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Catholic Education in France in the Interwar Period: Religious Life, Religious Orders, Adaptations. Research perspectives

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Abstract: The history of French teaching congregations during the twentieth century is quite unknown. Nevertheless, their experiences are of very high interest for historians who want to focus on social and religious transformations in contemporary societies. This research outlines two important events through some congregational archives: first, from World War I onwards, the return of the people who were forced into exile due to the Republican laws (1880s-1905); second, the way a Catholic group of women teachers, who decided to stay in France in spite of the Republican laws, adapted to this new context. Eventually, this article shows both internal and external adaptations of religious actors and institutions in modern societies, and its consequences on their legal, canonical and sociological situation.
Keywords: teaching congregations, religious practices, women congregations, Catholic Church, social history

French Catholic schools in the 1920s and 1930s were undergoing a profound transformation. Many were the consequences, whether direct or not, of the expulsion of teaching congregations, which, forced into exile, lost 30,000 of their members within a few years (Cabanel & Durand, 2005; Jusseaume, 2016; Paisant & Langlois, 2014). An unknown number remained in France by resorting to the subterfuges of wearing secular garb and ostensibly abandoning their orders – a phenomenon that has been called the "secularization of religious orders". Within a few years, the network of Catholic schools had to reorganize: before the measures taken by the French Third Republic, the congregants were the main actors of Catholic

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schools; after these measures, Catholic bishops extended and strengthened a network of diocesan schools. This reorganization began before World War I, but was still not fully completed in 1914.

Thus, at the end of the first World War, the religious congregations encountered an ambivalent situation. On the one hand, they were considered as necessary for the maintenance of Catholic schools; as such, they were supported by campaigns emanating from Catholic groups and movements like the *Défense des Religieux Anciens Combattants* (Ancient Religious Fighters Committee) and the *Fédération Nationale Catholique* (National Catholic Federation), as well as from bishops themselves. "We must act so that the special laws [i.e., secularism laws] will be reported", the Assembly of Cardinals and Archbishops strongly affirmed in February 1929, because Catholic education faced such a difficult situation that only "religious congregations [could] save it" (Assemblée des Cardinaux et Archevêques [Archbishops and Cardinals Assembly, 1929, my translation]). On the other hand, the bishops tried to strengthen the network of diocesan elementary and secondary schools outside of the religious orders, which had different school grid and organization.

Moreover, the congregations were themselves in a complex situation, due to both legal and internal factors. Indeed, a lot of them were forced into exile at the very beginning of the twentieth century; their coming back to France after 1914 is the result of both a fragile governmental circular (known as the *Malvy circular*, named after the Minister of the Interior who adopted it) and of a tacit political compromise. Whereas their legal position was unclear, many religious schools reopened without having to continue hiding their connection to the congregation to which they belonged. But their members faced a strong challenge, as some of them had experienced a life abroad while others had had to maintain their religious activities as secret in France: such gaps between them, in so few years, induced misunderstandings and conflicts between them.

In such a context, how did the religious congregations face their return to France in the 1920s and 1930s after World War I? As far as I know, there have not been specific studies about that issue.[1] The congregations themselves explored their own memories only recently: Georges

[1] It is worth mentioning the work of Jean-Paul Durand, who proposes an overview of the legal developments of religious congregations in France. Nevertheless, the internal aspects of the congregations are not discussed. (Durand, 1999).

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Rigault, a brother of the Christian Schools, prepared a story of his congregation in 1950; however, it was not until the early 1990s that his book about the exile, secularization, and the return was published (Rigault, 1991). The article I here present is but a prospective work and notes some of the research gaps to be further explored. I focus on two main elements. The first relates to the internal challenges of religious congregations; the second deals with the creativity of Catholics who, while continuing the work of the congregations and keeping the same purpose, did so in other forms: the case of the *Association Franciscaine des Institutrices* (Franciscan Association of Women Teachers) is an original experience in such a situation.

