


Olga Grzys^{f*}

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2173-4965>

REFLECTIONS ON THE SITUATION OF NUNS IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH WITH ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES FROM SPANISH-LANGUAGE LITERATURE

Abstract. In 2018 and 2019, the Vatican newspaper “L’Osservatore Romano” published two ground-breaking articles describing the psychological, physical and sexual abuse of nuns by clergymen of the Roman Catholic Church. The aim of this paper is to present the situation of consecrated women and the relationships between priests and nuns. The text will also attempt to discover possible reasons for the clergymen’s inappropriate behaviour towards nuns. To achieve this goal, the author refers to the status of women in the Catholic religion and examines documents issued by the Church that relate to the life and the functioning of women’s religious communities.

The second part of the paper presents fragments of Spanish-language poetry and prose whose authors or heroines are nuns. The selected texts address the problem of the clergy’s discrimination against nuns.

Keywords: gender, Catholic Church, Spanish language literature, gender-based discrimination, clergy, priests, nuns.

1. Introduction: Press reports on the abuse of nuns by clergymen

Nuns (sometimes referred to as “women religious”) are women who have chosen to praise God and serve their neighbours as the goal in their lives. To achieve this goal, they have renounced the opportunity to become wives and mothers or achieve professional success. Their lives, shrouded in an aura of mystery and sanctity, and the influence that some of them have had on the political, social and cultural life in many countries, have increased the popularity of nun figures in the literary works of various authors, from different currents and periods in literature.

Over the past two years, nuns have become the protagonists of press articles and films showing the abuses perpetrated by clergymen. The discussion broke out

* Master of Arts, Chair of the Literature of Spanish-Speaking Countries, Institute of Modern Languages, Philological Department, Pedagogical University of Krakow, ul. Podchorążych 2, 30-084 Krakow, e-mail: olga.grzys@up.krakow.pl

in March 2018 after the publication of the article entitled *The (almost) free work of sisters* by Marie-Lucile Kubacki in the Vatican newspaper “L’Osservatore Romano”. The article drew the attention of global public opinion to the problems faced by nuns: the nearly slave-like labour for the benefit of male superiors, lack of stability and future prospects, as well as widespread humiliation¹. In February 2019, the same newspaper published an article by Lucetta Scaraffia entitled *Without any touching*, which described cases of nuns being raped by priests, pregnant nuns forced to undergo abortions, and the years-long conspiracy of silence that allowed abusers to act with impunity. A few days after the publication of this text, Pope Francis officially acknowledged that the sexual exploitation of nuns by priests is a pressing problem of the Church (BBC News World, 2019). Both his words and abridged articles by Kubacki and Scaraffia were translated into many languages and appeared in the press around the world, including “El País”, “Le Monde”, “Der Spiegel”, “The New York Times”, “Newsweek” and “China Daily”.

2. The subject-matter and purpose of the research

Although it would be possible to study the representations of nuns in fiction from many angles, the aforementioned press reports about the serious abuses of nuns perpetrated by the clergy motivated me to try and analyse poems, novels, and short stories in Spanish where nuns are depicted as protagonists. The aim of this paper is to identify similarities and differences in the images of nuns created by authors from particular periods, and to find references in their works to discrimination against consecrated women among the clergymen in the Catholic Church.

The choice of literature written in the Spanish language as material for analysis was in no way accidental. I decided to look at the works written by Spanish-speaking authors because, firstly, the geographical area where Spanish is used is extremely broad and diverse – ethnically, politically, economically, socially and culturally, which can help to create a reliable and complete study of the topic. Secondly, Latin America and Spain are perceived as areas where *machismo* is still present and traditional gender roles are deeply rooted in the minds of their inhabitants (although changes are taking place much faster in Spain). It is possible that the underlying reason for this state of affairs is the high level of declared religiousness, especially in the case of Latin Americans, who make up as many as 41% of all Roman Catholics in the world (Araujo-Hawkins 2014).

¹ Interestingly, the problem of consecrated women being used for unpaid work and treated disrespectfully by the clergy was raised in Poland in 2004 by the “Więź” monthly in its issue entitled *Zakonnice – rodzaj nijaki?* [Nuns: A Neuter Gender?]. A book by Marta Abramowicz (2016) entitled *Zakonnice odchodzą po cichu* [Nuns Make a Silent Departure] also evoked considerable media attention.

