The world of Christian female cloistered life within the European context has usually been studied by scholars on the basis of ancient and modern texts, together with narratives by the nuns who actually experience that world and do not allow others to enter it. Cloistered life is a form of coenobitic monasticism, in which a group of persons is characterized first and foremost by their seclusion. Monasticism (a term derived from Greek *monachos* – *i.e.*, solitary person or living alone) is a way of life that involves abandoning social relations and renouncing worldly pursuits, with the aim to devote oneself fully to spiritual work and come into closer contact with the divinity. The separation from the world can imply partial or total isolation (*i.e.* anchoritism) or living in a secluded community (*i.e.* coenobitism). The two terms indicate a group-based spatial condition: anchoritism derives from anchorite, from old Latin *anachoreta*, Greek *anachoretes* and *anachoreo* ("to withdraw"); on the other hand, coenobitism derives from the old Latin word *coenobium*, the Greek term *koinobion*, composed of *koinos bios* "shared life." Against this background, cloistered life stands as a form of group-building and living together characterized by extreme isolation and closed to the external world. In Christian female cloistered life, the boundary places a restriction on access for both men and women. As mentioned by Emile Servais and Francis Hambye, cloistered group-building forms are fully-fledged institutions and are characterized first and foremost by a particular construction and appropriation of space, which is redesigned in accordance with the intimate and religious purposes pursued by the interested subjects (Servais and Hambye 1971: 29).

The restriction on access has often resulted in scientific research works based on indirect experience, as field work is practically non-existent in such an uncommunicative meeting environment. In fact, from an anthropological viewpoint, it is only through field work that it is possible to get closer to the other’s concrete life practices by means of direct experience and sharing. Investigating everyday life can help researchers understand how mystical and devotional aspirations translate into behavioural strategies. The aspiration to meeting the assumed divinity should be acknowledged as a social practice, and it is expressed in different physical (*i.e.*, corporeal) and mental forms.
According to what Marcel Mauss (1936: 45) suggested – subsequently also mentioned by Pierre Bourdieu (1982) – when the mystic state is considered, following Max Weber (1968: 547), as an experience of inner contemplation of the “holy” and of its unity beyond logical and discursive thought, it is based first and foremost on specific body techniques. By “technique” I mean a “traditional effective action”¹ (Mauss 1936: 35): it is “traditional” because it belongs to the cultural background of an individual as a member of a group – in our case a cloistered group – and thus it can be learned and passed on to others; it is “effective” because it is considered functional to the aim established by its users. From an anthropological viewpoint, it is interesting to take a closer look at the critical issue of being inside, investigating on the one hand how the religious individual is construed, as enacted by the nuns themselves and, on the other hand, how the resulting group is created and experienced.

Monasticism should be investigated not only through the relevant literature (e.g. the monastic Rules, the history of the orders, the texts by the founding fathers or mothers, life stories, the chronicles and the groups’ registries), but also as a way of life, looking at the habits, gestures, movements and daily actions involved (Albert d’Haenens 1985: 17). In studying monasticism, the field, as traditionally intended by the research community, is eventually misrepresented however. Whenever access is not granted, any type of encounter in the social actor’s daily life completely disappears, the only exception being the one that is mediated and controlled by the grating, leading to a fictitious relational situation. This controlled and binding situation takes place in a recreated border area, i.e., the parlour, which is not a living place after all: when access is granted, one has to deal with a unique field due to both the obligation to maintain silence, which is typical of these places, and the participatory conditions imposed by the nuns themselves (time restrictions, behavioural obligations, acceptance of certain dictates, community rules and so on).

In the former case the anthropologist, who must be a woman for obvious reasons, is forced to work in a non-field mediated by the words of the interested subjects and deprived of intersubjectivity, whereas in the latter case she would find herself in an extremely restrictive situation, without the possibility to use a fundamental part of her traditional research tools (i.e., listening and speaking). The case of cloistered life, as well as monasticism more generally, reveals that eventually such tools may prove to be intrusive in certain situations and ineffective from a research perspective.

¹ My translation of “acte traditionnel efficace.”

² The term parlor refers to a kind of reception room in collective dwellings (e.g. convents, schools, detention centres, barracks and so on) designed for meeting and talking to external visitors.