

Benediction

Script by Laura op de Beke, created in collaboration with Una Hamilton Helle, Sille Storihle, and OddHelge Gravalid. With thanks to Alex Brown.

This larp is about a group of medieval nuns who are told that in five days their abbey will be blessed with a visit from a traveling priest and miracle worker. The priest is making his way through the plague-ridden countryside to deliver a sermon. As they anticipate his benediction, the nuns ruminate on their feelings about themselves, the others, God, and the arrival of the vagabond priest, which has awakened in them unprecedented fears and desires.

Play to find out: who is this wandering priest to you? Threat, temptation, redemption? Or something else entirely?

Content warnings: blasphemy, potentially graphic language, sexual subtext

Duration: 1,5 hour workshop, 1,5 hours of play

Number of players: 6-12

Staging requirements:

- Audio: <https://mynoise.net/> -> church, medieval library, the Pilgrim.
- Space: a long table to use as the scriptorium, save space to walk around the table in a wide circle; and a space on the floor for all nuns to lie down with their head close together. This is the dormitorium.
- Lights: (nice to have) some strategic spotlights, and a dimmer.
- Tools: portable speaker, one blindfold or black 'shroud' per player, the printed appendices + printed pages of scripture with a wide margin (<https://lauraopdebeke.files.wordpress.com/2023/10/benediction-wide-margin-scripture.pdf>) a gong or bell to ring the liturgical hours.

Start with group prayer. We will be doing a lot of this. By the end of the larp, you will know this prayer by heart.

O merciful God, grant unto us that the fire of Thy love may burn up all things that displease Thee, and make us meet for Thy heavenly Kingdom, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior and the King of glory. Amen.

Workshop - Genre

This larp plays in the genre-space of nunsploitation. Nunsploitation is a film genre that was big in the sixties. It is characterized by explicit, sensationalist speculation about the private life of nuns. Sometimes these films were critical, sometimes they were just titillating, showing lesbian sex to gratify the male gaze. They featured many stock characters like sexy nuns, hot priests, and jealous mother superiors (mothers superior?). They also featured stock plots involving the inquisition, witchcraft, nuns challenging the church, having visions, or going insane.

What if we were to shore up this curiosity about the private lives of nuns with some historical knowledge?

Workshop - History

Together, try and answer these questions. The point is to activate whatever historical knowledge is slumbering in the group. Might be a lot, might not be very much at all, in which case, there are some short answers provided as well.

Who were nuns in the Middle Ages?

Predominantly noble women. To become a nun you had to pay the abbey a dowry. Nuns wealthy widows who 'retired' as nuns, daughters of wealthy families who were sold to the abbey as 'oblates.' Disabled (noble) women often lived as nuns. Poor women may have joined convents as 'lay sisters,' doing most of the work, but they were not likely to have reaped many of the benefits that were reserved for noble sisters.

What did their lives look like?

Quiet, regimented, perhaps hierarchical, perhaps not, defined by hard work, some degree of liberty, some access to education.

What were the crafts and economic pursuits they engaged in?

Nuns engaged in textile work, writing, providing education, and, chiefly the running of the abbey and its lands. The abbess was a landowner. Convents came with holdings, and serfs. Abbeys also sold prayer. In return for a donation, they would put in a good word for you with God.

What did Christianity look like in the Middle Ages?

Catholic. Patriarchal. Passionate, obsessed with Jesus, Mary and all the saints, promising deliverance through suffering. The middle ages also saw the rise of devotional trends like affective piety, which encourages practitioners to focus on the suffering of christ, for example by dwelling on the arma christi (the tools of his torture). Whereas Jesus was stoic on the cross in the dark ages, he was a weeping, feeling mess in the middle ages. This became a way for women, the 'emotional sex,' to claim a particular closeness to Jesus that was not so readily available to men.

Close this little history lesson by reading aloud the three visions in the appendix. Talk about the images and the language that are used. These visions will serve as inspiration for the larp's dream sequences.

Workshop - Character creation

While prostrate on the floor, arms outspread like a cross, work out the following. (play church soundscape)

- Character name?
- Why did you join the convent?
- What do you like about being a nun?
- What do you dislike about being a nun?
- What is your relationship to god, and to religion?
- What is your relationship to men?
- Do you have a secret?

Stand in order of age. Introduce your character to the others. Share some backstory, but keep your secret. Find a sister you confide in, and find a sister you disagree with.

Practicing the Phases of Play

Next we will go over the structure of the larp, which will follow a strict schedule inspired by the liturgical hours. This schedule will be repeated five times—once for each of the five days—until at last the priest arrives. The hours are announced via gong/bell/whatever is available.

