

Article

“For the Salvation of This Girl’s Soul”: Nuns as Converters of Jews in Early Modern Italy

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Abstract: This article argues that converting Jewish girls and women constituted an important expression of Italian nuns’ religiosity throughout the age of Catholic Reform. Unlike their male counterparts, however, converting nuns rarely left behind accounts of their conversionary efforts. Moreover, since these endeavors were directed exclusively at female Jews they are often obscured in the historical record and in modern historiography. The article tackles the difficulties of recovering the voices of converting nuns and presents examples that suggest how they could be circumvented. Exploring the potential of drawing on previously understudied texts, such as nuns’ supplications, the article calls for the integration of this specific manifestation of female devotion into the scholarship and teaching on women’s religious life in the early modern era.

Keywords: conversion; nuns; monastic enclosure; Council of Trent; Tridentine reforms; Jewish-Christian relations; Houses of Catechumens; forced baptism; Early Modern Italy; convent education

1. Introduction

The conversion of the Jews, who were considered “the unbelievers *par excellence*,” traditionally held a unique symbolic significance for Christian authorities, which was greater than that ascribed to the conversion of all other non-Christians (Bonfil 2012, p. 155). Believed to form a crucial part of the divine plan for the salvation of humankind, Jewish conversion assumed an accentuated importance after the discovery of the New World, which heightened eschatological expectations (Prosperi 1989, p. 176). From the 1540s onward, the papacy adopted various measures aimed at inducing Jewish conversions, an objective that Catholic reformers continued to promote throughout the post-Tridentine era (Segre 1973, pp. 131–32; Stow 1976; Marconcini 2016, pp. 35–37).

This article argues that Italian nuns played a pivotal role in the campaign to convert the Jews. They did so by taking into custody candidates for baptism—many of them reluctant ones, who were compelled to follow their male relatives to the baptismal font¹—and instructing them in the tenets of Catholicism, and by re-educating neophytes and providing them with a model of devout Christian conduct. The crowning achievement of nuns’ conversionary zeal was overseeing the transformation of a Jewish girl into the bride of Christ, when a neophyte who had been educated in a nunnery took the veil and became a living example of the veracity of the Catholic faith.

Constituting a major intersection in the history of the Jewish and Christian traditions, converting the Jews remained an important expression of Italian nuns’ religiosity throughout the age of Catholic Reform. Yet unlike their male counterparts, converting nuns seldom left behind accounts of their endeavors, which were usually communal rather than individual. Moreover, since their efforts were

¹ Whereas Jewish men either converted alone or set in motion the conversion of their entire families, female Jews often only converted following the baptism of their fathers, husbands or brothers (Galasso 2002, pp. 116–17; Marconcini 2010, pp. 534–36; Herzig 2015, pp. 252–53; Stow 2016, p. 12). For medieval precedents of this phenomenon, see (Tartakoff 2010).

directed exclusively at Jewish girls and women they are often obscured in the historical record, which privileges conversion narratives focusing on Jewish men (cf. [Medici 1701](#)),² and are also largely missing from modern historiography. This article tackles the methodological difficulties of uncovering nuns' conversionary activities. Exploring the potential of drawing on previously understudied texts such as nuns' supplications, it points to the need to integrate this manifestation of female devotion into the scholarship and teaching on women's religious life in the early modern era.

The first part of the article analyzes a rare testimony of nuns' conversionary endeavors as nuns in Spoleto presented and defended them in writing in 1496, illuminating religious women's involvement in converting the Jews before the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation. The second part moves on to the institutionalization of conversionary efforts as part of the revitalization of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, and discusses the adoption of the convent as the model for the female section of the first House of Catechumens. This choice, I propose, attested to the widespread appreciation of women's religious communities as the ideal setting for procuring the conversion of female Jews, while conveying a growing concern over the allocation of prospective neophytes to convents, at a time in which nuns' complete separation from the world figured high on the agenda of Catholic reformers. Finally, the article expounds the tension between the Tridentine goals of converting the Jews on the one hand and reforming female monastic houses on the other hand. It demonstrates how, despite the paucity of nuns' own writings on the topic, other kinds of sources may be used for unearthing their continuous engagement in Jewish conversion throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

