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The Vatican's mediums. The strange case of Pope Pius IX and the spiritualistic experiences of the archbishop of Rennes

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ABSTRACT

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Vatican addressed Spiritualism through a series of decrees, with prominent Roman theologians framing it as a diabolical plot aimed at undermining the Church. This polemic contributed to new narratives of the 'esoteric Other' that shaped the religious mnemohistory of Western societies. Yet, key aspects of this confrontation remain obscure. Around the time of Kardec's condemnation in 1864, Pius IX allegedly commissioned the archbishop of Rennes to carry out an empirical and confidential investigation into spiritualistic phenomena involving young children. Drawing on sources from the Vatican archives, this article reveals how the Holy See adopted a multi-layered strategy aimed not only at combating Spiritualism but also at understanding its phenomena. The findings shed light on the Church's approach, highlighting the complexity and diversity of its institutional response and offering new insights into the interaction between established religion and alternative spiritualities in the modern West.

KEYWORDS

Catholic Church; Vatican; Holy Office; Pius IX; Brossays Saint-Marc; Spiritualism; mediumship; occult

Introduction

This paper deals with a little-known episode in the history of the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century: the empirical investigation of mediumistic phenomena allegedly carried out between 1863 and 1869 by Godefroy Brossays Saint-Marc,[1] archbishop of Rennes, at the behest of Pope Pius IX. My reconstruction of these events is based on a single testimony. Inasmuch as the latter is filed in the official Vatican records and certainly appears, on the whole, to be a reliable source, it is unfortunate (although perhaps not surprising) that, at least to my knowledge, no other documents explicitly corroborate its contents. Perhaps new documentation will emerge in the future to complete the narrative and clarify the grey areas of this affair. In this article, however, I will show that this testimony is consistent with a variety of other sources, both published and unpublished, that are already available to researchers.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

[1]The archbishop's family name is sometimes spelled 'Brossais-Saint-Marc' or 'Brossay-Saint-Marc'. In accordance with the most recent scholarly literature (Libeau 1994; Gicquel 2011; Andrieux 2021), the spelling 'Brossays Saint-Marc' has been adopted here.

This seemingly erratic episode is, of course, best understood in context. While the history of the confrontation between the Catholic Church and modern Spiritualism has received some scholarly attention in the last decade or so (Biondi 2013; Cuchet 2012, [2005] 2020; Knowles 2013; Lynch 2013; Scaramella 2021), the subject has not yet been systematically examined. It is known that, in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Vatican dealt with Spiritualism through a series of normative resolutions (see below). Behind this regulatory façade, however, a complex activity of theoretical study and information gathering went on for decades, which is still poorly known and studied. In the following overview I will try to outline this activity in order to provide some background to the events described.

The Vatican and Spiritualism: some context

If mediumship is indeed 'ubiquitous', as Paper (2013, 16) notes, the history of Spiritualism in the modern era should be traced back to the exploration of trance states in somnambulistic and hypnotic phenomena that have their origins in mesmerism (Belhoste and Edelman 2015; Crabtree 1993; Darnton 1968; Edelman 1995; Ellenberger 1970; Méheust 1999; Monroe 2008). Beginning in 1766, Franz Anton Mesmer postulated the existence of a 'fluid', an ethereal and invisible force pervading all living things, including humans, that could be channelled for healing purposes. Its transfer to patients through mesmeric techniques often induced psycho-physiological 'crises' that were believed to be therapeutically beneficial (Peter 2009). A seminal development in this field came from one of Mesmer's students, Armand-Marie-Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur. In 1784, Puységur was the first to systematically study and document an anomalous psychological state that he termed 'magnetic somnambulism' (Puységur 1784, 157). Subjects mesmerized by Puységur appeared to be in a sleep-like state, while retaining the ability to speak and act. In this condition, they were able to diagnose illnesses and suggest appropriate remedies – but also, according to the Marquis, to access other people's minds and gain knowledge of distant or future events. Although similar phenomena had previously been observed in animal magnetism (Armando 2023), Puységur's contribution was significant. By placing this anomalous psychic state at the forefront of mesmeric treatment, Puységur emphasized the importance of somnambulists' verbal communication as well as their enhanced ability to access information during trance (Méheust 1999; Peter 2009).

Shortly after Puységur's discovery, explicitly spiritualistic applications of mesmerism began to surface in France, particularly in Lyon (Bergé 1995; Joly [1938] 1986). In this context, Freemason Jean-Baptiste Willermoz established the animal magnetism society *La Concorde*, which briefly integrated into the broader mesmeric network at the end of 1784 before breaking away by February of the following year. Influenced by Christian Illuminism, theosophical doctrines, and mystical Freemasonry, this group moved far beyond orthodox mesmeric practices. Here, trance states were employed not only for therapeutic purposes but also as a means of communicating with disembodied entities, exploring the afterlife, the nature of angels and spirits, and gaining insights into past and future events. This development marked the advent of what Faivre (2008) identified as 'magical eloquence' – trance-induced discourses aimed at unveiling 'ultimate realities' – and what Hanegraaff (2010) termed 'magnetic gnosis'. In the first decades of the

nineteenth century, 'magnetic spiritism' found particular resonance among Swedenborgians and German *Naturphilosophen* (Baier 2020; Crabtree 1993, 190–212; Hanegraaff 2021).

Between the 1840s and 1850s, amidst a climate of rampant positivism, the evolution of mesmerism into both a religious practice and an empirical framework for validating the existence of spiritual realms emerged in the works of early French occultist figures such as Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet (Hanegraaff 2016) and Jules Dupotet (Brach 2021; Jeanson 2023). However, these developments were soon overshadowed by the advent of Spiritualism, spurred by the introduction of table-turning from the United States in 1853. As Monroe (2008, 16–63) highlights, this practice gained widespread appeal due to its simplicity, perceived objectivity, and social entertainment value. By the late 1850s, Spiritualism had transformed into 'Spiritism' ('*Spiritisme*') under Allan Kardec, whose volumes introduced a structured doctrine centred on moral progress and reincarnation, greatly amplifying its influence in France and beyond (Cuchet 2012; Monroe 2008; Moreman 2013).

Despite Spiritualism's significant presence in the Anglo-Saxon world (Braude [1989] 2001; Moore 1977; Oppenheim 1985; Owen [1989] 2004), German-speaking regions (Heimerdinger 2001; Sawicki 2002), Spain (Abend 2004) and Italy (Biondi 1988), the primary sources analyzed in this paper highlight the pivotal role played by the French context. To fully grasp the Vatican's reaction to Spiritualism, then, it is necessary to first understand how the French clergy responded to these new phenomena within the period's distinctive cultural and political landscape. The transition from the revolutionary upheavals of the Second Republic (1848–1852) to the authoritarian regime of Napoleon III's Second Empire (1852–1870) marked a period of heightened conservative and clerical influence. Within this complex environment, the French clergy was divided: Gallicans, who supported the Church's autonomy in France and often aligned with state power, and Ultramontanes, who, inspired by counterrevolutionary thinkers like de Maistre, championed absolute loyalty to the papacy and advocated for centralized ecclesiastical authority in Rome (Gough 1986; O'Malley 2018, 54–95).

