

H-France Forum
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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.

Author's Response by Barbara Diefendorf, Boston University

I want to begin by thanking Hilary Bernstein for organizing this *H-France Forum* and the reviewers for their generous reviews. It is an honor to have *Planting the Cross* chosen for the extended discussion the forum allows, and I am gratified to see the book receive such a positive response from scholars who have worked so fruitfully on various dimensions of the problems I address. The reviewers present my arguments about the diverse, localized, and contentious nature of monastic reform with admirable clarity. Their perceptive questions encourage further thought about analyses I might have deepened, connections I might have made. I welcome the opportunity to take up several of the most intriguing questions here and, in particular, want to reflect on questions of women's versus men's experience, center versus periphery, and "old" versus "new" orders. I will then expand a bit on things I now see that I left out.

All four reviewers underscore my argument about the ways in which the reform and renewal of Catholic religious life in France was rooted in, and influenced by, local circumstances. As Olivia Carpi sums it up, Catholic reform was "un processus complexe, multiforme, très tributaire des configurations socio-économiques et culturelles dans lesquelles il se développe et qui diffèrent fortement d'un lieu à l'autre." In Linda Lierheimer's words, the book shows that reform was "an ongoing process" that "was defined in relationship to local circumstances and specific institutional contexts." Seeking broader patterns within this diversity, she goes on to raise questions about how both gender and location might have influenced the experience of religious reform. I will take up the question of gender first.

Linda Lierheimer sums up the many similarities between men's and women's experiences of monastic reform—"scarce resources, conflicts over authority, competition with other orders, internal differences about how to define and implement 'reform'"—before noting the disadvantages women faced because of men's greater access to resources and the benefits provided by connections to a larger religious order. She wonders, though, whether there might not have been some advantages to "the organizational isolation of women's houses." Did this sometimes allow nuns "greater independence and autonomy to shape and live their own visions of reform"? I can see how the chapters I devote to women might suggest an affirmative answer to this question. As David van der Linden notes, my chapter on the nuns who struggled for their convents' survival in war-torn Montpellier offers "an important story of female agency," despite the ultimate demise of two of the three communities. The chapter on the Carmelites of Pontoise credits them with a good deal of initiative in shaping their vision of Teresian life and implies at least that they enjoyed greater autonomy than their sisters in Paris, who were more subject to their superior, Pierre de Bérulle.

The lesson I take from these cases is, however, less positive: A convent's autonomy appears to have depended directly on its relationship with its (male) superior. It was, in other words, only as autonomous as the men with power to limit this autonomy allowed it to be. Pontoise's Carmelites had the good fortune to have benign superiors who, to all appearances, allowed them to shape their own vision of religious life. By contrast, Montpellier's nuns were forced to take charge of their own affairs during the long decades of Protestant domination because the male clerics who might have assisted them were absent or neglectful. Once the city had a resident bishop who aspired to a renewal of Catholic religious life, this autonomy disappeared—and with it two of the three old convents, whose remaining property the bishop gave to the new orders he favored. Moreover, the nuns who worked to salvage convent properties destroyed or appropriated during the wars paid a price for this that would not have been required of men. They were harshly criticized for breaking the rules of monastic enclosure—rules that applied only to women—when they went out to collect rents or opened their doors to receive them, even though they lacked the seclusion a convent provided and were living hand to mouth in rented rooms. They had to find funds with which to construct a high-walled cloister and appropriate living spaces if they hoped to attract new recruits with much needed dowries, and they had to pay large sums to the solicitors hired to oversee lawsuits filed to recuperate lost properties. Quite possibly, they were taken advantage of in ways that monks, whose numbers often included men trained in the law, were better able to avoid. At the very least, monks could live in improvised spaces, go out to collect rents, and deliver legal papers without the loss of reputation suffered by nuns. Religious women did successfully innovate—the Visitandines and Ursulines offer good evidence of this—but, given the constraints society placed on their gender, they needed active support, or at least acquiescence or benign neglect, on the part of well-placed men.

