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Barbara B. Diefendorf. *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 340 pp. List of contents, biographical appendix, list of Abbreviations, notes, index. \$51.34 (hb). ISBN 0-19-509582-0.

Review by Megan Armstrong, University of Utah

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To say that Barbara Diefendorf's third monograph is her most significant contribution is saying something indeed. *From Penitence to Charity* bears all the hallmarks of Diefendorf's fine scholarly hand: meticulous research, nuanced analysis, and narrative richness. It is, however, a more ambitious project, one that deftly weaves together gender, religion, economics, and politics to explain the spiritual renewal of the seventeenth century. In the process, Diefendorf rewrites the history of the Catholic Reformation in France, and, along with it, the spiritual life of women.

For Diefendorf, the seventeenth-century spiritual efflorescence was grounded in the radicalized spirituality fostered by the Holy League at the end of the sixteenth century, and, more critically, in the leadership of certain talented noble women. Diefendorf is candid in her introduction about her frustration with recent work on the role of women in the Catholic Reformation. While she does not question the interest of the post-tridentine Church in enforcing a strict understanding of the rules of monastic enclosure, Diefendorf believes scholars have overly simplified the Reformation as a period hostile to women.[1] She takes particular issue with scholarship that portrays women wholly as "hapless victims of repressive clerics, church dogmas, and family strategies." Such a perspective, she says, has deflected scholars from seriously investigating female "religious values and choices" (p. 9). Diefendorf also suggests that the impact of the Reformation upon women requires more regional differentiation. At present, much of the research has been on Italy and Spain, but France was a very different culture. Church prelates may have wished to implement homogeneity, but as the work of John O'Malley, Craig Harline, and Marc Forster shows, the Catholic Church was never that.[2] Bishops and other members of the clergy responded differently to the religious changes of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, a variety of social and cultural factors played into each region's interpretation of post-tridentine spirituality. Diefendorf notes, for example, that French property laws and inheritance customs gave women a substantially different place within the economic, legal, and political structure of France, and thus a distinctive role in their own determination of their religious life.

Diefendorf sets out in subsequent chapters to investigate the religious values and choices of those women who would go on to found new religious institutions and reform existing ones. Her focus in consequence is on elite women, members of the sword and magisterial nobility who had the funds, political influence, and administrative experience to spearhead religious reform. Diefendorf centers her study on the city of Paris. Paris witnessed a rapid outpouring of new religious institutions during the first half of the seventeenth century, many of which were founded by women and attracted women in large numbers. Diefendorf situates this efflorescence in the broader social, economic, and political context of late sixteenth and seventeenth century France, paying particular attention to the devastating effects of the two major civil conflicts: the Wars of Religion and the Fronde. She identifies two distinct strands of piety emerging among pious noble women in response these crises, strands that together laid the foundation for the seventeenth century renewal. The first generation of female reformers, typified by Barbe Acarie, was attracted to reforming traditions infused with penitential piety. The second generation, in contrast, was much more interested in combining the contemplative life with charitable foundations. These two generations of women sought out, promoted, funded, and guided religious

institutions that reflected their own religious values. What is more, they did so with the support of prominent members of the clergy.

The first four chapters chart the legacy of League spirituality on the first generation of women studied by Diefendorf. Chapter 1 looks closely at Catholic piety at the time of the League, a piety that she describes as an emotionally intense, penitential, and apocalyptic in nature. The assassinations of the Guise brothers at Blois in December 1588 sparked a “wave of penitential piety” in Paris that manifested itself in radical preaching and innumerable processions across the city. The siege in Paris by Henry of Navarre only heightened concern that France was at the end of days as hunger and fear spread. Devotional enthusiasm was at its height, reflecting profound concern about the moral and spiritual state of France. In this emotionally intense environment, Diefendorf follows the women who played a prominent role in shaping this “new religiosity”.

Diefendorf makes it clear that not all of the women who went on to found new religious institutions at the end of the sixteenth century were supporters of the League or admirers of its enthusiastic brand of piety. Marie de Tudert, an influential supporter of the Carmelites, and the Séguier women were Catholic royalists. As such they were shunned by friends, harassed by city officials, and attacked from pulpits for supporting Henry III and his successor Henry of Navarre. Other women had embraced League piety, however, among them members of the Guise family and Barbe Acarie. They experienced the emotionally charged atmosphere of Leaguer Paris, and this enthusiasm for a penitential religiosity later informed their foundations. Acarie, for one, looked back to this period of the League as a golden age of piety.