The "return": the internal challenges facing religious congregations

In 1919, the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary, founded in Ardèche by Marie Rivier during the French Revolution with the purpose of educating girls, was officially a single school; in the following year, there were 55, all of which were kept open in other ways through the troubled times of secularization (Couriaud, 1989, p. 731). This single school was kept open in Sorgues (Vaucluse) and preserved the use of religious garb after 1904: "There, the sisters have continued to teach in religious garb. The mayor and the population opposed their departure and their *secularization*" (p. 730, my translation). After several legal proceedings, benefiting from the defense of the famous Catholic lawyer Auguste Rivet, the congregation also succeeded in validating its hybrid status: recognized as being not just a teaching congregation, it avoided the liquidation of its assets, including the imposing mother house located in Bourg-Saint-Andéol, which housed 600 nuns at the time.

Above all, the early century troubles did not leave the congregations unharmed; moreover, the return to some normality was done with deep internal questioning. Indeed, the secularized Sisters of the Presentation of Mary

> are religious and are recorded in a register which will remain secret. Precautionary measures are taken: no contact with the parent; all private correspondence must be destroyed after reading. This radical break of the institute's seat sets a time of hardship for the *secularized* ones. (Couriaud, 1989, p. 727, my translation)

Internal disagreements appeared: the Superior General was favorable to exile in order to preserve their "fidelity to the thought of Leo XIII" and to protect the religious life first; the

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General Assistant, in turn, leaned towards following "the Council of Bishops to keep Catholic schools and, therefore, the first mission of the institute" and was favorable towards secularization. The sisters finally made their decision, "according to personal desires" and according to "the requests of foundation abroad", especially in Canada (Couriaud, 1989, p. 727, my translation).

The Congregation of Jesus and Mary (also known as Eudists) faced a similar situation, as seen in a number of collective and personal trajectories until the first World War: brothers experienced an "external secularization" (an apparent secularization, while maintaining a clandestine religious life), a "real secularization", or exile (Venard, 2008). Schools found themselves caught up in the political upheavals: in most Eudist schools, diocesan priests took over management, while at the same time continuing to be religious members of the educational teams. As a subterfuge, the buildings were bought by civil societies and owned by generous Catholic lay persons. The unity of the school teams suffered; cohabitation resulted in legal disputes and difficult negotiations between protagonists with very diverse interests. This was the case for the College Saint-Sauveur in Redon (Britain): Colonel Maurice Halgouet bought all the property to keep it as a Catholic school, while the diocesan priests continued the Eudist mission and educational work. When the Eudists came back, negotiations were conducted, between 1917 and 1933, to determine the legal process of transfer to the Congregation and its position regarding the diocese of Rennes, whose priests worked directly for college maintenance (Venard, 2008, pp. 113-114).

Thus, the period of hardship continued in the early 1920s from within communities, when they had to rebuild while returning from exile. The first postwar Eudists General Assembly was held in 1921. It explicitly requested "a courageous recovery in spiritual life and common life", as the noticed decline was attributed to the exceptional situation that the congregations faced in France, which was the "rise of individualism" (Venard, 2008, p. 122, my translation).

The case of the Congregation of Christian Brothers is also a strong indication of such difficulties (Rigault, 1991; Sorrel, 2003)[2]. Brother René Guillemin, a novice in 1903, gave an

[2] Christian Sorrel shed new light on these secularized brothers, including during the interwar period. Most congregations have only recently rediscovered the troubled history of this period, as the Christian Brothers did:

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enlightening testimony on this point as well as on the resulting pitfalls for both religious and secularized brothers (Guillemin, [ca. 1954]). He was himself exiled to the island of Rhodes at the time of the expulsions to complete his training; then, he served in schools in the Middle East. His contact with the secularized brothers who stayed in France was nonexistent, with one exception (Guillemin, [ca. 1954]). Both groups, secularized brothers and religious expatriates, while claiming to be faithful to the same ideal, lived very different realities. In this testimony, the author pointed out two distinct phases of secularization, corresponding to two different attitudes. The first one is characterized by the total breakdown of relations between secularized brothers and superiors. The second attitude reconnected secularized brothers with superiors. From this moment, secularization appeared as purely "artificial". The first World War suddenly put them in contact with one another:

> So, there I was, in September 1915, suddenly put in contact with secularization. Brother Périal ordered me to immediately join the St. Louis boarding school in Saint-Etienne. He explained that we would be four brothers in religious garb, as the doctor of the house, doctor Choupin, had obtained this exceptional approval from Briand himself.
>
> I must say that this first contact was rather painful, something like a cold shower after a warm bath. We arrived, my colleagues and I, from the Middle-East houses, which were prosperous with their many religious, and comfortable with their modern organization. We fell in a boarding school with an insufficient staff in so many viewpoints, and with run-down buildings as a result of requisitions and of ten years of secularization measures. (Guillemin, [ca. 1954], p. 3, my translation)

Cohabitation was difficult between the different categories of staff defined by René Guillemin [ca. 1954] as:

1. Former secularized brothers, still attached by their vows to the congregation.
2. The former brothers that sought the exemption of their vows, but who remained unmarried, living as residents at the school.
3. The former brothers who were married.
4. Religious who are temporarily professed but who had not renewed their vows in 1904 and whose situation was undecided. Some later came back to the Congregation and made a temporary and then a perpetual profession of vows.
5. Religious belonging to other congregations or former seminarians.

Rigault's book about the first part of the twentieth century, written as part of a historical epic about the congregation, was ready in the 1950s but was only published in 1991 (Rigault, 1991).

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6. Lay Catholics who have never been religious and came to education work for various reasons and were living as residents within the religious community.
7. Young people supporting the education staff before their call-up or until they find a more lucrative situation.
8. The women teachers for primary classes, with different categories of secularized sisters among them.

> After our arrival, the brothers with religious garb formed a ninth group that tended to join, as they could, the other eight groups. (pp. 3-4, my translation)

Because of this variety, common life was reduced, before a decision was made to separate lay people from the religious. Annual retreats "resumed the appearance of our traditional retreats", except for the name: they were called "congresses ... still for fear of police commissioners". But this time of secularization seems to have introduced a break in the schools, identified by brother René. "Independence" seems to be the rule, and the religious were "no longer afraid to wear a suit" (Guillemin, [ca. 1954], p. 6, my translation). Regular life was also shaken up by the demands of educational institutions:

> For the duration of my directorate in Saint-Etienne, it was not possible to fully resume regular life: I mean the regular schedule of daily exercises. The reason is not the secularization; but in such a large boarding with reduced religious personnel, it is not possible to join the requirements of the regular schedule and the absorbing work of classes and monitoring. (Guillemin, [ca. 1954], p. 7, my translation)

The opinion of Brother René on his secularized peers is nuanced; however, it could appear unfriendly. While regretting their "desertion" and feeling "lukewarm" about them, he admitted they strongly contributed to the perpetuation of the educational institutions.

Beyond the specific circumstances that were those affecting René Guillemin, it appears that the Lasallian congregation, like others, had to face a new context, which was going to question the very identity of the community and its mission. Save for some exceptions, because of the legal measures, the religious habit was no longer worn in the interwar period until the legislation of Vichy; at the same time, regular life was hardly maintained in practice, as it had to fit a creative school context. In these conditions, religious orders were subject to new challenges. Their relationship with the secular sphere became more complex. Indeed, the general living environment remained governed by a rule dating from the seventeenth century: the life of prayer

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was still very significant; the religious guidance of the student remained globalizing. The signs of a deep crisis of congregational education became obvious during the 1950s, but its roots were older. This was an important differentiation factor with the diocesan education, which grew and strengthened during the interwar period. In fact, the diocesan authorities did not always seem aware of the scale of this specific situation. Canon J.-B. Deschamps, diocesan director of Catholic Teaching in the diocese of Blois, future president of the *Fédération nationale des syndicats de l'enseignement libre* (National Federation of Diocesan Unions for Private Catholic Education), hardly looked at congregations other than as providers of cheap, personal, ready-to-serve diocesan plans. One of the solutions recommended by the Diocesan Director for facing the shortage of teachers in private education was to make sure "that religious teachers continue to secularize" (Deschamps, 1920, pp. 302-303, my translation).