2. Nun Converters in Their Own Words

To the best of my knowledge, no works penned by Italian religious women that documents their involvement in converting Jews are currently available in English. However, a critical edition of a dossier containing nuns' supplications (in Latin) that reveal their key role in the efforts to convert a Jewish girl may be found in ([Toaff 1994](#), pp. 1070–75). Although the documents in this dossier have been known for some time, historians have focused on their significance for understanding either Jewish-Christian relations ([Toaff 1989](#), pp. 194–95; [Chiapperi 1998](#), pp. 47–48) or Pope Alexander VI's attitude toward forced baptism ([Toaff 2000](#), pp. 21–22) and not on the light that they shed on nuns' investment in propelling Jewish conversions. Toaff's edition may thus be used both for introducing advanced students to the topic and for demonstrating the utility of applying new approaches to known sources, in order to uncover the voices of early modern women.

In this case, the women were the Augustinian nuns of San Matteo in Spoleto, who in June 1496 welcomed the five-year-old Jewish girl Chiarastella into their convent.³ When Chiarastella's parents, Gentile and Abramo, found out that she was staying in San Matteo they requested that she be returned to them, but the nuns refused to let her go. Chiarastella's age, it should be noted, was typical of "contested children" who featured in conversion narratives from premodern Europe ([Tartakoff 2017](#); cf. [Bonfil 2012](#)). Still deemed a child, whose greater impressionability could result in a more complete conversion to Christianity than that of adults corrupted by many years of living as Jews ([Sherwood 2013](#), pp. 203–4), a five-year-old child could, at least in theory, walk all the way to the local convent and while there, verbally express her wish to become a Christian. The nuns of San Matteo, who were keen to see Chiarastella embrace Christianity, claimed that this was precisely what happened when she arrived at their convent.⁴

² Written toward the end of the era, Medici's work epitomizes this tendency; in over seventy pages featuring well-known baptized Jews from premodern Europe, it does not mention a single woman.

³ The dossier pertaining to Chiarastella is now at the Archivio di Stato di Perugia, Sezione di Spoleto, *Suppliche, 1445–1530*, busta 1, fasc. 8 [hereafter ASPSS, *Suppliche*, b. 1.8], fols. 70–70a. The citations below are based on my reading of the original documents, which bears no significant discrepancies to ([Toaff 1994](#), pp. 1070–75).

⁴ As noted in the nuns' supplication to Cardinal Borgia of 4 July 1496, which was incorporated into Giovanni Oliver's instructions in ASPSS, *Suppliche*, b. 1.8, fol. 70^r.

While their abbess, Sister Agata, was busy instructing Chiarastella in the tenets of the faith, the girl's parents turned to the bishop of Spoleto for help. They argued that their daughter did not arrive at the nunnery on her own, but was in fact lured by their Christian neighbors, who led her to San Matteo "with sweet words" without her parents' knowledge.⁵ The neighbors rightly assumed that the nuns would know how to take care of Chiarastella, because in fifteenth-century Italy virtually all convent chapters admitted girls from the age of five, either as postulants destined to become professed nuns or as boarders who were to learn proper Christian conduct, catechism, and basic skills such as reading and sewing from the nuns (Strocchia 1999, p. 32; Strocchia 2009, pp. 17, 148–49).

Whereas the nuns of San Matteo stressed Chiarastella's declaration that she wanted to be baptized, her parents insisted that at age five, even if she expressed her wish to convert, this could not be considered an indication of consent but merely a result of the nuns' persuasion or intimidation. In keeping with the Canon Law prohibition on baptizing Jewish children against their parents' will (on which see Stow 2012; 2016, pp. 168–70), Abramo and Gentile insisted that Chiarastella be returned to them as a Jew.⁶

The bishop of Spoleto, Costantino Erolì (d.1500), delegated the task of resolving the issue to his vicar, who bade the nuns to discontinue preparations for the girl's baptism under pain of excommunication. Sister Agata was ordered to hand Chiarastella over to a Christian laywoman named Casaleta, who was to care for her while the vicar looked into the case. On 4 July, the abbess and her fellow nuns appealed to the apostolic legate and governor of Spoleto, Cardinal Giovanni Borgia (1474–1500), protesting Chiarastella's removal from their convent.

