific clients and, during production, they bear the preferences of these audiences in mind. They also have to take into account typical market requirements (the aesthetic aspect, functionality and form of the artefact). From this point onwards, every gesture is accompanied by prayer. The nun begins with an invocation – usually a predetermined formula – and then continues reciting the rosary out loud or meditating in silence. In this situation, silence is understood as inner prayer. The words of prayer make it possible to begin the processing. The nun takes the remains and, using tweezers and ordinary scissors, she *cuts* a fragment to the desired size, applies glue to it and attaches it to the decorative support (Figure 3). This moment marks the proximity and the relatively prolonged contact with that which is seen as the physical medium of an extra-human power. If this point of view is accepted, it is easy to understand the exceptional nature of the situation. On this occasion the nun may decide to *cut* the fragment into many pieces to create many other small objects of veneration. At this point the small support is reinserted into the shrine, where it is secured in place by thread passed through prefabricated holes at the sides (Figure 4). The wax seal is applied (Figure 5) and the shrine is closed for good. The nun puts the instruments away and cleans the work surface to recover any fragments of the remains that may have been lost.

The processing of remains becomes more delicate and problematic when the nuns work with bone. They are well aware that in this case they are dealing with the actual body of the saint or blessed and not with their clothing.[12] All the nuns I talked with

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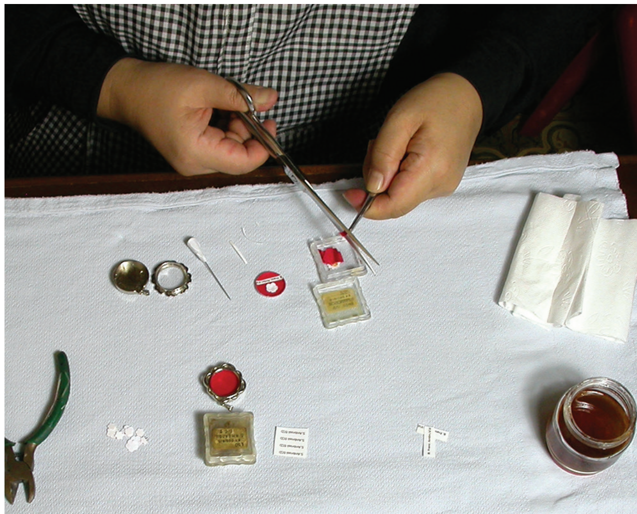

Figure 2 Decoration of the shrine base (Author's photo).

Figure 3 Arrangement of textile fragment on the shrine base (Author's photo).

admit that when processing bones, they are more emotionally involved. This greater personal involvement is often accompanied by a greater awkwardness in talking about the topic – a reticence probably dictated by the effective difficulty of describing these procedures, which at first sight might seem rather disturbing.

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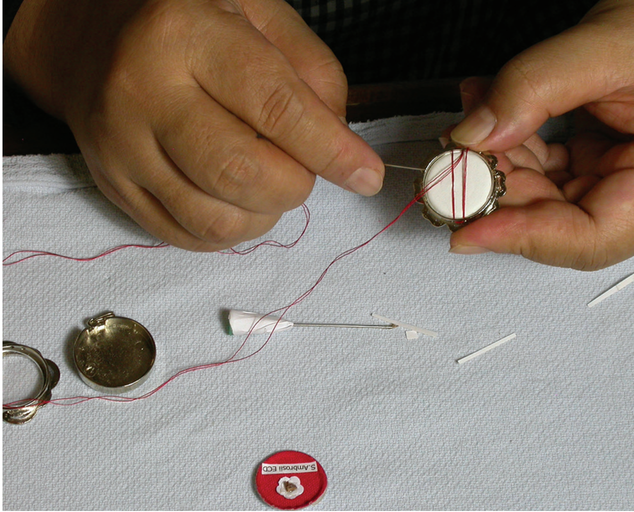

Figure 4 Securing the shrine (Author's photo).

Figure 5 Sealing the shrine (Author's photo).

Similarly to what happens with fabrics, remains of bone are broken into pieces, sometimes even ground to dust.[13] On a practical level, the processing of these remains is no different from that of fabric remains. For the nuns, however, it is certainly more difficult to face dealing with parts of the dead body that are systematically and repeatedly broken up. The aspect that creates probably even more

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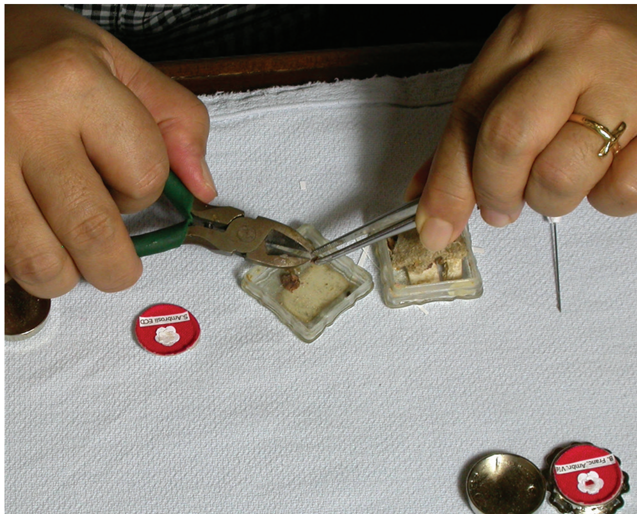

Figure 6 Fragmentation of bone remains (Author's photo).

