

H-France Review Vol. 18 (August 2018), No. 179

Alison Forrestal, *Vincent de Paul, the Lazarist Mission, and French Catholic Reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Xiv + 312 pp. Maps, Appendices, bibliography, and index. \$134.99. U.S. (cloth). ISBN 978-019-878576-7.

Review by Mita Choudhury, Vassar College.

Over the past decades, studies by Barbara Diefendorf, Joseph Bergin, and others have highlighted the complex landscape of Catholic Renewal in early modern France.[1] In focusing on grassroots movements and connecting Catholic Reform to early modern society, politics, and culture, such histories illustrate what John Bossy posited as a central feature of the early modern understanding and experience of faith: that religion primarily constituted a body of believers and not simply a set of beliefs.[2] Alison Forrestal's meticulous study of Vincent de Paul and the Lazarist Mission "offers a wholly fresh perspective on the challenges and opportunities that the contemporary environment offered an individual of vision and pragmatism in gathering the resources, devising the structures, and forging the relationships that enabled him to express his devotion to promote its like amongst others" (p. 2). Forrestal sees herself as departing from the canon of reverential biographies that define the bulk of scholarship on Vincent de Paul, one of the titans of French Catholic Renewal. At the same time, she notes that to neglect such individuals eclipses our understanding of how they negotiated various networks when introducing reform. According to Forrestal, it would be more accurate to view de Paul as an "ecclesiastical entrepreneur" rather than a path-breaking innovator (p. 269). Thus, de Paul's success in developing a secular missionary network was inextricably connected to the flourishing of religious devotion and activity of the period. Lazarist missions operated within a complex web that included the Church hierarchy, elites, and the poor in both Paris and in rural France. Forrestal goes beyond the Vincentian archives, privileged by most scholars of de Paul, and incorporates "letters, memoirs, decrees, contracts, and minutes" found in archives and libraries throughout France (p. 15). Her study follows a chronological narrative that highlights patronage, clerical formation, and de Paul's involvement with different associations, all of which allows us to see his influence on the overall religious life of seventeenth-century France.

In the world of Catholic Renewal, ecclesiastical vision could not take root and flourish without patronage, the mainstay of the early modern social network. Vincent de Paul's stellar career and the successful Lazarist mission owed much to noble and clerical sponsors. De Paul's first and perhaps most important benefactors were the Gondi family. Philippe-Emanuel and Françoise-Marguerite de Gondi employed the cleric in 1613 as a preceptor for their three children, including the future Cardinal de Retz. De Paul soon became Marguerite de Gondi's spiritual director and confessor. It was an experience that gave him insight and access to the piety of female elites, one

of the pillars of seventeenth-century French Catholicism. Indeed, it was Madame de Gondi and her concern for her tenants' spiritual welfare that turned de Paul's attention to the ignorance of rural believers in matters such as catechism and confession. Of course, the Gondi's financial generosity enabled the founding of the Congregation of the Mission. From the mid-1630s, the Lazarists expanded their mission by establishing houses in the provinces, and the success of such an expansion similarly depended on prominent patrons in different regions. Most notably, de Paul developed ties with the duchess d'Aiguillon and her uncle Cardinal Richelieu. Such powerful patronage enhanced de Paul's reputation and status so much so that de Paul assisted at King Louis XIII's deathbed in April 1643. As a result, de Paul obtained a royal gift to establish a house in the newly annexed and largely Protestant Sedan, whose location on the northeastern border gave it strategic importance against the Spanish. According to Forrestal, this gift "manifestly tied the Congregation's spiritual task of evangelization to the territorial and political ambitions of the French monarchy" (p. 145). In the end, for Forrestal, the question of lay patronage was not simply a narrative of de Paul seeking the necessary support to realize his vision but intrinsically connected to the "earnest faith" of elites who saw their donations as acts of piety (p. 131).

Clerical patronage was also key to de Paul's rise and the success of the Lazarist missions. Two giants of French Catholic reform, Pierre Bérulle and François de Sales, were central in forming De Paul's spiritual outlook as well as his vision of missionary work. Bérulle served as a mentor to de Paul, at one point acting as his spiritual director and introducing him to the Gondi family. More importantly, Bérulle's emphasis on clerical formation would influence the structure of the Congregation of the Mission. The spiritual aims of the Mission resulted from and were refined by de Paul's brief but powerful association with François de Sales. De Paul embraced de Sales's message of a "spiritual effectivity," which put charity and compassion at the center of devotion (p. 99). Another element of de Sales' teachings and career that would influence de Paul was the emphasis on female piety. Indeed, de Paul's membership in Salesian circles and the Visitation Order, which de Sales had co-founded with Jeanne de Chantal, enabled de Paul to establish Lazarist houses in Troyes and Annecy. In an era where new religious orders were proliferating, de Paul navigated turbulent waters with respect to those orders that resented potential rivals. Moreover, he had to contend with Church officials who distrusted the Lazarists' possible claim on resources and their autonomy from diocesan authorities. But some officials could also be of help as was the case with the influential Alain de Solminihac, bishop of Cahors. According to Forrestal, Solminihac's support for de Paul motivated other prelates in the region to embrace the Lazarists.