In order for reflections on a topic to be complete, they cannot be limited to fiction but, instead, should be based on the realities of the lives of nuns in the Catholic Church, which created the image of woman and the relationships between the communities of nuns and clergymen. In order to explore these issues, I looked at publications describing the organisation and functioning of women's religious orders, the duties and rights of nuns and their daily lives. The second category of texts used as a basis for writing this article includes books and studies on the situation of women over the centuries and the treatment of women by the Church. Here, I analysed the Bible, church documents issued by popes and hierarchs, the opinions of important figures in the history of the Catholic religion, especially the Church Fathers, and publications of feminist theologians. The last text type includes online articles on the abuse of nuns by clergymen as well as articles and reportage featuring fragments of interviews conducted with such nuns. In my work, I also invoke the documentary film *Religieuses abusées, l'autre scandale de l'Église* [*Abused nuns: Another scandal of the Catholic Church*] (Marie-Pierre Raimbault, Éric Quintin 2018), which was one of the first publicly available materials to address this serious issue. In the analysed sources, I tried to find references to the relationships that existed between nuns and priests in spheres such as the organisation and financing of monasteries, the supervision of nuns, and their relationship with the confessors who provide spiritual guidance to consecrated women. In addition, I focused on the less official contacts between women's religious communities and clergymen, and the way the two groups see and relate to each other.

3. The mental, physical and sexual abuses of nuns by clergymen

This text does not intend to prove that the abuse of nuns by the clergy, in a broad sense, is a common phenomenon: most consecrated women undoubtedly fulfil their vocation without falling victim to such practices. However, it is worth being vocal about pathological cases that take place in religious institutions, since a significant proportion of the public is not aware of them. This is largely due to the Church's policy of concealing inconvenient facts. The widespread lack of awareness of the problem means that nuns cannot count on intervention and assistance in situations where their rights are violated. While one may be tempted to claim that the image of a woman presented by the Catholic Church is widely known, so any woman who decides to join a convent should be well aware of the realities of life behind its walls, this assumption ignores many important factors. Firstly, nun candidates are mostly young women, who have an idealised image of monastic life, focusing exclusively on its spiritual sphere. Secondly, many are unaware of the degree of women's religious communities' subordination to the clergy and of the way nuns are treated by some clergymen. Thirdly, most novices are

not aware of the threats potentially coming from the clergymen, since the abuse scandals have been concealed for years. It is only recently that nuns from all over the world have decided to talk openly about the sexual abuses they suffered from clergymen. The International Union of Superiors General (IUSG) or the Conférence des Religieux et Religieuses en France (CORREF), which are associations of nuns, accuse clergymen of raping and harassing hundreds of nuns. What seems striking in press reports is that nuns are completely unable to defend themselves against the abuse perpetrated by priests, as the latter often consider themselves to be representatives of God on earth and expect women to treat them as such. Bound by the vows of obedience, sisters are taught to be absolutely subordinate to the male representatives of the Church, and, as a result, nuns do not protest or defend themselves when faced with situations of abuse. The dramas that happen behind the walls of convents, parishes and seminaries, highlighted by French journalists Marie-Pierre Raimbault and Éric Quintin in their documentary (2018), result from a system of power concentrated in the hands of men. Male members of the Church make decisions about the lives of nuns, have access to financial resources unavailable to nuns, and often act with a sense of complete impunity. Intimidated and humiliated women rarely decide to denounce their tormentors, fearing that they may be accused of lying or blamed for what happened to them (Scaraffia 2019). Many nuns from poorer countries feel indebted to their congregations that have financially supported their families and improved the living conditions of their loved ones. To them, leaving the congregation seems like treason, a sign of weak character and a token of ingratitude (Kubacki 2018).

Although sexual abuse is probably the most serious threat to nuns from clergymen, even those who do not experience any abuse are not always treated with due respect. The aforementioned article by Marie-Lucile Kubacki (2018) contains excerpts from interviews with nuns who complain about clergymen treating them with contempt and disregard, and about being exploited from dusk till dawn, often without remuneration and below their qualifications.

4. The image of woman in the Catholic religion

It is puzzling why the Catholic Church, which should be a model of love and respect, has allowed discrimination against women. The answer to this question has been sought by feminist theologians, who found one of the reasons in how God was presented in the Scriptures. *If God is male, then the male is God*, as the American writer and philosopher Mary Daly once wrote (1973: 19), drawing attention to the image of the supreme deity in the Bible as an omnipotent, strong and fearless man. Aleksander Gomola (2010) argues that language reflects the way of thinking in a society, while at the same time shaping its mentality. In other words, the biblical vision of God assigns a divine status to patriarchy (Gomola 2010:

54). Foucault maintains that power is held by those who have gained the right to use discourse (2002: 8). In the Catholic Church, this group includes the Pope, bishops and priests, i.e. only men, many of whom consider the traditional biblical world order to be inviolable. They seem to ignore the fact that the androcentric vision of God presented in the Bible is the outcome of multiple factors, such as the place and the time of its writing. Over the centuries, religious writings were created and translated by men, who reflected the stereotypes rooted in their culture and related to the role, significance and place of different genders in society.