Figure 7 Pulverisation of bone remains with pestle and mortar (Author's photo).

uneasiness is the particular method of producing the fragments. First, the portion of bone, being a hard material, is broken up using a small metal saw, with a view to producing smaller pieces of remains. These are subsequently cut with wire cutters (Figure 6) or ground up using a pestle and mortar (Figure 7). These are highly unusual operations, which some might consider ethically dubious. In this case, not

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only is an object in common use employed, as happens with fabric remains, but this object is used improperly, on a body part, making it a more aggressive act. Saws are normally thought of as tools for cutting timber, metal or stone; likewise, wire cutters, as their name suggests, are used to cut wires or metal bars. Unlike fabric remains, which despite representing the person's body symbolically are really just scraps of fabric, remains of bone are real parts of that person's body.[14] This is why breaking them up and pulverising them with saws, wire cutters and pestles and mortars is sometimes perceived as a lack of respect towards the body, if not outright violence. As such, in some monasteries they do not process human remains at all.

It is also important to note that, in convents where this activity regularly takes place, some nuns are strongly against the practice of fragmenting (both bone and fabric). As these are individual women belonging to institutions that take a different view on the practice, it proved particularly difficult to discuss this subject.

It should be emphasised that these operations are not fully recognised and accepted by ecclesiastical authorities. Luigi Canetti points out that, in the history of ecclesiastical thought, strong condemnation – especially in late antiquity (third to seventh centuries) – alternated with reappraisals and concessions, as for example in the late medieval period (thirteenth to sixteenth centuries).[15] Within a certain Christian tradition there exists the belief – which, due to reasons of space cannot be dealt with in greater depth here – that the integrity of the dead body is a condition for guaranteeing an afterlife.[16]

In current canonical texts, references to the breaking up of remains are extremely scarce. On the rare occasion when the subject is tackled, the practice tends to be strongly condemned. However, comprehensive comments justifying this position cannot be found. As some authors point out, since the advent of the Second Vatican Council, the Church has become less interested in issues relating to the cult of relics.[17] From a theological perspective, the cult of relics is an objectively marginal and secondary aspect of Christian liturgical practice. Dictionaries of theology and post-conciliar theological–pastoral current affairs publications for the most part do not discuss it or limit themselves to a few mentions from a historical standpoint.[18] The text that provides the most information on the practice of fragmenting dead bodies is probably the relatively recent *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, a document issued in 2001 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.[19]

> An adequate pastoral instruction of the faithful about the use of relics will not overlook: [. . .] preventing undue dispersal of relics into small pieces, since such practice is not consonant with due respect for the human body; the liturgical norms stipulate that relics must be 'of a sufficient size as [to] make clear that they are parts of the human body'.[20]

In many monasteries, however, this advice is ignored and the practice of breaking up bone parts is widespread. The text of the *Directory* is not well known. Presently, it appears that the world of the cloister has defied official ecclesiastical directives and that internal traditions are stronger than these suggestions.

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The remains considered thus far make it possible, through their *presentia*, to keep alive the memory of a person precisely because they were a *part* of that person (bone remains) or because they were *owned* by that person during his or her lifetime (fabric remains). It is necessary, however, to make clear that there are other types of remains, of a wholly different nature. These have no direct link to the saint or the blessed who is the subject of veneration, but undergo specific processes to become such. We are dealing here with ordinary fabrics – and it should be stressed that they have no (material, emotional or temporal) proximity to the blessed/saint – that, through a succession of contacts with the bone remains or the reliquaries that contain them, become in their turn *remains of* that saint or blessed, ready to be processed. The procedure is based on the ease of movement attributed to the extra-human power, which is transferrable through acts of adhesion, proximity and contiguity. The practice of sacred reproducibility is aimed at overcoming the principles of the relic's rarity and uniqueness.[21] These are remains produced by contact, something that has important cultural consequences, insofar as it implies the possibility of assembly-line production and reproduction. Usually linen cloth (defined as *brandea*[22] in the Catholic tradition), these fabrics have no connection to the saint or blessed, being from a later period and of undifferentiated origin.

Through a succession of theoretically infinite reproducible acts of contact, the virtues of the object are transmitted to ordinary fabrics. This happens after the person's death, and, more importantly, without any reference to his or her glorious or spiritual 'story'. Not all nuns agree on the amount of time necessary to produce the change in the nature of the fabric: some say that a short period of contact is enough, even when this is by chance or occurs for practical reasons (when, for example, they wrap remains or relics in cloths when transferring them from one place to another); others believe that a longer period of contact is necessary, as much as one year. For the interpretation of this practice, perhaps Durkheim's principle of the 'contagiousness of sacredness'[23] may once again prove helpful. With this expression Durkheim referred to the capacity of a supreme power to transmit itself through contact. On several occasions he says that extra-human power is perceived as a 'fluid and impalpable substance' that does not let itself be imprisoned by the form of the object.[24] Extra-human power is made to fall under those collective, hypostatised religious powers that society arouses in the individual. These powers, therefore, are independent of the objects in which they are localised. When discussing this phenomenon, the modern historian Jean-Pierre Duteil speaks of the 'multiplication' of relics.[25] He refers to a vital force contained in them that can spread from one object to another in an uncontrolled way and then self-reproduce, sometimes even without any intentionality on the individual's part. This aspect is interesting for the purposes of this research: the effectiveness of the power is not bound to a specific object. Any physical medium can receive it and can, consequently, make it usable, even the human body. It can be considered as something like a spiritual energy, whose essence has a dual value, both beneficial and harmful. In other words, it can produce positive effects (health, healing, good fortune) or, conversely, if not controlled, it can become a source of danger. Dorothea Theodoratus and Antonio La Pena point out that forces considered sacred have the characteristic of transmitting