Was it location, rather than gender, that gave the Ursulines and Visitation “more autonomy to implement their own particular vision of reform,” as Linda Lierheimer puts it? Observing that both congregations began in the provinces, she asks “whether there may have been more room for religious innovation and experimentation on the periphery than at the center.” I had not thought in these terms but would agree that it was easier to innovate on the margins than in the wealthier, more visible, and more powerful institutions in the kingdom's center. Lierheimer draws her examples from women's orders, but the observation is valid for male orders as well. Certainly, it was easier for Sébastien Michaëlis to turn a burned-out friary in Clermont-l'Hérault over to brothers wishing to return to an observant life than to persuade his brothers in Paris's venerable friary of the rue Saint-Jacques to adopt his program for reform. The Trinitarians' reform also had its greatest success far from Paris. The movement actually began at Pontoise, but the stubborn resistance of the order's superior general largely suffocated reform efforts in and around the Île-de-France. He tried to destroy the movement in Provence as well, but the Provençal brothers' greater distance from his authority allowed many of the changes they introduced to survive. It is, moreover, hard to imagine a reform as austere as that which Jean de La Barrière introduced at the isolated abbey of Feuillants, fifty kilometers southwest of Toulouse, occurring in one of the great abbeys in or near Paris. The powerful aristocrats who enjoyed these benefices saw all too clearly that any attempt at internal reform would threaten the wealth they and their families drew from these sinecures. This is, as I have argued, one of the

reasons why it was often easier to establish a new order than to reform an old one. It is also why many would-be reformers, recognizing the impossibility of imposing radical change on their old order, settled for establishing an observant congregation within it. It is no coincidence that the Feuillants delayed coming to Paris, despite Henri III's repeated pleas, until they achieved independence within the Cistercian order.

As Megan Armstrong observes, *Planting the Cross* questions the traditional framing of post-Reformation Catholicism in terms of “old” and “new” new orders. She rightly points to the continuing importance of the traditional orders, for example in Catholicism's global expansion, but also reminds us that the Capuchins, Feuillants, and discalced Carmelites, though often cited as “new” Catholic Reformation orders, were actually reform movements within older traditions. The Capuchins remained very much sons of Saint Francis, just as the Feuillants remained sons of Saint Bernard and Saint Benedict, and the discalced Carmelites heirs to the Marian devotion and contemplative traditions of Carmel. At the same time, these reform movements were animated by a very different spirit from that which prevailed in the old orders of which they remained a part. Reformers justified the changes they instituted in terms of a return to an earlier perfection but clearly were inspired at least as much by spiritual currents particular to their troubled age. The militant anti-Protestantism shared by these and other reformed orders is the most direct and obvious effect of their times. Their penitential piety and rigorous asceticism were also, as I have argued at greater length in *From Penitence to Charity*, inseparable from the prolonged crisis of a civil and religious war that was understood as a manifestation of God's wrath.

Olivia Carpi puts it well when she describes the reformed orders as “pratiquant l'activisme antiprotestant et prônant la rigueur, à l'aune de laquelle on mesure plus que jamais, dorénavant, le degré de perfection de la vie religieuse.” At the same time, as she adds, significant tensions and even ruptures could occur within a reform movement on account of disputes over just what was entailed in “cette notion d'austérité, faisant figure d'absolu, mais pas toujours tenable au quotidien et à long terme.” Whether viewed as a return to origins, a search for authenticity, or (as Megan Armstrong suggests) a pursuit of purity, the rigorously ascetic ideal that propelled reform movements was powerful but fragile. It prompted divisions but also, I would add, simply wore itself out in time. None of the “new” orders engaged for long in the punishing measures of bodily mortification that characterized their founders. This was partly out of concern for health—so many monks were dying in the Feuillants' Roman monastery that Pope Clement VIII ordered them to modify their inadequate diet in 1592— but it was also because the penitential spirituality that was so powerful during the Wars of Religion lost its urgency after the return to peace.

This brings me to a missed opportunity in *Planting the Cross*. I regret not having looked more closely at the origins of this ascetic drive in Jean de La Barrière's spiritual conversion and founding of the reformed congregation of Feuillants. My chapter on the Feuillants begins in Paris and focuses on the political and religious conflicts that divided the community there. I did not ask why Jean de La Barrière, after enjoying revenues from Feuillants as its commendatory abbot for ten years, decided to join the order from which he drew his income and, undergoing a novitiate in another Cistercian monastery, came to the Feuillants abbey in 1573 with the intention of reforming it. I did not ask how, after four years of being ignored, threatened, and

finally deserted by monks who refused his ascetic reforms, he began to attract followers. Nor did I ask why the number of men voluntarily submitting to La Barrière's mortifying regime then grew so rapidly that within ten years the congregation had 140 members. And yet these are important questions directly relevant to my broader arguments about the impact of the wars and the ascetic spirituality that characterized the era. As I have now discovered, the sources for this period of Feuillant history are hagiographic but, used with appropriate caution, revealing. They affirm in strong terms that La Barrière's religious vocation was motivated by a belief that the civil wars "were scourges that God sent to chastise the sins of the French" and that he was among those specially chosen to expiate the sins of others and appease the wrath of God by his acts of penitence.[1]