Part of de Paul's success, Forrestal argues, lay in his ability to forge ties with different associations, which "extended beyond organizations that he [de Paul] founded, promoted, or ran himself" (p. 199). Thus, de Paul's charitable mission was deeply intertwined with lay networks and female piety, both hallmarks of Catholic Reform. The lay confraternity was central to the French Catholic Renewal in fostering lay spirituality and, perhaps more relevant to de Paul, in promoting elite engagement in charity. In 1635, de Paul joined the Company of the Holy Sacrament, the *cabale des dévots*, a shadowy but influential group that shaped communal elite devotion and pious activity in seventeenth-century Paris. Indeed, de Paul's correspondence reveals very little about his association with the group, which has led to speculation that he was actually its puppet, a point Forrestal refutes. Instead, she argues that an intricate relational network was facilitated by de Paul's membership within different groups. De Paul's most famous female association was, of course, with Louise de Marillac. She was his liaison to the aristocratic Ladies of Charities of the *Hôtel-Dieu*, and together they established the Daughters of Charity,

whose history has been chronicled by Susan Dinan.^[3] The Ladies of Charities, in conjunction with the Company of the Holy Sacrament, would help establish the *Hôpital-Général* in 1653. Although de Paul acted as an advisor in the advanced planning of the *hôpital*, he chose not to serve within the workhouse and, instead, continued to throw his energy and resources at the Lazarist mission.

Through patronage and networking, as well as trial and error, de Paul established a congregation that was flexible and able to work with local authorities while maintaining its autonomy. In addition to material support, the Gondi family also provided de Paul with an opportunity to develop the key principles of pastoral care for the humble tenants on the Gondi estates. The congregation's structure and spiritual *raison d'être* were outward looking with an emphasis on charity, which de Paul believed to be an expression of love for God. He also adapted his teaching to fit his audience: for example, he developed a sermon style, called the "little method," that was direct and rhetorically unadorned (p. 103). Like his mentor Bérulle, de Paul was deeply committed to an uncorrupted and well-functioning clergy that followed in the footsteps of Christ. As the Lazarist order expanded, he formed a company, the Tuesday Conferences (1633), which included handpicked individuals who showed special promise as priests. While this company was comprised of a privileged few, the principle of humility defined the congregation; de Paul believed that humility was essential for servants of God and should shape the missionaries' interactions with lay individuals of all ranks.

However, de Paul's emphasis on humility potentially contradicted his various connections with powerful individuals and his influence on the Council of Ecclesiastical Affairs. In her final chapter, Forrestal illustrates this tension in detailing how de Paul became involved in the conflict over Jansenism between 1643 and 1653. His flexible approach to popular piety put him at odds with the Jansenists' strict emphasis on delayed communion and confession. Exchanges with Cornelius Jansen and Antoine Arnauld laid de Paul open to derision for being ignorant and naïve on theological matters. For de Paul, Arnauld's erudite arguments as well as the Jansenist call for spiritual purity exemplified devotional arrogance that was antithetical to humility. Conversely, Jansenist critics interpreted de Paul's humility as obsequiousness to powerful opponents of Jansenism, whose support he needed to maintain the Lazarist mission. Indeed, while engaged in the public fray over Jansenism, de Paul was able to galvanize key members of the Church hierarchy by urging Pope Innocent X to condemn Jansen's five propositions, which culminated in the bull *Cum occasione* (1653). However, de Paul's reputation and influence did not necessarily translate into unwavering support among his lay followers, some of whom, such as the duchess de Liancourt, were drawn to Jansenist teachings. De Paul's complicated relationship with Jansenism was further illustrated in his continuing interactions with Jansenist sympathizers, such as the bishops of Alet and Pamiers, in part because he hoped to convert them to his point of view.

By way of conclusion, Forrestal notes that "de Paul stands out amongst a host of distinguished peers, not because he controlled the path and products of the reform movement as a whole, but because he succeeded in articulating and applying traditional teachings and existing practices in new, enterprising, and systematic ways" (p. 267). Forrestal's thorough research showcases how deeply connected de Paul was with the existing social, religious, and political networks that governed seventeenth-century France. The studies spearheaded by William Beik and Sharon Kettering have highlighted the centrality of patronage and clientage in the rise of absolutism, and Forrestal's book illustrates how deeply enmeshed the Church and Catholic Renewal were

within these relationships and associations.[4] Given Forrestal's close attention to detail, the names, locations, and events can be overwhelming for non-specialists or newcomers to the field of Catholic Reform. It is perhaps a question of stylistic preference, but the important themes presented in the introductions and conclusions to each chapter would have been more effective if they were more developed and contextualized throughout. For example, some discussion as to how patronage functioned more broadly in the Old Regime would enhance Forrestal's central argument regarding de Paul's use of social and political networks. Forrestal discusses how de Paul negotiated and respected female piety. While she notes that some *dévot*es were attracted to Jansenism, she surprisingly omits any discussion of Port-Royal's influence on elite women as developed in Daniella Kostroun's work.[5] Regardless of these observations, Forrestal's work is important in locating the iconic Vincent de Paul within the complex world of Catholic Renewal. She not only shows how de Paul's activities were embedded in Old Regime practices but also highlights how the Lazarist mission contributed to the rise of the absolutist state.

NOTES

[1] Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Joseph Bergin, *Church Society and Religious Change in France, 1580-1730* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

[2] John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 170-171.

[3] Susan E. Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: the early History of the Daughters of Charity* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006).

[4] William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Sharon Kettering, *Patronage in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2002).

[5] Daniella J. Kostroun, *Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism: Louis XIV and the Port Royal Nuns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Mita Choudhury,
Vassar College
michoudhury@vassar.edu

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