Interestingly, in the early days of Christianity, Israelite women made up a significant part of the Church and performed important religious functions, such as prophets or deacons. In the New Testament, there are also hardly any signs of Jesus discriminating against women. It was only the teaching of St. Paul the Apostle that pushed them into a servant position towards men and deprived them of their voice (Bogucka 2005: 21–22). In the First Letter of St. Paul to Timothy, we read:

Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control (1 Tim 2: 11–15)².

His teaching was continued in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, a 12th century priest and philosopher who proclaimed that women are sinful and prone to fall in moral terms. This became one of the most important reasons why women were pushed to the margins of religious life and their previously acquired position was taken away, thus consolidating the exclusive power of men within the Church. However, justifying the primacy of men over women by drawing on the Bible is not fully justified. The Book of Genesis provides two versions of human creation: the Priestly and the Yahwist. The former claims that both man and woman were created in the image and likeness of God. The latter maintains that the man was made first, while a woman was made from his rib (Bogucka 2005: 19–20). In the Christian tradition, the version indicating the female as secondary, subordinated to man, seems to be more popular. This presumption is confirmed by the teaching of the Church Fathers, who invoke Bible verses to justify the woman's inferior social position. Saint Augustine believes that, given the order of creation, it is man who dominates over woman (cited in: Van Bavel 1994: 7), while Tertullian blames her for the fall of man, saying, *And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age [...] You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree [...]* (cited in: Baron 2011: 24)³. The lower position of women in the community of the faithful, without the right to

² New King James Version cited in: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/> (accessed 20.12.2019).

³ English version cited in: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm> (accessed 20.12.2019).

celebrate the Holy Mass and administer the sacraments is not surprising when we realise that the Catechism of the Catholic Church is largely based on the teaching of the Church Fathers.

5. The documents of the Catholic Church concerning women

For many centuries, the clergymen ignored women, as evidenced by the almost complete absence of documents on this social group. The change in this state of affairs did not occur until the last century, when the Church was no longer able to ignore or halt their increasing emancipation, although it did take steps to do so. One such step was *Casti connubii*, an encyclical proclaimed by Pope Pius XI in 1930, where he expresses the belief that equality of rights debases *the womanly character and the dignity of motherhood* (CC: 75)⁴. He also protests against women holding offices and actively participating in the life of society (CC II, 2b). An opposite opinion is expressed by John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in terris* of 1963, which states that *the part that women are now playing in political life is everywhere evident* and that *women are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons* (PiT: 41)⁵. The same Pope was also the initiator of the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965, which was considered to be a revolutionary event in the history of the Church. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* states that *every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent* (GS: 29)⁶. Another pope, John Paul II, was the first pontiff in history to write an apostolic letter exclusively on women. *Mulieris dignitatem* maintains Pius XI's view of marriage and motherhood (spiritual motherhood in the case of consecrated women) as the basic tasks of the female personality (MD VI: 17–21). The same Pope strongly rejected the possibility that women might be ordained as priests. In his letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, John Paul II writes: *in virtue of my ministry [...] I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful* (OS: 4)⁷. This quotation lacks any substantive or theological arguments in support of such a decision, which was based solely on

⁴ English version cited in: http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html (accessed 20.12.2019).

⁵ Both quotes cited in: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html (accessed 20.12.2019).

⁶ English version cited in: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed 20.12.2019).

⁷ English version cited in: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html (accessed 20.12.2019).

the dogma of papal infallibility (Makowski 2007: 16). An important document on relations between the Church and women was the letter of John Paul II entitled *A ciascuna di voi*. In this letter, the Pope apologises for any harm caused to women by this institution over the centuries (LW: 3). In the *Vita Consecrata* exhortation, the Pope also formulates a call to overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation against women, and calls men to reconsider the established patterns and roles of the different sexes in *social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial life* (VC: 57–58)⁸.