> Teaching congregations face a double duty: safeguarding their subjects and the salvation of the souls of little children of France, he said. More intense secularization would calm many concerns both in financial terms and regarding the recruitment of staff. Would it not also be a blessing for the congregations themselves? (Deschamps, 1920, pp. 302-303, my translation)

Brother René Guillemin did not report such an experience as a "blessing". The misunderstanding between diocesan authorities and teaching congregations, which were caught in both endogenous and exogenous complex situations, is one facet of Catholic education during the interwar period.

Religious congregations: an inadequate form for modern societies? The case of the Franciscan Association of Women Teachers

Due to the situation religious congregations encountered, while the process discussed above was in development, other forms of engagement were proposed, as both a consecration in the world and an education service. This was the case, for example, of the *Association Franciscaine des Institutrices* (AFI, Franciscan Association of Women Teachers). Their aim was clearly to find a new way to be present as consecrated people in the French and in the Church societies of the time. Such a creation mixed political matters – the French legal situation – and canonical ones: how to remain both active and contemplative nuns in the Catholic Church? How to be a full professional teacher, and a totally consecrated person, at the same time?

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In the summer of 1919, Capuchin Brother Gonzalo Delsuc founded the AFI during the retreat he gave to members of the *Syndicat des institutrices libres de l'Ouest* (Union of Western Catholic Teachers), in Brive-on-Charentes, a small village of 300 people, in the Charentes area, with a Catholic girls' school (Anonymous, [ca. 1928-1929]; Ménétrier, March 1931). For representatives of the institutional church, a spiritual group of teachers was the ideal:

> It is desirable that all the teachers of Christian primary schools could form between them a teacher's Third Order, not a regular one, but a secular one …. The Catholic teacher does not practice a profession but has received a vocation. It accomplishes what is stated in the Sermon on the Mount: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well". (Lanfrey, 2003, p. 509, my translation)

"Vocation" – the word was constantly repeated from 1900 to the 1930s. It described the teacher's place in the Catholic educational institution, that of a quasi-priesthood, a life that would be literally given to the Catholic school, on the model of what a religious teacher was expected to do (Teinturier, 2012). Therefore, there was a double evolution: an association, more than a professional relationship, and the primacy given to the vocation rather than to the exercise of a profession. Could this have been the reason for the change Fr. Delsuc proposed for the teachers' group that he gathered around Cognac? In any case, the new *Association Franciscaine des Institutrices* faithfully fulfilled these two requirements, one of submission to the hierarchical authority and the other of conforming to the model of the Catholic teacher, who was necessarily poor, considering the precarious resources of parishes and dioceses; the Catholic teacher should also have been a model of moral life, based on the teachings of the Church. We know very little about the trajectory of the President Miss Ménétrier, who remained the superior general of the AFI during the interwar period: a former professor of Normal School, based in Paris, she was a member of the Franciscan Third Order. She died in 1939 (Audollent, [ca. 1942], p. 206).[3]

[3] Georges Audollent was the diocesan director of the Catholic schools of the diocese of Paris from 1912 to 1922 before being named the Bishop of Blois in 1925.

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Originality of a Catholic association of women teachers

Several specificities characterized the new association mentioned above. When it was created, the AFI affirmed that it gathered teachers from both public and Catholic schools. This was rather unusual, since a large part of French Catholics still radically opposed both schools, symbols of two social projects that appeared mutually contradictory to most of them. At the same time, the reactions to the proposal of the *Davidées* group in the French Church attested such a situation. The *Davidées* was created in 1916 at the shrine of Our Lady of Laus in the Alps and it was soon extended to all of France. Its members were Catholic women teachers working in public education. As such, the *Davidées* attracted the ire of the proponents of secularism, as Catholics were close to a powerful Catholic activist organization for education (*Société générale de l'éducation et de l'enseignement*) and to Jean Guiraud, then a co-editor in chief of the very influential Catholic Journal *La Croix*, a prolific columnist in charge of news about education and schools in the Assumptionist daily newspapers during the interwar period. Similarly, an article that resembled a manifest was published under the title "Education reform projects before the Catholic conscience" in May 1931 in *La Nouvelle Revue des Jeunes* (New Youth Magazine), close to the Dominican order; it caused an internal controversy for Catholicism in France. Such a controversy focused on two strong statements by the authors of the article: first, the legitimacy of state action in the field of education through public school, and second, the need for Catholics to "work" to "participate in the civic life of this country", a remaining difficulty for a part of French Catholics, still hostile to the republican ideology. This open position was then marginalized (Les projets de réforme de l'enseignement devant la conscience catholique, 1931). In such a context, the opening of the AFI to teachers of public education appeared strongly innovative. However, no archival document indicates the motivation of such a posture. The *Rule of Life*, an internal rule AFI published in 1921, only affirmed: "Future Associated [...] will be teachers or professors or supervisors, whether in the Catholic education or in public schools" (Association Franciscaine des Institutrices, 1921, p. 12, my translation). In 1923, the first mention of the AFI in *Les Voix franciscaines* (*Franciscan Voices*) – a monthly bulletin of the brotherhood of the Franciscan Third Order of capuchin obedience, which was published in Toulouse – used similar terms (L'Association Franciscaine des Institutrices, 1923).