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themselves through the environment, understood both as the natural environment and as a set of constructed places, bodies and objects.[26] The procedure implemented by the nuns is based precisely on the power's recognised facility of movement – a mobility that they consider to be a distinctive character of the power itself, and one that they tend to encourage and, if not to control, to transfer through acts of adhesion, proximity and contiguity.[27] So appears the need to reify the perception of the supernatural and, as Remotti puts it, 'to solidify the conventional basis of thought'.[28]

Just like traditional remains of fabric or bone, remains that have acquired power through contact with other remains of bone or with their reliquaries are subjected to processing. They are transformed into 'contact relics', as they are called in Christian-Catholic circles. However, this involves a different type of procedure to those employed for the other remains, both in terms of the desired result and the way in which the procedure is carried out. These fragments of fabric are not set inside shrines or reliquaries but are sewn onto printed cards bearing the image of the blessed or the saint, sometimes inserted into clear plastic sleeves. They are not enclosed within glass and can easily be touched by anyone, even after processing.

This processing procedure highlights the different quality of these remains. Even though in this case too there are pre-established sequences like those for the processing of the saint's clothing – the remains are cut, glued and sewn onto the piece of card before being fixed at the back with a sticker bearing the symbol of the monastery – a change in the nuns' attitude can be seen. They are less concerned about the perilousness of remains obtained through contact. It is not a problem if anything falls on the floor – it is simply picked up – nor is it a problem if tiny fragments are lost. However, the process always involves ordered actions, carried out by the nuns with great care and in the most absolute silence. The moment of prayer subsides, both before and during the work, while all the acts aimed at controlling and structuring the remains are less evident. In this case, the extra-human power seems to be considered as being of a lower level, more easily handled. There appears to be a qualitative distinction linked to the type of material: 'contact relics', unlike those of bone or fabric, can be given to private individuals.

This subtle qualitative difference, however, disappears entirely when discussing their effectiveness. Indeed, there is always a tendency to emphasise the absolute equivalence of the objects on a devotional level.

> No relics work better than others. The miracle can be obtained both through bones and clothing but also through holy images ['contact relics']. What counts is faith and constancy in prayer. (Interview with nun, Rome, February 2017)

The silencing and control of knowledge

The processing of remains is characterised by little gestures, always carried out in a certain way and in the same sequence. These are highly standardised acts that correspond to a predetermined model of reference. The nuns do not act on variable personal choices but comply with precise rules and respect for a codified monastic tradition. Additionally, the processing procedure for remains is

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fairly uniform among the various monasteries that practise it. Despite some variations in local traditions and the directives of the individual prioresses, the process described here remains substantially the same. It involves having a 'knowledge' in the hands, and specific artisanal techniques that are an integral part of monastic life and characterise the nuns' various roles. As Yvonne Verdier observes, the gestural expressiveness of technical knowledge possesses 'its own stratigraphy and historicity' and should be framed within a normative order dictated by custom, perceived and recognised as local.[29] We are dealing with precise 'ways of going about things',[30] often differentiated on the basis of the sexes: movements, particular manoeuvres and the capacity to implement a series of operations and stratagems.[31]

When at work, the nuns use everyday implements: scissors, a needle and thread, tweezers, stamps and sealing wax. While during the preparation stage they try in every way to keep common objects away from the worktable and to avoid all contact with them, when they are actually doing the processing they use these very objects. In practical terms, they could not work otherwise. The situation can be thought of as full of clear contradictions, which the nuns attempt to eliminate by creating a symbolic setting at the beginning. Work on remains is considered very delicate. Processing would seem to produce a contact with the *potentia* of the object, that is, with the concrete, effective power contained in it.[32] While on the one hand this is seen as a great privilege, on the other it can be a source of danger: when the remains are divided up into parts, the *potentia* might also be divided up.

The act of processing remains (of whatever type) is perceived by the nuns – and by those who do not perform it and are not cloistered – as something different to manual work proper. This is because during the processing, as I have mentioned several times, contact with an extra-human power takes place. During the interviews I conducted, numerous references and specifications were made (even when not prompted) concerning the subject. It seems to be something that nuns, both Italian and French, perceive as problematic. This is why, especially when talking to persons from outside the monastic sphere, they tend to provide explanations and clarification.