6. Relationships between clergymen and consecrated women

The patriarchal vision of social relations, promoted especially strongly since the Middle Ages, pushed women into two closed spaces: the home or the convent. Those whose ambitions went beyond the roles of wife and mother often decided to devote their lives to God, gaining a certain independence and the possibility to obtain education. It is commonly believed that poor families forced their daughters to join a religious order because they could not afford a dowry. However, convents also required nun candidates to pay a fee to cover the costs of their subsistence (Burns 2002: 68). Dowries for consecrated women, together with proceeds from the sale of handicrafts and donations, were among the main sources of subsistence for women's religious communities. Discrimination on the basis of gender occurred here as well, because patrons were much more likely to support male religious orders. They saw women's communities as less prestigious, less effective in praying for graces and unfit to celebrate popular anniversary masses (Jordan 2012: 63–64, 66). The influence of men on the fate of women's religious congregations can be seen in the manner of organisation. Although generally considered to be typically female communities, where the prioress and the congregation of nuns have the final say in all matters, women's convents are in fact largely dependent on men. Rita Ríos de la Llave (2009: 180) writes:

The image of female communities as exclusively feminine spaces, tiny enclosed completely autonomous universes where women could live without masculine interference, is completely utopian. The rhythm of nuns' lives was dictated by rules imposed by the authorities of religious orders – always men –, by ecclesiastical authorities – likewise men, – and by Popes – also men.

Although the direct authority over the sisters is exercised by the mother superior, she is not independent in her decisions but subordinated to the bishop who, in turn, must obey the Pope. In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII issued *Periculoso*, a breakthrough decree for women's orders forbidding nuns to leave the walls of monasteries under the threat of excommunication. This decision was confirmed in

⁸ English version cited in: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html (accessed 20.12.2019).

1563 by the Council of Trent, and three years later, by virtue of the *Circa pastoralis* bull, Pope Pius V prohibited women's orders from being established without strict enclosure. It is highly significant that this restriction did not apply to men's orders (Radzik 2015: 109). The official justification for issuing *Periculoso* was as follows:

Wishing to provide for the dangerous and abominable situation of certain nuns, who, casting off the reins of respectability and impudently abandoning nunnish modesty and the natural bashfulness of their sex [...] we do firmly decree [...] that nuns [...] ought henceforth to remain perpetually cloistered in their monasteries, [...] so that occasions for lasciviousness having been removed, may most diligently safeguard their hearts and bodies in complete chastity (cited in: Makowski 1999: 135).

What led Boniface VIII to make a crucial decision for the lives of nuns was not concern for their safety but, rather, the belief that women generally have a greater propensity for promiscuity than men (Adamiak 2016: 208). The decree on confining nuns in a strict enclosure made them dependent on male congregations, which were obliged to provide maintenance for the sisters, who were to live in subordinated convents (the so-called *cura monialium*). In this way, a patriarchal model of the medieval family was transplanted into the sphere of religious life, although women's convents had been an alternative to that model before the papal decision. It seems that after the announcement of *Periculoso*, which brought revolutionary changes for the lives of women's orders, popes' reforming zeal in this sphere dwindled significantly. Another important document on nuns was not published until 1965. Signed by Paul VI, the decree on the renewal of religious life called *Perfectae caritatis*, adapted to modern times, permitted nuns to leave the walls of convents in justified circumstances and ordered them to adapt their religious habits to the needs of health and the ministry performed (PC: 16–17), and, as a result, many congregations completely abandoned habits.

The power of men is not limited to managing the organisation of nuns' lives, but also extends over their consciences. By virtue of the resolutions of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), each nun has an assigned confessor whom she should obey. Sometimes there were disputes between confessors and prioresses as to which of them was more entitled to guide the spiritual growth of nuns, but in the end the Vatican always settled these conflicts in favour of priests (Abramowicz 2016: 190), citing the sisters' vow of obedience. Toquica Clavijo (2001: 159) addresses this issue as follows:

The violation of this vow, which was fundamental to ecclesiastical control, entailed sacrilege and eternal damnation. A nun was subjected to two superiors: the prioress and the confessor. There was some rivalry between the two but, ultimately, it was the confessor who was their guide as spiritual director, and he decided whether the sisters were making progress in their spiritual life and measured the orthodoxy of their faith because he was entitled to denounce them to the authorities.

