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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 David van der Linden, Radboud University Nijmegen

Whenever religious orders set up a new monastic house in early modern France, their first act was to plant a cross on the prospective building site. Yet as Barbara Diefendorf argues in her compelling new book, *Planting the Cross*, in the wake of the Wars of Religion this ritual also signified renewal and conflict. Particularly in bi-confessional cities scarred by decades of civil strife, the cross served as a visible marker that Catholics were reclaiming sacred space. In Montpellier, for instance, the Huguenots had twice laid waste to the Catholic landscape, first during the early wars of the 1560s, and again when they rebelled in 1621. It was only in 1625 that bishop Pierre Fenouillet led a solemn procession to the Place de la Canourgue, where he planted a cross to mark the site for the rebuilding of the city's destroyed cathedral. This was a clear signal to Montpellier's Protestants that the Catholics had returned, just as it strengthened the resolve and piety of wavering Catholics.[1]

In many ways, *Planting the Cross* can be read as the culmination of Barbara Diefendorf's impressive scholarly career, one major aspect of which has been to explore the impact of the religious wars on early modern French Catholicism. The book also illustrates the changes in scholarship on the wars that have taken place since the 1980s. When Diefendorf's landmark study, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris*, appeared in 1991, it was part of a wave of Anglophone scholarship that explored the religious and social complexities of the religious wars within an urban context, such as Philip Benedict on Rouen, Kevin Robins on La Rochelle, Penny Roberts on Troyes, and Hilary Bernstein on Poitiers.[2] Likewise, *Beneath the Cross* charted the response of Parisian Catholics to the rise of Calvinism and sought to explain the eruption of violence that culminated in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre.

In recent years, however, historians have increasingly shifted their attention to the postwar period, asking how the experience of war—in particular memories of massacre, siege, and iconoclasm—affected the regime of religious coexistence as mandated by the 1598 Edict of Nantes.[3] Situated at the forefront of this new field of study, *Planting the Cross* offers important lessons for understanding the impact of the French religious wars on early modern Catholicism. Diefendorf is less concerned with concrete memories of violence, but convincingly demonstrates that the traumatic conflict “cleared the way” (p. 2) for Catholic reform. Although she does not deny that ideas and personnel from outside the kingdom, most notably Italy and Spain, also influenced efforts to reform French Catholicism, she argues that it was first and foremost the domestic experience of religious war that spurred French clerics into action to transform their faith.

Diefendorf's innovative focus here is on the rich fabric of monastic orders, both the old mendicant orders established in the later Middle Ages and the new foreign orders that grew out of the Counter-Reformation, most notably the Italian Capuchins and the Discalced Carmelites from Spain. As she rightfully notes, France's monastic orders have not received the in-depth and comparative scrutiny they deserve, even though local archives hold

important material to illuminate their role in transforming French Catholicism. By focusing on the reforming zeal of French monastic orders, Diefendorf takes issue with historical narratives of a “Catholic Reformation,” loosely defined here as institutional attempts at reforming the Church top-down, as well as with the narrative of a “Counter-Reformation,” which she associates with an explicitly anti-Protestant agenda. She instead opts for the term “reform” to describe the many local, bottom-up efforts of monastic orders to instill a new sense of Catholic piety. “Reform was not something fixed or completed with the adoption of a new constitution or rule but rather was lived as an ongoing process,” she notes, adding that movements of renewal also had to adapt to local and changing circumstances (pp. 1-2). To show the complexity and variety of Catholic reform spearheaded by French monastic orders, Diefendorf explores six case studies, arguing there existed no such thing as a “typical” reform. Whereas two of her case studies focus on Paris (the Feuillants and Discalced Carmelites), *Planting the Cross* also discusses male and female communities in Provence and Languedoc, thus adding an important local dimension to the reform movement.

To my mind, the first three chapters constitute the most fascinating part of the book, focusing on the wartime experiences of monastic orders and their efforts at reconstruction after 1598. The need to reform was present already prior to the outbreak of the wars, Diefendorf argues, as many orders were in deep financial and moral decline. Incompetent leadership and financial malpractice were at the root of this crisis: the French crown regularly appointed abbots and bishops who were more interested in syphoning off funds than in defending the interests of the monastic houses, which by 1560 were in need of repair and faced dwindling membership. The civil wars exacerbated these dire circumstances. Protestants razed many churches and monastic houses to the ground, expelled or massacred friars and nuns, and alienated vital funds. By contrast, the new orders founded in Spain and Italy, which only settled in France after the outbreak of the wars, faced no such problems, capturing the imagination of French Catholics with their promise of spiritual renewal and a fight against heresy. Paradoxically, then, the religious wars not only made reform necessary, they also enabled Catholic renewal.