Diefendorf suggests that Acarie’s fondness for this period may also have owed something to the more fluid gender boundaries of the era. “Wartime conditions,” she notes, “offer women opportunities for independent action and initiative they seldom enjoy in more settled times” (p. 37). In a time of crisis, such as the Wars of Religion, women can more easily develop and hone their skills as administrators and make independent decisions. Diefendorf’s monograph makes it clear that crisis also can make it somewhat easier for women to assume the mantle of religious leader. The Guise women are a case in point. As Diefendorf shows, the duchess de Nemours was an important political supporter of the Catholic League, one who raised funds for the radical organization and even made policy decisions. Even more important a supporter of the League was Catherine de Guise, the duchesse de Montpensier and sister to the two assassinated Guise. She sent funds secretly to preachers in Paris, and encouraged inflammatory preaching against Henri III and Navarre. Less prominent women also played a critical role in spreading Leaguer influence. Both Madeleine Luillier and Acarie raised funds for the League. Acarie did much more, deciding to volunteer in League hospitals to heal the injured. Royalist noble women for their part were just as active in raising

The pious women who comprise Diefendorf’s study were soon labeled *dévotes* by more skeptical, and perhaps war-weary, contemporaries. Along with their male *dévots* counterparts they came to exercise substantial political and spiritual influence under the Bourbon monarchy. Whereas Henry IV tolerated the *dévots*, Diefendorf suggests that Marie de Médicis shared “their religious values and concerns.” Diefendorf consequently gives Médicis a prominent role in the subsequent spread of reform in France. It was during her regency that the *dévots* earned a prominent place at the French court. Her patronage of reformed religious orders, furthermore, stimulated other noble women to follow suit. During the first few decades of the seventeenth century, several powerful noble women took a leadership role in the foundation of religious institutions.

Chapter 2, “The Ascetic Impulse”, shows how one strand of league spirituality, penitential asceticism, informed the spiritual values of the women who came to found new religious institutions. What

Diefendorf attempts to explain in this chapter why so many women were moved to found their own religious institutions at the end of the Wars of Religion. To answer this question, Diefendorf looks at the options open to women bent on a life dedicated to spiritual renewal. Diefendorf consequently examines the nature of monastic life in Paris, both for men and for women, the possibilities for a religious life lived in the secular world, and the particular spiritual values of the women who went on to found their own institutions. Diefendorf determines that the efflorescence of religious foundations in the early seventeenth century reflected a disjunction between the new kind of religious life craved by these women, and the kind of religious life offered by contemporary institutions. To be sure, the emotional fervency of League religiosity had dissipated somewhat by the first decade of the seventeenth century even for these women. Here, Diefendorf agrees with other historians of the seventeenth century spiritual renewal who espy a noticeable shift towards “more personal and interiorized” religious practices among the early *dévots* (p. 50). Long hours spent in meditation, performing charitable activities, fasting, wearing hair shirts, and sleeping on wood planks were typical practices engaged in by these women. The desire of the early female founders for a more rigorous, penitential form of piety explains their attraction to such reformed male traditions as the Capuchin (Franciscan) and Feuillant (Cistercian).

Infused with penitential enthusiasm, the early *dévotes* were disappointed to discover that many existing communities were in dire need of reform. The solution was to found new institutions that better reflected their understanding of the path to spiritual perfection. Chapter 3, “Mademoiselle Acarie’s Circle”, looks at the religious reformers closely associated with the first new religious tradition formed in France—the Discalced Carmelites. Here, Diefendorf makes a convincing case for viewing Acarie’s circle not simply as a spiritual salon of sorts but rather as a command post for the organization of new religious foundations. The gathering of *dévots* at the Acarie residence on the rue des Juifs began in the 1590s. Here, clerics and lay people gathered to foster their own spirituality, but they also discussed ecclesiastical reform and the Catholic renewal of French society more generally. The Acarie home was a “center of spiritual action,” a place where reform-minded men and women worked at times closely together to organize new religious foundations among other religious activities. Along with Acarie herself, female members of this circle who would go on to found their own reformed religious institutions included Marie de Beauvilliers who reformed the convent of Montmartre in Paris, Louise de L’Hôpital (abbey of Montivilliers, Normandy) and Jacqueline de Blémur (Dominican convent of Poissy).