> When they [the nuns who process the relics] make the cutting movement, it is a *liturgical gesture* because they are making it to create an important or sacred object. [. . .] it is something that expresses an intention of the heart and the spirit, an intention raised up toward the Lord. (Interview with nun, Pluherlin, France, August 2002)

Defining the processing of relics as a liturgical act means framing it within religion as a whole, as established by tradition and the responsible religious authorities. In the Christian tradition, the liturgical act is a (ceremonial or ritual) religious action through which a community professes its faith and, in a form that is legitimate and sometimes broadly confirmed by custom, offers its worship to God.

The life of cloistered nuns is punctuated by a fundamental liturgical act, the so-called 'liturgy of the hours', in other words the various prescribed moments of prayer throughout the day.[33] Considering the processing of relics as a liturgical act means, therefore, performing this activity during the moments of communal prayer

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and not in those devoted to manual work, which moreover the nuns do regularly (embroidery and sewing, preparation of sweets, production of ceramic objects). Even when no specific reference is made to liturgical action, in any case we are talking – as Italian nuns do more often – about prayer.

This desire to specify the nature of the work carried out is emphasised by careful linguistic choices. Nuns never use terms such as 'work', 'work surface', and not even 'processing'. This last term, even more generic than 'work', indicates the operation and the technique of tangibly processing a material to give it form and aspect. And when these terms are used by an external interlocutor – as I often naively did – nuns are quick to point out the inaccuracy. At times this is received as a lack of respect for their activity. The processing of remains is considered a moment of intimate devotion, falling under the aspect of contemplative life. It seems that nuns experience a certain spiritual and cultural disquiet when it comes to this activity and feel the need to present it in a more favourable light. They translate it into the religious code typical of enclosure: manual work on relics is conceptualised in prayer. All these expressions highlight the devotional and cultic aspect of the act itself. There is a tendency to attach only secondary importance to the idea of the material activity involved in producing a commodity, or at any rate obtaining a product that individuals or the public can use. Bodily and spiritual practices seem to overlap. Aspiration to the mystical element,[34] typical of the enclosed community, is facilitated by specific bodily correspondences. As Marcel Mauss[35] points out – an aspect subsequently also picked up by Pierre Bourdieu[36] – the movements and the technical practices acquired by individuals, insofar as they are members of a society, make it possible to act on the emotions and the subconscious. According to Mauss, even mystical states are underpinned by specific techniques of the body. My experience in enclosure led me to discover that the principal mode of prayer with God occurs through the body, which is subjected to practices of posture, movement and attitude, most of which are tiring and difficult to keep up. Repeated in everyday life, they become habitual and wholly integrated.

A clear contradiction must be mentioned here. When nuns tell others about their activities with remains, they try to make it seem, as I have said, like a devotional act. However, when they discuss this among themselves, they use expressions strongly characterised by materiality. They say, 'we manufacture/make relics'. These expressions, typical of spoken language and used only inside the monasteries, would suggest that the nuns do not consider all remains to be sufficient in themselves to become relics. In other words, this allows us to surmise that to become relics they must be processed and manufactured using specific methods linked to their materiality. Outside the monastic world, nuns seem to want to represent themselves through functions and roles connected exclusively with the contemplative–devotional sphere and not with the practical–manual one. My interviews, however, often reveal inaccuracies and embarrassment.

> When the shrine is finished, *the relic is completed* for veneration, because we cannot handle it, it is a sacred thing and must be enclosed within glass, so it cannot be touched! People who come to see it, to touch it, they cannot touch it like that [...]

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> Always through glass! Yes, always with glass, for pity's sake! (Interview with nun, Rome, January 2002)

In one sense, remains are considered relics per se. They say, however, that they are relics that must be *completed* if they are to be venerated. Note the linguistic muddle that arises in their spoken language. Nuns say they manufacture and make relics, but at the same time they use that same term for the remains from which these relics are produced. In other words, they use the same term when talking about two different objects. The remains, although considered 'sacred' and already called relics, are not perfect in themselves; they cannot be used in religious practices, nor can they be venerated. To become perfect, they must be subjected to specific selection, processing and placement procedures. They must be of a regulated shape and size, and they must be adapted to the various requirements dictated by the modes of conservation and placement, by aesthetics and, no less importantly, by current religious sensibilities. These acts produce different objects that, although constructed using remains, are distinct from them and have their own character and form.

The storing and processing of remains seems to take place only in specialised monasteries by a relatively restricted number of authorised nuns. This is an environment almost totally separated from the secular world, with this separation guaranteed by spatial conditions (evidently produced by the monastery itself) and, above all, by the silence that shrouds all the operations. This barrier, however, acquires its full significance not so much in relation to secular people – who in most cases do not know about the operations involved in producing relics, and very often do not even wonder how the final object is made – as in relation to other nuns and other ecclesiastics, even though most of the time they are the ones who bring in remains for processing. They know about the procedure but they do not know how it is carried out, nor can they take part directly or watch. As such, just a few women enjoy the privilege of being the only ones who can touch and freely handle the remains of special deceased persons.

