

Article

Living in Religious Life in the Early Modern Period: Rules, Daily Life, and Reforms in Portuguese Nunneries—The Case of the Cistercian Order

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Abstract

This article focuses on the choice of the religious life for women during the early modern period, following a *Rule* that ensured harmony within the cloister. We trace the emergence of codes of life for female communities across time, with particular attention to the *Rule* of St. Benedict and its adoption by Cistercian communities, where silence assumed a particular significance. Silence, sounds, and monastic daily life as governed by the *Rule*, by the Tridentine decrees and, in the case of Portuguese Cistercian communities, obedience to the Autonomous Congregation of Alcobaça and to its supervisory mechanism of Visitations, were elements that shaped both the discourse presented here and its interpretive framework. While the Council of Trent emphasized the importance of vocation and simultaneously imposed upon women the so-called “fourth vow” (enclosure), documentary evidence allows us to observe to what extent the conventual milieu, composed of women from diverse social origins, remained engaged with the wider world outside cloister; nunneries became both a mode of existence and a space of affirmation for women, one that fostered creativity (in music, writing, painting) and upheld authority and power, embodied in the figure of the abbess and in the acts, rituals, and ceremonies associated with her.

Keywords: religious *Rule*; silence; sounds; daily life; Council of Trent; Cistercian Order; early modern period; Portugal



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1. Introduction

While it was common practice to adapt the Rules of male religious communities for female ones (as exemplified by the *Rule* of Saint Benedict and its later adoption by the Cistercian Order), there also existed, from a very early period, rules specifically designed for consecrated women. These written texts bear witness to both local oral influences and to the importance of the leading figures within these communities—the abbesses. Thus, around the year 534 AD, Saint Caesarius, Archbishop of Arles, composed the *Regula ad virgines* (which is in fact a double rule, as its second part, the *Regula ad monachos*, is addressed to monks), and, in 550 AD, Aurelian produced a set of regulations bearing the same title. Later, in the seventh century, the *Regula cuiusdam ad virgines*, attributed to Waldebert, Abbot of Luxeuil (also known as the *Regula Waldeberti*), appeared; during the same century, Saint Donatus wrote the *Regula Donati* (around 655), and Saint Columbanus, between 620 and 632,

composed the *Regula Columbani ad virgines*. By the eighth century, we already find mention of the *Regula "Psallendo pro sancta devotione"*, which was influenced by its predecessors as well as by certain ideas of Saint Jerome, particularly concerning asceticism and virginity (Réal 2019).

For Barros (1885), monastic life began in the sixth century, while the life of nuns likely emerged from the seventh century onward. Conversely, double monasteries seem to have appeared shortly after the seventh century, remaining in existence until the eleventh century. From the outset (Gerhard 1998), retreating into convents was an option available to young women of noble birth; abbeys founded by queens and princesses soon emerged, with recruitment typically restricted to members of the aristocracy. This withdrawal from the world, dependent upon almsgiving, also gave rise to the phenomenon of the so-called “poor women” or “walled-in women,” which spread throughout Europe and often served as the foundation for monastic-conventual communities (Fontes 2015; Dias 2015). Beginning in the eleventh century, with the creation of monastic orders such as the Cistercians, and owing to a more favourable economic context, non-noble women were able to access an organised religious life recognised by the Church (Leclercq 1997). Structurally, however, social elites continued to dominate the hierarchy of monasteries throughout the twelfth century. For their existence as communities, it was essential that these institutions be governed by *Rules* and *Constitutions* reflecting the spirituality of their respective Orders. Indeed, the *Rule* enables us to understand the purpose and spiritual aims of the Order, as it alludes to the figure of the holy Founder and to the saints who embody its charism and individuality. In the case of the Cistercian Order, the *Rule* is that of Saint Benedict, but it is the *Carta Caritatis* that established the organisation and hierarchy of the Order¹. Papal legislation concerning female monasteries became particularly significant following the promulgation of *Periculoso* (1298), a decretal issued by the Pope, which forbade nuns from leaving the cloister and prohibited outsiders from entering (Duval 2009). This decree also sought to prevent the external world from observing the activities and gestures of the nuns within the monastic enclosure—a goal materially reinforced by high walls and barred windows. Such legislation was complemented by local religious authorities, both regular (especially after the Council of Trent) and secular.

The *devotio moderna*, which promoted mental prayer and study and was rooted in the ideas developed at the Councils of Constance (1414–1418) and Basel (1431–1449), regarded the cell as the ideal place for the monk to read and meditate. From the fourteenth century onwards—and especially in the fifteenth—within communities of both sexes, communal spaces gradually lost importance in favour of private ones. However, in female communities, these private areas were not so much study rooms as small cells within the convent itself, where nuns often had their own servants (in addition to those serving the community) or even slaves. The growing number of communities led to the expansion of dormitories—sometimes through the construction of parallel wings, additional storeys, or the adaptation of existing monastic spaces—and to their division into *cellae*. The Poor Clares of Oviedo, between 1595 and 1614, built numerous cells financed by the nuns themselves, each comprising a living area, a sleeping room, an oratory, a kitchen, and a fireplace; some even had two storeys. In large monasteries, the cell was by no means a small space. It was subdivided into an inner and an outer area, thereby incorporating a small garden, a study, a bedroom, a sitting room, and even a reception area where, for instance, books were exchanged and conversations took place. The erosion of communal life occurred during the eighteenth century, marked by the widespread introduction of individual cells—an indication that their inhabitants were neglecting religious observance and even abstaining from meals in the refectory, being instead attended by servants. This was also the case among the Benedictines in Spain, who, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

adorned their cells in a sumptuous manner (Colombás 1997). Considering the Carthusian world, the model does not differ greatly, except in its relationship with other members of the community and with the outside world: each cell, to this day, constitutes a unique micro-cosm. The option of entering the cloister for women under the Ancien Régime—particularly during the period following the Council of Trent—has increasingly been examined within Portuguese historiography. This choice presents variable characteristics depending on the context, notably in relation to differing geographical and scalar frameworks (European, national, regional), the specific requirements of religious Orders, and issues connected to the social origins of the women themselves. The latter aspect manifests itself, for instance, through literacy and writing skills acquired prior to monastic entry, through previous musical training, through the possession of personal incomes which they continued to enjoy throughout their cloistered life (such revenues often deriving, for example, from moneylending at interest both within and beyond the monastery walls), or even through the ownership of slaves, as we have discussed in previous works (Conde 2016).

