The female religious communities represent an exceptional case, since they cannot be divided into the same distinctive groups as the male orders, despite the fact that many of them arose as supplementary communities to the male religious orders, whether monastic (e.g., Benedictines, Cistercians, etc.), orders of regular canons (e.g., Augustinians, Premonstratensians, etc.) or mendicants (e.g., Dominicans, Poor Clares, etc.). Female orders put usually a significant emphasis on contemplative live (*vita contemplativa*), respected a strict seclusion and had a common chorus. Female religious communities more oriented on active live (*vita activa*) – focused in particular on caregiving in healthcare and education –, began to emerge until the 16th and 17th centuries (e.g., Angelines, etc.).[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Order of Saint Benedict (*Ordo Sancti Benedicti*) is a mendicant order which was established in around the year 529 by Saint Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c. 548). Its female branch was allegedly founded by the Saint’s sister Saint Scholastica (c. 480-c. 543). Life in the Benedictine monasteries has been ruled by the Rule of Saint Benedict, nevertheless, other authorities of the Church are also worshiped, such as Saint Augustine, etc. As for the organization of female Benedictine monasteries, the head of the big houses are the abbess, the head of the smaller establishments the prioress.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. In addition, we can distinguish military orders (e.g., Order of Saint James, Knights Templar or Knights Hospitaller, etc.), which are sometimes defined as a separate category, however, Derek Beales ranks them among the orders of regular canons. Furthermore, we can distinguish also congregations of regular clerics (e.g., Jesuits or Piarists, etc.) and laics (e.g., Theatines, etc.) that began to emerge in the age of Reformation from the 16th century onward. Eventually, there are also secular communities, societies of apostolic life and forms of consecrated life outside institutions (e.g., virgins consecrated to God or the consecration of widows), see: BEACH – COCHELIN (eds.), *The Cambridge History*, vol. I., esp. chap. 3 and 9, pp. 44-45, 163-188 and vol. II, esp. chap. 41, 42, 55, 56, pp. 729-738, 766-782, 783-802, 1027-1038, 1039-1056; BEALES, *Prosperity*, pp. 17-23; VLČEK – SOMMER – FOLTÝN, *Encyklopedie,* pp. 9-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. VLČEK – SOMMER – FOLTÝN, *Encyklpedie*, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)