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Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Planting the Cross: Catholic Reform and Renewal in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. x + 215 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-088702-5

Review Essay by Linda Lierheimer, Hawaii Pacific University

In a series of lectures given at Cambridge University in 1951, the historian H. Outram Evenett famously explored the question of how to define the “Counter-Reformation.”[1] Since then, this problem of definitions, as well as what to call the religious upheaval and transformation in Catholic Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, has continued to generate lively debate among scholars.[2] While the question of terminology may seem a matter of mere semantics, I don’t think I am alone in struggling with what words to use to describe this period every time I write about it: Catholic Reformation? Counter Reformation? Catholic renewal? None of these seem to fully capture the complexity of the age.

Barbara Diefendorf takes up this problem of definitions in her recent book, *Planting the Cross: Catholic Reform and Renewal in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France*, but shifts the focus to the various ways those engaged in monastic reform articulated and understood its meaning as it related to lived experience, from the “bottom up.” Diefendorf argues that, in France at least, the “Counter-Reformation” and the “Catholic Reformation” were inseparable: anti-Protestantism and the violence of religious war were the conditions that made possible the spiritual revival that followed. In this regard, the book is a logical “sequel” to her two previous ones, *Beneath the Cross*, a study of religious conflict and violence in Paris that culminated in the St. Bartholomew’s day massacre in 1572, and *From Penitence to Charity*, which examines the pious Catholic women whose experiences during the 1590s under the Holy League shaped their approach to spiritual renewal in the half century that followed.[3] *Planting the Cross* continues the story by exploring how the trauma of religious and civil war impacted efforts to reform religious life during the first half of the seventeenth century. However, it also marks a departure from Diefendorf’s previous focus on Paris. Using examples from both Paris and the provinces, this book “decentralizes” Catholic reform and in so doing raises new questions about how historians should define it.

Planting the Cross is organized around six case studies that demonstrate the ways specific contexts generated different approaches to monastic reform. These cases are taken from three regions, Paris, Provence, and Languedoc, and include a mix of old and new religious orders. While each chapter can stand alone, this is not just a collection of essays. Reading the chapters together gives us a sense of the immense variety of responses to religious conflict and the diverse meanings of reform for women and men in religious institutions throughout France. Diefendorf shows that reform was “an ongoing process” (p. 2) and was defined in relationship to local circumstances and specific institutional contexts. But while she insists that there was no “typical” experience of religious reform, there are common themes that link these six case studies that can help us rethink how Catholic reform was implemented and understood in early modern France.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the book is its close attention to the reform of older religious houses. Much of the scholarship on organized religious life during this period has focused on innovative new orders, such as the Jesuits.[4] There is a growing literature—including Diefendorf’s own *From Penitence to Charity*—on the new religious congregations for women, such as the Ursulines and Carmelites, which spread quickly throughout France during the same period.[5] However, attempts at reform—especially unsuccessful ones—in religious houses that pre-dated the Protestant Reformation have been largely overlooked.[6] Diefendorf’s examination of the reform of monastic houses that traced their origins to the Middle Ages complicates widely-held stereotypes about the decay and decline of convents and monasteries on the eve of the Reformation and about the resistance of the monks and nuns in these institutions to reform. The first case study, which focuses on three convents in Montpellier, a Protestant stronghold in southern France, opens our eyes to the very real challenges involved in attempting to rebuild, much less reform, communities that had been devastated during the religious wars. By the mid-sixteenth century, Montpellier’s three convents were already facing significant financial difficulties, and the destruction of their properties and dispersion of the nuns during the years of violence only worsened their situations and made it extremely difficult for them to rebuild once peace was restored. To add insult to injury, the bishop and town elites shifted their patronage to one of the new religious congregations for women, the Visitation, which established a convent in Montpellier in 1631. Burdened with debt and unable to recruit new members, only one of the three original convents survived.