2. The Silence Imposed by the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Communication in the Cloister

In its first three chapters, the *Rule of Saint Benedict* outlines the organic constitution of the monastery: the different types of monks, the election of the abbot, and the convocation of the brethren for counsel (as well as the necessity of collective decision-making). Between Chapters IV and VII, it addresses the “tools of good works”, the moral and behavioural precepts for the monks, emphasising the importance of silence (Marques 2020; de Certeau 2005; Bisello 2003; Casagrande and Vecchio 1991), obedience, and humility, that is, the practical principles of a well-ordered spiritual life. Chapters VIII to XX concern the norms governing prayer and divine offices: these are the chapters that regulate the *Opus Dei*, the structure and practice of liturgical prayer. Chapters XXI to LXII deal with aspects of the communities’ daily life, their governance, internal organisation, and disciplinary code, addressing the various offices, their respective duties, and the penalties to be applied in cases of transgression. The final ten chapters, up to the seventy-third, refer to the order within the community and to the internal hierarchy, which must always be respected. In the final chapter, the Rule is described as a mere “outline,” the true paradigms being the Bible, the Church Fathers, and the works of Saints Cassian and Basil. A more detailed analysis of the treatment of silence across the different chapters reveals the following (Schmitz 1987):

Chapter 4—The Instruments of Good Works. It is stated that the monks must: “(. . .) 39. Not be murmurers. (. . .) 51. Keep their tongue from all evil or pernicious speech. 52. Not love much talking. 53. Not utter vain words or those that provoke laughter. 54. Not delight in loud or boisterous laughter. (. . .)”.

Chapter 6—Restraint in Speech. The monks are instructed as follows: “1. Let us do as the prophet says: ‘I said, I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue. I have set a watch upon my mouth; I was dumb and humbled, and kept silence even from good things.’ (Ps. 38: 2–3) 2. In this, the prophet shows that, if at times we must refrain even from good discourse out of love for silence, how much more ought we to abstain from evil words to avoid the punishment due to sin. 3. Therefore, because of the importance of silence, permission to speak—even of good, holy, and edifying things—should rarely be granted to the disciples, even to those who are perfect. 4. For it is written: ‘In the multitude of words, thou shalt not escape sin’ (Prov. 10: 19). 5. And elsewhere: ‘Death and life are in the power of the tongue’ (Prov. 18: 21). 6. Indeed, while it is the role of the master to speak and teach, it befits the disciple to be silent and to listen. 7. Consequently, if a disciple needs to ask something of the superior, he shall do so with all humility, submission, and reverence. 8. As for buffoonery, idle talk, and words that provoke laughter, we utterly banish them from

all places and at all times, and we do not permit the disciple to open his mouth for such speech. (...)”

Chapter 7—Humility. It is recommended that: “(...) 12. Let him guard himself at all times from sins and vices of thought, of the tongue, of the hands, of self-will, and of the desires of the flesh. (...) 56. The ninth degree of humility is that a monk restrains his tongue from speaking, and, practising restraint in speech, keep silence until he is addressed. 57. For Scripture teaches: *‘In the multitude of words, thou shalt not escape sin’* (Prov. 10: 19). 58. And *‘The talkative man shall not be directed upon the earth’* (Ps. 139: 12). 59. The tenth degree of humility is not to be ready or inclined to laughter, for it is written: *‘The fool lifts up his voice in laughter’* (Ecclus. 21: 23). 60. The eleventh degree of humility is that a monk, when he speaks, does so gently and without laughter, humbly and with gravity, briefly and reasonably, avoiding loud tones. 61. As it is written: *‘A wise man is known by the modesty of his speech.’*² 62. The twelfth degree of humility is that the monk not only possesses this virtue in his heart but also manifests it outwardly in his bearing. 63. At the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on the road, in the fields, whether sitting, walking, or standing, he should always keep his head bowed and his gaze fixed upon the ground. 64. Feeling at all times the weight of his sins, he should imagine himself already standing before the dreadful judgment seat of God, 65. And should constantly repeat in his heart the words of the publican in the Gospel, with eyes cast down: *‘Lord, I am not worthy, I, a sinner, to lift up my eyes to heaven’* (Luke 18: 13; Matt. 8: 8). (...)”

Chapter 38: The Weekly Reader—It is stated that “(...) 5. Perfect silence shall be kept at the table, so that neither whispering nor speech be heard there, but only the voice of the reader. (...)”

Chapter 42: That No One Speak After Compline—The *Rule* prescribes that “1. Monks ought to cultivate silence at all times, but most especially during the night. 2. Therefore, in every season, whether fasting or dining, 3. if it be a time of dining, immediately after the evening meal, the brothers shall all sit together in one place. (...) 5. Thus, during the time of fasting, after the singing of Vespers and a short interval, the brothers shall at once proceed to the reading of which we have spoken. 6. Four or five pages shall be read, or as much as the hour permits. 7. Meanwhile, all shall hasten to join the assembly during this reading, including those who may have been occupied in obedience. 8. When all are thus gathered, Compline shall be recited. After this Hour, no one shall be permitted to speak of anything whatsoever. 9. Whoever breaks this rule of silence shall be severely punished; 10. except in urgent matters of hospitality or by order of the abbot. 11. Yet even in such cases, all shall be conducted with utmost seriousness and perfect restraint. (...)”

Chapter 53: The Reception of Guests—It is established that “(...) 23. No monk shall approach or speak to guests without permission. 24. If he meets or sees them, he shall greet them humbly, as prescribed, and having asked for a blessing, he shall pass on, adding that it is not permitted for him to converse with guests. (...)”