Chapter 4, “First Foundations”, illuminates the role of a particular group of noble women in founding new religious institutions, in particular the Discalced Carmelites, the Ursulines, and the Daughters of the Passion. Diefendorf makes it clear that she and the other female members of the circle were much more than founders of new institutions. This is not to downplay the importance of female patrons as financial providers. Without their generosity, the spiritual renewal of the seventeenth century would have numbered many fewer reformed religious communities. Diefendorf nevertheless argues that their importance also lay in their leadership roles. These noble patrons raised large sums to endow their communities, supervised the construction of new buildings and frequently took on the administration of the institution as well. Moreover, the new religious communities bore the imprint of their patron’s particular understanding of the route to spiritual perfection. Acarie personally selected postulants of the new tradition, for example, and even spent time in the convent instructing the French novices herself.

Chapter 4 makes a wonderfully nuanced case for female agency in establishing new religious foundations. These women were not simply walking in the footsteps of Pierre Bérulle and other male reformers. Diefendorf shows that Bérulle respected Acarie’s opinion and supported her spiritual endeavors. A later chapter similarly makes a case for the unique and influential spiritual contribution of the noble women associated with the great reformer of the next generation, Vincent de Paul. Diefendorf is making another significant argument here, however, because she uses the example of the Discalced Carmelites to illuminate the regional distinctiveness of the French church and spirituality. Regionalism,

she insists, was yet another factor shaping the formation of the seventeenth-century religious foundations.

Tensions did arise during the early years of the order between the Spanish nuns who were brought to France to initiate the new order and their French administrators. Diefendorf nevertheless suggests that this tension reflected a religious tradition that was moving in a decidedly French rather than Spanish direction. Barbe Acarie placed the fledgling tradition under the guidance of three French secular clerics, including Bérulle, whereas in Spain they lay under the jurisdiction of the male order of Discalced Carmelites. The early Carmelite communities were also larger and much more ornate than those founded by Teresa of Avila, and admitted wealthy patrons into its quarters. These were changes that the Spanish nuns considered betrayals of the original ideal. The French branch of the tradition also embraced the 1581 Institutions of Alcalá. These Institutions were disavowed by the male order of Spanish Discalced Carmelites but recognized in France as of 1606. Interestingly, the 1581 Institutions invested greater institutional authority and autonomy in French prioresses. This sign of regionalism shaping Carmelite reform in France raises questions about the degree to which Tridentine reform did shape the spiritual renewal of the seventeenth century. While there is no question that the Council of Trent (1545-1563) was influential in many parts of Italy, France long resisted recognition of its decrees. Besides which, as Diefendorf points out, France was not Italy. Regionalism was a powerful cultural force shaping medieval and early modern European religion and religious institutions. The distinctive spirituality of Mack Holt's sixteenth-century Burgundian vintners is one other vivid example.[3]

Chapter 5, "The Contemplative Revival", shows how the founding of the Carmelite, Capucine, and Ursuline convents sparked remarkable enthusiasm for religious life in Paris and eventually across France. Here, Diefendorf marshals together a wide array of sources, including correspondence, conventual records, histories, and hagiographies. Diefendorf points out that in Paris alone, forty-eight new communities were built between 1604 and 1650. This revival was largely led by members of the lay elite. Once again elite women were at the forefront. Diefendorf here discusses the new "spiritual geography" of Paris, a geography marked by the establishment of over forty-eight female religious communities between 1604 and 1650. Most of these new foundations appeared outside the city walls on lands devastated by the Wars of Religion. These ruined lands, she notes, became "prime real estate" for the Catholic revival, because they were "easily accessible from the city" but nevertheless sufficiently distant from its noise. Since many of these new traditions emerging at this time reflected a growing contemplative impulse, their pursuit of locations promising tranquility was to be expected. The Feuillantines and the Annonciades Célestes were two such new traditions, each dedicated to a life of strict reform. Members gave up dowries and all other forms of property to the community. They were forbidden luxurious items, including curtained beds, tapestries, and paintings. Many of these new communities revived, along with an invigorated assertion of chastity, a strict understanding of cloisture. Heavy grills, veils, and shortened visits with families severely limited access between nuns and the outside world. Clausturation was one characteristic of the Counter-Reformation, but, as Diefendorf shows, we have to be careful about viewing it wholly in terms of misogyny. Here, she is taking issue with scholarship on gender that neglects to take into serious consideration the ideological foundations of monastic culture.[4] For women as well as men, cloistering was about removal from the world and not simply containing female sexuality. Strict clausturation "was both a symbol and a tool of worldly renunciation" (p. 145). The Annonciades Célestes, for example, referred to the four vow of strict clausturation as their "asylum."