Attempts to reform houses belonging to older male religious orders also encountered significant challenges. These included internal conflicts over authority and different definitions of what constituted reform. In the case of the Paris Feuillants, conflict developed into outright rebellion. Although both the monks and their abbot shared a desire for reform, they had different ideas about what this process entailed. The conflict played out against the backdrop of civil war, with the Paris monks supporting the League and the abbot remaining loyal to the crown. Diefendorf underlines the parallels between the revolt of the Paris Feuillants against their abbot in 1589 and the League’s revolt against Henri III: “The Holy League provided the occasion but also the conceptual framework and language that transformed resentment into revolt” (p. 61). A decade later in Toulouse, Dominican reformer Sébastien Michaëlis faced opposition from some who feared his efforts would lead to a schism in the order. After appeals on both sides to the Parlement of Toulouse and to Rome, the matter was only settled when Henri IV took the side of reform. The Trinitarians of Provence, faced with opposition from the superior of their order, instituted a gradual reform from the “bottom-up,” rewriting their constitutions to allow them more autonomy and replacing a hierarchical model of organization with a more democratic and collaborative one.

While old orders and new ones alike had to adapt to changing circumstances, foreign transplants like the Capuchins and the Carmelites faced unique challenges. The most immediate of these was the language barrier. The Capuchin fathers who came from Rome to establish their first French house in Toulouse in 1582 were known for their fiery preaching, but these gifts were of little use when they did not share a common language with their flock. The Spanish Carmelites who arrived in Paris in 1604 had difficulty communicating with their French sisters. The popularity and spread of both these congregations attest to the capacity of these men and women not only to personally adapt to unfamiliar surroundings, but also to adjust their original ideals to a new place

and culture. This capacity for “reinvention” was also essential to older, established religious houses. While in theory, “reform” involved a return to the past, in practice, it required balancing fidelity to tradition and incorporating the new spiritual ideals of the era. For example, the original purpose of the Trinitarians of Provence, founded during the Crusades, had been to ransom slaves. However, the order had fallen into decline, and their mission needed serious revamping. To do this, the Trinitarians framed their efforts at monastic reform as a return to their original rule, while at the same time creating a new organizational structure and embracing the spiritual practices of new religious orders such as the Capuchins. But while the new orders offered spiritual models to older ones like the Trinitarians, they also provided serious competition. The proliferation of religious orders required creative strategies to make one order stand out over another. The Capuchins were especially clever at using public rituals and ceremonies to “market” themselves and establish their “brand.” Upon arrival in a new town, they staged a procession and ceremonial planting of the cross, a potent symbol during the years of religious war, complete with fifes and drums to introduce themselves to local Catholics, who were informed about the event with notices posted on church doors.

The final case study explores competing notions of reform and identity among the nuns in one of the new women’s congregations, the Discalced Carmelites. In 1604, six Spanish nuns arrived from Spain to establish the first French Carmelite house. From the beginning, there were differences in how the Spanish nuns and their French counterparts envisioned reform. The former were shocked by the size and ornateness of their new convent, which the latter deemed necessary to attract wealthy patrons. A few months after their arrival, the Spanish nuns left to found a second congregation in Pontoise. An intense rivalry developed between the two houses over who had the strongest claim over the Teresian heritage. The Pontoise nuns made a conscious choice to model themselves on Teresa’s first Spanish convent and rejected attempts of the Paris convent to establish itself as the Carmelite motherhouse. However, the Paris nuns just as strongly believed themselves to be the true daughters of Teresa. Diefendorf’s close examination of the longstanding rivalry between the two houses shows that their different cultures and identities were not fixed or predetermined but rather developed over time and in relation to one another in response to specific circumstances and events.

It is appropriate that the two case studies that begin and end the book focus on women’s religious congregations—old and new—with the four on male houses and orders sandwiched in between. Though Diefendorf does not comment on this organizational choice, it serves to de-center men from the story of Catholic reform by foregrounding women. Both in terms of gender and location, these two case studies are emblematic of the central message of *Planting the Cross*, which is that the process of religious reform looks different from the periphery.

