

horrible mortal sins, and would have frightened me from the sacraments till I had settled my conscience according to his will, and mind. What was I to do in this case? I had been warranted by three former confessors, two of which were my chief superiors and doctors of divinity; and now this present wholly doubted my case. He had (as he pretended) a greater reach into my case than all the rest, and they were simple to him in discovering truly the state of my soul. But should I in this case put my soul into his hands, who desired to know all that had passed in my life to inform him in some things he desired to know out of policy, thereby also to tie me to him self more absolutely? Verily if I had thus put myself on him, I had done great wrong to God and I might have bid farewell to all true peace hereafter. But standing to my former warrant, and giving him the respect was due to him, and being reserved towards him, I have hitherto God be praised kept myself out of his fingers. And also by the grace of God [I] hope to hold on my way in tendance towards God, thereby raising myself (according to his divine Majesty shall vouchsafe to enable me) out of my natural fear to the love of God, who is only able to satisfy, and satiate our soul. And not as this my confessor would have had me to plunge my-self by reason of his words, and threats of my miserable state: which notwithstanding his apprehensions is so much, and no more, as it is in the sight of God, who changeth not his opinion of us, as the humour of the confessor may be: but imagineth us according to what we really are in very truth. But these spiritual men of this kind would be so absolute that there is no power left in the soul thus under such to have relation, or confidence in God, whereby those for the most part under them, if they be poor simple women, of how good spirits soever, live miserable dejected lives: for it is their only way to bring their politic, and absolute government about. And ordinarily under this pretence they do it; saying that there is no way to make this, or that soul humble, but to bring them into such fear, that they neither dare speak, think, or do any thing without their approbation. At least so far they must have relation to them, as it may serve this turn to inform them of what is for their purpose: and then that soul is happy in their eyes, and they will declare that they are so to others: that they may follow their example. Then the perplexity the soul suffereth they term a profitable pill to cure their disease with all. And the confusion they suffer to see themselves disloyal to God and man, to serve their confessors turn; he termeth a suffering for justice, and warranteth them. What harm, disquiet, or confusion soever cometh by this their doings to others, or themselves out of obedience to him, he will answer for it, and therein they have done God, and their congregation great, and faithful service. . . .

Oh Lord my God; Father of the poor, and true comforter of all afflicted souls; be merciful to my desolate heart, and stir it up to perfect love of thee, that I may simply seek thee, and sigh after thee my beloved absent, and not for the sorrow I feel at the present. Let me long to embrace thee with the



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arms of my soul, and think it little to endure any misery in body, or soul, to be at last admitted into the bosom of my love, fairest and choicest of thousands. Let all fall down, and adore my God, the glory of my heart. Let the sound of his praise be heard to sound, and resound over all the earth.

Oh when shall my soul, having transcended itself, and all created things, be firmly united to thee, the beloved of my heart, resting in thee, not in thy gifts or graces, and neither desiring, nor taking any satisfaction in any work, or exercise whatsoever, but in all pains, temptations, contempts, desolations, poverties, and miseries either of body, or mind, conforming my self to thy sweet will for time and eternity, who as justly as ever thou didst any thing, mayst (yet God forbid!) condemn my soul eternally to hell, from which nothing but thy mere mercy were able to save and deliver me; and daily I should incur this sentence if thou didst not, out of thy goodness ever help and protect me, thy sinful servant.

This only I desire, this only I ask, that I may in all things praise thee, and that I may desire no comfort, but to be able, without all comfort, human or divine, to be true to thee, and not offend thy Majesty . . .

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#### 2.5 'It is with soul as with the body': Elizabeth Joceline, 1622

Elizabeth Joceline, née Brooke (c. 1595–1622?) was orphaned at an early age. She was taught by her grandfather, a famous Cambridge theologian, Laurence Chaderton. Married at 20 years of age, she feared death in childbirth, and wrote instructions to her husband about how to rear her child if she should die. She died giving birth, and her husband subsequently arranged for the printing of her thoughts. The work was well known, and reprinted many times.

*The Mothers Legacie to her unborne childe*, London, 1624, sig. B1v.–B2, pp. 78, 86–91.

To my truly loving, and most dearly loved husband, Tourell Joceline.

Mine own dear love, I no sooner conceived an hope, that I should be made a mother by thee, but with it entered the consideration of a mother's duty, and shortly after followed the apprehension of danger that might prevent me from executing that care I so exceedingly desired, I mean in religious training our child. And in truth death appearing in this shape, was doubly terrible unto me. First, in respect of the painfulness of that kind of death, and next of the loss my little one should have in wanting me. But I thank God, these fears were cured with the remembrance that all things work together for the best to those that love God, and a certain assurance that he will give me patience according to my pain.



*The Mother's Legacy*

... Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath day ...