The relationship between the nun and her confessor was based on her total obedience, without the right to oppose, since, by the very fact of being a man, the priest was considered to be more competent in matters of faith (de Pazzis Pi Corrales 2010: 33). Although by virtue of the *Pastoralis curae* constitution proclaimed by Pope Benedict XIV in 1948 nuns had the right to choose a confessor, some were not aware of this right or could not find a suitable one. Alejandra Araya Espinoza (2003: 180) cites the example of Saint Rosa of Lima, who, before she came across a perfect confessor, had as many as thirty. Confessors controlled sisters' literary works, and often appropriated them (Franco 1989: 39), published without their knowledge or consent, and sometimes attributed their own authorship to nuns' works. The best-known example of the absolute power exercised by a confessor over a nun's creative work is the fate of Sister Marcela de San Félix, an illegitimate daughter of Lope de Vega: obedient to her confessor's will, she burned her works without even saving her autobiography. Only one of the five volumes she wrote survived, thanks to the fact that the rigorous confessor was succeeded by a more liberal one (Pérez, Ihrie 2002: 542; Trambaioli 2017: 58–59). The clergy's strict supervision over nuns' literary output was justified by invoking the obligation to ensure that their writings were not heading towards heterodoxy. If clergymen saw any traces of this, they were obliged to inform the church authorities, sometimes indirectly condemning the nuns in their charge to death by burning at the stake (Mejías Navarrete 2004: 7). Another reason why a nun could be burned at the stake was the suspicion of being possessed by demons. This accusation was often put forward against women who underwent weeks of fasting, which caused fainting, haemorrhage or hallucinations (Rodríguez Peláez 2007: 681–682). This phenomenon was so common in women's congregations that a special term *anorexia mirabilis* (Rodríguez Peláez 2007: 687) was coined to describe it. Silvia Fendrik (1997) states that from the 16th to the 18th century there was a real *holocaust of women* accused of practicing black magic, depicted in popular culture as bony old women. The borderline between a saint and a witch was very narrow: they both experienced visions, heard voices and lived almost "on fresh air" (Fendrik 1997: 27). Whether they were made saint or burned at the stake was decided by the men in the Church. Women who refused to eat did so largely out of the desire to gain control of their own body – the only thing they owned. The self-mortification practiced by nuns can be considered as a subversive response to the power of the masculinised ecclesiastical hierarchy controlling every element of their lives (Kirk 2009: 145–146). By starving, they renounced their feminine nature, which, according to the Church, was inseparable from matter, impurity and sin (Fendrik 1997: 15). Extreme emaciation caused lack of menstrual periods and deprived the nuns' bodies of typically female features, bringing them closer to the male body that was valued much higher in the Christian tradition.

The duties incumbent on nuns differ greatly from those entrusted to priests or monks. Women in the Church do not fulfil important tasks, do not decide on key issues, do not hold church offices and do not administer the sacraments. Thus, a nun's day is filled with prayer, contemplation and work. The latter, often performed at parsonages or in men's monasteries, is rarely appreciated by clergymen, who are used to treating sisters as servants. In interviews published in the issue of the "Więź" monthly entitled *Zakonnice – rodzaj nijaki?* [*Nuns: A Neuter Gender?*], nuns raise the problem of disregard by clergymen and how nuns react to such inappropriate behaviour. One of them bluntly shows her disagreement with such treatment, saying: *Behold the maidservant of the Lord, but not of a priest* (Kołodziejczyk, Waluś, Piłśniak 2004: 20). Other nuns, however, do not have enough courage to say "No" because they think that following the orders of the clergy is their vocation and their path to holiness. This belief is more common among the elderly nuns who were educated before the Second Vatican Council, a group that includes many prioresses. Their decisions, based on a patriarchal vision of the world, have an impact on the lives and functioning of the nuns they are in charge of. It is the prioresses that send nuns to work in monasteries and parishes or prohibit sisters from embarking on their much desired studies, explaining that this prohibition is in the interest of the congregation (Abramowicz 2016: 19).

7. Examples of clergymen's discrimination against nuns in Spanish-speaking literature

Bishops, priests, monks and nuns have been the protagonists of Spanish literature since its early days. Monk Gonzalo de Berceo wrote about a pregnant prioress as early as in the 13th century in *Milagros de nuestra Señora*, while *The Book of Good Love* written by clergyman Juan Ruiz in the mid-14th century presents an ironic and witty picture of the celibacy of the clergy, ridiculing their weaknesses and vices. The plentiful texts that are critical of the clergy in Spanish-language literature were often written by the clergy themselves, as was the case with Saint Theresa of Ávila or the Mexican sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, the first prominent writer from the New World. However, criticism is not the only perspective adopted by Spanish and Latin American authors when describing the clergy. If we look at how they present consecrated women, we can see that they fit into three patterns.

The first one presents nuns as naive and docile beings, easily persuaded by men or even leading them into temptation. This picture is part of the well-known trend of thinking about woman in the Church as the heiress of Eve: a sinner and traitor causing men to fall. The following passage from *The Book of Good Love* by Juan Ruiz depicts such a vision of a nun:

Juan Ruiz – *The Book of Good Love*

“Accept, dear sir, our shelter” was the Nuns’ most fervent proffer.
 “Forget, we beg, those others, who no luxury can offer.
 Those men are dreary wretches, and their ways show rank confusion.
 So have a try at haircloth [in our reticent seclusion]”.