Thus, the project of the AFI was not presented as a policy and did not make the Association a direct actor in the "war of two Frances" – Catholic France vs. Secular France, and

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public schools vs. Catholic schools. However, such a dimension was present in the objectives of the new group while expressed exclusively in internal distribution documents. The spiritual dimension of the work of the Association not only targeted its members and their immediate entourage, it intended "to make life sweet and meritorious for the Sisters, and fruitful for their students". It also especially widened its objectives to the dimension of the nation, since it was regarded as an action that was "redemptive for France and for sinners" (Association Franciscaine des Institutrices, 1921, p. 10, my translation), with the aim "to rebuild the Homeland" (Anonymous, [ca. 1928-1929], p. 4, my translation). This was not an isolated discourse in the catholicity of the 1920s, which asserted itself as "French" and tended to participate in the national life through the mobilization of a patriotic matrix (Bonafoux-Verrax, 2002; Loubes, 2001). But in an original way, the AFI intended to take part in the ecclesial field itself while maintaining its presence in schools. Indeed, it did not call for a minimalist spiritual commitment related to the ideal of life presented by Saint Francis and the Franciscan family. The new association intended to lead towards a full consecration in the secular sphere, without the separation that the religious life usually implied. Congregational teaching was not made only to circumvent the ban, but it also tried to reclaim a public space defined by the abandonment of religion. Following the hypothesis that Marie-Antoinette Perret (2000) defends, this type of still-original commitment could be interpreted as an adaptation to the secularization experienced in France since the late nineteenth century. If other movements experienced a similar orientation at the same time, the proposal remained marginal within the Catholic Church. In this sense, the AFI appeared as an unidentified canonical object.

The Third Order as a basis

The creation of the AFI coincided with the renewal of the Secular Franciscan Third Order, encouraged by the popes since Leo XIII – he was himself a Francisan tertiary. Fraternities, members, and types of apostolates increased in numbers since the mid-nineteenth century (Mayeur, 1984; Savart, 1984). Valenti Serra i Fornell, author of a study on the Third Order of Capuchins in Catalonia during the first half of the twentieth century, interpreted this papal encouragement to secular tertiary as a part of the Church's strategy engaged in a struggle against the various errors of modernity – naturalism, positivism, liberalism, socialism – and

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against the secularization of Western societies (Serra i Fornell, 2004).[4] It was in such a context, both of a new dynamism and of a reconquest of modern society, that the AFI arose as an offshoot of the Third Order of the Capuchin Province of Toulouse. For its founders, the aim was "to group tertiary teachers of St. Francis", like the other fraternities' apostolic commitment. But the Association also had another aim. Indeed, the strict implementation of the rule of the Third Order did not fully fit with the high demands of its promoters:

> If we exploit all the wealth that the Third Order contains, [...], it seems that the Franciscan Third Order is particularly suited to achieve this goal of a more active piety and of a deeper sanctification.
>
> But precisely because the Rule of the Third Order is for everyone, it can not concern but some general points. A number of souls demand something more precise, a stronger discipline. … They aspire … the full sacrifice of themselves (Association Franciscaine des Institutrices, 1921, p. 4, my translation).