This internal division, which intersected with the broader rationalism-fideism debate (Amesbury 2022), significantly shaped the French clergy's response to Spiritualism. Many Gallican bishops, appointed under Napoleon III and known for their moderate stance, were largely content with the Church's situation under his regime and sought to avoid overly alarmist tones. They thus approached Spiritualism with measured concern, regarding it – sometimes with a hint of rationalistic condescension – as a transient superstition rooted in fraud and imagination. In contrast, ultramontane and intransigent factions, echoing the fears of Rome, saw Spiritualism as an apocalyptic threat associated with modernization and liberal political currents, a diabolical force capable of destabilizing both social and religious order – a perception further amplified by the political uncertainties surrounding the Papal States. Yet traditionalist clergy also discerned in Spiritualism a potential advantage, interpreting its paranormal phenomena as compelling evidence for the existence of malevolent spirits, which exposed the limitations of rationalism in providing a comprehensive understanding of the world (Cuchet 2012, 353–387). During this period, the Church's approach to Marian apparitions reflected a parallel dynamic. Events such as those at Lourdes (1858) were used to

counter rationalist scepticism, reinforcing the fideistic belief that genuine supernatural experiences could indeed occur, but only within the boundaries of orthodoxy and under the Church's validation (Harris 1999).

Soon, the need to respond to these emerging movements began to be felt in Rome, where the Holy Office and the Congregation of the Index closely monitored developments originating from France (Armando 2024). Between 1838 and 1847, the Inquisition had issued a series of decrees condemning as 'illicit' and 'heretical' any attempt to employ animal magnetism to explain (or provoke) genuinely supernatural phenomena (Armando 2005, 2013, 2015, 2022). In 1856, building on these condemnations – and alarmed by reports from abroad concerning table-turning and related practices[2] – the Holy Office published a double encyclical (one text in Italian and one in Latin) addressed to all bishops. This decree, entitled *Adversus magnetismi abusus*, forbade as 'superstitious' and 'fraudulent' the 'abuses' of animal magnetism, practiced outside of the legitimate context of scientific research, especially by women who dared 'to preach on Religion itself, to summon the souls of the dead and receive their replies; to perceive unknown and distant things' (Armando 2022, 4), thereby issuing an implicit yet unequivocal condemnation of spiritualistic practices.

But this was only the beginning. From 1863 to 1864, the Inquisition – prompted by a member of the ultramontane clergy, the Belgian priest François Veracruysse, a devoted follower of Our Lady of La Salette – launched an in-depth investigation into Spiritualism (Cuchet 2012, 379–387). This inquiry resulted in an extensive report written by Giacinto De Ferrari, a Dominican theologian who served as Commissioner of the Holy Office (De Ferrari 1864). Ultimately, the writings of key figures in the French Spiritualist movement, such as Allan Kardec and Zéphyr-Joseph Piérart, were condemned and placed on the Index by a decree issued on 25 April 1864. For this investigation, the Inquisition heavily relied on the expertise of Cardinal Césaire Mathieu, archbishop of Besançon, who was tasked with conducting a systematic review of the state of Spiritualism in France (De Ferrari 1864, 47–74). While Mathieu acknowledged the potential involvement of human magnetic forces and did not rule out demonic intervention in mediumistic séances – where seemingly supernatural events were observed – he also emphasized the role of fraud in such occurrences and framed Spiritualism primarily as a threat to moral and religious order, especially due to Kardec's reincarnationism. In a second phase of the inquiry (1864–1866), the Holy Office aimed to assess the global proliferation of the Spiritualist movement. A subsequent report by De Ferrari, drawing from international correspondence and written in March 1866, indicated that Spiritualism was either absent or effectively countered in most countries, leading to the conclusion that no further action was warranted (De Ferrari 1866). The investigation concluded in August 1866 with plans to potentially address the issue in an encyclical.

This initiative was later taken up by the First Vatican Council (1869–1870). Here, the discussion of Spiritualism took place in an almost apocalyptic atmosphere, marked by the heightened tensions associated with the process of Italian national unification, which threatened the temporal power of Rome, and by the struggle with Freemasonry, which

[2]These documents are preserved in a Holy Office file relating to J.E. de Mirville's *Pneumatologie* (1853), a volume that had been sent to Rome for examination by the Inquisitor of Perugia, the Dominican Giacinto Novaro, in September 1853 (Archive of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Holy Office, Censura librorum 1851–1856, n° 20).

was suspected both of supporting the Italian patriots and of fomenting the new 'necromantic' heresies. On 16 September 1869, the celebrated Jesuit theologian Giovanni Perrone presented his *votum* (report) *De magnetismo animali, somnambulismo et spiritismo* to the Theological-Dogmatic Commission of the Council (Perrone 1875). Here Perrone argued, on the basis of an earlier treatise on the same subject (Perrone 1866; see Shea 2014, 2015) – but also in the wake of the so-called French 'new demonologists' (Introvigne 2016, 71–109) and of the Italian antimagnetic literature (Baroni 2025) – that spiritualistic phenomena could not be attributed to natural causes, as they went far beyond them, and that Spiritualism should be considered a diabolical heresy, akin to ancient pagan rituals. In the wake of this report, the members of the Commission for Ecclesiastical Discipline undertook the task of writing a formal decree on animal magnetism and Spiritualism (Mansi 1927, 773–775).

This document, written in 1870, contains the first explicit condemnation of Spiritualism issued by the Holy See. After making clear that 'superstitions of this kind were introduced by the frauds of demons, from which all divination is derived', the final section of the text reads as follows:

> Therefore, in order to effectively suppress a crime so hostile to both religion and civil society, under the penalty of excommunication and other sanctions at the discretion of the Ordinaries, we prohibit anyone from henceforth engaging in, participating in, or in any way supporting experiments in animal magnetism, somnambulism, turning tables, spiritualism, and similar practices aimed at the aforementioned effects, regardless of any reason or pretext. (Mansi 1927, 774)[3]

Although approved, this decree never saw the light of day and is now almost forgotten. The Council was suspended *sine die* on 20 October 1870, following the annexation of Rome to the Kingdom of Italy. By the end of the century, further investigations by the Vatican would not challenge the 'demonological' assumptions adopted by the Council. However, they would have to consider additional sources, including turn-of-the-century parapsychology.[4]

Pius IX and Spiritualism

Thus, by the decree of 25 April 1864, the books of the leading figures of French Spiritualism were condemned by the Congregation of the Index. The very next day Pius IX sent a long letter to the archbishop of Paris, Georges Darboy, a part of which dealt specifically with Spiritualism. It is worth noting that relations between the two were strained. 'The archbishop's pastoral mentality and ecclesiological conception', writes Martina, 'were in sharp contrast with those of the pope', who was annoyed by Darboy's deference to Napoleon III, his adherence to Gallicanism and his independence from Rome

[3]Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Latin, Italian and French are my own.

[4]In the 1890s, a further investigation by the Holy Office resulted in a volume written by the pope's physician Giuseppe Lapponi. Lapponi (1897) concluded that Spiritualism was 'the manifestation of activities of a preternatural order' and in this regard it was 'identical to the Magic and Necromancy of the Greeks, the Romans, and the Middle Ages' (215). A decree issued by the Holy Office on 30 March 1898, formally prohibited the practice of Spiritualism (*Acta Sanctae Sedis* 1897–1898, 701–702). This procedure was repeated in 1917 with another decree (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 1917, 268). In the journal *Acta Sanctae Sedis*, which played an important role in disseminating Vatican pronouncements and framing their interpretation, the text of the 1898 decree is accompanied by a commentary stating that 'such phenomena are to be attributed to demons' (*Acta Sanctae Sedis* 1897-1898, 219).

(Martina 1986, 662; see also Martina 2014). In this very letter, as Armando (2024, 45) notes, Pius IX's warning concerning Spiritualism 'mingled with other disputes of a political and, above all, ecclesiological nature (Darboy had imposed a visit on the Capuchin and Jesuit institutes, even though they depended directly on the Holy See)'. Such disagreements would eventually prevent Darboy from becoming a cardinal – despite the support of Napoleon III – which was unusual for an archbishop of Paris (Boudon 2011, 113–114).