[...]
 They set most store on cooing [and on billing most frenetic],
 They speak with insincerity, display a crude cosmetic.
 With come-on looks and actions, and enticements false, and wiggling
 They many drive insane, alas, with false, deceptive giggling.

Lord Love, our puissant sovereign, if he’d followed my advice,
 The Nuns, sure, would have heeded–bargain that, at any price!
 He’d have been with very lavish entertainment thus presented.
 In dormitories once installed, he’d never have repented!⁹

From the Middle Ages to the 19th century, Spanish-language literature has produced numerous texts where nuns are tempted by men, both the clergy and lay people. The figure of *galán de monjas*, the *seducer of nuns*, gained the greatest popularity in Spanish poetry of the Golden Age, although this motif is present in almost every era. Stories of romance between men and nuns can be found in a collection of didactic anecdotes *Jardín de flores curiosas*, written in 1570 by Antonio de Torquemada, in the picaresque novel *El Buscón* (*Paul the Sharper or The Scavenger*) by Francisco de Quevedo from 1626, in the *Jardín de Venus* poems by Félix María de Samani from 1780, in the poem *LXXVI* (from the collection *Arias tristes* published in 1903) by the Spanish Nobel Prize winner Juan Ramón Jiménez, or in the crime novel *The Last Cato* by the Spanish author Matilde Asensi from 2001. In the following excerpt, the Spanish author of the Romantic era, José Zorilla, depicts a nun who is completely subjected to the will of a man and prefers the joys of the flesh and temptations of the world to staying in the cloister and praising the Lord.

José Zorilla (2019: 12) – *El capitán Montoya* (published 1840)

– Sir, how’s the nun?
 – And how should she be, Ginés?
 Lying at my feet,
 softer than a sponge.
 [...]
 – I don’t know yet how,
 but I’ll get her out of there,
 according to what I’ve seen,
 the lovebird prefers
 to fly free in Castile
 than to be caged with Christ.

⁹ English translation in: Juan Ruiz (1975), *The book of the Archpriest of Hita* (*Libro de buen amor*), transl. M. Singleton, Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, Madison, p. 121.

In the second approach, nuns are shown as wise, good and just people who are not afraid of taking up the fight against injustice and evil, even at the price of a severe punishment. The novel *Historia de un otoño* by the Spanish writer José Jiménez Lozano (1971), based on real events, fits perfectly into this pattern. It tells the story of the events preceding the demolition of the French monastery of Port-Royal des-Champs, the culmination of a six decades long dispute between a congregation of nuns, the Jansenists, the French church dignitaries, King Louis XIV and several popes. The nuns refused to renounce their faith in the Jansenist theses and, as a result, were deprived of the right to confession, to receive communion, and even to bury one of the deceased nuns, which finally led to the dissolution of their convent. The author of the novel presents the female protagonists as rational and strong women who stand up against the ecclesiastical and secular power of men in defence of their ideals, despite having no chances of victory. The author writes about them as follows:

Their NO to Louis XIV, to the Pope, to the bishops, to the universe and to brute force is the first act of a civil conscience in historical modernity [...]. It is the affirmation of the autonomy of conscience in the face of any power, which came from a few women, regardless of consequences. They knew what they were risking and accepted it. They got crushed and trodden, but they kept saying NO (Jiménez Lozano, Galparsoro 1998: 24–25).

However, nuns do not always muster up the courage to oppose their superiors. A situation where a nun follows the orders of a bishop without a word of opposition can be found in the crime novel *La monja que perdió la cabeza* by the contemporary Spanish writers Andreu Martín and Jaime Ribera (2007). The full omnipotence of church hierarchs is best illustrated by the following quote: *...the bishop told her: "You go to the cloister, with your little mouth closed". They discharged her from the Missionaries of the Divine Word, or whatever they call themselves, and turned her into a cloistered nun* (Martín, Ribera 2007: 355–359). The quoted excerpt shows how the female protagonist in the novel is totally subordinated to her superiors. She has no say and no influence on her fate. The bishop treats her like an object that can be freely disposed of.

In the history of Spain and Latin America, there is no shortage of talented nun writers who rebel against the power of the clergy. The two best-known ones, whose writings abound in criticism of the patriarchal reality of their time, are the 16th-century Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Ávila and the Mexican nun Juana Inés de la Cruz. In their works, we find traces of conflicts between them and their confessors. In her autobiography *The Book of My Life*, St. Teresa speaks about priests as follows: *these others, especially if they are confessors, cause severe disturbance; I have undergone some years of such great trial that I am amazed now at how I was able to suffer it*¹⁰. (St. Teresa of Avila 2008: 283). Juana

¹⁰ English translation in: St. Teresa of Avila (2008), *The book of her life*, transl. K. Kavanaugh, O. Rodríguez, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, p. 171.