This power of silence, articulated in the Benedictine *Rule* and practiced in communal life, led to the development of other forms of non-verbal communication—namely, the language of gestures and signs. The use of gestures by monastic communities expressed not only respect for silence but also restraint of the tongue—an organ difficult to master and easily inclined toward sin, as the faults of speech could be associated with the seven deadly sins. Bernard of Clairvaux enumerated five categories of the unguarded tongue: the dissolute, the impudent, the grandiloquent, the deceitful or hypocritical, and the malicious. In contrast to this, the sacrifice and penitence of refraining from speech were seen as a path to spiritual improvement and as a means of exalting the value of words uttered in prayer, reading, or meditation. Thus, the *Rules* imposed either total or partial silence. In the Benedictine *Rule*, oral communication was forbidden in the oratory, the

dormitory, the refectory during readings, the scriptorium, and speech was to be avoided in the church, the cloister, during offices, in the kitchen, the novices' cells, and in certain liturgical functions. This discipline fostered the development of communication through gestures or signs—gestures regulated by the Church—which became a gestural language, or *signa loquendi*, as attested in certain manuscripts from the Cistercian Abbey of Alcobaça. These manuscripts contain written instructions on how signs were to be performed with the hands or fingers, depending on time and place (though they underwent alterations, mainly due to scribal transmission) (Martins 1960; de Macedo 2003)³.

These signs, serving as guarantors of communication, referred to concrete or abstract objects and subjects (animals, food, people, trades, instruments, garments, monastic spaces, sacred figures, liturgical objects, ceremonial acts, sensations, movements, and behaviors). Several lists of such signs exist in many male abbeys across medieval Europe⁴. In any case, during the times and in the spaces where conversation was permitted (for example, in the warming room or the parlour), it was to be conducted in a low and gentle tone, with a calm and peaceful demeanor—just as gestures were to be discreet. At the same time, these sign codes, a Benedictine legacy practiced by the Cistercians, helped to preserve silence and foster meditation. The “(...) gestural signs, substitutes for speech, became a code, a means of communication proper to a community (...)” (Marques 2020)⁵, as was the case in Alcobaça abbey.

Daily life and the gestures associated with it can be described both in communal terms—prayers, chants, meals, as well as reading or manual labour, whether on ordinary days or on solemn feast days—and through the *Vitae* narratives of certain nuns, in which the most common and humble gestures (such as housework, for example) could be understood as acts of mortification or voluntary humiliation.

Ensuring the proper performance of the Divine Office, maintaining the observance of silence, and giving equal attention to both sick and healthy nuns were among the key principles that were to guide the abbess's conduct. She was responsible for selecting those who would assist her in the administration of the community: the prioress, sub-prioress, cellaress, portress, as well as others with more specialized duties, such as those in charge of chant and music, the official writing (contracts) of the monastery, the mistresses of novices, the sacristans, infirmarians, and even apothecaries (responsible for gathering medicinal herbs and preparing remedies and medicines). The care of the sick involved not only gestures such as baths and bloodletting—performed with the assistance of barbers and bleeders—but also the use of soothing substances such as tobacco, donkey's milk, or chicken broth. All these roles required specialized knowledge and were linked to clearly defined responsibilities.

We have no record of sign codes specific to Portuguese female monasteries that might have substituted for spoken dialogue and ensured the observance of silence. The nuns were expected to know the *Rule* and its prescriptions regarding silence, in addition to mastering gestures of reverence, inclinations, and prostrations.

Sounds and the Virtue of Silence Within the Cistercian Nunnery of Évora

The few sources available for analysing the observance of these rules come from the *Books of Visitations*, written by visitors from the male abbey upon which the female community depended, as was the case for the Cistercian nunnery of S. Bento de Cástris in Évora. Silence was to be observed not only by the nuns but also by the lay sisters and servants. The latter, in the event of transgression, could be expelled. The fate of secular individuals depended on the corrective measures imposed by the Father General, in order to prevent any scandal that might bring disrepute upon the monastery. Silence was particularly required in specific areas: the church, the choir, the dormitories, the refectory,

and the cloister. Its violation could result in various penalties: deprivation of access to the belvedere, the gate, the grille, or the enclosure, or the imposition of dietary penances such as a regimen of bread and water, with the suppression of other foods.

The *Definitions* of the Order of 1593 clearly established the places and times when silence had to be maintained, especially at night, regarded as a privileged time for the soul seeking God. Only the abbot (or abbess) was permitted to break silence within the cloister, and then only briefly. Likewise, addressing guests was forbidden except with the express permission of the prelate. However, speech was not completely prohibited, except during Lent, when absolute silence was required. The fundamental issue lay in the moderation of its use, always in a low and subdued voice. In addition, certain signs existed to allow communication among the nuns without recourse to words, generally used when necessary, for instance, to summon a sister to perform a particular duty.

For the Cistercian community of Évora in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the *Books of Visitation* frequently record breaches of the rule of silence, particularly in the cloister and the dormitory, as well as a lack of discipline in the use of the grilles. The monastery's documentation contains numerous criticisms regarding the improper use of windows, balconies, or even private houses for conversing with people of various social standings near the monastery's perimeter. Such remarks appear recurrently in nearly all recorded visitations, as in other nunneries in Europe (Rives 2017).

In order to preserve the virtue of silence, it was also forbidden to bring dogs into the cloister or to admit children under the age of seven, especially those belonging to the servants—unless they were relatives of the nuns or had written authorization from the Father Abbot General. Whispering and false testimony are likewise mentioned in the *Books of Visitation*, considered grave faults and true scourges within the sacred space of the cloister. The penance imposed for such transgressions consisted of one month of seclusion in the cell, with a diet reduced to bread and water (“bread and water on the floor”), without the right to partake at the common table. Additionally, the offender was required to prostrate herself at the entrance of the choir and the refectory on Fridays, as a sign of humility and expiation⁶.

In this monastery, each nun was required to go to the choir for at least one hour a day, where she took part in the full range of liturgical ceremonies. To these offices were added personal or communal prayers, depending on the time of day. The nuns generally prayed with their arms crossed—a posture of silent recollection. Two masses were celebrated daily, and the lay sisters were obliged to attend at least one of them. General communion, gathering the entire community, took place on Good Friday. Among the notable moments of daily life were also the station in the cloister before meals, communion administered to the sick, and the weekly *chapter of faults*, a time of both communal and individual examination. One of the ordinary tasks entrusted to the lay sisters was to work the bellows and ring the bells, marking the rhythm of monastic life. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the nuns of the monastery were reprimanded for the immodesty of their attire. The visitors reported the presence of elements deemed inappropriate to religious life, including gold buttons, coloured shoes, jewellery, diamonds, pearls, and hats adorned with feathers. These observations concerned mainly those occasions when the nuns approached the grille, thus appearing before outsiders. On such occasions, they were required to wear veils and plain religious habits, in keeping with the spirit of monastic life. The visitors recommended that only sober colors—white, black, or brown—be tolerated for ornamentation. In 1718, strict instructions were once again issued: the nuns were forbidden to wear mantillas or ribbons “(…) of a silk they call *Noblesse*, and *Commende* across the chest, as if they were secular women (…).”⁷, accessories judged too closely akin to worldly fashions.