"Full Sacrifice" means the Association offered a radical life choice to a group of tertiary women teachers of St. Francis: "a very united religious family, to make them live under a simple and easy rule, to help them in their spiritual and professional lives, to spare them from sickness and unemployment, and a house to shelter them in their old age" (Anonymous, [ca. 1928-1929], my translation). The radical engagement was announced without any ambiguity. This choice of life was seen as a calling, a profession of the "three religious vows" (Association Franciscaine des Institutrices, 1921, p. 14 sq., my translation): poverty, chastity, obedience – like all religious professions, as then defined in the Code of Canon Law of 1917 (Catholic Church & Peters, 2001, Cann. 487-681). The similarities to the religious state of life were not the only aspects of this profession that were determined by the Association. The Rule of the AFI defined a postulate, a novitiate, and a minimal three-year temporary profession before the perpetual profession. Moreover, several other elements were also specified: a Superior General, a Higher Council, and a Novice Master; a General Chapter reserved to perpetually profess and to meet on a regular basis; the term "sister" to designate members; a non-optional annual retreat; and the impossibility of being at the same time an AFI member and a member of another religious congregation. Thus, the AFI seemed, at first, to be the germ of a new congregation. Such a

[4] The author especially analyzes the encyclical Auspicato September 17, 1882 about St. Francis of Assisi and the spread of his Third Order, pp. 95-97.

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trajectory was not rare within the Franciscan Third Order, which soon after its creation gave origin to a Third Order Regular. Indeed, religious congregations, especially women congregations, were born from this branch of the Franciscans, above all in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, working in apostolate fields, such as teaching or health (Iriarte de Aspurz, 2004, p. 575 sq.).

The requirement for a secular life

The Association proposed living the aforementioned evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience in a very specific way: "the ascent towards God, which is the purpose of life on earth, can and must be pursued from within the world", in order to "live in the secular world[5]" (Association Franciscaine des Institutrices, 1921, p. 3, my translation). Such a proposal was a way to stand out from the religious congregations, for two main reasons. The first one was the absence of a religious garb, i.e., the absence of the primary, external sign revealing the consecration of the member. The second reason was the possibility of not living in communities; the religious feature of community life was not a requirement for the AFI. The *Rule of Life* did not explain the reasons for these choices, it simply noted that the members "therefore retain the appearance, manners and habits of a secular life" (Association Franciscaine des Institutrices, 1921, p. 19, my translation), "to live in the world" (Anonymous, [ca. 1928-1929], my translation). But the motivation was clearly to maintain a presence among secular activities in "both religious and social perspectives" (Anonymous, [ca. 1928-1929], my translation), so that members could keep their jobs, including in public schools, which were closed to the religious. To bring or to maintain religion in a society that seemed to exclude it was the very purpose of the Association that significantly adopted the motto "*Ut Diligam serviamque veni"* (I came to love and to serve).

The approach of the AFI was original; however, it was not isolated within the Church. In Europe, at the same time, various groups tried to reconcile radical consecration and ordinary secular life, particularly through common professional activities. Such operations were reviewed in 1889 in Rome, without a canonical solution being found: between religious congregations and pious associations of the faithful, whose membership were not subject to the issue of the

[5] The French words are "*au milieu du siècle*": in the midst of the human ordinary activities, not from a closed religious convent.

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religious profession, no legal gap had been opened at this moment (Perret, 2000, p. 178 sq.).[6] The situation had changed in the interwar period, particularly at the instigation of the Italian Franciscan Agostino Gemelli and of Armida Barelli, a lay tertiary of St. Francis and an active member of the Italian Catholic Action Women. In 1919 in Assisi, they founded a "Congregation of the Franciscan Tertiary Social Reign of the Sacred Heart":

> From this moment, the inspiration was already clear: a total consecration of life in chastity, poverty, obedience, but "in the world" to the Church's service, with commitment for the Kingdom, in the spirit of St. Francis … The fledgling institution was entrusted to the Order of Friars Minor, the only way possible at this time, and suggested by Pope Benedict XV. (Soixante ans après, n.d., my translation, emphasis in original)