In contrast with Chiarastella's parents, who stated her age as five and emphasized their neighbors' involvement in leading her to San Matteo, the nuns referred to her as an older girl, "aged about six" (*etatis annorum sex vel circa*), who arrived in San Matteo of her own initiative and willfully expressed her desire to become a Christian. The bishop of Spoleto, the nuns contended, had initially consented to her stay with them. Yet because of his frail health, he subsequently entrusted his vicar with determining the girl's fate, and the latter failed to do so in a proper judicial proceeding, in which both sides would be given a fair hearing. Instead, the vicar directed a threat of excommunication against the nuns lest they allow the girl to leave their convent. By publicizing this threat, the nuns complained, he showed a lack of respect for their religious community. To undo the offense to their communal honor, they asked that the matter of Chiarastella's baptism be decided either by their Augustinian provincial or by the prior of the Augustinian hermits of San Nicolò.⁷

Giovanni Oliver, Cardinal Borgia's lieutenant and deputy in 1495–1497 (Sansi 1879, pp. 106–7) who received the nuns' supplication, summoned both Bishop Erolì and Chiarastella's parents to appear before him within three days. In the meantime, he warned Erolì and his vicar not to take any steps that could blemish the nuns' honor. In Oliver's decree, the victims in the affair were neither the Jewish girl nor her parents but rather the sisters of San Matteo. From a dispute involving a contested child, the case now focused on the converting nuns' reputation.⁸ On 9 July, however, Pope Alexander VI (r.1492–1503) intervened in the controversy and issued a brief instructing the Augustinian provincial of Spoleto to see to its conclusion.

Before having his brief drafted, Pope Alexander received a supplication from the San Matteo nuns. While in their earlier appeal to Giovanni Borgia the nuns had emphasized the offense to their convent's honor, now their supplication focused on Chiarastella's eternal salvation. Stressing Bishop Erolì's declining health that, combined with his old age, led him to delegate Chiarastella's fate to his

⁵ The parents' version appears in the *Copia brevis hebreorum* incorporated into ASPSS, *Suppliche*, b. 1.8, fol. 70a^r: "per blandicias vicinorum ad monasterium S.ti Mathie... ignorantibus dicte puelle parentibus, seducta extiteret."

⁶ *Copia brevis hebreorum* (ASPSS, *Suppliche*, b. 1.8), fol. 70a^r.

⁷ The nuns' supplication of 4 July 1496 to Cardinal Borgia, incorporated into Giovanni Oliver's instructions (ASPSS, *Suppliche*, b. 1.8), fol. 70^r.

⁸ Giovanni Oliver's instructions of 4 July 1496 (ASPSS, *Suppliche*, b. 1.8), fol. 70^v.

vicar, they argued that the latter, “for an unknown reason,” disregarded his priestly obligation to care “for the salvation of this girl’s soul.”⁹

The nuns maintained that Chiarastella had voiced her desire to convert, and when her parents came to fetch her from San Matteo she refused to go with them, repeatedly affirming that she wanted to be baptized. When forced to relocate to Casaleta’s home, “where her mother was allowed to talk to her, she always persisted in saying what she had said earlier, namely that she wished and intended to be a Christian,”¹⁰ and her parents could not wrench out from her the prayers that she had learned during her sojourn in the convent. Hence, the nuns requested that the provincial of their order examine Chiarastella’s case, and should she persist in her wish to convert, have her baptized so that her soul would indeed be saved.

Notwithstanding the nuns’ argument in favor of rescuing Chiarastella from life as a Jew, which doomed her to damnation, Alexander VI ordered that she be returned to her parents. The pope did, however, grant the nuns their request to have their Augustinian provincial investigate the affair and examine Chiarastella’s intentions once she reached the age of consent, which for girls was generally agreed to be twelve (cf. Bowd 2012; Caffiero 2004, p. 88).¹¹ Whether or not this actually happened remains unknown, because Alexander’s brief is the latest document regarding the girl to have come to light so far.