As for gestures and sounds within the monastery, these structured not only daily life but also the most solemn moments of religious ritual, such as the ceremony of profession (Conde 2022). Although the details could vary slightly from one religious Order to another⁸, a largely shared ritual structure may be observed, in which the mistress of novices and, above all, the abbess played a central role, both in the preparation and in the unfolding of the ceremony. The abbess thereby asserted her authority, both symbolically and concretely, before the entire community, extending practices inherited from the Middle Ages into the modern period. The gestures described—such as the kiss of peace, the kiss on the back of the hand offered to the entire community, the bow, the kiss on the sleeve of the habit, or the collective embrace, as well as the act of prostration at the feet of the whole convent—were all ritual manifestations rich in symbolic meaning. According to the prescriptions of the various Orders, they expressed fundamental values such as obedience, humility, acknowledgment of inferiority, and a deep longing for communal life.

Musical presence—through singing and the playing of instruments—was likewise a constant feature within all female communities, and professional ceremonies were no exception to this essential sonic dimension. It is possible to identify recurring musical passages—such as the *Veni Creator* or the *Te Deum Laudamus*—woven into these rituals, though their performance varied according to religious order, the specific moments of the ceremony, or the individuals appointed to sing them. Among the Poor Clares, for instance, the *Veni Creator* might be sung by different participants, depending on whether the occasion was the taking of the habit or the solemn profession. The modes of execution—whether individual or collective singing, performed kneeling in reverence or standing, in plainchant or polyphony—reflect the diversity of local and oral traditions while underscoring the liturgical and spiritual importance of these musical sequences. Yet, they also followed higher directives, namely those issued by the male monasteries or abbeys upon which the female houses depended. In the Cistercian context in Portugal, detailed records exist for all communities around the time of the Council of Trent (c. 1550)⁹.

It is equally important not to overlook the artistic context in which these ceremonies took shape: music, gesture, liturgical and vestments setting, all contributed to the creation of a solemn scenography, rich in visual and sonic symbolism, thereby reinforcing power dynamics, internal hierarchies, and the bonds that connected the cloistered world to the outside.

When the community was to be summoned—for meals, choir prayer, or the collations specific to periods of fasting—the ringing of bells and chimes played an essential role. Their rhythm and intensity (the succession of slow, brief, or prolonged peals) structured the rhythm of daily life, imposing a sonic order instantly recognizable to the nuns. The coordination of these temporalities was a constant task, entrusted to the various officers of the monastery according to spaces and functions: cooks and servers, refectory attendants, sacristans, or choir mistresses ensured the regularity of these rhythms, orchestrating both the material and spiritual life while maintaining the silence of the cloister.

3. Tridentine Orientations and Female Regular Communities

The Ecumenical Council of Trent—concerned not only with disciplinary and reformative measures but also with the strengthening of the doctrinal structure of the Roman Church—left an indelible mark on the history of women who had chosen the religious life (Monson 2002). Central provisions, particularly of a disciplinary nature, were established during the Council's final session (the twenty-fifth), held on 3 December 1563. These were articulated in twenty-two chapters, setting forth concrete measures to be applied to both male and female religious orders.

Among these measures were the safeguarding of freedom of vocation, ensuring the absence of forced professions, under episcopal supervision; the strict enforcement of enclosure, with bishops expressly commanded to restore it, empowered even to call upon the secular arm to guarantee its observance; and the prohibition of strangers or externs from entering the cloister without written permission from the Ordinary. The Council also advised bishops to encourage female communities to establish themselves closer to, or even within, the walls of towns for the better safeguarding of virtue. Private property was abolished in order to reassert the communal character of religious life.

Prelates and generals of the Orders were urged to pay particular attention to the question of the communities' self-sufficiency: to oversee the number of nuns and limit it when necessary; to demand the universal payment of the dowry for all postulants two months before the beginning of the novitiate; and to strengthen the role of the priest-administrator, responsible for the regulation of finances and especially of expenditures, so as to avoid indebtedness. Male members of the Orders were likewise charged with ensuring the observance of certain general principles of discipline and their faithful execution. Thus, no nun under forty years of age and with fewer than eight years in religion could be superior (abbess) and no one, in any case, could be appointed over more than one community; every nun was required to confess at least once a month; the habit could not be received before the age of twelve, and profession not before sixteen, with the novitiate lasting one full year.

As for education, nunneries were required to provide both disciplinary and intellectual formation. Within this framework, the mistresses of novices and of chant played a central role, while the elder sisters supervised the conduct of the younger ones, ensuring that they acquired both discipline and mastery of the sacred texts. The internal hierarchy of these communities was structured around experience in the cloistered life and the transmission of monastic practices, passed down from the elder to the newly arrived (Réal 2019, p. 3). Prayer and rest, fasting and meals, work and reading varied according to the seasons and the liturgical calendar, introducing periods of abstinence, dividing time between labor and study, and altering the content of the offices. The nuns' time was therefore dynamic and varied. The *Table of Offices* was managed on a weekly, rotating basis, organizing tasks related to daily necessities: meal preparation, bread-making, cleaning of utensils and materials used in service. It was a life rhythmically ordered by daily prayer and presence in the choir, which had to be observed in silence. Thus, for example, in the refectory, to maintain this rule, the food was to be served by a nun appointed to each table—especially to that of the abbess and the elder sisters—without the sound of footsteps or clattering dishes.

