



Collection 20: French Spiritual Life

Religious renewal in early modern France

Revisit the prodigious holdings of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* to present an array of texts centered around French spiritual life. Over 900 items featuring more than 370,000 pages of content have been selected from six different BnF departments, with the majority sourced from the renowned *Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal*. These items – mainly printed in France - reflect both the long history of Christian writings as a whole and the distinctive character of French religious institutions, practices and sensibility. Ranging from early incunabula publications to those of the late 17th century, the collection also serves as a register of Western Christendom's shifting foundations during the turbulent period of Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, which in France culminated in the fratricidal Wars of Religion and the Huguenot diaspora.

It's widely recognised that one response to the Protestant Reformation was a turn towards a renewed spirituality and asceticism. A late medieval guide to the spiritual life that enjoyed great popularity into the era of print was the *Imitatio* of Thomas à Kempis, although its authorship was at the time often disputed. Some attributed the work to the French scholar Jean Gerson, and Collection 20 features an incunable edition which presents the *Imitatio* alongside Gerson's *De meditatione cordis* as if both works were his own. While such devotional books were now being embraced and contemplated more widely by everyday laity, the Catholic Counter-Reformation also witnessed the revival and reform of religious orders like the Franciscans, as well as the marked growth of women's orders. Collection 20 reflects these developments both through a series of items relating to these orders and in texts by or about female religious figures. Among them is a 1500 Nuremberg edition of the *Revelationes* of Bridget of Sweden, as well as

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Source Library: French materials from the BnF

Approx. 400,000 pages, 1000 works

Launch: June 2022





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editions in French translation of the letters of Teresa of Ávila, together with a life of Saint Teresa by her confessor, Diego de Yepes. Also featured is Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy's account of the lives of four Reverend Mothers of the *Filles de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie*, an order established for older or infirm women in 1610. Its co-founders, Jeanne-Françoise de Chantal and François de Sales, similarly appear as subjects in a brace of biographies by Henri Cauchon de Maupas du Tour. François de Sales was a bishop whose ideas also had an impact on the so-called French school of spirituality, a 17th-century movement closely identified with the cardinal and statesman Pierre de Bérulle. Collection 20 features two editions of Bérulle's collected works, as well as a 1646 life of the cardinal written by Germain Habert.

Since France is predominantly a Catholic country, it is perhaps inevitable that items relating to the Catholic Church tend to dominate this selection. Nevertheless, Collection 20 is not without its share of dissident or fugitive voices, including Jean Calvin, Philip Melancthon and Antoinette Bourignon. Indeed, it could be said that the collection provides a reminder that – even within a single branch of the church or an individual nation – spiritual matters are frequently contested and scarcely settled. Beyond this, what Collection 20 undoubtedly provides is a compelling and rewarding survey of early modern religious and spiritual preoccupations in France and elsewhere, as articulated through the revolutionary medium of print.



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