The supplications of the nuns of San Matteo indicate that they had not only tried to make Chiarastella’s stay in their midst an attractive alternative to life with her Jewish family, but also vehemently opposed the attempts to have her transferred to the care of a Christian laywoman. Seeing it as their responsibility to oversee her conversion, they presented the girl’s removal from their convent as an offense that challenged their spiritual supremacy as the brides of Christ, as well as their expertise in supervising the devout upbringing of girls who were entrusted to their care (cf. Strocchia 1999; Strocchia 2009, p. 17). The nuns argued that the Catholic faith they had instilled in Chiarastella was so durable that it enabled her to resist her parents’ attempts to lure her back to Judaism after departing from their nunnery. In this manner, the nuns hoped to demonstrate that under their spiritual guidance, the girl had indeed undergone a true change of heart (*conversio*).

3. Monastic Enclosure and Jewish Conversion

There is a good reason to believe the nuns of San Matteo’s claim that Bishop Erolì had initially consented to Chiarastella’s stay in their convent, because ecclesiastical authorities in pre-Tridentine Italy often favored the placement of female candidates for baptism in nunneries. Hence, when in 1470 the wife of a Jewish innkeeper fled from her wayward husband in Pavia the local bishop sent her to a convent, where she was to make up her mind whether or not she wished to cross over to the Catholic camp (Horowitz 2002, pp. 605–6). The practice of assigning unbaptized Jews to convents was called into question during the 1540s. This was not the result of a sudden concern over the legitimacy of pressuring minors such as Chiarastella or disgruntled wives such as the Pavian Jewess to accept baptism, but rather of the growing preoccupation with the exposure of professed religious women to the potentially sinful influence of secular society. The foundation of Houses of Catechumens, first in Rome and then in other Italian cities, was meant to provide an alternative institutional solution for prospective female neophytes, thereby eliminating nuns’ close contacts with unbaptized Jews who could endanger their spiritual safety within the cloister walls that were supposed to protect it.

⁹ The nuns’ second supplication, titled *Copia supplicationis puelle hebreae*, was incorporated into the *Copia brevis apostolice in causa puelle hebrae*, in ASPSS, *Suppliche*, b. 1.8, fol. 70a^r: “qua ratione nescitur, in premissis que fidei stat[us] non videtur eam affectionem haberi quam deberi pro salute anime dicte puelle.”

¹⁰ *Copia supplicationis puelle hebrae*, fol. 70a^r: “data eidem matri commoditatem alloquendi eandem puellam, ipsa semper perseverav[er]it in his que ante dixerat, videlicet quod volebat et intendebat esse christiana.”

¹¹ *Copia brevis apostolice in causa puelle hebrae*, fol. 70a^r.

When Paul III (r.1534–1549) ordered the establishment of the first House of Catechumens in Rome in 1543, he declared that it should comprise of “a convent for [Jewish] girls, and a [guest]house for male Jews” who contemplated baptism (“*unum monasterium pro puellis, & unum hospitale pro viris Judaeis*”) (Cherubini 1742, p. 767). That the pope designated the female branch of the institution which was meant to facilitate Jewish conversions as a convent, while referring to its male branch simply as a guesthouse, is certainly instructive. It attests to an appreciation of the pivotal roles that women’s religious communities had previously played in expediting Jewish baptisms, leading to the adoption of the convent as a model for an institution dedicated to overseeing the conversion of female Jews. Once the Roman House of Catechumens began its operation, its male branch was not modelled on a monastery, but its female section was indeed arranged in a monastic format. Significantly, although the woman who supervised the House’s female section was called “prioress,” she was not to be a professed nun but a lay widow (Van Boxel 1998, pp. 116–17).¹²

It took several decades before additional Houses of Catechumens began to function in other Italian cities, and in some places the plans to establish one never materialized (Mazur 2016, pp. 18–36). Where no House was in operation, nuns continued to function as key converters, and contemporary sources attest to the high esteem in which both ecclesiastical officials and baptized Jews held their conversionary activities. For instance, before the foundation of a House of Catechumens in Venice in 1557, one inquisitor recommended placing the daughters of Iberian *conversos* suspected of lapsing into Judaism in nunneries to ensure their orthodox upbringing away from their religiously suspect parents (Salomon and Di Leone Leoni 1998, p. 162). In the same vein, the Venetian neophyte Simile of Montagnana (aka Giovanni Giacomo de’ Fedeli) expressed his hope that by impregnating his Jewish wife he would secure her assignment to a convent, where she would be held until the birth (and baptism) of their baby while the nuns would surely succeed in convincing her to follow him to the baptismal font (Pullan 1983, p. 281).