The tone of Pius IX's missive was worried and severe. The pope expressed his concern about the spread of teachings contrary to Church doctrine among the Catholic youth of Paris, but also about the rise of Spiritualism, and seemed to intend to suggest that the archbishop would not be able to contain it:

> We also know that in your city the sect known in French as 'Spiritisme' is growing increasingly powerful, focusing on evoking spirits, enabling their communication with humans, and undermining our most holy Catholic faith. In 1858, the 'Société Parisienne d'Études Spirites' was established, complete with a board of directors, bylaws, members, new recruits, and nocturnal meetings. This group brazenly engages in discussions on a variety of religious matters. The books and publications on this topic are particularly detrimental, especially the 'Revue Spiritualiste' by Pierart [*sic*] and the 'Revue Spirite' directed by Allan Kardek [*sic*]. These, along with other pernicious books, have been condemned and placed on the Index of Forbidden Books by a Decree of Our Congregation of the Holy Office, published on the 20th of this month and approved by us'. (Sallua 1890, 15)

Darboy did not respond until several months later, on 1 September 1864. His reply had a bitter tone. The papal letter clearly reflected a low regard for his pastoral efforts. Darboy, for his part, surmised that this distrust stemmed from the insinuations of his critics, and firmly rejected the idea that they knew better than he did how to tackle the 'evil' of Spiritualism. According to Darboy, the 'spiritualist sect' was merely a collection of charlatans and the deluded; the real threats to the French Church lay elsewhere ("Monseigneur Darboy et le Saint-Siège: documents inédits" 1907, 242–243).

Pius IX's involvement with Spiritualism, however, went far beyond the letter sent to Darboy in April 1864. In fact, during the same period, the pontiff was in contact with another French prelate, the influential archbishop of Rennes, Godefroy Brossays Saint-Marc: the two were dealing with the same issues from a completely different angle. According to a witness heard during the beatification process of Pius IX, the archbishop was commissioned by the pope, presumably in confidence, to conduct a series of 'experiments' aimed at exploring the nature of spiritualistic phenomena, the possibility of supernatural involvement, the characteristics of mediumistic abilities, and the potential risks to participants. The significance of this testimony warrants a brief overview of the source and a brief biographical sketch of the witness.

The source of this information is the *Positio super introductione causae* related to the beatification and canonization process of Pius IX (see Cannone 2012, 189–202; Mucci 1984; Rusconi 2010, 385–407).[5] This extensive three-volume book, printed in Rome in 1954, was not intended for the public. It is an internal document of the Sacred Congregation of Rites (whose functions were later transferred to the Congregation for the Causes

[5]I am very grateful to Giuseppe M. Croce for bringing this important source to my attention and to Simona Durante, archivist of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, for assisting me in my research.

of Saints, now known as the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints), the ecclesiastical body that oversees the procedures for the beatification and canonization of the 'Servants of God'. The *Positio super introductione causae* thus served as a preliminary report to facilitate the discussion and judgment of the consultors, bishops and cardinals involved in the process of Pius IX's beatification and canonization.[6] Among the 243 witnesses heard between 1907 and 1922, we find 'Princess Henrica Maria Cassano Zunica, née Riario Sforza', whose birth name was actually Henriette-Marie de Courte (1856–1922). Henriette-Marie – or simply Marie[7] – was born in Paris on 9 October 1856, to Neapolitan marquise Elisabetta Riario Sforza (≈1823–≈1893) and Breton count Jean-Baptiste-Marie de Courte (1801–1878).[8]

The family background of the witness warrants closer examination. Henriette-Marie's mother, Elisabetta (Frenchified as Élisabeth), was the daughter of the Neapolitan Marquis Antonio Riario Sforza (1787–1856), Minister Plenipotentiary of the King of the Two Sicilies in Florence and then in Spain in 1852, and the Scottish Isabella Lockhart (1786–1850). The noble Riario Sforza family had been providing cardinals to the Church since the fifteenth century, and still counted important contacts in the inner circles of the Vatican. In fact, Elisabetta was a cousin of Sisto Riario Sforza (1810–1877), archbishop of Naples since 1845, cardinal since 1846, former Special Secretary to Pope Gregory XVI (with whom he shared the papal apartment), and very close to Pius IX himself (Ambrasi 1999, 38–42). Elisabetta's uncle, Tommaso Riario Sforza (1782–1857), was also a cardinal. We do not know whether Elisabetta was raised in France. It appears, however, that she married Jean-Baptiste-Marie de Courte on 26 April 1854. A native of Laval, with distant Swiss ancestry, de Courte was the son of a former royal

[6]The process had begun in 1907 under the pontificate of Pius X. Between 1907 and 1922, during with the so-called 'ordinary processes' held in Rome, Senigallia, Spoleto, Imola and Naples, 243 witnesses were heard. The outcome of this work was a massive *Positio* in twelve volumes from which the postulator of the cause, Giuseppe Stella, extracted in 1952 a *Summarium* of 1159 pages, collecting the most relevant testimonies, which coincides with the first volume of the *Positio* with which we are dealing. 'From the origins of the Dicastery it was customary to prepare and give to the press a specific *Positio*, not infrequently very voluminous, concerning every stage of the Cause itself and with the intention of offering the judging bodies evidence of the exercise of virtues, martyrdom or alleged miracle. Each *Positio* therefore contained the *acta processus*, that is, the oral testimonies and documents, and the *acta causae*, that is, the debate between the Dicastery and the actors in the Cause […]. The complexity and progressive rigour employed in the study of the Causes thus also had a direct influence on the composition and size of the numerous respective *Positiones*. Thus for example with regard to the writings of the Servants of God, an initial *Positio super scriptis* or a *Positio super revisione scriptorum* was composed. Equally in the preliminary stages it was necessary to prepare a *Positio super non cultu* […] and then a *Positio super validitate processuum,* respectively on the validity of the ordinary or informative principal and rogatorial processes, to arrive then at the *Positio super introductione causae*. The next stages […] provided for the respective congregations a *Positio super virtutibus et fama sanctitatis*, a *Positio super martyrio et causa martyrii*, and finally *a Positio super miro*. These *Positiones*, following the more or less numerous and pertinent *Animadversiones* formulated by the Promoter of the Faith – sometimes also amalgamated in a specific *Positio* […] – were to be again prepared with the respective *Responsiones* and under the title of *Nova Positio*, or even just under the title of *Nova Positio* or *Altera Positio* or even *Novissima Positio*, or even just under the name of *Responsio ad novissimas animadversiones* … Such *Positiones*, sometimes not very voluminous, were nevertheless prepared in separate small volumes, or even amalgamated into a single volume; at other times they constituted substantial volumes in their own right' (Criscuolo, Ols, and Sarno [2011] 2012, 211–212).

[7]As she was referred to in her father's last will testament. See Departmental Archives of Mayenne (Laval), 187 J 28, document entitled 'Liquidation de la succession de Jean-Baptiste-Marie de Courte' (1879), 55.

[8]On 7 February 1877 Henriette-Marie married Orazio Zunica, Prince of Cassano (1855–1926), born in Naples to a family of ancient Spanish origin. The couple does not appear to have had any children. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Henriette-Marie de Courte was involved in the activities of Italian Catholic feminism, becoming president of the Union of Women of Catholic Action and participating in 1908 in the first congress of the National Council of Italian Women, in which aristocratic women played an important role (Dawes 2011; Cova 2023). Orazio Zunica, for his part, was an advocate of the United States of Europe and active in the League for European Unity founded by Sir Max Waechter (Tiedau 2019).

bodyguard and associated with the Chateaubriand family (Duine 2009). A devout Catholic, he served for many years as mayor of the commune of Saint-M'Hervé, located between Rennes and Laval (Saint-Allais 1878, 86–77), where the de Courtes had their family estate (see below).