So approach and enter with reverent and fervent zeal, the house of God and throwing away all thoughts, but such as may further the good work thou art about, bend thy knees and heart to God, desiring of him his holy Spirit, that thou mayst join with the congregation in zealous prayer, and earnest attention to his word preached. And though perhaps thou hearest a minister preach, as thou thinkest weakly, yet give him thine attention, and thou shalt find that he will deliver something profitable to thy soul, either that thou hast not heard before, or not marked, or forgotten, or not well put into practise. And it is fit thou shouldest be often put in mind of those things concerning thy salvation.

Thus, if thou spend thy time at church, thou wilt be ready to give thyself to meditate of the holy Word thou hast heard, without which truly hearing profiteth little. For it is with soul as with the body, though meat be never so wholesome, and the appetite never so great, if any ill disposition in the stomach hinder digestion, it turn not to nourishment, but rather proves more dangerous. So the Word if after hearing it be not digested by meditation, it is not nourishing to the soul. Therefore let the time thou hast to be absent from church be spent in praising God, praying to go, and applying to thyself what thou hast heard. If thou hast heard a sin reprov'd that thou art guilty of, take it for a warning, do it no more. If thou hearest of a good action which thou hast overslipt, strive to recover time, and resolve to put it in act. Thus by practising what thou hearest, thou shalt bind it to thy memory, and by making it thine own, make thyself most happy.

Learn of the true observation of the Sabbath. If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy will on any holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight to consecrate it as glorious to the Lord, and shall honour him, not doing thy own ways, nor seeking thine own will, nor speaking a vain word: then shall thou delight in the Lord, and I will cause thee to mount upon the high places of the earth, and fee thee with the heritage of *Jacob* thy father, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it, *Isaiah 58.13*.

## 2.6 'Exactness in all regular observances': Catherine Wigmore (d. 1656)

Elizabeth (Abbess Catherine) Wigmore (d. 1656) became a nun at the Ghent Benedictine Abbey in 1626. Renowned for her intense spiritual relationship with God, and for her capable exercise of household offices, in 1652 she was chosen to head the filiation, the daughter-house, to Boulogne. This extract from her lengthy obituary, which was probably written by one of the senior nuns, reveals the variety of personal devotions undertaken by nuns, as well as the qualities nuns deemed worthy in their abbess.



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'Obituary Notices of the English Benedictine Nuns of Ghent in Flanders, and at Preston, Lancashire (now at Oulton Staffordshire), 1627-1811', in *Miscellanea 11*, Catholic Record Society, vol. 19, London, printed privately for the Catholic Record Society by J. Whitehead and Son, 1917, pp. 58, 61-2.

*This document and its note supplied by Claire Walker.*

In the year 1656 on the 28 of October, most happily departed this life the Right Reverend Lady Catherine Wigmore, Abbess of the English religious of the holy order of St Bennet [that is, Benedict] then at Boulogne, but now translated from thence to Pontoise. She was clothed<sup>1</sup> on Low Sunday 1625 and made her holy vows<sup>2</sup> 2nd of July 1626. Her most remarkable virtues was a most singular great charity and exactness in all regular observances, humility, obedience, patience, compassion and self contempt, with a continual zeal of the divine glory, love of spiritual exercises and union with God. She died in the years of her profession thirty, and four months of her age sixty, and four months of her prelatore. . . .

When my Lady Mary Roper of happy memory died, she [Wigmore] prayed in a manner incessantly and got all the prayers she could of others that the chief superiority might not be laid upon her, and God in his chief providence provided otherwise most comfortably for us and reserved her for what in his eternal decree he had determined concerning her supreme government elsewhere. For in the year 1652, the beginning of January, our Right Reverend and dear Lady Abbess, my Lady Mary Knatchbull, sent a little colony of virgins to Boulogne, and Dame Catherine Wigmore being then our prioress, her Ladyship and my Lord Bishop had ordered her for their chief commander. . . . Her life there and prudent government, accompanied with a great zeal mixed with a mother's compassion, together with her exactness, not only to teach, but also to do on all times and occasions the perfect will of God in the most punctual observance of our holy rule and statutes,<sup>3</sup> is most constantly affirmed by all her children<sup>4</sup> in that new plantation; and for the greater authority, by those also, into whose hands she put the charge of her soul,<sup>5</sup> unto whom she perseverently remained most candid and clear in the account of herself. Retaining in that chief dignity<sup>6</sup> her wonted spirit of holy poverty, humility, patience and charity, not only mending the poor and few accommodations for her own use, but also patching her children's clothes and mending their stockings, excusing herself from better works [by saying she was] blind and unable to do anything of neatness. And she was so careful

1. Clothing refers to the ceremony in which the woman was first dressed in her religious habit, after which she became a 'novice'.
2. Ceremony of religious profession in which the novice made her final vows.
3. Rule: guidelines for the structure of monastic life written by the founder of a religious order. Statutes: adaptation of the rule for use in a particular cloister.
4. Nuns.
5. Her spiritual directors.
6. Position of authority.