That prioresses shaped the religious life of the nuns under their care is accepted, but how they shaped their lives is often difficult to trace. One reason for this is that women were not supposed to interpret doctrine. The early Beguines ran into trouble with authorities in the Netherlands because of such suspicions. Mining spiritual biographies and correspondence for anecdotal and linguistic evidence, Diefendorf manages to identify four ways in which women could shape their own religious life while in

the convent: the weekly chapter meetings, the hour of “recreation” after the main meal, private conversations of nuns with superiors and mistresses of the novices, and letters of advice exchanged between prioresses. Diefendorf also discovered that many of the clergy closely associated with the new religious foundations had few problems with the spiritual guidance provided by the prioresses. The confessor Jean Macé lauded the eloquence of Marie de Saint-Charles in her exhortations, and noted that she makes “amazons” out of her nuns (p. 150). Marie de Saint-Charles, for her part, also had little time for traditional conceptions of female spiritual weakness. “The Word of God was made incarnate to take upon himself all of the weaknesses of our poor nature, and by a precious exchange, to give us all his force and virtue” (p. 151). Diefendorf also finds evidence of laywomen specifically seeking the spiritual guidance of these women.

The first generation of religious founders were eager to implement strict reform, but Diefendorf shows that the very success of many of their foundations and the constant need for sufficient funds ultimately made their communities vulnerable to accusations of worldliness. The economic disruptions caused by the Thirty Years War and later those of the Fronde, in particular, wrecked havoc upon the fiscal health of many communities by the 1630s. Wealthy patrons wanted easier access to the community, special attention from its members, and, when some patrons decided to move into the community, they brought with them their lives of luxury and privilege.

The worldliness of some communities reflected the intrusion of the secular world inside the cloister, but Diefendorf shows that the changing nature of French piety also played a role. The last two chapters of her book look at this shift from a penitential, ascetic spiritual religiosity to one that downplayed the spiritual benefits of rigorous austerity in favor of contemplation and charity. Chapter 6 discusses the new spirituality. The Visitandines were among the new traditions emerging after 1620. In contrast to the cloistered communities of the previous generation, members of this tradition took only simple vows and were able to travel outside the community in pursuit of their vocation. François de Sales was in many respects the spiritual architect of this new tradition. De Sales preached a more optimistic, Christocentric love of God, and encouraged women to engage in charitable practices. Interestingly, he encouraged members to cater to female spiritual needs in particular. He urged the formation of lay retreats at female convents. Diefendorf suggests that De Sales was essentially arguing for a female apostolate. He also permitted widows to come and live at the convent, even though this was very much against the traditional practice of enclosure.

Other new traditions emerging at this time included the Penitent Magdalenes who ministered to repentant prostitutes, and the Filles de la Charité de Notre-Dame, founded by Françoise Gaugin. These and the other foundations mitigated the rigorous mortifications required of the previous traditions in favor of, in some cases, interior mortifications. The Austerities of Charité, for example, were largely symbolic. Since many of these communities only enjoyed a fragile economic basis to begin with, Diefendorf shows that they began to suffer economically by the 1630s. In fact, many of the new communities established in the first half of the seventeenth century were debt-ridden by the 1650s. It is difficult to generalize about the nature of their financial difficulties, though clearly many of the communities over-spent. The Filles de Notre-Dame suffered serious financial problems from their arrival in Laon in 1634, because they bought an expensive piece of property and spent a fortune building the community. Although successful in attracting novices and thus pensions, the community’s debt still substantially outran its income ten years after its foundation. In 1663, the debt-ridden community suffered a serious blow when the Parlement ordered their house sold to satisfy its creditors. A fair number of communities also suffered when funds promised by patrons failed to materialize. Still others like the nuns of Notre-Dame de Liesse pretended to have patrons when in fact their notarized contracts were fraudulent (pp. 195-198). New religious communities could not gain royal permission to establish without promised funding. The Notre-Dame de Liesse example also points to warfare as one reason for the financial difficulties of many communities at this time. These religious women were forced to leave



their original home in the Ardennes for Paris because of marauding troops involved in the Thirty Years War, and, in doing so, left behind financial security. Chapter 7 and the Conclusion return to the issue of warfare. Between 1650 and 1652, Fronde warfare devastated the lands, and consequently the religious communities in Picardy, Champagne, and the Ile-de-France (p. 245). Nuns living outside the walls of Paris scrambled inside for protection. Many found it difficult if not impossible to reestablish their communities once the conflict was over.