If we can distinguish three broad spheres of activity for the nuns—communal work (food preparation, production of daily goods), the education of the young, and the care of the sick and the reception of guests—larger communities involved an even greater diversity of roles, both among the choir nuns and lay sisters (black-veiled and *conversae*) and among the servants working within the cloister. Their tasks were numerous: spinning wool, weaving, making candles, sewing garments and ornaments, preparing accessories for communal feasts, embroidery, baking conventual pastries and sweets, tending flowers, decorating the altars (floral arrangements, garlands, paper cuttings), caring for the sick, rehearsing choir chants, keeping the community's records (books of income and expenses, copies of official monastic documents), maintaining contact with the notary outside the monastery, overseeing agricultural work carried out by tenant farmers, and collecting rents through the priest-administrator. More rarely, some devoted themselves to transcription, manuscript illumination, or other forms of artistic creation such as painting and writing. Of diverse social origins, though most often noble or from the prosperous bourgeoisie, nuns were frequently accustomed to being served. Private maids, sometimes even personal slaves, along with the domestic servants of the monasteries and the lay sisters (*conversae*),

provided a constant presence to carry out the most demanding household tasks (gardening, cooking, washing) occasionally assisted by novices or nuns from more modest backgrounds. The black-veiled choir nuns sanctified their activities, limiting them essentially to prayer, *lectio divina*, and, when permitted, to teaching, embroidery, or the preparation of liqueurs, preserves, and sweet confections.

When the *Opus Dei* allowed it, as prescribed by the *Rule*, the Order provided for a workroom within the female monasteries. There, tasks useful to the community were performed in an atmosphere of regular silence. One of the most widespread crafts in these spaces was weaving, a transversal activity among female monastic houses. It enabled the recitation of sacred texts, safeguarded against idleness, and kept the hands occupied, thus preventing venial sins. Producing or transforming goods within the monastery, such as flour or olive oil, ensuring the preparation and supply of foodstuffs (through rents and tithes), their preservation, and the preparation of daily meals and beverages required mastery of inherited knowledge and gestures transmitted within each community, a body of skills that profoundly defined its identity.

The books of income and expenses, dowry contracts, wills, suffrage registers, and inventories reveal the multiplicity of objects that populated the daily life of the nuns. They bear witness not only to the reproduction of social hierarchies within the cloister but also to the enduring presence of rich trousseaux: towels, tablecloths, garments of various fabrics, accessories, jewels, works of art, books, ceramics, and even a few pieces of furniture within private cells (Juan García 2011). All these elements point to a daily existence that extended, within the cloister, certain habits inherited from the outside world. While wills constitute an essential source for understanding the fate of possessions prior to religious profession, the moment of death within the monastery allows us to appreciate what the nuns continued to own during their life in the institution.

Cistercian Order in Portugal: Impacts of the Council of Trent Determinations

The disciplinary decrees, declared binding after 1 May 1564, were gradually received across the various communities. In Catholic countries, these decrees were formally accepted and promulgated by the sovereigns of the respective states, thereby reinforcing their obligatory nature. It is important to recall, in this context, the pivotal role of bishops: as delegates of the Holy See, they bore responsibility for implementing and supervising the decrees. The Council's action was further continued through several papal bulls and briefs concerning monastic communities—notably the bull *Militantis Ecclesiae* (1565) and the brief *De Statu Ecclesiarum* (1568), the latter addressing chiefly the economic difficulties of the religious houses.

The local structures of the Church, particularly through the directives of the archbishop, sought to respond to the appeals issued by the Council of Trent, which had in turn recognized the crucial role of bishops in the organization of the Church at the local level. The legislative determinations adopted for this purpose were implemented promptly. The Council was concluded on 4 December 1563, and on 29 August 1564, Cardinal D. Henrique, Archbishop of Lisbon and *legatus a latere*, issued a *letter patent* ordering that throughout the kingdom of Portugal the faithful be informed of the Council's determinations, already printed in Portuguese. The Archdiocese of Évora had shown early concern for the voluntary nature of the choice of religious life, even before the Council of Trent, as evidenced by the *Constitutions* of 1534¹⁰, as already studied about the legislation of the archdiocese and the effects of the Protestant Reformation (Conde and Lalanda 2019). The main purpose of these *Constitutions*, as stated in the Prologue, was the unification of religious life within the archdiocese by setting in writing matters of vital importance such as the conduct of the clergy, their immunity and exemption before secular justice, and the regulation of the

sacraments, among others. Comparison with later *Constitutions* of the same archdiocese, published shortly after Trent, reveals that, regarding the sacrament of marriage, they relied explicitly on Session 25, Chapter 25 of the Council as their doctrinal foundation¹¹.

The question of religious vocation is a fundamental one; the provincial synods, which theoretically took place every three years, and the diocesan synods, held annually, regarded it as a matter of relevance. In the Provincial Synod of 1 May 1567, presided over by D. João de Melo, Metropolitan of the Province¹², concern for the freedom of choice was made very explicit, with the penalty of excommunication being decreed for those who had collaborated in any forced vocation, or who had knowledge of such acts and failed to report them. The need to disseminate the Tridentine determinations in this field was also emphasized, including the involvement of the diocesan authorities.

Emerging from a grave situation caused by the Protestant Reformation, the consolidation and restructuring of the Roman Catholic Church necessarily required renewed investment in monasticism. The monastic orders, beyond the general guidelines established by the Council, drew inspiration precisely from previous reform initiatives or earlier internal reforms.

Thus, after the Protestant Reformation, throughout Europe, particularly in France, Italy, and the Iberian Peninsula, the Tridentine Reform found a favorable ground for renewal, reinforcing its traditional vocation of separation from the world. According to Pacaut (1993) nunneries which experienced a greater number of abandonments and extinctions, faced an even more dramatic situation; between 1625 and 1630, in addition to the French case with its system and affiliations, the same author mentions two congregations in Italy, two in Spain (those of Vargas and Aragon), and one in Upper Germany. Furthermore, the Council of Trent also entailed, in the case of female monasteries, the triennial election of abbesses, who sought to leave their mark and to exercise authority within their communities (for instance, through the commissioning of works of art), while remaining under the obedience of the Abbot of Alcobaça (Conde 2017). It was, at the same time, a period of intense spiritual fervour, with new vocations that made possible new foundations—signifying, within the Portuguese Cistercian panorama, not only a renewed splendour of medieval foundations, notably Arouca and Lorvão, but also the emergence of two new nunneries south of the Tagus River: St. Bernard in Portalegre and Piedade in Tavira. This exacerbated devotion also manifested itself in the desire to draw closer to Christ and in the detachment from the world, which brought many nuns out of anonymity, both in the sphere of spirituality and of creativity (Monson 1992). At S. Bento de Cástris, for the seventeenth century, nine nuns are mentioned in contexts that place them within the sphere of sanctity, out of a total of thirty-seven from all Portuguese nunneries (Sottomaior 1601–1700). Moreover, in terms of musical practice, with nuns as singers and instrumentalists (Conde 2016), or in the field of outstanding written production for seventeenth-century Portugal, exemplified by the works of the nun Maria de Mesquita Pimentel (Conde and Lalanda 2020), the post-Tridentine period proved decisive for the cultural and spiritual life of the community (Morujão et al. 2014).