The last session of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which stressed the observance of monastic enclosure as nuns’ primary obligation, amplified concerns over their participation in the Church’s massive project of converting non-Catholics (Evangelisti 2007, pp. 41–65, 184–99; Wiesner-Hanks 2007, pp. 474–76). The tension between ecclesiastical commitment to the reform of female monastic houses and the campaign to convert the Jews erupted in Florence twenty years later, when the celebrated rabbi and physician Yehiel da Pesaro (c.1559–1635) resolved to cross over to the Catholic side, assuming the name Vitale Medici.¹³ A high-profile neophyte (cf. Furstenberg-Levi 2008, 2012), Vitale left behind a long paper trail that repeatedly touches on his family’s ties with nuns, bearing witness to the wealth of sources—many of them still awaiting scholarly investigation—that could be used for unveiling nuns’ activities as converters.

Vitale was baptized in January 1583, and the baptism of his sons was secured shortly thereafter. Nonetheless, his wife refused to follow his lead, as did his two daughters (Segre 1986, pp. 130–31), who were no longer minors and had to express their consent to be baptized. Since a House of Catechumens would only be established in Florence in 1636 (Marconcini 2016, p. 19), it was initially suggested that they be sent to a nunnery in order to propel them to do so. However, the reforming Archbishop of Florence (in 1574–1605) Alessandro Ottaviano de’ Medici expressly opposed the idea. The first archbishop to implement the Tridentine directives in Florentine convents by imposing architectural measures aimed at segregating nuns from society (Weaver 1992, pp. 73–75; Evangelisti 2007, pp. 107–8), Alessandro preferred having Vitale’s daughters board with a devout lay

¹² Baptized Jewish girls were allowed to remain in the House of Catechumens until they either married or took monastic vows. In 1562, a Dominican convent was established in Rome specifically for those neophytes who wished to become nuns (Caffiero 2004, p. 23; Liroso 2013, pp. 147–80). In other Italian cities, converts from Judaism continued to take the veil in existing nunneries (see below).

¹³ The attempts to secure the baptism of Vitale’s children occurred during the most forceful phase in implementing the Tridentine decrees concerning monastic enclosure (cf. Weaver 1992, pp. 73–75).

family. Giulio Antonio Santori (1532–1602), the cardinal of Santa Severina, explained:¹⁴ “it seemed more expedient to [Archbishop Alessandro], out of the respect that one should have for convents, that [the Jewesses] stay in the house of his relatives.”¹⁵

Vitale’s daughters were consequently assigned to the house of an upperclass family—though one not related to the Archbishop (Plaisance 2008, pp. 166–70)—where they were subject to intense pressure to convert. The younger daughter was the first to give in, and by July preparations for her baptism were already under way. Vitale’s older daughter, however, was steadfast in wishing to remain a Jew. When it became clear that her sojourn in a pious household did not prompt the conversion of this eighteen-year-old girl, Pope Gregory XIII (r.1572–1585) ordered that she be sent to a nunnery after all. On 20 July, Marcantonio Maffei (d.1583), the cardinal secretary of apostolic briefs, informed Archbishop Alessandro: “The Lord [Pope] wishes you to have the Jewish daughter of Master Vitale, the neophyte physician, placed in one of the convents of Florence, so that maybe with the example of these mothers [in the convent] where she will be placed she will make up her mind to console her father and imitate him by accepting the Holy Baptism.”¹⁶

This letter presented the nuns’ virtuous comportment as a decisive factor in impelling a Jewess who resisted baptism to give in. The girl’s stay in a nunnery indeed soon produced this desired outcome. On 14 October, Vitale acknowledged in a missive to Guglielmo Sirleto (1514–1585), cardinal protector of the neophytes, that his eldest daughter finally agreed to baptism.¹⁷ The last of his seven children to be baptized, she received the sacrament on 4 December, and was christened Grazia.¹⁸