Henriette-Marie de Courte's family lineage – an aristocracy closely linked to the Vatican and deeply rooted in Breton Catholicism – provides some contextual background to the events described. While the available biographical information is somewhat limited, leaving some details unclear, the family's close ties to both the pope and the archbishop of Rennes are well established and corroborated by other sources.[9]

What, then, does Henriette-Marie reveal about Pius IX in her testimony, which, according to the textual evidence, seems to have been given towards the end of 1915 or at the beginning of 1916, that is, some fifty years after the events described?[10]

I think it is best to let the witness speak directly, quoting the beginning of her testimony:

> My name is Enrichetta Maria de Courte Riario Sforza of the late Giovanni Battista and Elisabetta Marchesa Riario Sforza. I was born in Paris on October 9, 1856, and baptized, I believe, on January 19, 1857, at the parish church of Mary Magdalene. I was raised and kept in the holy fear of God, and from childhood my mother instilled in my brother and me the habit of writing a daily diary of my life, both of what I did and what I felt and heard; so that not only are all the events that I heard or saw recorded, but I also remember those that many others would not remember, even though they occurred or were heard much more recently.
>
> I met the Servant of God Pius IX for the first time at the age of seven on the occasion of a private Audience, as he wanted to see the five or six children, among whom I numbered, who were to serve in experiments by the Archbishop of Rennes, Godfroi Saint-Marc [*sic*], later Cardinal, which he was conducting on the orders of the Servant of God Pius IX ['*per ordine del Servo di Dio Pio IX*'] on Spiritualism, magnetism, Illuminism and the subconscious ['*spiritismo, magnetismo, illuminismo e subcoscienza*'], in which studies he was most versed; and he later wrote an account, which was sent to the Pope. The Servant of God wanted to see us to bless us and assure us that the Immaculate Mother would crush the devil and that nothing bad would happen to us if we put ourselves at the service of the Church. The Servant of God wanted these studies to know how far the natural part went and also to know the dangers to which those who practiced spiritualistic meetings, etc. were exposed. It should be noted that Illuminism is the Protestant sect that is causing the greatest havoc among Catholics today. (Positio 1954, vol. 1, 797–798)

From the chronological references provided, it appears that the meeting between the pope and the children involved in these experiments took place between late 1863 and October 1864. It may not be unreasonable to speculate that these experiments were commissioned by Pius IX after the inquisitorial process was over, that is, after April 1864. With the Holy Office investigation complete, and with the extensive reports of both

[9]Jean-Baptiste de Courte offered a nine-quintal bronze statue as an *ex voto* to the church of Notre-Dame du Roc for the birth of his son. In 1865, at the request of his wife's cousin, the archbishop of Naples Sisto Riario Sforza, Pius IX granted the altar of the church the title of 'privileged altar' (see Jégo 1949).

[10]The witness was fifty-nine years old at the time of the interrogation, which places the date between 1915 and 1916 (Positio 1954, vol. 1, 798). More information about the witness and the circumstances of her testimony may be found in the original records of the cause, which are also kept in the archives of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints. However, these documents are not available for consultation because the canonization process of Pius IX, who was beatified on 3 September 2000, is still in progress.

Figure 1. The Château de la Bougatrière as it appeared around 1902. © Municipality of Saint-M'Hervé.

Mathieu and De Ferrari at hand, the pope probably had a solid theoretical basis for embarking on an empirical investigation. However, the text does not exclude the possibility that the archbishop's experiments had already begun by the time of the hearing; it is impossible to determine exactly when.

Additional details provided later in the text offer context for the experiments, which must have occurred, at least in part, after December 1864. This timing is suggested by references to the *Syllabus of Errors* during the séances (see below). It seems most likely that these sessions took place at the de Courte family estate in Saint-M'Hervé in Brittany, in northwestern France. The 'Château de la Bouchartrière' mentioned in the source (see below) is probably a misspelling of the Château de la Bougatrière in Saint-M'Hervé, which had been owned by the de Courte family since 1694 (Figure 1).[11] Count Jean-Baptiste de Courte was also present at these meetings. It is also worth highlighting Pius IX's reference to the Immaculate Conception. During these years, after the visions seen by Catherine Labouré (1830) and those experienced at La Salette (1846) and Lourdes (1858), Marian devotion received a significant boost from the pope himself, who had proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854. In December 1863, this devotion was further consolidated with the establishment of a new office and a new mass, which provided the cult with a 'clear and precise dogmatic foundation' (Martina 1986, 285).

According to Henriette-Marie de Courte, it was her father Jean-Baptiste who later presented a report on these experiments to the pope in December 1869, coinciding with the opening of the First Vatican Council. Among other things, the report contained a number of prophetic revelations. Some of these predictions foreshadowed the impending

[11]See https://patrimoine.bzh/gertrude-diffusion/dossier/IA35000108 (accessed March 28, 2024); and Orain 1882, 27.

Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), an event that was interpreted – according to a distinctly apocalyptic framework – as indicative of a collective moral decline that would plunge Europe into chaos. Specifically, the war and its catastrophic aftermath were seen as the consequences of society's adherence to the errors denounced by the *Syllabus*:

> Due to family circumstances, we did not return to Rome until December 1869 […]. In that audience, my father gave the Holy Father the account of the studies and experiments, in which he had also participated, of the Archbishop of Rennes on Magnetism, spiritualism, etc. […]. In the report that my father made to the Servant of God, on the aforementioned magnetism and Spiritualism, etc., among other things I remember that he informed him that the Prussians would invade France as far as the Church of Saint-Céneré,[12] diocese of Laval, Mayenne, in which village Pius IX had taken a great interest and had given money for the church, and a stained glass window that had been installed in the Church of St. Clement (I believe in the lower church), and that the table that they used for experiments, as the table itself had declared, would fall into the possession of the Prussians. So it happened to the letter, for this table was transported from our Castle of the Bouchartrière [*sic*] (Diocese of Rennes) to our other property in the village of Saint-Céneré, and thus fell into the hands of the Prussians. In those experiments reported to the Servant of God, it was also known that two of the propositions of the Syllabus of Errors would be revealed as the true root of all the upheaval and war in which the world would find itself. I have also seen other particular things verified in those experiments, but here is not the place to speak of them. When the Servant of God was told that prophecies were not to be expected, he replied, 'I do not grant faith, nor do I deny it, but only want to examine it', and he confirmed this quoting the word of St. Paul, who says that one must test spirits to see whether they are from God or not. In these terms he had expressed himself to the Secretary of Godfroi Saint Marc [*sic*], who had come to bring some papers to be examined by the Servant of God. (Positio 1954, vol. 1, 799–801)

A few pages later, de Courte points out: 'The propositions of the Syllabus, of which I have already said in another session that their falsity would be recognized on the occasion of a great war, are 59 and 64, that is, *Omnia humana facta iuris vim habent* [All human facts have the force of right], and *Tum cuiusque sanctissimi iuramenti violatio, tum quaelibet scelesta flagitiosaque actio sempiternae legi repugnans, non solum haud est improbanda, verum etiam omnino licita summisque laudibus efferenda, quando id pro patriae amore agatur*' [The violation of any solemn oath, as well as any wicked and flagitious action repugnant to the eternal law, is not only not blameworthy but is altogether lawful and worthy of the highest praise when done through love of country] (Positio 1954, vol. 1, 811). Both propositions, previously condemned by Pius IX,[13] are contained in the section of the *Syllabus* entitled 'Errors Concerning Natural and Christian Ethics'.[14] Especially in the second one, as Sandoni (2012, 173–174) notes, 'Pius IX rails against those who claim to justify […] the usurpations made to the detriment of the Church and pontifical authority […] in the name of what the Roman patriots […] consider beneficial and useful for the homeland and for the state', condemning 'the strongly naturalistic claim to place an all-human value before the "eternal law" and its sacred bonds'.