This is when, in an explicit and recognised way, the hierarchically structured diversification of roles and expertise within the monastery comes into play. The existence of this secret knowledge is precisely what creates different levels and powers, ordering and differentiating the nuns and, especially, the relationship between monasteries and ecclesiastical hierarchies. Both the practices carried out by the nuns and the entire lexicon that refers to them are unknown. It should be noted, in fact, that around the actual processing of the object, inside the individual monasteries, a complex and specific set of expressions and terms that refer to such work has taken shape. This lexical repertoire allows the nuns to understand one another quickly but excludes others at the same time.[37] In this sense, there comes into being a system of communication reserved for the few nuns who process remains and who feel 'other' with respect both to the outside world and to those nuns who do not carry out this task. They strongly perceive the feeling of being in another dimension. However, there is no particular special knowledge that these nuns possess which others do not. Objects considered 'sacred' are subjected to traditional artisanal work, mostly carried out with the aid of everyday implements (glue, scissors,

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a needle and thread). These are not exceptional practices, but they become so when lay persons are not told about them and other nuns are left to imagine them. We are induced or led to suppose that the processing of the 'sacred', precisely because it is *other* par excellence, cannot happen in the usual ways or by using everyday instruments. The nuns hint at wholly particular ways of processing materials. They create an aura of mystery, which makes for and guarantees complete secrecy. When a form of secret knowledge is implemented, in most cases it is not so much the *content* of the communication that is important but having *control* of it. The secret is often the 'frame' of the situation rather than its real content.[38]

The way in which the knowledge is passed on contributes to creating the *frame* of isolation and to valorising the knowledge itself. It is passed on like an initiatory skill, shrouded in confidentiality and secrecy. The act of processing relics is handed down as an extraordinary ability, which not all nuns can acquire and which must be passed on with care. Usually, the prioress of the monastery decides who will perform this duty. All the nuns interviewed, on recounting the moment in which they were entrusted with the task of dealing with relics, speak of the joy and pride they felt. After setting the remains in the shrine or reliquary, direct contact, from that point mediated by the glass, becomes impossible, even for the nuns who did the processing. From the nuns' standpoint, this task means being in the presence of the saints and measuring themselves against their lives. Physical proximity with the saints' remains is a reminder of the example to follow, the model with which to conform if they are to fulfil in the best possible way their own religious calling.

Even though formally the production of relics ought to be inspected by the postulator general of the order to which the nuns belong or by the appointed ecclesiastical organs, in reality, control and effective management is in the hands of female monastic religious groups. These women, having side-stepped the influence of the secular clergy, practise and decide the entire process of constructing the objects of the blessed. As such, these nuns have acquired technical know-how and logics of production that have enabled them to carve out niches of autonomous power within the broader ecclesiastical sphere. They have created specific areas of competence and seem to have circumvented male authority. Within a religious institution that has made them subordinates, they seem to have managed to construct privileged roles that involve having direct relations with hypothetical extra-human powers and presences.[39]

There appears to be a clear social division of work, founded not only on belonging to the religious class, but also, within this class, on the differentiation between the sexes. Claude Langlois uses the term 'sexual dimorphism' to indicate the difference in religious practice according to whether one is male or female.[40] Often considered a characteristic of French Catholicism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, dimorphism – which I do not have space to discuss in depth here – should be understood not only as diversity among lay churchgoers, most of whom are women,[41] but also as the differentiation of roles within the religious world itself.[42] According to this analysis, it is possible to discern religious positions and competences proper to the sphere of each gender, which assigns and reserves for itself distinctive and characteristic specialisations. As Giordana Charuty observes, opposition between

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the sexes seems to characterise the very models of (not only Christian) sanctity: in them the division between man and woman indicates different forms of fusion with the divine.[43]

In Western culture, women's integration into supernatural religious practices seems to be decidedly partial. They are excluded from most of the constitutive acts of religion, kept at a distance from the sacrificial sphere or relegated to secondary positions. As historian Michael Lauwers notes, within Catholicism, the exclusion of women is the result of a long history, especially in medieval days, which refers to ideologies developed by the ecclesiastical institution. Many medieval writings and documents tackle the problem of the relationship between women and religion,[44] and several authors agree in saying that the Catholic tradition holds fast to this distinction, which is unresolved and still causes problems today.[45] In most cases women are still excluded from official ecclesiastical channels. It is hard to find justifications or exhaustive explanations for this. The two anthropologists Agnès Fine and Claudine Leduc maintain that, whereas in many religious traditions discrimination is usually explained by the impurity of menstrual blood, as for example the condition of *niddah* in traditional Judaism,[46] in the Catholic world they prefer to talk generically of the 'inferiority' of women. The two authors point out, however, that in traditional ritual practices there is a deeply rooted belief in the impurity of women, 'marked by menstrual blood and giving birth'.[47]