For the Congregation of Alcobaça as a whole, though more intensely within the female houses, the second half of the eighteenth century was marked by the generalship of Friar Manuel de Mendonça¹³, which lasted nine years, between 1768 and 1777 (three triennial terms), characterized by a strong reformist intent. In a Pastoral Letter addressed to all communities¹⁴, already studied (Conde 2014), the Abbot acknowledged the great responsibility incumbent upon him as head of the Lusitanian Congregation and, drawing on the *Definitions of the Order*, referred to his powers as ordinary judge over his community, which owed him full submission and obedience. Recalling the contents of the papal bull *Pastoralis Officii*, issued in 1567 by Pius V in Rome, by which the erection of the Congregation

of Santa Maria de Alcobaça in Portugal was approved, along with all privileges, local rights, prerogatives, and exemptions associated with it, he affirmed a level of authority equivalent to that of the Abbot of Cîteaux, namely as “(. . .) *Father, Head, and superior of the entire Order* (. . .)”¹⁵, powers that had long been ancestrally recognized by Rome¹⁶. In him also resided all the authority of the General Chapter, as well as the power to unite certain monasteries with others; he was likewise vested with the duties of Visitor, in both spiritual and temporal matters¹⁷, and of general reformer, in accordance with the original spirit of the founding patriarchs. As early as 1593, the Chapter of Alcobaça, concerned particularly with the population of Cistercian nunneries¹⁸, so that they might not bear a burden greater than they could sustain (a question of the communities’ self-sufficiency), determined the number of nuns to be admitted in the female houses of the Order. Yet, the Chapter makes it perfectly clear that within this number “(. . .) are included both conversae and veiled nuns, and the aforementioned houses may not exceed this limit, nor may they, while exceeding it, receive any new novices. (. . .)”¹⁹. As we have already analysed (Conde and Lalande 2015), the cross-referencing of information from the Laws of the Chapters and Assemblies and from the Visitation Books has allowed us to conclude that, in matters concerning liturgy in particular, the learning of plainchant could not be neglected (Conde 2021). A test of such learning was required for the transition from novice to conversae, and singing was to be entrusted only to those who knew how to sing, even if they also played instruments. These were to obey the Mistress of the Chapel and the Mistress of Chant, and figured singing was expressly forbidden. The spaces designated for the practice of music and singing were also defined, and, by the eighteenth century, restrictions had been imposed on theatrical performances within monasteries—the sacred space was not to be profaned by such activities, even when of a spiritual nature. It should also be noted that while the dynamism of the Congregation manifested itself in the foundation of new houses, like Tabosa, Mocambo and Vale de Madeiro (dos Santos 2000), its influence was equally reflected in the everyday life of the monasteries on various levels. The fullness of the Abbot’s powers was reached, as acknowledged by the General himself, with the royal letter of 2 December 1775: the monarch therein declared his authority to be unlimited, a declaration that would henceforth define his course of action.

During his long generalate, Friar Manuel de Mendonça intervened directly in the internal life of the communities—not only in material aspects, such as matters of property or the clothing of the monastic community, but also in temporal concerns, including the standardization of the celebration of the Divine Office. His actions even extended to the suppression of certain houses—a wave of closures from which Cástris did not escape in 1776, when it was decreed that the community should merge with that of St. Denis of Odivelas²⁰. This measure implemented the royal favor (*Beneplácito Régio*) granted to the brief of 23 August 1756, issued by Benedict XIV, which determined the suppression of those convents of nuns in Portugal unable to sustain themselves—whether due to lack of income, the poor state of their buildings, or overwhelming debts. In the Chapter of 2 April 1778, during which Friar António Caldeira, Chief Chronicler of the Kingdom, was elected, new vigour was given to the laws of the triennia prior to 1770, and an appeal was made for the reconstruction and reform of the Congregation, which was to be inspired by Cistercian ideals and rites. Within this framework, a renewed attention was directed toward the condition of the monasteries, both temporal and spiritual. All communities that had previously been subjected to processes of incorporation into other houses regained their individuality and autonomy. It should be added that the European panorama concerning the Cistercian Order and its derived congregations did not differ greatly from the Portuguese case.

4. Conclusions

The rules of religious orders, such as the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, are above all rules of life—structured around a code of laws and principles designed to order communal existence. This shared life demands a form of harmony, and the Rule serves as a guide for those who inhabit the same space, time, and rhythm of life—respecting silence, sharing the cadence of meals, the offices, the pauses dictated by the measured sounds of the cloister. It asserts itself over individual will, acting as a master of life. The Statutes and Constitutions that emerged over time were inspired by this initial Rule, seeking to update it and to ensure its practical application by addressing both the temporal and spiritual aspects of the communities.

The imperatives of the Catholic Counter-Reformation exercised a vigorous influence upon female communities, imposing enclosure and requiring an increasingly strict obedience to a religious policy of national character—as seen in Portugal with the establishment of the Autonomous Congregation of Alcobaça in 1567. Moreover, the determinations of the Council of Trent for women’s convents demanded personal reform and the restoration of authentic communal life.

Benedictine Rule, as interpreted through the Cistercian tradition and particularly through the spirit of Bernard of Clairvaux, gave form to the power that women’s vocation could assume in fulfilling the spiritual ideal of the crusade. Under the shadow of the male abbeys, to which they were bound by umbilical—and thus vital—ties, the nuns received spiritual and moral guidance through the monks, confessors, chaplains, and overseers, who guaranteed the enduring union of the daughters with the Mother House.

Little known and scarcely studied, referred to only occasionally by chroniclers of the Order or by major scholars of Cistercian female monasticism—especially in the modern era—the Cistercian nuns, and particularly those of Évora, have until now remained secondary figures in the history of the Cistercian Order in Portugal, or more precisely, of the Autonomous Congregation of Santa Maria de Alcobaça. The distinctiveness of the nunnery of S. Bento de Cástris—its relations with the Mother House (Alcobaça), with the archbishopric, and with royal authority, the way it responded to the unique situation that Portugal faced within the political and religious framework of Tridentine Europe (marked by dynastic union and the excessive weight of ecclesiastical control over society), as well as its position amid the sweeping transformations of the Cistercian Order with the creation of autonomous congregations on a European scale—does not allow us to view this monastery as a case of exception, excellence, or pre-eminence, but rather as one of monastic normality, distinguished by the inwardness, perseverance, and resilience of its nuns, by the silence and prayer that shaped the life of its community.