This kind of apocalyptic discourse fits perfectly into the cultural framework of the time. In France, since the 1830s, Catholic counter-revolutionary and ultramontane

[12]In the original: 'San Cennerio'.
[13]The first was from the allocution *Maxima quidem* (1862); the second from *Quibus quantisque* (1849).
[14]Here I follow the English translation of the *Syllabus* provided by the website https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm (accessed June 18, 2024).

circles cultivated prophecy, often centred on the figures of the 'Grand Monarque' – a 'great king' who would return to save France – and the 'Grand Pape', restored by the former (Kselman 1983, 130). In this context, 'private revelations […] convey[ed] divine warnings and exhortations to repentance and conversion', and foreshadowed 'the most severe punishments and catastrophes' (Airiau 2000, 67), while also fostering expectations of an 'imminent restoration of an *ordo mundi* disrupted by revolutionary upheavals' (Rusconi 2010, 376). Such a trend, overlapping with the phenomenology of Marian apparitions, escalated during the war with Prussia, an event which would be often interpreted as a punishment for France's acquiescence in the annexation of the papal territories in 1860 (Kselman 1983, 131).[15] In this sense, the mediumistic revelations received by Brossays Saint-Marc appear to be a variant of a broader apocalyptic discourse that resonated with the conservative Catholic milieux, in need of eschatological frameworks capable of making sense of the historical and political turmoil of the era – and in particular seem to echo the mindset and anxieties of an ultramontane cleric concerned about the fate of the Church's temporal power.

While these remarks about the Prussian war conclude the account of Brossays Saint-Marc's spiritualistic 'experiments', Henriette-Marie's involvement in the paranormal realm was far from over. According to her own testimony, she continued her investigations in this field during the following pontificates, at the request of prominent foreign prelates:

> In May 1870, during the farewell audience with the Servant of God's family, I expressed my regret at leaving Rome, but that I flattered myself that I would be returning soon. But the Servant of God replied to me: 'When you return, I will no longer be here; you will resume the work under a successor of my name'. And so it happened. The work to which the Servant of God alluded consisted of those experiments on Illuminism, Spiritualism, etc., which I spoke of in the previous session, and in which I had then only taken a passive part, but with which I then became occupied under Pius X, making a list of possessions, and in general of spiritistic, hypnotic phenomena, etc., and writings about these. Yet even before the advent to the Pontifical throne of Pius X, by order of the archbishops of Paris and London, I dealt with the aforementioned phenomena, without, however, coming to Rome. (Positio 1954, vol. 1, 801–802)

Questions

De Courte's text raises several questions, some of which are not easy to answer. In general terms, the fact that Pius IX asked the archbishop of Rennes to carry out 'experiments in spiritualism' cannot fail to arouse some surprise at first. It is true, and worth repeating, that the empirical study of paranormal phenomena by clergymen was not a new thing. In 1853, in Italy, not only had some 'fringe' priests such as Taddeo Consoni and Enrico Dal Pozzo investigated table-turning at first hand (Consoni 1853; Dal Pozzo 1853a, 1853b), but – as Roman priest and historian Vincenzo Tizzani reveals in his manuscripts – similar experiences had even been arranged in the Vatican, in the presence of the

[15]A similar prophetic fervour was prevalent in intransigent circles in Italy as well. Since 1854, the Turin priest Giovanni Bosco had been publishing his prophetic insights, filled with hints about the military and political events that would lead to the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy. On 18 February 1870, during a private audience, he even presented the pope with a prophetic document announcing the restoration of papal power, under the aegis of the Virgin Mary (Rusconi 2010, 371–385).

powerful Cardinal Giacomo Antonelli, Secretary of State under Pius IX, by the Jesuits Giambattista Pianciani and Pietro Tessieri.[16] Antonelli is described by Tizzani as 'the promoter and protector of those revolving tables' (Croce 2015, 276 and note 272), and his influence on the events of the following years cannot be ruled out. It cannot be denied, however, that the testimony we are now dealing with illustrates a different level of involvement within the Church system, revealing that the pontiff himself favoured an empirical examination of these matters.

But the text quoted above also raises more specific questions. In fact, de Courte recounts episodes from Pius IX's life that might have seemed controversial, if not downright unseemly, in the eyes of many contemporaries, and such as to provide potent fodder for any detractors of the pontiff. One may wonder, then, whether this testimony was used during the process of Pius IX's beatification by the Promoter of the Faith – also known as the 'Devil's advocate' – or by some of the consultors, in order to cast doubt on Pius IX's virtues and thus hinder his cause for beatification.

In this regard, it is worth noting that in the second volume of the *Positio* (and more precisely in the *Informatio*, which offers a systematic examination of Pius IX's virtues), some passages from de Courte's testimony are indeed quoted, but only to emphasize the pope's moral qualities. In the chapter on 'heroic faith', for example, de Courte's testimony is used to show that Pius IX '*summa animi commotione admiratus est constantem firmitatem fidelium qui pro Christo patiebantur*' ('was deeply moved with admiration at the steadfast firmness of the faithful who were suffering for Christ'; Positio 1954, vol. 2, 294). The chapter on 'heroic prudence' recalls Pius IX's cautious attitude toward the prophecies of La Salette, as described by de Courte (Positio 1954, vol. 1, 801). If the episodes reported by the witness had caused confusion about the pope's behaviour, they would probably have been mentioned in the *animadversiones* formulated by the Promoter of the Faith and contained in the third volume of the *Positio*. But a reading of the text shows that this was not the case. Such suspicions could also be found among the objections to the beatification of Pius IX, as summarized in 1963 in the *Nova positio super virtutibus* (see Cannone 2012, 221–231). Among the remarks aimed at refuting the 'heroic quality' of Pius IX's virtues, however, there is no trace of the episodes reported by the witness.[17] At first glance, therefore, the latter do not seem to have aroused much interest, either among those who supported the canonization of Pius IX or among those who opposed it.

If we broaden our perspective, more complex and challenging questions arise from this document. First, why did Pius IX specifically choose the archbishop of Rennes to conduct in-depth studies on Spiritualism? What was the rationale for involving such young children in these experiments? What drove these experiments – was it purely scientific inquiry, or was there a motive to extract certain information through psychic states, and if so, what kind? Finally, what were the results of these experiments, and

[16]On these experiences, see *Civiltà Cattolica*, 2(2), 1853, 459–460. On Vincenzo Tizzani, see Croce 1985, 1993, 2015, 2019.
[17]These new *animadversiones* focus on several points, highlighting the pope's behaviour at some specific moments of his life. Among the aspects scrutinized are Pius IX's youth and his interest in women; his liberal sympathies; the amnesty granted to the Church's political enemies; his flight to Gaeta in 1848; his relations with Rosmini; the political influence of Cardinal Antonelli, judged by some to be excessive and controversial (just as controversial was Antonelli's very personality; see Coppa 1990). Other objections relate to Pius IX's moral profile and point to character traits of the pontiff that do not support the 'heroic quality' of his virtues. These traits include a certain vanity, irascibility, and an inclination to sarcasm or mockery (*Nova positio super virtutibus* 1963; see Cannone 2012; Mucci 1984; Rusconi 2010).

where is the elusive 'report' that Count de Courte allegedly submitted to the pope in December 1869?