Within a religious institution that has made them subordinates, however, women seem to have succeeded in constructing for themselves privileged roles connected to those things defined as 'sacred'. Situations have occurred in the past and still occur today in which some women attain positions of primary importance. The Catholic Church seems to have an ambivalent relationship with women. There are serious contradictions. As some authors suggest, we need to understand whether we are dealing with an approach to the divine specific to the female world and tolerated by the institution or, conversely, with individual, isolated cases rendered exemplary by the institution.[48] Be that as it may, there are exceptions, even significant ones, to the subordination or containment of female functions in religious circles. According to an analysis by Étienne Fouilloux, the 'masculinity' of the clergy is balanced out by a surprising growth in female orders and groups, in which some outstanding women wield specific authority not only in the religious field but also in the secular one.[49] From this standpoint, in the contemporary ecclesiastical world there would therefore exist niches of female power which, albeit not very evident, represent a counterpart to male authority. As has been seen with the processing of the remains of saints or blesseds, women seem to be the only ones who, in some circumstances, permit and guarantee mediation with the divine. The role of manipulating the prodigious object seems to have freed itself of the priestly function to which it is traditionally bound.[50] Marlène Albert-Llorca examines the work of the Spanish female group called *camareras* at the festival of the Madonna dels Desemparats. They are tasked with undressing and redressing the statue, hence seeing and handling its body. The statue is considered 'sacred' and is prepared in secret but recognised by ecclesiastical institutions.[51] These women possess specific and exclusive knowledge, handed down from generation to generation within the group itself.

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This knowledge is highly specialised, governing behaviours, acts and words: as Gri says, the care of simulacra, in Europe, seems to be a 'female prerogative'.[52]

Significant examples in this sense can also be found if, while respecting the differences, we shift our focus to the ancient world. It should not be forgotten that in republican Rome, despite the strict separation of male and female roles in the religious sphere and women being granted only a statute of dependency, the Vestals were nonetheless present. As historian Jean-Marie Pailler notes, these women were charged with tending the city's sacred fire, whose permanence was thought to guarantee Rome's public health and, at the same time, a favourable outcome for public and private worship. Exemplary public priestesses were held to be necessary for the entire community, they assumed the role that Pailler, using Georges Dumézil's categories,[53] defines as 'bearers of the sacred'.[54] This expression refers to those women (in the roles of *vestales*, *flaminica dialis* or *regina sacrorum*) who can touch and carry objects of extra-human power during religious ceremonies. They were assisted by the 'manipulators of the sacred', exclusively men, who were permitted not only to come into contact with these objects but also to handle and use them for specific purposes.[55]

Concluding remarks

It is useful to distinguish two different levels of proximity with the object of veneration. While the female role is regarded as just involving contact, the male role is considered to involve manipulating the object and using it for practical purposes. However, during my research on this subject, I have met women who play a privileged, sometimes exclusive, role concerning not only contact with objects of veneration,[56] but also their production and management. These objects are recognised and venerated by all of society. Usually, this role is played by restricted, selected groups of 'specialised' women,[57] who possess specific technical knowledge handed down from generation to generation, often initiatorily. They become, to all intents and purposes, 'manipulators of the sacred'. This analysis obliges us to reinterpret the object-relic as a product of artisanal processing and, at the same time, as a detector of function, role and gender. A prospective, comparative study that looked beyond just the Catholic world would enable us to expand our knowledge on issues relating to the sacred object constituted of human remains, and to focus on the remains themselves and the non-sacred representational values connected with them. As religious beliefs are constructed and supported through materiality,[58] studying the materiality would allow us to probe deeper into the cognitive paths of religiosity.

Notes

Translated by Cadenza Academic Translations.

1 In the Catholic Church, religious orders are societies of communal life, approved by the ecclesiastical authority, whose members strive for evangelical perfection by taking the three solemn vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

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2 M. Albaric, 'Les objets religieux domestiques', in *Encyclopédie des Religions* (Paris, Encyclopaedia universalis, 1991), pp. 314–15. Translator's note: our translation from the French.
3 In ecclesiastical language the term cloister (from the Latin *claudere*, 'to close') indicates, in a physical sense, a closed space where ecclesiastics may withdraw and, in an official sense, the rules that discipline life, entry and exit. A nun is a cloistered ecclesiastic.
4 F. Sbardella, *Antropologia delle reliquie. Un caso storico* (Brescia, Morcelliana, 2007).
5 F. Sbardella, *Abitare il silenzio. Un'antropologa in clausura* (Rome, Viella, 2015).
6 Code of Canon Law (CIC) 1917, cc. 539–54. For a definition of postulant/postulate see É. Jombart, s.v. 'Postulant' and 'Postulat', in *Dictionnaire de Droit Canonique*, 7 (Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1965), pp. 67–70 and A. Gauthier, s.v. 'Postulato', in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, 7 (Rome, Edizioni paoline, 1983), pp. 138–41.
7 Sbardella, *Abitare il silenzio*, p. 199. Over the years I have been able to build up an archive of oral sources comprising both interviews and conversations (around 200 items in total).
8 F. Sbardella, 'Il silenzio dell'antropologo e l'altro degli altri. Fare etnografia in clausura', in C. Gianotto and F. Sbardella (eds), *Tra pratiche e credenze. Traiettorie antropologiche e storiche. Un omaggio ad Adriana Destro* (Brescia, Morcelliana, 2017), pp. 163–81; F. Sbardella, 'L'antropologa annullata. Fare etnografia in monastero', *Humanitas*, 69:3 (2014), 421–42; F. Sbardella, 'Ethnography of Cloistered Life: Field Work into Silence', in *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, 5 (2014), 55–70, monographic issue *Sociology of Monasticism: Between Innovation and Tradition*, I. Jonveaux, E. Pace and S. Palmisano (eds).
9 A case for holding holy objects, usually decorated.
10 G.P. Gri, 'Salire verso la grazia. Strutture simboliche marginali dell'itinerario religioso', in Accademia Udinese di Scienze Lettere ed Arti (eds), *Santuari Alpini. Luoghi e itinerari religiosi nella montagna friulana. Atti del Convegno di Studio, Udine 1997* (Tavagnacco (UD), Arti Grafiche Friulane, 1997), pp. 69–84, p. 76. Translator's note: quotation is our translation from the Italian.
11 M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1966).
12 A significant fourteenth-century example of the processing of corpses considered sacred is presented by P. Camporesi in *La carne impassibile* (Milan, il Saggiatore, 1983), pp. 11–31. Examining some seventeenth-century texts, he recounts the disquieting story of the body of the Augustinian nun Chiara da Montefalco, processed by the nuns of her own monastery.
13 On the fragmentation of bodies, see A. Paravicini Bagliani, 'Démembrement et intégrité du corps au XIIIe siècle', *Terrain*, 18 (1992), 26–32; D. Hillman and C. Mazzio (eds), *The Body in Parts. Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York, Routledge, 1997).
14 An incident that took place during my fieldwork seems to clearly show how difficult it was for nuns to speak about the breaking up of bone and to show the objects they used to do so. The day on which I filmed the processing of bones, I was met in the cloister by a nun who told me that I would not be able to film the first stage of the