Although the name of the monastic community whose members succeeded in procuring Grazia’s conversion remains unknown, her father evidently valued their efforts. A request that he addressed to the Grand Duke of Florence four years later indicates that Vitale continued to regard nunneries as places in which his daughters could be safely deposited in times of crisis, to be sheltered and cared for in a manner that would safeguard their honor and thus also his own reputation. When his younger daughter, Anna,¹⁹ fled from her violent husband in Pistoia in 1587, he turned to the Grand Duke and asked him to assist the sixteen-year-old girl who, “afraid to return to her husband, wished to retire to a convent.”²⁰

After his conversion Vitale, now a Christian physician, belonged to one of the few categories of men whose indispensable services could earn them permission to enter enclosed nunneries. After working as nuns’ doctor for fourteen years, however, his appointment in unspecified convents was revoked. Addressing his protest in the matter to Alessandro de’ Medici in December 1598,

¹⁴ On Santori’s involvement in facilitating the conversion of Vitale’s family, see (Plaisance 2008, pp. 153–55, 166–69).

¹⁵ Giulio Antonio Santori’s letter to the Inquisitor of Florence, Fra Dionigio Costacciaro, of 13 January 1583, Archives Générales du Royaume, Brussels, Archives ecclésiastiques 19283 ter, vol. 2 (Florence. *Saint Office. XVI^e–XVIII^e*): “T’è parso più espediente per rispetti che si deve tenere dei monasterii, che stano in casa de suoi parenti.” I consulted John Tedeschi’s photocopy of this document.

¹⁶ Cardinal Marcantonio Maffei’s letter to Archbishop Alessandro de’ Medici of 20 July 1583, Archivio Arcivescovile, Florence, *Religiosi e Religiose, Professioni di Monache*, filza II: “Il S[igno]re si contenta, che V[ost]ra S[ign]oria possa far mettere in alc[un]o delli monasterii di Fiorenza la figliuola hebrea di Mastro Vitale Medico Neofito che forse con l’esempio di quelle madri ove sarà posta si risolverà di consolare suo padre, et imitarlo con pigliare il S[an]to Battesimo.”

¹⁷ Vitale Medici’s letter to Cardinal Guglielmo Sirleto of 14 October 1583, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, *Vat. Lat.* no. 6195, pt. I, c. 276^r.

¹⁸ The baptism of “Gratia già Hebrea di M[ae]str[o] Vitale Medici, d’anni 18” on this date is recorded in the register of girls baptized in 1583, under “G,” in Archivio Storico dell’Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, *Registri Battesimali* [hereafter ASOSMFF, RB]. Vitale’s eldest daughter never became a nun, as suggested in (Saracco 2009) and (Toaff 2013, p. 103). She was married off to a Florentine citizen named Bartolomeo Sermanni, as noted in the manuscript *Vita di Vitale Medici* (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence, *Manoscritti II*... 174 [Vite di diversi], no. 8).

¹⁹ The baptism of “Anna già Hebrea di M[ae]str[o] Vitale Medico, d’anni 12” on 11 August 1583 is recorded in the register of girls baptized in 1583, under “A” in ASOSMFF, RB.

²⁰ Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Acquisti e Doni* 292 (transcription from the *Suppliche della Pratica per Pistoia* of September 1587, unpaginated): “Anna, paurosa di tornare col marito, vorrebbe ritirarsi in un monistero.” The request to have Anna placed in a convent was first noted in (Cohen 1992, p. 29), but (Marconcini 2016, p. 153) identified her father as the convert Vitale Medici. Anna did not ultimately enter a convent, though. She remained in Pistoia, where her brother Antonio later paid the rent for her apartment, as recorded in the *Quaderno di ricevute di Antonio Medici* (entry of 29 July 1620; renewed in 1621 and 1622) in Archivio Storico del Capitolo della Cattedrale, Florence, *Fondo Medici* [hereafter ASCCF, FM], busta R–66.

the convert played on the Archbishop's known preoccupation with nuns' contacts with the outside world. Refuting the claims that the nuns had asked to have their relatives man the positions of convent physicians (D'Addario 1972, pp. 289–90), the neophyte exclaimed: "no physician had entered these vacancies for reasons of family ties, but by other ways, of which it is better to keep quiet. Suffice it to say, that neither merits nor age or experience had been taken into consideration, everything [was given] to good-looking young men wearing tight-fitting clothes, and suffice it to say, that of eight [positions in] convents that were being assigned, I have none."²¹