One day is 16 minutes, x5 is 80 minutes, + 10 mins buffer. 1,5 hours of play.

The liturgical hours (included in this larp) are:

- Morning Prayer (Lauds) (1min): during which Mother Superior, played by the facilitator, announces the news of the day, and guides the nuns in prayer. “*Oh merciful God...*”
- The lesser hours (Terce, Sext, None) (4mins) (Play Medieval Library music.): during which the nuns are engaged in labor in the scriptorium. They will occupy themselves with illustrating and annotating manuscripts (provide the players with copies of pages from the bible with large margins as well as brush pens). While thus occupied, the nuns may also leave each other messages. See appendix: marginalia for inspiration.

These hours are traditionally spent in silence, though Mother Superior will not be looking over your shoulder, so you might get away with some whispered conversation, and you may pass each other notes, or indeed, subtly excuse yourself to play a more private scene.

- After mass (Vespers) (4mins) (Play The Pilgrim): during which the nuns walk home from evening mass in silence. In this phase, the players walk in a wide circle around the scriptorium thinking aloud their most private thoughts. These thoughts may be mundane, or profound. They may, and probably will, involve the other nuns. Practice thinking aloud some thoughts about your fellow sisters. About God. About the priest; express jealousy, love, desire, pain, dread, etc.

One again, this is an activity that is not closely overseen by the mother superior, so you are free to break from the script, and instead of waling alone, you may walk together, e.g. holding hands.

- Compline (1min): during which the nuns get ready for bed and say their evening prayer. “*Oh merciful God...*”

- Vigil (6mins): during which the nuns have the most fantastic dreams. In the dormitorium, lie down with your heads close together and narrate your dreams while the others provide a soundscape. Dreaming does not happen in a set sequence, players take turns whenever they want. Players can choose not to narrate, and just to listen and vocalize instead.

Vocal warmup for Dreaming

Dreaming requires a little practice as well as a voice warmup. When we dream we will speak these over a dynamic symphony created by vocalizing. This is a technique inspired by Nina Runa Essendrop's larp Sound Explorers. You can hum, you can chant, you can whisper. Close your eyes or wear blindfolds. The players lie with their heads close together.

Do a count. Get a sense of each other's timing. If two players speak at the same time, start again. Explain speaking at the same time may happen during the larp, but that you should just shake it off and continue. Practice vocalizing with the following prompts:

- Hum
- Speak a vowel
- Vocalize opening your mouth really wide
- Vocalize by pursing your mouth
- Highest volume
- Lowest volume
- Highest pitch
- Lowest pitch
- Modulation
- Whispering
- Vocalize freely. Listen and collaborate with others.
- Sound an Angelic choir
- Sound the Garden of Eden
- Sound the depths of Hell
- Speak a dream. Use first-person, present tense narration e.g. I am on a road in a dark forest. I hear the calling of an owl. In front of me I see a small, glowing light. I walk towards it, but a strong wind picks up and holds me back, I am fighting and crying. I hear a voice; it's calling to me. It's saying come to me. It's the voice of my mother.

Dreams can be gory, sexy, innocent, mysterious, surreal, good or bad.

Play

Remember to have a 10 minute break before you start playing. You might also want to write down the different steps of the larp somewhere in view (although, the steps will soon become routine). When everyone is ready, invite the players to lie down in the dormitory. Then wake them up for lauds, and read aloud the first announcement.

Lauds Day 1:

Mother Superior: “Greetings, my dear Sisters. I have received a most joyful letter, which brings us a ray of hope in these dark and troubled times. While the countryside is being ravaged by pestilence, the holy wanderer and worker of wonders, Father James of Venice, has announced his gracious plan to visit our humble convent and to preach the word of God. He is but five days away from us, and we must make ready for his coming. Let us devote these days to labor and penitence, purifying ourselves and our dwelling, so that we may greet him with clean hearts and spotless souls.”

Complete the liturgical hours. Repeat until you have played 5 days.

Lauds Day 2:

Mother Superior: “Greetings Sisters. I have informed the Archbishop of Father James’ coming. He sends us his blessing and rejoices that our humble flock has drawn the gaze of such an eminent preacher. His holiness has preserved a record of Father James since he first learned of his wondrous deeds. You see, when Father James was just a boy, he performed many miracles, like curing those who suffered from ailments. We are to welcome him with all the reverence that befits a living saint.”