A spiritual(istic) bond

A brief portrait of Brossays Saint-Marc may provide some context for at least the first question.[18] Born in Rennes into a wealthy Catholic bourgeois family that had prospered in the textile (silk curtains, cloth for merchant and military ships) and food trades, Godefroy Brossays Saint-Marc (1803–1878) enjoyed a distinguished ecclesiastical career. Ordained a priest in 1831, he was named honorary canon of the Metropolitan Church of Rennes the same year. He became vicar general of the diocese in 1835 and bishop in 1841, supported by the political authorities (the Bourbons) who appreciated his liberal views and his Orleanist tendencies. Moreover, his excellent relationship with Napoleon III facilitated the transformation of Brittany into an autonomous ecclesiastical province, independent of the See of Tours, culminating in his elevation to the position of first Archbishop of Rennes in 1859.

The political upheavals of the following years would have a profound effect on Brossays Saint-Marc's ecclesiastical trajectory. The unification of Italy (1860–1861), initially favoured by Napoleon III's alliance with Piedmont, drastically reduced the Papal States and left the pope politically vulnerable. As the Vatican faced mounting challenges, Brossays Saint-Marc made a decisive turn in his allegiances: he aligned himself with the most intransigent form of ultramontanism, becoming a staunch advocate of absolute adherence to papal authority. He advocated the standardization of the liturgy according to the Roman rite, fervently defended the temporal power of the Church, and was a vocal critic of the secularization and moral decline of French society. This decay, he argued, was due to the abandonment of the authority of the Church and the pope, the latter perfectly embodying the prerogatives of the former. During the First Vatican Council, he supported the dogma of papal infallibility. He also diverted substantial sums of money from his followers' donations to the Holy See, a move that severely strained relations with the local community (Libeau 1994).

During these years, the theological discourse of Brossays Saint-Marc found expression in a series of writings related to the exercise of the episcopal ministry: Lenten messages, pastoral letters, circulars. According to Libeau, a 'profoundly reactionary' ideological dimension emerged from this work, which incidentally brought him excellent relations with the Holy See. Between 1861 and 1862, Brossays Saint-Marc visited Rome twice (Libeau 1994, 88). On his first visit, Pius IX presented him with a solid gold chalice decorated with micro-mosaics and bearing the archbishop's family crest (the pelican, a Christian symbol of charity), which is now a centrepiece of the treasury of Rennes Cathedral (Oulhen 2021, 381–382). Subsequent correspondence between the Holy See and the archbishop also attests to the latter's requests for precious marbles to embellish the cathedral's altar; Brossays

[18]To my knowledge, the only in-depth biographical study on Brossays Saint-Marc is the dissertation by Christophe Libeau (1994). The text has not been widely disseminated and is only available in some French public libraries and archives (I consulted it at the Departmental Archives of Ille-et-Vilaine, in Rennes). On the early years of Brossays Saint-Marc, see also Libeau 2001. More recent publications also include Gicquel 2011, a volume characterized, however, by a more legal slant, and offering less material on the cardinal's life. Some useful references can be found in Andrieux 2021 (see in particular Heudré 2021 and Oulhen 2021).

Saint-Marc envisioned making it 'a true Roman basilica', in his own words.[19] In recognition of his qualities and his fervent ultramontane activism, Brossays Saint-Marc was elevated to the rank of cardinal in 1875. He received the cardinal's hat directly from Pius IX in a ceremony at the Vatican on 31 December 1877. Just over a month later, on 7 February 1878, Pius IX died. The archbishop followed just three weeks later, on February 26.

Brossays Saint-Marc and table-turning

The strong bond with Pius IX, reinforced by the prelate's fervent papism (a stance that differed markedly from the more reserved approach of Darboy), provides a partial background to the episode narrated by de Courte. To fully understand it, however, one must also consider Brossays Saint-Marc's concern with paranormal phenomena. Such an interest, absent from his theological writings, appears in two 'episcopal reports' on table-turning that Brossays Saint-Marc wrote between 1853 and 1854.[20] It is important to note that Brittany was not yet an autonomous ecclesiastical province at that time. Therefore, these reports could have been sent by Brossays Saint-Marc to the archbishop of Tours, under whose jurisdiction he fell as bishop of Rennes, to inform him of the evolution of table-turning, a phenomenon that was causing quite a stir throughout France.

According to the first report, on 14 July 1853, Brossays Saint-Marc, assisted by Vicar General Augustin Combes, decided 'not out of curiosity, but only in order to give a guide of conscience to the faithful entrusted to him', to 'judge for himself the reality of the phenomena known as the turning and speaking tables' (Libeau 1994, 267). The classical apparatus was therefore set up. In addition to the bishop and his vicar, a total of twelve people were present, including five young men between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, who formed a chain around a three-legged table (*guéridon*). After about half an hour of waiting, the small table began to turn, slowly at first, then faster and faster. At the request of one of the young people, named Ernest Deléchuse, the table stopped, stood up on two legs and knocked on the ground, answering the questions asked by one of the young people (one knock for 'yes' and two knocks for 'no'):

> Then, at the young man's request, [the table] began to answer, in the most surprising manner, a series of questions, asked over and over again by the same man and suggested by us or the other assistants, sometimes about present things, sometimes about future things, sometimes about objects that existed only in the mind of the questioner. It is true that in six of the answers we found a rather large number of errors, but also a large number of answers of such accuracy and of such an extraordinary nature that they were obviously beyond the comprehension and power of the human mind. (Libeau 1994, 267)

[19]Letter from Brossays Saint-Marc to the Secretariat of State, 28 April 1868 (Vatican Apostolic Archive, Segreteria di Stato, year 1868, rubric 183, f. 108r, protocol no. 51969). Previously, the archbishop had sent to the Vatican the design of the new altar, including a tomb in which Brossays Saint-Marc himself would be buried (see ibid., ff. 105–106, protocol no. 51632). Antonelli, the Secretary of State, replied on August 11, communicating 'being in readiness the five slabs for the step, in accordance with the drawing. To these then I am pleased to add as a gift eight small columns for the tabernacle' (ibid., f. 109r). Brossays Saint-Marc replied on August 23 with a letter of thanks, commissioning one of his diocesans, the military man Eugène Pongerard, commander of French artillery in Civitavecchia, to transport the marble and columns (ff. 110–112, protocol no. 52213).

[20]The two texts (reproduced in Libeau 1994, 225–226) are preserved in a document belonging to the archives of the secretariat of the bishopric of Rennes (*Registre contenant les mandements, les circulaires, les ordonnances et autres actes administratifs,* vol. 12, 1848–1856, now kept in the Departmental Archives of Ille-et-Vilaine, 6 V 117. The text of the two reports can be found on pp. 223–225 and pp. 317–318, respectively). The Rennes archbishopric's records dating to before 1905 have become the responsibility of the Ille-et-Vilaine Departmental Archives.

The bishop then decided to verify what the fideist writer – and ecclesiastic – Louis Bautain had reported in his pamphlet *Avis aux chrétiens sur les tables tournantes et parlantes* (1853). According to Bautain, the fact that the tables were shaking, overturning, and refusing to answer when questioned about Jesus was a strong indication of Satan's direct intervention (Bautain 1853, 10–11). Consequently, a rosary, a blessed medal, and a small cross with holy relics were placed on the table. The table reacted by shaking as if it wanted to get rid of these objects. When the bishop blessed it with the sign of the cross, the table stopped answering questions and fell with a loud noise at the prelate's feet, remaining motionless. The participants were frightened and attributed these phenomena to an evil spirit or the devil. 'As for us', the bishop wrote, 'our faith was strengthened by this, and we wished that many scientists who deny the existence of anything outside of matter and the possibility of supernatural facts had witnessed such an extraordinary spectacle' (Libeau 1994, 268). The experience was repeated with the presence of a sixth participant. The table again reacted to the sight of the Gospel and violently toppled at the bishop's feet when he made the sign of the cross. In addition to the bishop and the vicar, nine witnesses signed the report.