Inés also had a longstanding dispute with her spiritual director Antonio Núñez de Miranda. He demanded that the nun should abandon writing texts on secular or erotic themes and focus on religious work. Saint Teresa and Juana Inés rebelled against the men who tried to control them under the guise of care and concern. The men treated them with great severity, considering the nuns as beings whose every gesture is streaked with sin. The medieval belief that a woman was *Satan's chamber* and *an instrument of the devil* and the culprit of sexual sins committed by men (Niekielska-Sekuła 2013: 90) persisted for centuries, without losing its power even today. The two nuns mentioned here, although living in different times and on different continents, wrote astonishingly similar texts on how the men of their respective epochs perceived the fair sex. Here are some examples:

Saint Teresa of Jesus – *The Way of Perfection* (published 1566–1582)

Lord [...] for Thou art a righteous Judge, not like judges in the world, who, being, after all, men and sons of Adam, refuse to consider any woman's virtue as above suspicion. [...] when I see what the times are like, I feel it is not right to repel spirits which are virtuous and brave, even though they be the spirits of women¹¹.

Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Silly, you men...* (published 1698)

Silly, you men-so very adept
at wrongly faulting womankind,
not seeing you're alone to blame
for faults you plant in woman's mind.
After you've won by urgent plea
the right to tarnish her good name,
you still expect her to behave—
you, that coaxed her into shame¹².

The nun protagonists who are depicted on the pages of contemporary Spanish-language novels and short stories do notice the androcentric organisation of church life that excludes women from the system of power. The Chilean writer Mario Valdivia Valenzuela (2015: 475) writes the following words in his crime novel *El Padre*:

The sister does not hear confession, nor does she possess the power to administer the sacraments that might be urgently required. She does not celebrate the Mass, does not consecrate the Host, cannot give the last rites. At night, a nun serves only to pray, a service of too ethereal to be required in the early hours of the morning.

¹¹ English translation in: St. Teresa of Avila (1999), *The Way of Perfection*, transl. E.A. Peers, Sheed and Ward, London, p. 13.

¹² English translation in: Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Silly, you men...*, [in:] A.S. Trueblood (ed.) (1988), *A Sor Juana anthology*, transl. A.S. Trueblood, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p. 111.

The Argentinian writer Patricia Suárez (2012: 690–694) rebels against the monopoly of men in administering sacraments and holding church positions in her short story *Monjas*, where she writes:

[...]and suddenly we all began to wonder how badly arranged the Catholic religion was since women cannot study to become priests or become pope. We should start a protest, invent a new worship, with Masses full of flowers of all colours, lacy cassocks, beautiful hats with a wide brim instead of bishops' bonnets.

The problem of nuns being used as free labour in churches and parishes was raised by the contemporary Spanish writer Matilde Asensi (2001: 235–239) in her crime novel *The Last Cato*, where she writes:

I assume that Monsignor Tournier, as well as the rest of the audience, would prefer his own nuns-servants, of whom each one of us must have at least three or four, or some Polish nuns [...] who, dressed in a habit and a canopy veil, were in charge of preparing His Holiness' meals, cleaning his rooms and always keeping his clothes perfectly clean.

In this work, we will find more references to clergymen who treat nuns without respect or who question their professional competence and intellectual capacity solely on grounds of their gender. This is illustrated by the following quote: *While the others remained silent with surprise, a sarcastic grin emerged on his [prelate Tournier's] face, which made me suspect him of openly opposing the use of my services before I even entered the office. I could almost hear him speak with contempt: 'A woman...?'* (Asensi 2001: 282–286).

The last way of presenting nuns shows them as women who are morally corrupt, sadistic and without conscience. As hardly accessible and mysterious institutions, convents are the perfect setting for crime stories or horror novels. High walls and bars provoke authors to produce a variety of visions of what might be happening behind them. The image of a nun as a demonic and disturbed figure coincides with the opinion of Tertullian, who saw women as the source of all evil and made them responsible for pain, suffering, sin and corruption in the private and public sphere (cited in: Tavard 1973: 58–59). The vision of monster nuns can be found in many contemporary novels by Spanish-speaking authors, for example in *Las madres negras* (2018) by the Spanish author Patricia Esteban Erlés, in *El beso de la monja* (2015) by the Mexican writer Carmen Solís, or in the science fiction novel *El sueño* by César Aira from Argentina (1998). All these works are linked by a vision of the brutal reality behind the monastic walls and the presence of cruel rituals that novice nuns have to undergo. All three of these works are linked by the theme of the oppressive and absolute power of the prioress and the fanatic devotion to a certain ideology which, when misunderstood, gives rise to violence and suffering for the soul and body. This is perhaps most clearly visible in *El sueño*, where an army of robotic nuns armed with machine guns tries to control the world with weapons and tea with a drug dissolved in it. The liquid calms