of expense of time that even [in] the hours allowed in our statutes for recreation she would always be mending or making somewhat for common good. Nor did she grow slack in her ordinary penance and austerity, which were rods, discipline, bracelets, chains, and haircloth, still punishing herself for anything amiss in her actions. And the summer before she died being vehemently hot, yet would she not be dispensed from wearing woollen<sup>7</sup> which indeed is feared did hasten her death for she got a fever and other great indispositions by it. 'Tis credibly believed she had a certain knowledge of her death, running on in her first fervour to a midday height. She had the virtue of modesty in a most eminent manner, and always blushed at her own praise. She loved God entirely and would all her life in religion seem transported speaking of him. She wore an hour glass at Ghent in her pocket, secretly turning it each hour, renewing acts of virtue and memory of our Saviour's passion, with an invocation to the nine choirs of angels and orders of saints. Her prayer was always pure and intense, [and] her death was like her life: remarkable for piety. Some clergy of the bishop's and some seculars too were present at her most saintly and happy departure, who received such edification that in their whole life the[y] had not experienced the like. 'Tis believed by them that [knew] her exercises of spirit that she had chiefly bent her whole endeavours to emulate our Saviour to the utmost of her power in her life and actions. She received all the rites of [the] holy church in perfect sense, breathing out the ardent affections of her heart to our blessed Saviour, her only Lord and love, and sweetly expired in [the] midst of her truly afflicted children, pouring forth tears and prayers. Her virgin body in his manner of burial had some resemblance with our blessed Saviour's, for it was interred in a garden where yet never any had been laid.

### 2.7 'Our Most Reverend Mother, Margrit Clement' (d. 1612)

In 1557 Margaret Clement (c. 1539–1612), daughter of Dr John Clement and Margaret Giggs, became a nun in a Flemish Augustinian cloister in Louvain. Noted for her piety and virtue, in 1569 she was elected prioress at the youthful age of 30, thereby attracting several of her countrywomen to the monastery. In 1609 the English nuns left their Flemish sisters to establish their own monastery. When Margaret Clement died in 1612, her biography was written by Sister Elizabeth Shirley, who described the former prioress' life and acts as 'a firebrand to enkindle in me the love of God'. In this extract Elizabeth Shirley explains how Margaret Clement cared for the spiritual welfare of not only her own nuns, but also for spiritually troubled women sent to her for counselling by the clergy and other religious superiors.

7. Woollen: woollen underclothes which were part of the religious habit. They were worn even in hot weather as a form of penance, but sick nuns were permitted to take them off.



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Elizabeth Shirley, 'The Life of Our Most Reverend Mother, Margrit Clement', 1626, Priory of Our Lady of Good Counsel, Sayers Common, West Sussex, St Monica's MS Q29, fos 48-50, 51-2. (This is a copy of the original manuscript held by the Priory of Our Blessed Lady of Nazareth in Bruges.)

*This document and its note supplied by Claire Walker.*

Her fame was such over all the country that whosoever had any such troublesome persons as they could no way with, they brought them aright unto her, and her charity was such, and zeal of souls so great, that she had not the power to deny them how desperate soever their cause were. The archbishop himself was fain to use her help in such difficult matters and hath wonderfully admired at her prudency therein. Oh would to God I were anyways able either by words or pen to declare her great labour and travail to gain souls to God; her devout prayers, her watchings, her tears, her continual exhortations, her long suffering with such unspeakable patience without any show of wearisomeness therein, when they were such crooked persons as was tedious and irksome to the whole company. . . . Now if I should tell what she had to suffer for this her labour of the better sort of the religious, it were unspeakable. Some would tell her in plain terms that she was partial, and that she esteemed more of those troublesome persons than of their<sup>1</sup> good. Some said that she hung so much time on them that it hindered her other duties. These and other such like speeches which were too long to rehearse was her daily bread: all which she bore with invincible patience, only she would sometimes sweetly with a mild word reply and say, sisters if we knew how dear and precious those souls are in the sight of almighty God we would afford them willingly what help we could. And well might we see that her pains came to good effect, for such persons as one would have thought was unlikely ever to have been brought to any thing, came after by God his grace and her good endeavour to be good religious, as themselves did well confess that next unto God they did ascribe unto her the whole cause of their salvation. . . . She would many times comfort us in telling us that temptations were necessary for young religious, for by that they came to know themselves and to make their recourse the more to God. . . . Therefore she would say that if she should see any novice or young religious that passed through with out any difficulty she should be greatly afraid for them; by this and such like, I must confess she did greatly comfort me and gave me strength to bear the better my impediments which I found in myself.

1. I.e., her own nuns' good.