This is an important corrective. In the past, as now, there has been a tendency in French history to see Paris as the center from which everything else emanates. However, as the case studies in this book so brilliantly illustrate, Catholic reform had numerous “centers” throughout France. The Catholic revival of the early seventeenth century was a grassroots affair that grew out of local initiatives. Many of the new religious congregations of the age traced their origins not to Paris, but to other regions of France, such as Provence and Languedoc. The first French Ursuline congregation was in Avignon, while Jeanne de Chantal initiated her project for the Visitation in Burgundy and established its first convent in Savoy. The Carmelite nuns who left Paris for

Pontoise did so with the belief that they would have more autonomy to implement their particular vision of reform. The book left me wondering whether there may have been more room for religious innovation and experimentation on the periphery than at the center. While Diefendorf insists that there was no typical case, is it possible to draw at least some tentative generalizations about the different experiences of monastic reform in the provinces and in Paris?

Bookending the six case studies with the two that focus on women also raises questions about how gender shaped both the experience and definition of reform. At the outset, Diefendorf says that she “decided to broaden [her] focus from Paris so as to avoid simply putting men back into a story [she] had already told” (p. ix). *Planting the Cross* shows us that both men and women throughout France were engaged in defining and implementing reform in their religious houses. However, except for the chapter on Sébastien Michaëlis, who was called upon to oversee a case of demonic possession at the Ursuline congregation in Aix-en-Provence, the stories of the male and female religious orders in this book rarely intersect. As with all great books, one is left wanting more. The case studies, along with Diefendorf’s previous work, lay the groundwork for a sustained analysis of the similarities and differences between men’s and women’s experiences of monastic reform. While many of the issues they faced were remarkably similar—scarce resources, conflicts over authority, competition with other orders, internal differences about how to define and implement “reform”—some seem to have been unique to women. For example, while male and female religious houses alike had to confront severe financial problems, the former had greater access to resources and formal connections to a larger religious order, which could help sustain them in times of crisis. On the other hand, the organizational isolation of women’s houses may at times have allowed them greater independence and autonomy to shape and live their own visions of reform, since there was not a single motherhouse or “Superior General” to impose (or attempt to impose) uniformity. I would also like to know more about the gendered experiences of foreign transplants such as the Capuchins and Discalced Carmelites. What difference, if any, did gender make in shaping how members of these orders adapted their ideals to a new environment?

Planting the Cross chronicles the complex power dynamics that shaped monastic religious reform, between Paris and the provinces, between church leaders and grassroots organizers, and both between and within religious orders. By shifting our focus from the center to the periphery, Diefendorf transforms our understanding of the spiritual movement known as the “Catholic” or “Counter” Reformation. Taken together, the six case studies show us that monastic reform was a messy affair, filled with conflicts and contradictions. Those involved employed a variety of approaches, some successful and others not. Religious orders, both old and new, had to reinvent (or invent) themselves in ways that integrated traditional identities and ideals with the newer spiritual practices and ideals of the Catholic Reformation. In this context, they developed diverse and competing definitions of “reform” in relation to their particular circumstances and location. This contestation, Diefendorf shows us, was at the very heart of Catholic reform.

NOTES

[1] These lectures were published in the now classic *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

[2] See John W. O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[3] Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Protestants in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); idem, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[4] Thanks to Seán Alexander Smith, we now know a great deal about the seventeenth-century Lazarists, the order of priests founded by Vincent de Paul: *Fealty and Fidelity: The Lazarists of Bourbon France, 1660-1736* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2015). The literature on the Jesuits is too extensive to be detailed here.

[5] One exception is Daniella Kostroun, *Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism: Louis XIV and the Port-Royal Nuns* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2011), especially chapter two. On the reform of the Benedictine order in France, see Dom Yves Chaussy, *Les Bénédictines et la réforme catholique en France au XVII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Editions de la Source, 1975).

[6] This literature includes Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life: French Ursulines and English Ladies in Seventeenth-Century French Catholicism* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005); Susan E. Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006).

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