Whether or not Vitale really came to share Alessandro de' Medici's view of nuns as particularly prone to temptation—and thus in need of confinement within strictly enclosed institutions (Weaver 1992, p. 75; Weaver 2002, pp. 23–25, 88–89, 178)—or merely strove to ingratiate himself with the Archbishop or voice his fury at being let off is hard to say. Tellingly, though, his sons Antonio and Alessandro, who had both been baptized as children (Battistini 1929, pp. 443–44; Saracco 2009), continued to express their high esteem of female monastic communities well into the seventeenth century. After Vitale's death, his sons established a fund for helping impoverished girls who could not afford to pay a spiritual dowry enter convents. Set up by the brothers of a Jewish girl whose conversion had been secured thanks to nuns' endeavors, this fund continued to facilitate the monachization of Florentine girls well into the twentieth century.²²

4. Conversionary Zeal and Post-Tridentine Sanctity

Whereas Archbishop Alessandro valued nuns' protection from the dangers that could ensue from their contacts with secular society over their contribution to Jewish conversion, other reformist ecclesiastics in post-Tridentine Italy were more appreciative of the advantages of assigning potential converts to nunneries. Gregorio Barbarigo (1625–1697), the saintly Bishop of Padua, is a case in point.²³ Barbarigo relied on the assistance of nuns in caring for Jewish girls such as Sara Alpron, a ten-year-old who in 1673 was abducted from her parents and consigned to the Paduan convent of San Benedetto in preparation for her baptism, after her brother had "offered" her to the Church (Ioly Zorattini 1988, pp. 171–72). Barbarigo also sent several baptized Jewish girls to be educated in nunneries and encouraged them to take monastic vows. At least three Jews that he baptized eventually became nuns, signaling Catholicism's ultimate triumph over Judaism (Cassese 2009, pp. 55–59).²⁴

Barbarigo's contemporary, the holy woman Lucia Ferrari (d.1682), also became known for her commitment to the cause of Jewish conversion. Sister Lucia had initially donned the Ursulines' habit and later that of a Franciscan tertiary, before becoming a Capuchin nun and founder of six convents in northern Italy (Riccardi 1789, pp. 77–78). Upon the foundation of a House of Catechumens in her native Reggio in 1632, at the beginning of her saintly career, she served as prioress of its female section. Ferrari was responsible for instructing the Jewish women who entered the House in the aftermath of the devastating plague of 1630 in the tenets of Christianity. The bishop of Reggio also entrusted her with caring for Jewish children whose parents had perished in the epidemic and who were thereafter forcibly taken from their surviving relatives to be raised as Catholics (Venezia 1722, pp. 83–85; Balletti 1913, pp. 192–98; Fabbrici 2014).

Ferrari's pious conduct had a profound influence on the religious formation of the girls who were brought up in the House of Catechumens, with whom she kept in touch after the end of her

²¹ Vitale Medici's letter to Archbishop Alessandro de' Medici of 7 December 1598, in Biblioteca Marucelliana, Florence, *Fondo manoscritti*, Ms. A 142, c. 207r: "[N]issun medico è intrato in q[ues]ti luoghi vacati per caggione di parentella, ma per altre vie, le quali mi conviene tacere. Basta, che non si è considerato bene ne meriti ne età, ne sperienza, il tutto a giovani attillati, et di bello aspetto, e basta, che di otto monasteri che sono stati dati, io non ho nessuno."

²² The numerous and hitherto unexplored records of the fund for *fanciulle monacande* are preserved at ASCCF, FM (those pertaining to its early years of operation, in *buste* no. R-123, R-175).

²³ On Barbarigo's reformist mission in Padua, see (McNamara 2013).

²⁴ In northern Italy, sending ex-Jewish girls to be educated in nunneries in which they were later prompted to take the veil harkened back to the thirteenth century (cf. Superbi 2014).

term as prioress there. Like Bishop Barbarigo, Ferrari encouraged converts from Judaism to enter monastic houses. Two of the baptized Jewish infants she had cared for later joined the first Capuchin convent that she founded in Guastalla (Pasotti 1729, pp. 1–40). One of the two, Sister Anna Beatrice Manfredi (d.1691), accompanied Sister Lucia on trips that were aimed at facilitating the foundation of new Capuchin houses, but also at convincing Italian rulers to ghettoize the Jews as a means of compelling them to convert (Venezia 1722, pp. 93–97). In 1664, Ferrari left Manfredi in charge of the new Capuchin convent in Mantua, of which the baptized Jew became the first abbess. After Manfredi died in the odor of sanctity, the *vita* that commemorated her life of devotion and charity presented them as reflecting the enduring influence of Ferrari’s religious fervor (Pasotti 1729).

