SUMMARY

This thesis describes a little-known area of French religious and social history, the guardianship and moral re-training given by certain religious orders to women and girls designated as "repentant" - who had been earning their living by prostitution, or were suspected of having done so. Young girls and children considered polluted by association with morally undesirable surroundings were also accepted for treatment by most of the congregations, particularly in the second half of the century. The chapters deal with the following subjects:

I Christian moral theology relating to prostitution and illicit sexual union; the early refuges in France, and their unchanging nature.

II Society's attitude expressed in concrete terms - the regulation system and the prison for prostitutes - and in intellectual terms, as it appeared in the work of two influential social commentators and certain major figures in contemporary French literature.

III - V A description of the foundresses and activities of five congregations established between 1800 and 1852 which set up convent refuges, including the major order devoted to this work, N.D. de Charité du Bon Pasteur d'Angers.

VI - VIII The life inside the refuge as it may be inferred from the spiritual climate and religious excercises; the background of the penitents and their use of the convent as either a home or a temporary shelter; the ways in which income was raised to support the institutions under study.

Conclusion: Theology has a very great influence on culture, even after the religion which produced it is no longer widely believed in. The particular application of theology which brought the convent refuges into being was a combination of mercy and life-denying pessimism which resulted in an attempt to infantilise the subjects and keep them in the convent's care until death, not as a punishment but as a means of saving their souls. Unfortunately this appears to have resulted in only a fraction of the destitute women and girls taken in being able to profit from the shelter offered.
Convent Refuges for Sexually Disgraced Girls and Women in Nineteenth Century France

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