Chapter one, “Old Orders in New Times,” is set in Montpellier, focusing on the convents of Saint-Guilhem, Sainte-Catherine, and Notre-Dame de Paradis. These institutions struggled for a range of reasons: not only had their convents been destroyed, but under Protestant rule, it also proved nearly impossible to collect revenue from confiscated lands. These problems occurred just as the religious communities were losing an uphill battle against age—by the 1580s, the last nuns had died. Whereas homeless friars could integrate into their order elsewhere, female convents lacked a wider hierarchy, which meant that in times of adversity they were completely on their own. And although nominally under supervision of Montpellier’s bishop, the nuns discovered that he showed little interest in their spiritual and material well-being. Despite this gloomy outlook, Diefendorf offers an important story of female agency and local activism in this chapter. King Henry IV eventually appointed new abbesses to restore the decaying houses of Montpellier to their former glory, including Blanche de Castillon from Arles. Heading the convent of Saint-Guilhem, she relied on notaries and lawyers to pursue court cases for arrears, took out loans to rebuild her convent, and attracted nuns from outside the city to repopulate it. Although Castillon’s efforts saddled the community with a large debt, and her work was undone in 1621, when Protestants again destroyed the convent, her tale reminds us that old orders were not wholly powerless in trying to rebuild from the bottom up.

Chapter two, “A Monastery in Revolt,” takes us to Paris during the period of the League. This alliance of Catholic noblemen, clergy, officeholders, and devout laymen vocally opposed the tolerant policies of Henri III and—following the king’s murder in 1589—disputed Henry IV’s accession to the throne. This chapter does a brilliant job of complicating our understanding of clerical support for the League, as Diefendorf shows that approval among the monastic orders was far from universal, not even in the Leaguer stronghold of Paris. The community under investigation here are the Feuillants (a branch of the Cistercian order). When its abbot, Dom Jean de la Barrière, continued to support Henri III even after the king had ordered the murder of the Guise brothers, the talented preacher, Dom Bernard, seized control of the convent and aligned it with the League. Bernard also condemned the strict asceticism of the abbot, proposing a more liberal rule for the convent. Yet the Leaguer revolt soon took its toll on the friars, who lived in extreme poverty and died like flies: by 1595 just nine out of the seventy men remained. The League, Diefendorf argues, thus allowed internal tensions to emerge about what constituted true reform—tensions that perhaps contributed more to the downfall of the League than Henri IV’s military campaign against the movement.

In chapter three, “Catholic Militants in France’s Protestant Heartland,” we return to Languedoc to explore the implantation of the Capuchins and their fight against Protestantism. Imported from Italy, the Capuchins first opened a house in Toulouse in 1582, quickly spreading to such major cities as Béziers, Agde, Carcassonne, Montpellier, Montauban, and Castres. They were often invited by local bishops and Catholic elites, who favored the Capuchins over the old monastic orders, in particular because of their emphasis on preaching, processions, and missions to convert the Protestants. Yet the Capuchins met with limited success in this domain. In Montpellier, for example, the cross planted in 1609 to mark their new convent was burnt by angry Huguenots, few of whom ever converted. The Capuchins’ missions to Béarn even sparked a new religious war that saw Huguenots rebel across southern France in the 1620s. In practice, Diefendorf argues, the Capuchins were probably more effective in bolstering Catholic piety among Catholics than in winning the hearts and minds of the Huguenots, and as such helped to solidify religious boundaries between the two communities.

Chapters four, five, and six are less tied to Diefendorf’s argument that the wars were crucial in reforming French Catholicism; instead, they analyze how monastic orders promoted piety from the bottom up and adapted to local circumstances. Chapter four focuses on Sébastien Michaëlis, a Dominican friar from Languedoc who wished to reform his order through a stricter observance of monastic rule, in particular by imposing asceticism in food and dress. When his approach met with stiff resistance from within his own order, he seized upon a case of demonic possession to defend his reforms and to critique the laxity and impiety of other priests. Chapter five, on the Trinitarians of Provence, again drives home the message that bottom-up initiatives were key to reforming French Catholicism. Wishing to return their order to the ideal of simplicity, while also competing with the more successful foreign orders, the friars favored fraternal instead of hierarchical government, implemented better education of novices, and promoted daily prayer and meditation. Chapter six, finally, analyzes the implantation of the female Discalced Carmelites at Pontoise, near Paris, and the tortuous adaption of the Spanish nuns to French local circumstances.