The abbey of Feuillants lay in an area where there was a great deal of fighting during the wars.[2] This fact doubtless contributed to the perceived need to appease an angry God with acts of penitence and helps to explain the extremes to which Jean de La Barrière and his followers took their mortifications. But the reformed Feuillants were not just contemplatives. Jean de La Barrière was also a gifted preacher, who reportedly attracted such crowds when preaching Lenten and Advent sermons in Toulouse that the gatherings sometimes had to be moved outside into public squares. Catherine de Medici and the courtiers who accompanied her to the Midi in 1579 heard La Barrière preach in Toulouse and then in Muret, where she also had private meetings with him.[3] These details help explain the interest that Henri III took in the Feuillants and his determination, first expressed in 1583, to found a monastery for them in Paris. They also provide the backstory for Jean de La Barrière's continued loyalty to the king, when most Paris Feuillants became active proponents of the Holy League.

When the abbot and sixty of his monks finally came to Paris in 1587, they came surrounded by the military guard the king insisted on providing to protect them "from the insults of the heretics." [4] La Barrière's biographer describes the procession at length, telling how the monks walked the more than 700 kilometers between Feuillants and Paris barefoot behind their cross, as crowds gathered to watch the novel spectacle. The monks slowed their pace to recite the Holy Office at all of the canonical hours and spent each night near a church, so they could rise at 2:00 a.m. to recite the office and say mass. Vividly juxtaposing the religious and military dimensions of the wars, the description highlights the point that for Jean de La Barrière—as indeed for all of France's monks and mendicants—the wars were fought with penitence and prayer and not just with sermons and works of controversy, much less with sieges and battles. *Planting the Cross* mentions Teresa of Avila's belief that she could combat heresy with her prayers but fails to call attention to the broader belief in the power of prayer that was, after all, the very foundation and purpose of Catholic religious life.

The armed and mounted soldiers that Henri III provided the Feuillants for their long trip to Paris are also a reminder of the dangers to which monks and mendicants exposed themselves when they traveled during the wars. It would have been good to point, however briefly, to the courage Sébastien Michaëlis displayed as he repeatedly crisscrossed Huguenot-infested lands to fulfill his administrative and preaching obligations and to fight for reform in the Dominicans' far-flung province of Occitanie. Good also to underscore how unsettled conditions and banditry persisted

after the wars, making it unsafe, for example, for Provence's Trinitarians to venture into hinterlands where they had traditionally collected alms.

The Wars of Religion had a broader and longer-lasting impact on France's political and religious cultures than we often realize. I agree with David van der Linden that we need to know more about how both lay Catholics and Protestants responded to the wars' legacy. These questions are important; they are also enormous—and beyond the scope of *Planting the Cross*, which focuses on the internal dynamics of religious communities as they struggled to respond to changing circumstances and not their relations with the secular world, much less the role that “ordinary” Catholics played in France's Catholic revival or the Huguenots' response to the movement. Fortunately, a number of excellent historians are working on various aspects of these problems. I hope *Planting the Cross* will inspire others to investigate the long-term impact of France's civil and religious wars. I know that I have more questions to ask and in time, I hope, to answer.

NOTES

[1] [Jean-Baptiste Pradilhon de Sainte-Anne,] *La conduite de dom Jean de la Barrière abbé et instituteur des feuillens durant les troubles de la ligue ... par un religieux feuillant* (Paris: François H. Muguet, 1699), 65-66.

[2] Pierre-Jean Souriac, *Une guerre civile: Affrontements religieux et militaires dans le Midi toulousain (1562-1596)* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2008), offers an excellent analysis of the impact of the wars in this region.

[3] [Pradilhon de Sainte-Anne,] *La conduite de dom Jean de la Barrière*, 69-79.

[4] [Pradilhon de Sainte-Anne,] *La conduite de dom Jean de la Barrière*, 104.

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