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Appendix A

Original text of *Ordinary Book of the Divine Office According to the Cistercian Order*, newly corrected and amended, composed by Friar Gonçalo da Silva, abbot and rector of the College of St. Bernard in Coimbra, printed by João Álvares, University of Coimbra,

1550. Porto Municipal Public Library, Res. XI-2/17, pp. 373–75: “(…) Quem começar aña ou salmo ou hino ou Responso ou Alleluia diga uma ou duas partes estando todos os outros calados e daquele lugar donde ele deixar, dahi comecem e não repitam o que o outro já disse. Isto mesmo se guarde quando o câtor começa as antiphonas, ou Alla e nos Resposos. E esta regra se guarde em toda parte que nenhu torne a dizer o que o outro já dixe. Quando câtamos hymno ou Alleluia ou resposos pausemos hum pouco nas clausulas, & mayormente nos dias de festa. Além disto vos amoesto hirmãos muyto amados (diz o glorioso Padre) que sempre estejaes com pureza & diligencia aos divinos louvores. Com diligencia digo, que estejais diante ao senhor cõ alegria, como de reverencia deueis teer, nem preguiçosos, nem sonolentos ou dorminhocos, nem bocejado cõ priguica & descuido, nem deixado de cantar perdoado as vozes, nem cortado as palavras pelo meio, ou deixando as palauras nã nas pronunciando nem canteis com vozes quebradas & remissas, nem balbociado canteis pollos narizes. Mas cantay esforçadamente, como he rezam que se faça, deitado vozes do spunscto assi como o toõ, como o desejo. (...)”. **Translation** (under responsibility of the author): “(…) Whoever begins an antiphon, psalm, hymn, responsory, or Alleluia shall sing one or two parts while all others remain silent; and from the point where that person leaves off, the others shall continue, without repeating what has already been sung. This same rule must be observed when the cantor begins the antiphons, the Alleluia, or the responsories. Let this be kept everywhere, that no one repeat what another has already said. When we sing hymns, Alleluias, or responsories, let us pause briefly at the cadences, and especially on feast days. Moreover, I admonish you, dearly beloved brothers (says the glorious Father), that you always be pure of heart and diligent in offering divine praises. By diligence, I mean that you should stand before the Lord with joy, in the reverence that is His due—neither slothful nor drowsy nor half-asleep, neither yawning in idleness and neglect, nor ceasing to sing and softening your voices, nor cutting words in half or failing to pronounce them; do not sing with broken or languid voices, nor mumble through your noses. Rather, sing with strength and belief fervour, as is fitting, lifting up your voices with both tone and desire.”

Appendix B

Original text of Évora Public Library, Cod. CXXXI/2-7, fols. 20v–21: “(…) No século XVIII, além de as Visitas determinarem com clareza os locais onde se podia cantar, ficava proibido o canto figurado em favor do cantochão, não devendo ser para deleite dos sentidos ou para deleite de quem escutava, devendo o único instrumento utilizado ser o órgão: “(…) Item por ter mostrado a experiência que a musica figurada de canto de órgão tem degenerado notavelmente da gravidade, e devoção religiosa com que se deve tratar tudo o que diz respeito a ordem, e respeito ao culto Divino, a que claramente se opoem a doutrina dos Santos Padres, e muito principalmente Nosso Meliflo Pay S. Bernardo. Na sua elegantissima Epistola 312 escrita ao veneravel Guido Abbade Arromarence, na qual lhe aconselha a que no seu Mosteiro não consinta canto que tenha levesa, e sirva só de deleyte e agrado aos sentidos, e sem a gravidade que edifique, e faça Levantar o espirito puramente a Deus o que se não acha na Musica figurada de que de presente se uza, e outrosy pellos grandes inconvenientes, assim temporais como espirituais que se acharão na conservação da tal musica ordenarão, e mandarão que nas Igrejas, e Coros, assim de Rilligiosos, como de Freiras da nossa Congregação se não use o tal canto figurado, nem ainda nas mayores festas, e solemnidades, ou procissões do anno, como já se pratica no nosso Mosteiro de Alcobaça, e nas mesmas Igrejas, e Coros, se não poderá usar de instrumento algum musico, excepto órgão, ao qual cantarão somente o canto chão grave sem os requebros e passos de garganta de que usa o canto figurado, o que os Padres Dons Abbades, e Madres Donnas Abbadessas observarão, e farão observar sob pena de suspensão de seus cargos por seis

meses, de que os Nossos Reverendissimos e Padres Visitadores se informarão com especial cuidado nas suas vesitas. (...)”. **Translation** (“under responsibility of the author”): “(...) Likewise, since experience has shown that figured music and organ chant have notably degenerated from the gravity and religious devotion with which all matters concerning the order and the reverence due to Divine worship must be treated—matters that stand in clear opposition to the doctrine of the Holy Fathers, and most particularly of our mellifluous Father St. Bernard—in his most elegant Epistle 312, written to the venerable Abbot Guido of Arras, wherein he counsels him not to permit, in his monastery, any singing that is light or serves only for delight and the pleasing of the senses, and lacks the gravity that edifies and raises the spirit purely toward God (which is not found in the figured music presently in use)—and also considering the great inconveniences, both temporal and spiritual, that have arisen from the maintenance of such music, they have ordered and decreed that in the churches and choirs, both of monks and of nuns of our Congregation, no such figured chant shall be used, not even on the greatest feasts, solemnities, or processions of the year, as is already practiced in our Monastery of Alcobaça. Likewise, in those same churches and choirs, no musical instrument whatsoever shall be employed except the organ, to which they shall sing only the grave plainchant, without the trills or ornamental passages used in figured song. The Reverend Fathers Abbots and the Reverend Mothers Abbesses shall observe and ensure the observance of this rule, under penalty of suspension from their offices for six months, a matter about which our Most Reverend Fathers Visitors shall make special inquiry during their visitations. (...)”.