Chapter 7 continues the discussion on the second generation of pious foundations, paying particular attention to the female patrons associated with Vincent de Paul. The battles of the Fronde ignited an outpouring of charitable practices in and around Paris, and, along with it, charitable institutions. Pious women collected used clothing, money and food, tended to the injured, established orphanages, and even housed nuns fleeing from other war-torn regions of Europe. Vincent de Paul looms over most historical discussion on this charitable outpouring, but Diefendorf reminds us that De Paul was heavily reliant on a number of pious elite women for his own success, among them Marguerite de Silly and Louise de Marillac. In championing the centrality of these women to the spiritual reform at mid-seventeenth century, Diefendorf is once again taking issue with the male-centered historiography of this period. In this respect, her work overlaps nicely with that of Susan Dinan's on the Filles de la Charité. Dinan, like Diefendorf, views the Filles as a uniquely female religious tradition, and its founder Louise de Marillac as an innovative religious reformer.[5]

Diefendorf argues that Pierre Coste and other biographers of De Paul never gave sufficient credit to de Silly and Marillac as religious reformers even though De Paul himself did so.[6] Looking closely at letters exchanged between De Paul and Marguerite de Silly, Diefendorf rejects previous interpretations that portray de Silly as a needy, demanding noblewoman who wanted de Paul's services only for herself. De Paul acknowledged De Silly's encouragement of his early missions, her desire to improve the pastoral training of the French clergy and her profound concern for the spiritual well being of her peasants. De Paul also aided de Silly in founding the confraternities of Charity (*Charité*) among the peasants on her estates. These confraternities provided aid to families in need, and, with De Paul's encouragement and the financial backing of other noble pious women, these organizations quickly spread to other rural estates. Under the direction of Louise de Marillac, the Filles de la Charité brought the *charités* to urban environs. By the 1640s, the Filles de La Charités joined forces with the Dames de la Charité to manage new foundling hospitals. Diefendorf notes in her conclusion that the *charités* were an extraordinarily important and influential response to the rising demands of poverty on French society. Eventually, the charitable activities of these confraternities were superseded by those provided by municipal and state institutions. These organizations were thus, in many respects, the fore bearers of social welfare institutions in France.

Diefendorf's book is a remarkable monograph, at once meticulously researched, broad in historical scope and, without question, intellectually provocative. Diefendorf forces us at one time to re-examine the role of women in early modern France and the Catholic Reformation by placing lay noble women at the center of the Reformation. Noble women patronized reformers such as De Paul, and funded and organized new religious traditions infused with their own particular understanding of spiritual perfection. They did so, furthermore, frequently with the active support of members of the clergy. The very fact that many members of the clergy worked closely with pious noble women to found new religious establishments is just one more indication that France enjoyed a unique religious culture, a culture which legitimated a role for pious noble women as spiritual reformers in their own right. Diefendorf concedes that Paris was perhaps a unique religious environment in itself. It had the highest concentration of educated, elite women in Europe, and noble women were politically more visible here than in most other regions. She nevertheless finds evidence of similar spiritual leadership among women in other parts of Europe that might benefit from a regional approach.

Diefendorf is saying much more, however, because she convincingly argues that women were largely responsible for spurring and shaping the spiritual renewal of the seventeenth century. *From Penitence to Piety* consequently challenges us to look at early modern women as architects of their own societies. In France, women as well as men were agents of religious change.

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## NOTES

[1] Ruth Liebowitz, "Virgins in the Service of Christ: The Dispute over an Active Apostolate for Women during the Counter-Reformation" in Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, ed., *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 131-152; R. Po-chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540-1770*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998); Merry Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[2] John O'Malley, *Trent and All That. Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Craig Harline and Eddy Put, *The Bishop's Tale. Mathias Hovius among his Flock in Seventeenth-Century Flanders*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Marc Forster, *Catholic Renewal in the Age of the Baroque: Religious Identity in Southwest Germany, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[3] Mack P. Holt, "Wine, Community, and Reformation in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* 138 (1993): 49-91.

[4] Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

[5] Susan Dinan, "Spheres of Female Religious Expression in Early Modern France" in Susan E. Dinan and Debra Meyers ed., *Women and Religion in Old and New Worlds* (Routledge: New York and London, 2001), 71-92.

[6] Pierre Coste, *Le grand saint du siècle: Monsieur Vincent*. 2nd ed., (Paris, 1934).

Megan Armstrong  
University of Utah  
megan.armstrong@utah.edu

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