Significantly, whereas Lucia Ferrari’s male counterpart Gregorio Barbarigo was beatified in 1761 (and later canonized in 1960), Sister Lucia was never elevated to the honor of the altars. That a nun who had invested considerable efforts in winning new converts to Catholicism did not attain beatification, attests to the ecclesiastical hierarchy’s persistent ambivalence toward religious women’s active pursuit of one of the main goals of the Church Militant.²⁵ Ferrari’s tenure as prioress at the House of Catechumens had preceded her profession as a nun, and after entering a Capuchin convent she obtained special permission allowing her to leave the cloister and travel across northern Italy (Venezia 1722, pp. 81–101). Nonetheless, after her death, her many accomplishments were deemed incompatible with the foremost Tridentine ideal of female religiosity, that of observing strict monastic enclosure (cf. Zarri 2000, pp. 106–8).

5. Conclusions

From the fifteenth through the seventeenth century and beyond,²⁶ numerous Italian nuns expressed their strong commitment to Catholicism by facilitating Jewish conversion. This article has delineated the challenges for teaching and studying their conversionary activities and has presented examples suggesting how these challenges could be circumvented. As demonstrated above, nuns cared for children such as Chiarastella of Spoleto or the Paduan Sara Alpron, who had been forcibly taken from their families, and persuaded older Jewish girls and women, whose male relatives had opted for baptism, that Catholicism was the true faith. They imparted the tenets of Christianity to the female Jews entrusted to their convents and taught neophytes who were sent to their nunneries as *educande* how to behave like devout Catholics.

The peculiar physical setting in which nuns’ conversionary efforts took place, namely gender-homogenous communities set off from the rest of society and especially from the prospective converts’ Jewish relatives, must have contributed to the effectiveness of their persuasion, instructions, and undoubtedly—as Chiarastella’s parents suggested—also threats. The converters’ comportment, as pious women who dedicated their lives to Christ, was also instrumental in ensuring the success of their conversionary endeavors, which found its utmost manifestation when the baptized Jews who had been educated in convents resolved to become nuns themselves. While the strategies that nuns employed in specific cases remain shrouded in obscurity, the documents pertaining to Grazia de’ Medici’s conversion make it clear that these were indeed potent.

Some nun-converters, notably those who headed monastic houses, such as Sister Agata, or founded convents, like Sister Lucia Ferrari, may be identified by name today. Yet most of them pursued their endeavors collectively, as part of a monastic community committed to gaining new souls for Catholicism. As shown in this article, the occasional presence of Jewish girls and women, or of female converts from Judaism, was a common feature of life in Italian convents—one that

²⁵ Proselytizing the enemies of the Church constituted a central aspect of the post-Tridentine model of sanctity (Schutte 2001, p. 77), but its incompatibility with the concurrent emphasis on nuns’ monastic enclosure made it largely unavailable to women (Prosperi 1991, pp. 104–6; Wiesner-Hanks 2007, p. 476).

²⁶ On nuns’ conversion of Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which lie beyond the chronological scope of this article, see (Marconcini 2016, pp. 116–18) and (Al Kalak and Pavan 2013, pp. 143–44).

has to be taken into account in our attempts to recover women's religious expression in the age of Catholic reform.

In light of the increased concern over enclosing women's monastic communities after the Council of Trent, some reformist prelates, such as Alessandro de' Medici, attempted to deprive nuns of their roles as converters of Jews while others, including Pope Gregorio XIII and Bishop Gregorio Barbarigo, were reluctant to divest the Catholic camp of such important agents of conversion. The failure to acknowledge Ferrari's achievements as a pious converter of Jews attests to the persistent unease surrounding religious women's active participation in one of the major projects of the revitalized Church. Integrating nuns' conversionary activities into the study of women's history in early modern Italy thus opens a window into the complexities of female religious experience in this era of reforms and upheavals.

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