Appendix C

Decrees of the Provincial Council of Évora, Évora, printed by André de Burgos, 1568, pp. CIII, CIII v, CIIIII. Title VIII—Of the Nuns, Decree I,” (...) The Holy Council of Trent has demonstrated that the professions of nuns are to be made freely, without the use of force or coercion; and it has excommunicated all persons, of whatever rank or condition they may be, who compel or constrain said nuns to profess against their will. Likewise, it excommunicates all others who provide assistance or support in this regard, as well as those who, knowing that certain religious women wish to make their profession under coercion and against their will, fail to report it. (...) This Holy Synod decrees that the ruling of the Sacred Council of Trent, in Session 25, concerning the renunciations and obligations made prior to profession, shall be written in the vernacular language and displayed in the churches; furthermore, that the ordinaries shall inquire during their visitations whether compliance with what is prescribed in said decree is being observed. Should this not be the case, diligence must be exercised to restore the matters that were renounced in contradiction to the form of the said decree to those who claim to have been so coerced and who did not wish to make profession. (...)”.

Notes

- ¹ In this regard, the *Charter of Charity* established the subordination of subsidiary houses to the mother house, with the Abbey of Cîteaux serving as the primatial abbey. This right was recognized in Portugal through the Abbey of Alcobaça, which exercised authority over the monasteries of Odivelas, Bouro, Seica, Cós, Estrela, S. Bento de Cástris, Maceiradão, S. Paulo de Almaziva and Tomarães. About affiliations of Cistercian monasteries and nunneries in Portugal, see (Rêpas and Farelo 2024, pp. 239–88; Rêpas and Leitão 2024, pp. 87–112; Gomes 2025, pp. 63–93).
- ² Text taken from the *Sentences* of the Greek philosopher Sextus, which Rufinus translated, attributing them to Sixtus II, pope and martyr.
- ³ According to Mário Martins, the use of signs gave rise to a “silent monastic cloister, full of mute people who speak.”
- ⁴ Among these signs, there was none exclusively feminine (apart from those referring to nuns, women were generally designated either as the mothers of saints or as beings who corrupted men), but rather gendered: the Virgin Mary was represented by two

signs—one indicating sainthood (the five fingers of the right hand placed upon the right shoulder) and another denoting the feminine gender (the index finger drawn from one eyebrow to the other) (van Rijnberk 1953).

- 5 Original text: “(. . .) Os sinais de gestualidade substitutos da palavra, tornaram-se um código, um meio de comunicação próprio de uma comunidade”. (Translation under responsibility of the author).
- 6 Law of the General Chapter of 1 May 1750, by which Father Pedro de Mendonça became Abbot and Chief Almoner.
- 7 Public Library of Évora, Cod. CXXXI/2-23, fol. 111v.
- 8 For the Dominican nuns of Évora, see National Library of Portugal, IL. 152.
- 9 *Ordinary Book of the Divine Office According to the Cistercian Order*, newly corrected and amended, composed by Friar Gonçalo da Silva, abbot and rector of the College of St. Bernard in Coimbra, printed by João Álvares, University of Coimbra, 1550. Porto Municipal Public Library, Res. XI-2/17, pp. 373–75 (see Appendix A). In the eighteenth century, in addition to the Visitations clearly determining the places where singing was permitted, figured chant was forbidden in favor of plainchant. Music was not to serve as sensual pleasure or delight for those who listened; the only instrument allowed was the organ; see Évora Public Library, Cod. CXXXI/2-7, fols. 20v–21 (see Appendix B).
- 10 “Title VIII, On Marriage, Constitution V—Of the age at which one may be bound to religion. Fol. XV,” in *Constitutions of the Archdiocese of Évora, ordered to be made by the Lord Cardinal D. Afonso, Infante of Portugal, Archbishop of Lisbon and Perpetual Administrator of the Diocese of Évora*/Título VIII, Do Matrimónio, Constituiçam V—De que idade pode algum ser obrigado aa religiam. Fl. XV», in Afonso, Cardeal D. 1534. *Constituições do Arcebispado de Évora*. Lisbon: Germão Galhardo Francez. (Afonso 1534). (Translation under our responsibility).
- 11 “Title VIII—On the Sacrament of Marriage, Chap. IX, fol. XXI—What age is required for one to be bound to religion and to make profession,” / «Título VIII—Do Sacramento do Matrimónio». Cap. IX, fl. XXI—Que idade se requiere pera algum ser obrigado a relegiam & fazer profissam”, in de Melo, D. João. 1565. *Constituições do Arcebispado de Évora*. Évora: André de Burgos. (de Melo 1565). (Translation under our responsibility).
- 12 See Appendix C.
- 13 In the documents, he is referred to as Frei Manuel de Mendonça, Dom Abbot of the Royal Monastery of Santa Maria de Alcobaça, Donor Lord and Captain Lord of the same town and of the others within its district, Patron of the Convent of Magdalena of the Province of Our Lady of Arrábida, General Reformer and General Visitor of the Congregation of Saint Bernard in these Kingdoms and Dominions of Portugal and the Algarve, Member of His Most Faithful Majesty’s Council, and His Lord Mayor.
- 14 Pastoral Letter of 23 December 1775, issued at Desterro.
- 15 National Library of Portugal, *Alcobacense* 1493, fol. 197.
- 16 Bull of Clement IV from 1265; Memoranda of Innocent VIII from 1489; Bull of Nicholas V from 1481; Bull of Clement VIII from 1603.
- 17 This constitutes an example of the responsibility entrusted by Pope Eugene IV to the abbot of the Cistercians.
- 18 For São Dinis de Odivelas, the highest number was authorized, with 120 nuns and conversae, followed by São Mamede do Lorvão with 112, Santa Maria de Celas and São Pedro de Arouca, each monastery with 80, São Bento de Cástris with 70, São Bernardo de Portalegre with 60, Almoester and Santa Maria de Cós with 50, and finally Tavira, with 40.
- 19 Original text: “(. . .) entrão conuersas & religiosas de veo, do qual não poderão passar as casas sobre ditas, nem poderão, em quanto tiverem mais gente, receber nouiças nenhuma. (. . .)”. *Deffinicoens da Ordem de Cistel: E Congregaçam de N.^a Sr.^a de Alcobaça*. Lisboa, por Ant.^o Alvarez, 1593, fl. 60.
- 20 National Library of Portugal, *Alcobacense* 1479, fol. 219.

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