To consolidate the legal and theological foundations of what was to be named a secular institute after World War II, the Council of Congregation, which was competent in matters of secular associations, supported Agostino Gemelli. The support did not come from the Congregation for Religious but was a partisan of a strict interpretation of the Code of Canon Law and rather hostile to this new proposal for consecrated life. The Belgian Jesuit Joseph Creusen, a canonist, also played an important role in the maturation of these new groups that aspired to a consecration fully accomplished "in the world". From July 1930, he was one of the backbones of the meetings in Europe that gathered representatives of these various so-called "modern societies"; there were 16 societies at the inaugural meeting held in Salzburg, then located in France, England, Austria, Germany, Canada, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia (Creusen, 1932). According to the Jesuit, among the explicit causes of the emergence of these groups were the limitations the constitution of religious life faced in order to reach a contemporary society, now either in fact or by law distant from religion. In this new situation, community life and religious habit "are barriers to entry in many environments where there are spiritual needs", he argued. "To keep the essential elements of the state of perfection, but by eliminating the visible forms" was the very specificity of these "modern societies". From that moment, Fr. Creusen was aware of the difficulties that members may have faced. Because they no longer had the support of the usual common life, they had to hold fast to "an intense interior life which will be based on a solid ascetic training, a rooted religious instruction and an absolute fidelity to prayer". Joseph Creusen was careful not to state that religious congregations were outdated, but

[6] The following analyses are based on Perret's argumentation.

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"alongside the religious institutes, there is a place for societies whose organization responds better to the needs of modern life, and especially whose members are trained to a less protected life and to a wise use of freedom,", he said (Soixante ans après, n.d., my translation).

The development of these groups and the thoughts about their canonical nature remained discreet in France in the 1930s, despite regular meetings in 1935. During this year, the "Conference of groups of laity, for the increase of the apostolic life in the world" that gathered was composed of: Marius Gonin, a member of the Order of Jesus Worker and a pillar of the *Semaines sociales* (Social Weeks); Joseph Folliet, a founder of the Companions of St. Francis, a journalist in the Dominican review *Sept* (Seven), and later of *Temps-Présent* (Present Time); Madeleine Delbrêl; Jesuit Gustave Desbuquois, host of the influent *Action Populaire* (*Popular Action*); and representatives of six associations (the Association of Lyon, the Auxiliary of Lille, the Company Study of Cambrai, the Apostles of the work of Angers, Jesus-Worker, and Union Saint Peter and Saint Paul). The AFI did not participate in such meetings. The few documents that could be found about the life of the AFI did not refer to these meetings or to Rome's ongoing reflections on these "modern societies". In fact, these new groups, that canon law could not yet classify, were born almost incognito in the Church, in France, or elsewhere[7]. However, the AFI continued to seek a formulation which would grant ecclesial recognition, by trial, and was caught in the middle of both diocesan authority and the Franciscan Third Order. "In harmony with civil law and canon law, strongly supported by the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin" (quoted from Anonymous, [ca. 1928-1929], my translation).

The AFI submitted a *Rule of Life* to the Bishop in February 1921, as Fr. Raymond de Millau (from the Capuchin Convent and Religious Superior of the Diocesan Missionaries of La Rochelle) requested it. Located in the diocese, the AFI could not override the approval of the local bishop. The necessary *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* were given in June of the same year. The legal form of the association did not seem to have attracted any attention. The commentary accompanying its authorization focused on the spiritual significance of the proposed doctrine,

[7] In 1947, Pius XII gave "secular institutes" a legal form, with the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*. Meanwhile, Joseph Creusen was appointed consultor of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, in which he was a member of the Secular Institutes Commission. In 1967, the Congregation for Religious became the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and in 1988 the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

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"which can be very useful and do much good to women teachers" (Association Franciscaine des Institutrices, 1921, p. 2, my translation).