Lauds Day 3:

Mother Superior: “Greetings Sisters. Wondrous news of Father James’ deeds precedes him. I have heard, that as he journeyed through the countryside, Father James of Venice bestowed his grace upon a dwelling of the deaf and the blind, who by his holy blessing regained their sight and their hearing. Praise God. On another occasion, not far from here, Father James performed an exorcism and delivered a woman from sin. She was a harlot who had fallen prey to the devil’s temptations, having given herself over to wicked spirits. Father James cast them out, absolving her, and setting her back on the path to salvation. Glory be to God.”

Lauds Day 4:

Mother Superior: “With two days left to prepare for the festivities, I am grieved to begin this day with a solemn word on some foul and wicked tales that have reached my ear. I am of course addressing the series of vile rumors that have penetrated the holy seclusion of our convent. They concern the virtuous Father James and his dealings in the nearby hamlet. I assure you, Sisters, that the man who was driven out of that place—who was charged with most abominable and loathsome deeds—was nobody but a rogue. The perverted and despicable deeds that you may have heard of, involving innocent women and children, even beasts, have no link to the saintly man who will grace us with his presence ere long. As far as I’m concerned that is the end of the story, and I will tolerate not one more word to besmirch the good Father’s name.”

Lauds Day 5:

Mother Superior: “My Sisters in Christ. Today is the day that we expect the arrival of the virtuous Father James of Venice. He has journeyed from far, through pestilence-ridden towns and villages, assailed by marauders and wicked people who would tarnish his reputation. These are the designs of the Devil himself who seeks to dull the sword of God in his war for the souls of mankind. We are all at stake. We are all in danger of eternal damnation. We must not yield to temptation, but cleave to those who will lift us up to heaven. Like those who are wrecked at sea, we must hold on to the Church that is our fragile vessel, and kick off the weight that would threaten to drown us. Our lives depend on it.”

End

After the last dream sequence dies down, instead of turning on the lights keep them off and rap your knuckles on a table. There is someone at the door. Father James has arrived.

Appendix 1: Visions

From *Matrix* by Lauren Groff, 2021.

I was standing with axe in hand watching a tree fall in the woods when I felt my head heated by a deep throbbing, and then the snake of lightning whipped through my limbs.

A light grew in the forest behind me. It shone upon my daughters and the children seated upon the pulling beasts; and all that had just been in motion were stopped in their work and held there as though by a mysterious hand; and the dirt thrown off the shovel and the saw-dust flying were held in its flight. I turned. And then I fell to my knees, for standing in the place where the road was to be made in the forest were two women whose holiness shone so brightly their radiance made me hide my face from them.

The one wore a gown of green paleness of first spring, when the leaves burst in their richness from the boughs and the flowers first open in bloom and the wind blows sweetly and chill over the land; and jewels of emerald and sapphire and pearl adorned her head and her sleeves, and from her breast there bled a wound large and open and shining in gold, and this was the wound of her maternal sorrow.

For this was the Mother of God, Mary, the Blessed Virgin, who bestowed this vision upon me.

And this was the second time she deigned to reveal her face to me. Holding her hand was a woman of equal radiance, cloaked in the red of blood, with diamonds and silver upon her neck and wrists, and upon her brow was shining in rubies the wound made by the staff of the angels who had chased her from the first garden; for this was Eve, the first mother of all humankind. And she held in her other hand a rib made of crystal, for she herself had been molded from a rib, and so proved herself a refinement of the first mortal made of mere clay. For is not gold pulled from the rock less perfect than the gold melted from the rock by handiwork and annealed to a shine that echoes that of the sun? The women gazed upon me in silence and with faces full of love. And when I could at last dare to fix my gaze upon them and did not dare to drag my eyes away, they raised their clasped hands and kissed. Let her kiss her with the kiss of her mouth. Thus they showed me that the war so often vaunted between them was a falsity created by the serpent to sow division and strife and unhappiness in the world.

REVELATIONS
of DIVINE LOVE

**Recorded by JULIAN,
Anchoress at *NORWICH***

ANNO DOMINI 1373

THE EIGHTH REVELATION

CHAPTER XVI

"A Part of His Passion"

After this Christ shewed a part of His Passion near His dying. I saw His sweet face as it were dry and bloodless with pale dying. And later, more pale, dead, languoring; and then turned more dead unto blue; and then more brown-blue, as the flesh turned more deeply dead. For His Passion shewed to me most specially in His blessed face (and chiefly in His lips): there I saw these four colours, though it were afore fresh, ruddy, and pleasing, to my sight. This was a pitiful change to see, this deep dying. And also the [inward] moisture clotted and dried, to my sight, and the sweet body was brown and black, all turned out of fair, life-like colour of itself, unto dry dying.