Like any stimulating study, *Planting the Cross* also raises questions for further research. Because Diefendorf’s focus is on monastic orders as agents of spiritual renewal, we are left to wonder how lay Catholics tackled the legacy of the wars, and to what extent they

supported—or perhaps even spearheaded—the drive for Catholic reform. Judith Pollmann’s work on Catholic renewal in the Low Countries has shown that private journals, diaries, and correspondence can shed new light on popular responses to the religious wars and clerical reform efforts.[4] Diefendorf has little to say about such lay Catholics, suggesting that reform, even when driven by local communities instead of church hierarchies, was essentially a clerical affair. In chapter three, we briefly encounter Catholic urban elites who supported the implantation of Capuchin houses and sent their daughters to these newly established convents, but how “ordinary” Catholics more widely responded to new models of piety and the religious legacy of the civil wars still deserves further scrutiny.

The focus on Catholic reform also left me wondering about the Protestant side of the story. Diefendorf rightfully stresses that combating heresy was a major impetus for Catholic renewal. As she argues in her conclusion, “anti-Protestantism and Catholic reform were so closely intertwined that it would be futile and impossible to separate them” (p. 151). Yet, for all their importance, French Protestants do not figure prominently in *Planting the Cross*. They constitute the background against which the narrative of Catholic reform unfolds but seldom appear as agents in their own right. In the cities of southern France, however, where four of Diefendorf’s case studies are set, Protestants remained a force to reckon with throughout the seventeenth century, resisting Catholic activism through the power of sermons, petitions, and even outright violence.[5] It would be interesting, therefore, to further explore how Huguenots viewed Catholic renewal, and how this engagement shaped the successes and failures of reform. As Diefendorf notes, the proselytizing efforts of the Capuchins met with little success in Languedoc, but to what extent did Protestant wartime experiences—in particular inherited animosities—also affect Catholic reform? And how do these encounters in southern France compare to other regions with large Protestant minorities, such as Normandy and Dauphiné?

Such questions demonstrate that Diefendorf has written another thought-provoking study of early modern French Catholicism. *Planting the Cross* succeeds in putting the monastic orders back into the story of the religious wars and Catholic reform, identifying them both as key agents of spiritual change and frontline actors in the ongoing struggle with the Huguenots. Diefendorf’s profound archival knowledge also demonstrates that reform was very much a local and haphazard affair, rooted in the painful experience of civil war, rather than a uniformly imposed model of “Catholic Reformation” drawn up in Trent. As such, the importance of *Planting the Cross* for our understanding of religious culture and coexistence in postwar France can hardly be overstated.

NOTES

[1] Though not discussed in *Planting the Cross*, this episode is analyzed in Barbara Diefendorf, “Religious Conflict and Civic Identity: Battles Over the Sacred Landscape of Montpellier,” *Past & Present* 237 (2017): 53-91, here 80.

[2] Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Protestants in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Philip Benedict, *Rouen during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Kevin C. Robbins, *City on the Ocean Sea: La Rochelle, 1530-1650: Urban society, religion, and politics on the French Atlantic frontier* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Penny Roberts, *A city in conflict: Troyes during the French Wars of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Hilary J. Bernstein, *Between Crown and Community: Politics and Civic Culture in Sixteenth-Century Poitiers* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[3] Philip Benedict, *Graphic History: The “Wars, Massacres and Troubles” of Tortorel and Perrissin* (Geneva: Droz, 2007); Philip Benedict, “Divided memories? Historical calendars, commemorative processions and the recollection of the wars of religion during the Ancien Régime,” *French History* 22 (2008): 381-405; Philip Benedict, “Shaping the memory of the French Wars of Religion: The first centuries,” in *Memory before Modernity: Practices of Memory in Early Modern Europe*, ed., Erika Kuijpers, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 111-125; Tom Hamilton, “The Procession of the League: Remembering the Wars of Religion in visual and literary satire,” *French History* 30 (2016): 1-30; David van der Linden, “Memorializing the Wars of Religion in Early Seventeenth-Century French Picture Galleries: Protestants and Catholics Painting the Contested Past,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 70 (2017): 132-178; David van der Linden, “The Sound of Memory: Acoustic Conflict and the Legacy of the French Wars of Religion in Seventeenth-Century Montpellier,” *Early Modern French Studies* 41 (2019): 7-20.

[4] Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Judith Pollmann, “Being a Catholic in Early Modern Europe,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Counter-Reformation*, ed. Alexandra Bamji, Geert Janssen, and Mary Laven (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 165-182.

[5] See for example Robert Sauzet, *Contre-réforme et réforme catholique en Bas-Languedoc: Le diocèse de Nîmes au XVII^e siècle* (Brussels: Nauwelaerts 1979); Estelle Martinazzo, *Toulouse au Grand Siècle: Le rayonnement de la Réforme catholique, 1590-1710* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016); David van der Linden, “The Sound of Memory: Acoustic Conflict and the Legacy of the French Wars of Religion in Seventeenth-Century Montpellier,” *Early Modern French Studies* 41 (2019): 7-20; and the older but still relevant study by Louise Guiraud, *Études sur la Réforme en Montpellier* (Montpellier: Veuve Louis Valat, 1918).

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