Meanwhile, the AFI looked for its place in the Franciscan family while it grew. Indeed, in September 1923, the Association had about 50 members, with 12 postulants coming from more than 20 French departments (AFI, 1923). The first one, the Minister General of the Capuchin order, gave its blessing in February 1923. According to him, "to the traditional organization of the Third Order, the Association mingled elements that tend to make a secular society beyond [the Minister General's] authority"; thus, his decision would "just be to agree with His Highness Bishop of La Rochelle and Saintes" (AFI, 1923, s.p., my translation). But the new problem now was that AFI members belonged to different provinces of the Capuchins. The Association was no longer a parochial or local society. "A united and effective leadership [was needed] to remain united and strong, and [the Association] shall not be governed as local fraternities or parishes" (AFI, 1923, s.p., my translation). Which ecclesial jurisdiction did the AFI depend on? With the support of the provincial Capuchins of Toulouse, Fr. Sebastien, and provincial secretary, Fr. Gabriel, the Association asked the Superior General of the Capuchins to appoint a "responsible regular superior, whose mission [would be] to provide for all their spiritual needs, to govern in [the Association's] name, which means the reporting relationship between [his] daughters from the Franciscan Association of Teachers with [himself]" (AFI, 1923, s.p., my translation). The application did not succeed as expected. Indeed, the Superior General of the Capuchins answered that the situation of the Association was "unclear". He noted some characteristic elements of the religious life, which were incompatible with the maintenance of a secular activity, according to him. The AFI therefore appeared to him as "a religious institute still in training" (Superior General of the Capuchins, February 13, 1924, my translation). In this matter, the episcopal authority was competent, especially to appoint a cleric or religious superior.

Again, the AFI answered to the Bishop of La Rochelle and Saintes. In 1928, Bishop Curien, who succeeded Bishop Eyssautier, then confirmed he was the bishop protector of the AFI; this was an additional step in the ecclesial recognition of the small organization towards designating an ecclesiastical authority for the Association. As a result, Melchior of Benisa, General Minister of the Capuchins, quickly put the AFI under his immediate jurisdiction, by a decree of the General Curia. Gonzalo Delsuc was appointed its superior the following year, in

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October 1929 (Ménétrie, March 1931). Thus, although without a clear canonical definition, the Association founded a *modus vivendi* involving a Capuchin Director and protection of the local bishop. The AFI also had to define a civil legal person responding to its development. In 1927, it formed the *Association Professionnelle Syndicale des Institutrices Franciscaines* (Professional Union Association of Franciscan Women Teachers). Once again, Gonzalo Delsuc used the union form as the legal form for one of its associations. Meanwhile, the Association acquired, in Southern France, in the village of Mirambeau, "a lovely big house, and opened, the following October, a school and a boarding school under the patronage of St. Mary of the Angels" (Anonymous, n.d. [ca. 1928-1929]. This house was also a place of healing for members of the Association.

At first, members were present within educational institutions; later, some of them became founders of schools. The AFI disappeared in the 1950s, for reasons not precisely known; its existence was both brief and discreet. At the same time, the Association was not the only attempt at looking for other ways to reach a now secular world. To bring society back to God remained the horizon of action for different groups. This objective did not prevent forms of innovation, even within the ecclesial institution.

Conclusion

Religious congregations and religious life adapted to the French context in the 1920s and 1930s: this is a situation about which we do not know much, and which appears as a new field of research. Individual trajectories are as numerous as those of communities and of their members. We still know very little about this history. There is a wide range of challenges for such research. The first one is to better know the reality of the return of the congregants, both in numbers and in the different contexts that likely varied across regions and local situations. The second one is to seize the multiplicity of options that are presented to individuals who are caught between conflicting imperatives and especially important socio-political changes. Another one is to contribute to a historical sociology of religious congregations, of which we know little about in this period.

These elements make several further questions possible. Were there any changes in congregations' educational proposals, in light of the experiences abroad, during the exile? Was this situation experienced differently depending on whether it was within a men's congregation

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or a women's congregation? The fact that congregations were in crisis in France during the 1950s-1970s is well known; did this crisis draw some of its roots not only from the context of sociocultural transformations of this period but also from the challenges faced by congregations from 1920 to 1930, and in what ways? Apart from the AFI, have other groups been created to address the issue of Catholic education in a secular society, and if so, in what form? Religious life in France since the early twentieth century was profoundly transformed. Both the reasons and the implications of these numerous transformations on Catholic schools and teaching schools are still to be better understood.

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