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processing because the saw – I report the expression used by the nun herself – had 'vanished'. Subsequently I was told that the saw had not been found again. I never managed to see the tool or how it was used.

15 L. Canetti, *Frammenti di eternità. Corpi e reliquie tra Antichità e Medioevo* (Rome, Viella, 2002).

16 Canetti, *Frammenti di eternità*, p. 246. According to Canetti, the problem arises because the Catholic tradition has established a close connection between the 'material condition of the corpse (including the forms and specific modalities of burial) and the effective fate of the soul in the afterlife'. The state of the corpse and the conditions of its burial and preservation are closely related to the possibility of resurrection and the otherworldly destiny of the soul.

17 Numerous works focus on the historical background of the cult of relics. For the purposes of this article, I will mention here the critical reflections of P. Séjourné, s.v. 'Reliques', in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* 13/2 (Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1937), pp. 2312–76; J. McCulloh, 'The Cult of Relics in the Letters and Dialogues of Pope Gregory the Great: A Lexicographical Study', *Traditio. Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought, and Religion*, 32 (1976), 145–84; and Canetti, *Frammenti di eternità*.

18 F. Magnani, 'Le reliquie: tra l'oblio della teologia e il rinnovato interesse della cultura post-moderna', *Liturgia*, 173 (2002), 506–27, at 506.

19 This is a normative text for bishops that contains principles and guidance related to the liturgy. It was officially approved during the plenary assembly of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, which was held on 26–28 September 2001.

20 *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (Vatican City, Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments City, 2002), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html. The quotation in this passage comes from the following text: Pontificale Romanum, 1977, *Ordo dedicationis ecclesiae et altaris*, Editio Typica, Tipis Polyglottis Vaticanis, chap. II, *Praenotanda*, 5.

21 J. Wirth, 'Image et relique dans le christianisme occidental', *Studia Religiosa Helvetica*, 10:11 (2005), 325–42, monographic issue *Les objets de la mémoire. Pour une approche comparatiste des reliques et de leur culte*, P. Borgeaud and Y. Volokhine (eds).

22 H. Leclercq, s.v. 'Reliques et reliquaires', in F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq (eds), *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, 1:A (Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1907), 2294–359. Leclercq makes a distinction between *corpus*, *reliquiae*, and *brandea*.

23 E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1915), p. 320.

24 *Ibid*., p. 200.

25 J.-P. Duteil, 'Reliques et objets pieux dans les communautés chrétiennes de Chine et du Vietnam', in E. Bozóky and A.-M. Helvétius (eds), *Les reliques. Objets, cultes, symboles* (Turnhout, Brepols, 1999), pp. 65–77, at p. 75. Translator's note: our translation from the French.