all the senses one by one, which can be seen as a reference to the control over the body – an obligation of nuns. Fasting and self-mortification are mentioned in *Extramuros* (1988: 12), a novel by the Spanish author Jesús Fernández Santos, who writes of one of the heroines that she *barely ate or drank, and did not take any meal other than the Holy Communion in her mouth, she was constantly awake, almost without sleeping, praying during the hours that other nuns used for sleep*. The author also describes the struggle of the protagonists with the Spanish Inquisition, which carries out an investigation to ensure that the stigmata of one of the nuns are not the work of Satan. The nun knows that if she is found guilty of being possessed, she will face only one possible end: death at the stake.

8. Final considerations

In conclusion, women's monasteries, despite their apparent autonomy, are very much dependent on the male representatives of the Church, many of whom still seem to see women as weaker and inferior. Nuns as protagonists have appeared in Spanish-language literature since its earliest days, and their images presented by authors in different epochs vary greatly: in the Middle Ages, authors depicted femmes fatales preying on male victims, in the Renaissance and Baroque – fiery beings easily succumbing to the temptations of the body. Romanticism painted them as a tempting yet forbidden fruit, while contemporary literature often portrays them as full-blooded women who notice the lack of equality in the Church, who criticise the oppressive treatment by priests and call for change not only in interpersonal relations but also in the fundamental principles of the Catholic religion. It cannot be ruled out that, given the publicity around the abuse of nuns in the Church, there will be more press articles, scientific publications, novels and stories inspired by this topic in the near future. Although I presume that the main goal of the Spanish-speaking authors mentioned in the article was not to fight for the improvement of the situation of nuns, their works nevertheless draw attention to the discrimination of women in the Church structures, making readers reflect on what kind of turn would need to occur within this institution to eliminate the existing inequalities, and highlighting the effort needed to achieve this goal. Despite the obstacles, the resistance of hierarchs and the centuries-old tradition of the Catholic Church which pushed women to the margins, the contemporary Spanish-language texts presented above are filled with the conviction that the equal rights of male and female believers are an important and urgent matter. It cannot be ruled out that talking and writing about the need to introduce changes aimed at this goal will draw public attention to this problem and enforce change sooner than anyone could expect.

List of acronyms:

- CC – Pius XI (1930), *Casti connubii*, encyclical.
 GS – Second Vatican Council (1965), *Gaudium et spes*, constitution.
 LW – John Paul II (1995), *A ciascuna di voi*, letter to women.
 MD – John Paul II (1988), *Mulieris dignitatem*, apostolic letter.
 OS – John Paul II (1994), *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, apostolic letter.
 PC – Second Vatican Council (1965), *Perfectae caritatis*, decree.
 PiT – John XXIII (1963), *Pacem in Terris*, encyclical.
 VC – John Paul II (1996), *Vita consecrata*, apostolic exhortation.

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Olga Grzyś

ROZWAŻANIA O SYTUACJI SIÓSTR ZAKONNYCH W KOŚCIELE KATOLICKIM A PRZYKŁADY Z LITERATURY HISZPAŃSKOJĘZycznej JĄ OBRAZUJĄCE

Abstrakt. W 2018 i 2019 roku na łamach watykańskiej gazety „L'Osservatore Romano” opublikowano dwa przełomowe artykuły opisujące psychiczne, fizyczne i seksualne wykorzystywanie sióstr zakonnych przez duchownych Kościoła katolickiego. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie sytuacji kobiet konsekrowanych oraz zależności występujących pomiędzy nimi a męskimi przedstawicielami Kościoła. W tekście zostanie podjęta próba odpowiedzi na pytanie o przyczyny występowania przypadków nadużyć kleru względem zakonnice i mniszek. Posłuży ku temu przedstawienie kreowanego przez Kościół obrazu kobiety oraz wydanych przez tę instytucję dokumentów traktujących o życiu i funkcjonowaniu żeńskich wspólnot zakonnych.

W drugiej części pracy omówione zostaną wybrane fragmenty z poezji i prozy hiszpańskojęzycznej różnych epok, których autorkami bądź bohaterkami są zakonnice. W tekstach tych porusza się problem dyskryminacji kobiet konsekrowanych przez duchownych.

Słowa kluczowe: gender, Kościół katolicki, literatura hiszpańskojęzyczna, dyskryminacja płciowa, duchowni, kler, zakonnice.