



University
of Victoria

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

MEGHAN KORT

BA (University of Northern BC, 2014)

**“The Girls Who Spoke for God: Vocation and Discernment in
Seventeenth-Century France”**

Department of History

Thursday, August 25, 2016
10:00 A.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B215

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Sara Beam, Department of History, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Jill Walshaw, Department of History, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Claire Carlin, Department of French, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Catherine Harding, Department of Art History and Visual Studies, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

Abstract

During the seventeenth century, the Catholic Reformation sparked unprecedented growth in girls' educational opportunities with the opening of over five-hundred new teaching convents. Yet the history of girlhood during this time remains poorly understood. Even though girls' autobiographical writing from the seventeenth-century is rare, prescriptive, educational, and biographical sources from convent schools are rich in details about girls' lives. Moreover, they highlight the importance of vocational discernment. Upon leaving school, girls were encouraged to either take marriage vows and become a mother, or religious vows and become a nun. This decision was weighty, since orthodox Catholicism taught that salvation could only be received if one's life reflected God's will. In fact, reformed convents tested their entrants to ensure that their vocations were freely chosen and not forced. Seventeenth-century girls' educational theorists shared this concern, and while they debated the details of curriculum, they agreed that only girls had the authority to articulate their own God-given vocations. Girls were taught about their vocational options in convent school, where they encountered both models of female domesticity and women who were dedicated to religious life. The repeated affirmation of both of these paths created an atmosphere in which girls could legitimately choose either. Furthermore, the memories of vocational discernment recorded in nuns' lives offer evidence of plausible ways in which girls proved their callings to their communities. Focusing on religious vocation reveals how girls in the seventeenth-century actively articulated their ideas, impacted their societies, and challenged adult authority.