For that same time that our Lord and blessed Saviour died upon the Rood, it was a dry, hard wind, and wondrous cold, as to my sight, and what time [all] the precious blood was bled out of the sweet body that might pass there from, yet there dwelled a moisture in the sweet flesh of Christ, as it was shewed.

Bloodlessness and pain dried within; and blowing of wind and cold coming from without met together in the sweet body of Christ. And these four,—twain without, and twain within—dried the flesh of Christ by process of time. And though this pain was bitter and sharp, it was full long lasting, as to my sight, and painfully dried up all the lively spirits of Christ's flesh. Thus I saw the sweet flesh dry in seeming by part after part, with marvellous pains. And as long as any spirit had life in Christ's flesh, so long suffered He pain.

This long pining seemed to me as if He had been seven nights dead, dying, at the point of outpassing away, suffering the last pain. And when I said it seemed to me as if He had been seven night dead, it meaneth that the sweet body was so discoloured, so dry, so shrunken, so deathly, and so piteous, as if He had been seven night dead, continually dying. And methought the drying of Christ's flesh was the most pain, and the last, of His Passion.

Appendix 3: Visions

Hidegard von Bingen, Scivias. 1151. VISION ELEVEN: The Last Days and the Fall of the Antichrist

Then I looked to the North, and behold! five beasts stood there. One was like a dog, fiery but not burning; another was like a yellow lion; another was like a pale horse; another like a black pig; and the last like a gray wolf. And they were facing the West. And in the West, before those beasts, a hill with five peaks appeared; and from the mouth of each beast one rope stretched to one of the peaks of the hill. All the ropes were black except the one that came from the mouth of the wolf, which was partly black and partly white. And lo, in the East I saw again that youth whom I had first seen on the corner of the wall of the building where the shining and stone parts came together, clad in a purple tunic. I now saw him on the same corner, but now I could see him from the waist down. And from the waist down to the place that denotes the male he glowed like the dawn, and there a harp was lying with its strings across his body; and from there to the width of two fingers above his heel he was in shadow, but from there down to the bottom of the feet he was whiter than milk. And I saw again the figure of a woman whom I had previously seen in front of the altar that stands before the eyes of God; she stood in the same place, but now I saw her from the waist down. And from her waist to the place that denotes the female, she had various scaly blemishes; and in that latter place was a black and monstrous head. It had fiery eyes, and ears like an ass', and nostrils and mouth like a lion's; it opened wide its jowls and terribly clashed its horrible iron-colored teeth. And from this head down to her knees, the figure was white and red, as if bruised by many beatings; and from her knees to her tendons where they joined her heels, which appeared white, she was covered with blood. And behold! That monstrous head moved from its place with such a great shock that the figure of the woman was shaken through all her limbs. And a great mass of excrement adhered to the head; and it raised itself up upon a mountain and tried to ascend the height of Heaven. And behold, there came suddenly a thunderbolt, which struck that head with such great force that it fell from the mountain and yielded up its spirit in death. And a reeking cloud enveloped the whole mountain, which wrapped the head in such filth that the people who stood by were thrown into the greatest terror. And that cloud remained around the mountain for a while longer. The people who stood there, perceiving this, were shaken with great fear, and said to one another: "Alas, alas! What is this? What do you think this was? Alas, wretches that we are! Who will help us, and who will deliver us? For we know not how we were deceived. O Almighty God, have mercy on us! Let us return, let us return; let us hasten to the covenant of Christ's Gospel; for ah, ah, ah! we have been bitterly deceived!" And lo, the feet of the figure of the woman glowed white, shining with a splendor greater than the sun's.

Appendix 4: Marginalia

Some notes, found in medieval manuscripts.

- Love poems: Hebban olla uovala nestas hagunnan hinase hic enda thu uua umbidan uue nu? (All birds have started their nest except for you and I, what are we waiting for?)
- Jokes: As the harbor is welcome to the sailor, so is the last line to the scribe.
- Reflections: This is sad! O little book! A day will come in truth when someone over your page will say, 'The hand that wrote it is no more.'
- Complaints: I am cold, my hand hurts, the ink is bad etc.

Drolleries are illustrations decorating the margins of medieval manuscripts. Sometimes they seem to comment on the text, though much of their symbolic meaning is now just guesswork. Drolleries often included:

- half man half beasts
- devils and monsters
- gross acts, characters showing the reader their but
- sexual acts
- visual jokes