The séance held on 14 July 1853 seems to have been organized on the initiative of the bishop himself. In 1854 Brossays Saint-Marc intervened instead at the request of a faithful woman from his diocese, Madame J*** of Saint-Servan-sur-Mer, a small town adjacent to Saint-Malo. The woman claimed to be visited by an archangel, who communicated with her through table-turning, dictating insights into the deepest mysteries of spirituality. Uncertain about the legitimacy of such practices, she sought the bishop's guidance on whether she could safely continue these communications and requested his assessment of their nature. A meeting was arranged for 22 September 1854, in a room of the bishop's palace. Present were Brossays Saint-Marc, his valet de chambre André Lepinay, his vicars general – namely the aforementioned Augustin Combes and Amand-René Maupoint, the future bishop of the island of Réunion and a friend of Brossays Saint-Marc – and Abbot Duval Duchesnay, honorary canon of the cathedral of Saint-Brieuc. Madame J*** sat at a small round table facing her niece, a young girl of about 16–18 years of age, who placed her hand on the table. Arranged upon it was a French alphabet, which the bishop himself assisted in steadying. Madame J*** held a pencil in her right hand and placed her left hand on the table. When everything was in order, she invited the spirit to communicate:

> Immediately the table seemed to listen to the invitation […] and raised a leg to say yes. Then, with the help of the pencil, which was passed over the letters of the alphabet above, (between) the table, us, the Lady and the assistants, began the most amazing dialogue on the highest points of theology, spirituality and mysticism, all according to the most orthodox rules of theology, without ever erring or contradicting itself for a single moment. It [the table] claimed to be an angel of light, the Archangel Raphael, and that it was not afraid of the exorcisms of the Holy Church; on the contrary, it remained calm and impassive under the influence of the signs of the cross and the commands in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ that we imparted to it. These phenomena were repeated before us for more than three consecutive hours, leaving us all in great amazement at the sight of such extraordinary events, which obviously could only have been caused by a supernatural agent of the spiritual order. (Libeau 1994, 269)

The bishop, however, determined that the entity invoked must be a 'spirit of darkness' disguised as an angel of light to deceive and mislead the pious woman and, after

careful consideration, forbade her to have further relations with 'that mysterious being' (Libeau 1994, 269).

This is what the archival documents tell us about Brossays Saint-Marc's involvement with the phenomena of Spiritualism. Such experiences clearly reflect an empirical approach that, while aligning with the methodology of positivist investigation, paradoxically inverted its purpose by demonstrating – as Libeau (1994, 225) notes – the existence of the supernatural, albeit in a diabolical guise.

To further contextualize this interest, however, it may help to add a few ethnographic notes. If an examination of French folklore allows us to distinguish between 'regions with revenants and regions without revenants' (Cuchet 2012, 254), Brittany is certainly a region where the cult of the dead was robust in both medieval and modern times, organized around motifs such as the *anku* (cart of the dead) and the *ananoon* (ride of the dead; see Callard 2019, 20). In this context, Spiritualism harmonized with what the historian Jean Delumeau (1979, 198) described as a 'thesaurus of popular religious culture' centred on the theme of death. It was believed that the dead could occasionally manifest themselves in the form of visions, apparitions, and seemingly inexplicable phenomena to request prayers, the redress of a wrong, or the fulfilment of a promise made in life (Poulain 1997). Indeed, cases of poltergeists and hauntings are documented from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century in Brittany.[21] Furthermore, a survey of the judicial archives of Mayenne in Laval, the birthplace of the Count de Courte, reveals that witchcraft and magic trials were not uncommon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in that area (Denier 1990). Among the fifty documented cases, that of Françoise Legeay, a fortune-teller from Château Gontier, is particularly interesting. In 1830, this woman claimed to be in constant communication with a spirit from whom she derived her powers of divination (Denier 1990, 130–131). The folklore of northwest France thus provides a background to the events described in the *Positio*, revealing a widespread substratum of beliefs and practices centred on the afterlife that became entwined with Spiritualism and the apocalyptic discourses typical of the period.

Child mediums

Brossays Saint-Marc's expertise in spiritualistic phenomena must have been well-regarded if the pope entrusted him with an 'empirical' investigation into such delicate matters. The involvement of children in these experiments, however, raises complex questions. While adolescents were commonly associated with somnambulic states and mystical experiences – as confirmed by the tradition of Marian apparitions in

[21]In 1900–1901, for example, the *Revue du monde invisible* reported the case of a Breton castle that fell victim to a haunting in 1875, caused by the spirit of a woman to whom a promise had been made at her deathbed, which was later broken (Cuchet 2020, 178–179). As late as 1908, in the volume *La foi en Bretagne*, Abbot Millon of the diocese of Rennes noted that the Bretons 'believe in ghosts. Haven't their sheets been violently pulled back at night? Haven't they felt an icy breath on their faces as the clock struck twelve? Have they not often contemplated, in the pale moonlight, emaciated skeletons crouching in the hearth? […]. These men, who have never been stopped by wild beasts, fire, blood or death, in the light of the first star […] tremble at the whistling breezes, at the weeping voices; they shudder at the invisible and hostile beings who, by the thousands, look at them with eyes that cannot be seen' (Millon 1908, 73–74). Moreover, certain traditional practices, such as leaving rocks by the fire on St. John's Day for the ancestors to warm themselves, further illustrate this intimate relationship with the dead (Callard 2019, 20).

France,[22] and also by the mediumistic experiences conducted by Brossays Saint-Marc himself[23] – younger children were less frequently considered for such roles.[24]

Yet, as mid-nineteenth-century Spiritualism redefined somnambulic trance as 'mediumship', it opened the door to broader interpretations of who could serve as a medium. Allan Kardec, in *The Mediums' Book*, argued that mediumistic potential could manifest early in childhood, although he warned against its premature cultivation due to potential risks to mental health (Kardec 1861, 275–319). Despite such caution, some accounts from the Spiritualist movement do attest to the active participation of children in mediumistic practices. One interesting case is that of William Robert Bertolacci. In 1864, Bertolacci published *Christian Spiritualism* in London, based on the mediumistic revelations of his daughters Caroline Cecilia (1840–1889), Marie Eliza (1843–1929), and Ida Louisa Clara (1845–1933), the youngest of whom, Ida, was eight years old when the experiments began. This is about the age of Henriette-Marie de Courte at the time of the experiments in Brittany (Bertolacci 1864; see Hardinge Britten 1884, 167–171).

To address this challenging question, however, it may be beneficial to broaden the scope of the inquiry. An overly narrow focus on the immediate historical context should not overshadow the fact that, as Boudet (2001, 136, note 53) writes, 'the use of child mediums is widely attested in both Jewish and Christian magic, in antiquity and the Middle Ages' (see also Kieckhefer 1997). In fact, practices aimed at invoking benevolent spirits are a significant aspect of the tradition of medieval Christian ceremonial magic, blending elements of Jewish angelology with techniques of popular origin. In these contexts, the use of child mediums, whose abstinence and virginity are emphasized in certain texts, was definitely not uncommon. Such a reference, for instance, appears in the *Clavicula Salomonis*, a late medieval text described by Boudet (2006, 353) as a 'best-seller of European ritual magic'. Moreover, as demonstrated by Christian ([1981] 1989, 220) in a study focusing on the Spanish context, during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance children were often regarded as the most reliable visionaries, thus serving as 'intermediaries between society and God, whether as seers, saints, or both' (see also Schwebel 2004). In reconstructing the background of the events reported by de Courte, therefore, it may be more illuminating to consider a '*longue durée*' perspective. Such a broader view should encompass not only the practices of learned Christian and Jewish ceremonial magic, but also their analogues in folk traditions, including scrying and other divination techniques.

