Postscript

The Catholic Church, Women, and Priests’ Celibacy

This book was written because the time had come to talk about Marie-Louise’s story before the last witnesses to her life pass away. The research I conducted has convinced me that it is also time to talk openly about the relationship between the Catholic Church and women.

The Catholic Church does not recognize equality of the sexes. It justifies its position by quoting the Bible where, in Genesis, a woman is made from a man’s rib and tempts him with an apple. The mythical image of this woman as both stemming from man and being his temptress is still well anchored in the psyche of the Catholic Church’s representatives. This mental programming is the basis upon which woman’s status has been defined in the Christian world for a long period of our history.

In the early twentieth century, the Church conferred on women a limited and strictly defined role: the Church praised the woman servant. It bestowed on her the title of “Servant of God” when she took the veil and that of “Queen of the household” when she carried out her role of wife and mother in service of her husband and children. As well, the Church commended women who devoted themselves to serving the sick, the career of nursing having the status of a vocation. Apart from these well-defined limits, women had very little credit in the Church’s eyes. They remained a subordinate whose judgment was easily and frequently called into question.
In this beginning of the twenty-first century, the image of woman as a temptress leading man into sin persists in the Catholic Church. When a Catholic priest and a woman have a liaison as consenting adults, it is the woman who, in the eyes of the Church, is generally perceived as the instigator. And so when it comes time to find solutions to the problems generated by such a liaison, the woman’s happiness and that of her children carry very little weight in the Church’s decision making. Recently, some women have decided to disclose this situation by publishing their love story with a Catholic priest. Their actions publicly open the debate concerning the relationship between the Catholic Church and women.

I hope that this biography of Marie-Louise Bouchard Labelle provides these pioneers with a historical perspective on the question of the mandatory celibacy of Catholic priests by demonstrating how this practice already had terrible consequences in the early twentieth century. What difference has a century brought to this practice and to the way in which we manage its consequences?