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26 D.J. Theodoratus and A. La Pena, 'Wintu Sacred Geography of Northern California', in D.L. Carmichael, J. Hubert, B. Reeves and A. Schanche (eds), *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994), pp. 20–31, p. 22.
27 This practice of acquiring power through contact is fairly widespread in the Catholic tradition. One need only think of the (still practised) custom of 'sacralising' certain ecclesiastical vestments by bringing them into direct contact with the tombs of saints. Before an archbishop uses the pallium (a circular band of white wool decorated with six crosses that is worn around the shoulders and has two lappets, one that hangs over the front and the other over the back), for example, it is laid for a period on the tomb of Saint Peter, in Saint Peter's, Rome (cf. P. Siffrin, s.v. 'Pallio', in *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, 12 [Florence, Sansoni, 1952], pp. 646–7, at p. 646).
28 F. Remotti, *Luoghi e corpi. Antropologia dello spazio, del tempo e del potere* (Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1993), p. 129. Translator's note: quotation is our translation from the Italian.
29 Y. Verdier, *Façons de dire, façons de faire. La laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière* (Paris, Gallimard, 1979), p. 81. Translator's note: quotation is our translation from the French.
30 *Ibid.*, p. 12. Translator's note: quotation is our translation from the French.
31 F. Lai, 'Trasmissione e innovazione dei saperi locali', in F. Lai (ed.), *Fare e saper fare. I saperi locali in una prospettiva antropologica* (Cagliari, CUEC, 2004), pp. 17–30, at p. 21. The ways in which its practices are passed on and learned mean that the processing of remains can be likened to artisan techniques.
32 M. Niola, *Sui palchi delle stelle. Napoli, il sacro, la scena* (Rome, Meltemi, 1995), p. 55.
33 The liturgy of the hours takes place as follows: lauds (7.30); the middle hour, comprising the third hour (9.00), the sixth hour (12.00) and the ninth hour (15.00); vespers (18.00); and compline (20.00), the last prayer before rest.
34 E.G. D'Aquili and A.B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 1999); A. Newberg and E.G. D'Aquili, *Why God Won't Go Away. Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York, Ballantine Books, 2001).
35 M. Mauss, 'Les techniques du corps', *Journal de Psychologie*, 32:3–4 (1936), 27–45, at 45.
36 P. Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire. L'économie des échanges linguistiques* (Paris, Fayard, 1982), p. 129.
37 Some recurrent expressions include 'se mettre aux reliques', that is, to undertake the processing of remains (fragmenting and placing in shrines); 'tagliare le carte', cutting out pieces of card showing the names of the saints/blesseds to be inserted in the shrines; and 'cucire la teca', sewing the support inside the shrine with thread.
38 C. Poppi, 'Sigma! The Pilgrim's Progress and the Logic of Secrecy', in Mary H. Nooter (ed.), *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals* (New York, Prestel, Munich, The Museum for African Art, 1993), pp. 197–203, at p. 202.
39 M. Albert-Llorca, 'La Vierge mise à nu par ses chambrières', *Clio. Histoire, Femmes et Société*, 2 (1995), 201–28, at 205.

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40 C. Langlois, 'Toujours plus pratiquantes. La permanence du dimorphisme sexuel dans le catholicisme français contemporain', in *Clio. Histoire, Femmes et Société*, 2 (1995), 229–60, at 229.
41 Langlois, 'Toujours plus pratiquantes'. Translator's note: our translation from the French.
42 É. Fouilloux, 'Femmes et catholicisme dans la France contemporaine', *Clio. Histoire, Femmes et Société*, 2 (1995), 319–29.
43 G. Charuty, 'Logiques sociales, savoirs techniques, logiques rituelles', *Terrain*, 24 (1995), 5–14, at 13.
44 M. Lauwers, 'L'institution et le genre. À propos de l'accès des femmes au sacré dans l'Occident médiéval', *Clio. Histoire, Femmes et Société*, 2 (1995), 279–317, at 279.
45 Fouilloux, 'Femmes et catholicisme'; Lauwers, 'L'institution et le genre'.
46 *Niddah* is a Hebrew term used to describe a woman who is menstruating or who, after her period, has still not carried out the purification rituals in the mikveh (ritual bath).
47 A. Fine and C. Leduc, 'Femmes et religions', *Clio. Histoire, Femmes et Société*, 2 (1995), pp. 5–16, p. 12.
48 J.-P. Albert, *Le sang et le ciel* (Paris, Aubier, 1997); Fine and Leduc, 'Femmes et religions'.
49 Fouilloux, 'Femmes et catholicisme', p. 321.
50 Albert-Llorca, 'La Vierge mise à nu par ses chambrières', 205.
51 D. Puccio, '"Mieux vaut habiller les saints que déshabiller les ivrognes." Vêtir les saints à San Juan de Plan (Aragon)', *Terrain*, 38 (2002), 141–52. The author highlights how the relationship with the 'sacred', activated through the dressing of statues, serves in the construction of the person.
52 Gri, 'Salire verso la grazia', p. 76.
53 G. Dumézil, *La religion romaine archaïque* (Paris, Payot, 1974), p. 163.
54 J.-M. Pailler, 'Marginales et exemplaires. Remarques sur quelques aspects du rôle religieux des femmes dans la Rome républicaine', *Clio. Histoire, Femmes et Société*, 2 (1995), 41–60, at 50.
55 The distinction between 'porteurs de sacré' (bearers of the sacred) and 'manipulateurs du sacré' (manipulators of the sacred) was picked up, albeit without distinction of gender, by J. Scheid, 'Le flamine de Jupiter, les Vestales et le général triomphant', *Le temps de la réflexion*, 7 (1986), 213–30, at 228. In his analysis of some ritual figures from the ancient Roman Empire, Scheid poses the problem of the different degrees of proximity with the divine and the different social figures who represent it. This, in fact, takes shape in devotional practice through figurational strategies.
56 Albert-Llorca, 'La Vierge mise à nu par ses chambrières'.
57 A.M. Di Nola, 1981, s.v. 'Sacro/Profano', in *Encyclopedia*, 12 (Turin, Einaudi, 1981), pp. 313–62, at p. 336.
58 D. Morgan (ed.), 2010, *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London and New York, Routledge).

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