Conclusion

Despite my best efforts, I have not been able to locate the report written by Brossays Saint-Marc and addressed to the pope: searches in the Vatican archives and those of

[22]Mélanie Calvat and Maximin Giraud were fourteen and eleven, respectively, during the visions at La Salette in 1846, and Bernadette Soubirous was fourteen when she experienced the presence of the Virgin at Lourdes in 1858.

[23]In the 1853 session, Brossays Saint-Marc asked five young people between the ages of 13 and 17 to form a chain. In the 1854 session, a girl aged between 16 and 18, the niece of the medium, placed her hand on the table, perhaps to encourage the phenomenon. See above.

[24]An author very close to the pope, Vincenzo Tizzani, in his treatise of 1842, based on French sources, wrote that a condition for the magnetic effects to succeed with certainty was that the magnetized person should be of the right age. It does not help 'to be of tender age, because, as M. Teste says, children are distracted, careless, impatient, and it is impossible to ask them for faith (*demander la foi*), faith being a necessary condition, a *sine qua non*; besides, as the magnetizers say, the susceptibility of the nervous system is not sufficiently developed in children; so that in youth and adolescence, and especially in the first days of puberty, the most marvellous animal magnetic effects occur' (Tizzani 1842, 55).

the Archdiocese of Rennes (now partially housed in the Departmental Archives of Ille-et-Vilaine in Rennes) have so far been unsuccessful. While this document may turn up in the future, perhaps in a lesser-known archival collection, it is not impossible that it has been lost or even deliberately destroyed for prudential reasons. In addition to confirming de Courte's claims, such an account would be crucial in clarifying the grey areas of the episode reported in the *Positio*, which remains elusive and incomplete in many respects.

In the preceding pages, however, I have attempted to provide some context for the events described. They occurred at a time when the Vatican was actively opposing Spiritualism, amidst political turbulence and a resurgence of apocalyptic, prophetic and visionary discourse. The fact that these events coincided with the conclusion of the first phase of the Holy Office's process suggests that the Church may have adopted a multifaceted strategy in dealing with Spiritualism, pursuing several lines of investigation simultaneously. In this context, a discreet study of mediumistic phenomena – conducted in a confidential setting and supervised by an ecclesiastical authority considered knowledgeable in the field – could provide a basis for further evaluations.

Building on this premise, what new perspectives does this hitherto overlooked episode offer on nineteenth-century Church history and religious history more broadly? At a minimum, this story provides compelling evidence of the pervasive influence of esoteric and occult currents in Western thought, highlighting the permeability of institutional religion – even at its highest levels – to the 'spiritual technologies' introduced by animal magnetism and Spiritualism. Regarding the Church's response to these phenomena in the period under review, I suggest that it can be analyzed along three interrelated dimensions, which also open avenues for future research:

1. *A dialectic of boundaries and exploration*. At first glance, the stance of the Holy See may appear ambivalent or even paradoxical: condemning spiritist doctrines while simultaneously investigating the phenomena underlying them. Yet such an interpretation oversimplifies the strategy at play. What emerges from the sources, instead, is a nuanced attitude that combined theological and regulatory vigilance with investigative engagement. Theological vigilance, in this context, implied what social scientists call *boundary work* (Gieryn 1999). By condemning Kardec's spiritism and other forms of Spiritualism, the Holy See reasserted its authority over interpretations of the supernatural, thereby safeguarding its 'symbolic capital' within an increasingly pluralistic religious landscape. This boundary work, however, was dynamic and adaptive, enabling selective engagement with phenomena that resisted straightforward categorization. Trance states and mediumistic events occupied a liminal space between the natural and the supernatural, mind and matter, subjectivity and objectivity, thereby challenging the established frameworks of both science and religion (Mancini 2006, 2012; Méheust 1999). Their epistemic ambiguity created space for theological *exploration*. In a striking application of Saint Paul's *discretio spirituum* to mediumistic phenomena, Pius IX himself explicitly declared that spirits must be 'tested'. Such empiricism clearly resonates with the positivistic *Zeitgeist* that shaped Spiritualism itself (Monroe 2008). This willingness to navigate areas of epistemic uncertainty through empirical methods challenges stereotypical portrayals of the nineteenth-century Church as unyieldingly conservative and static, instead highlighting its engagement with broader processes of modernization.

2. *Instrumentality*. Secondly, one might question whether those involved in these investigations – including Pius IX himself – were seeking more than theological

clarity from these experiences. Could they also have been pursuing practical outcomes? While it is impossible to answer this question with certainty, it is not implausible that the pope – amid the political uncertainties surrounding the State of the Church – recognized the strategic value of exploring these phenomena for their potential prophetic insights.[25] In this regard, personal and psychological factors may also have played a role. While Cardinal Antonelli, a key figure in Pius IX's court, was reportedly supportive of table-turning practices (see above), the pope himself was said to have an openness to mysticism and a fascination with miraculous events.[26] He may therefore have supported Brossays Saint-Marc's experiments partly due to his own penchant for such phenomena.

3. *Hybridity*. Finally, and precisely because of the exploratory dimension outlined above, this story appears to encapsulate, by its very nature, an 'edge case' of cultural hybridization, understood as the 'crossing and blurring of [cultural] boundaries' (Engler 2016). While de Courte's testimony offers only limited insight into this process, the scenario of a Catholic bishop receiving ultramontane-oriented prophecies through mediumistic devices, and subsequently conveying them to the pope, is noteworthy in its own right. We might then partially apply to our story the insightful observation made by Riddle, in an article on the Catholic influences on American Spiritualism:

> Beneath the pronouncements of theologians, mediums, and polemicists defining the proper bounds of religion lies a more fluid world of religious hybridity. […] This is not to say that such boundaries are meaningless. On the contrary, hybridity reflects the very borders it transgresses; bounding and crossing are paired ideological projects. (Riddle 2018, 455)

That such an interesting episode – blurring the boundaries between cultural and epistemic categories – has come to light could well be a fortunate accident, revealing only a fragment of a larger, hidden story. The Vatican archives may yet hold further insights into how the Church engaged with the esoteric and the spiritual currents of the nineteenth century.

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[25]This interpretation finds support in Veracruysse's observation that Napoleon III strategically utilized prophecies obtained through the renowned Scottish medium Daniel Dunglas Home to enhance his political influence (De Ferrari 1864, 1). Fin-de-siècle occultist literature is replete with accounts of Napoleon's spirit-mediated prophecies (Introvigne 2016, 136–137). Notably, Pius IX had received Home at the Vatican in 1856 following the latter's conversion to Catholicism (see Thurston 1933, 61–82).

[26]As recounted once again by Tizzani, the pope was not 'alien […] to favouring in some circumstances a kind of mysticism' and for this reason 'was not once mystified either by malice, or by the simplicity of others. He also had around him that confidant of his, Monsignor Stella, who was often pleased to speak of miracles, visions and prophecies' (Vatican Apostolic Archive, Segreteria di Stato, Spoglio Leone XIII, box 13, folder 72, 'Manoscritti contenenti la storia di alcuni pontificati scritta da monsignor Vincenzo Tizzani, 1882–1883,' f. 909v). Interestingly, Pius IX himself was believed to possess gifts of ecstasy, prophecy and levitation according to the first postulator of his canonization process, Antonio Cani (Cannone 2012, 162).

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