

H-Net Reviews

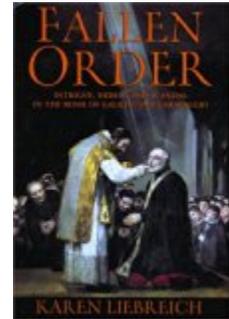
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen Liebreich. *Fallen Order: Intrigue, Heresy, and Scandal in the Rome of Galileo and Caravaggio.* New York: Grove Press, 2004. xxxii + 336 pp. Illustrations. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8021-1784-7.

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Published on H-Italy (May, 2009)

Commissioned by Gregory Hanlon



Schools of Vice

This compelling work recounts the dramatic, and largely unknown, story of the Piarist order in seventeenth-century Rome. Founded in 1597 by Jose de Calasanz to teach poor boys, and initially insistent upon extreme poverty for its members, the Piarists (Scuole Pie or Scolopi) imitated the Jesuits and other Counter-Reformation religious orders in attempting to broaden the message and membership of the Catholic Church through education. Despite some notable successes, such as enrolling 1,200 students in only two weeks in their Neapolitan school, the order was suppressed in 1646 amidst growing concern about sexual scandal and administrative incompetence. Karen Liebreich's accessible, lively writing style synthesizes the pace and form of a detective story with the archival underpinning of a historical monograph.

Previous scholarship on the Piarists has been dominated by its own members, who often wrote hagiographically about Calasanz and skipped any mention of the unpleasant details that plagued its early decades. As Liebreich shows, however, there are numerous references within the Piarists' own archive, and in the Vatican Archive, to sexual misbehavior by its members. Euphemistically referred to as "the worst vice," sodomy and the abuse of male students appear to have been practiced repeatedly by a number of infamous members, including Stefano Cherubini and Melchior Alacchi. More importantly, Liebreich argues, both Calasanz and his associates, as well as the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Rome,

were keenly aware of these allegations, yet chose to follow the practice of *promoveatur ut amoveatur* (promotion for avoidance). Thus even in the face of overwhelming evidence of child molestation, she claims, the offending priests were reassigned to other schools or—in the most egregious cases—promoted to more important positions. She calls this "the destabilising secret" at the heart of the order, which ultimately contributed to the suppression of the order just two decades after its constitutions had been approved. As Liebreich points out in her concluding chapter, there are many obvious parallels to the clerical abuse scandal that rocked Boston and other cities in the past decade. Those who distrust the Catholic Church will find much grist for their mill here, but the larger story narrated by Liebreich deserves careful attention.

It is clear that Liebreich has perused the Piarist archive with considerable care. She quotes extensively from Calasanz's own correspondence (4,869 letters) as well as from a trove of other documents, many only recently available to scholars in the Vatican Archive. She includes extensive information about the context of seventeenth-century Rome, particularly the byzantine nature of papal politics. Occasionally her desire to flesh out the story results in some digressions, as when she spends several pages summarizing Galileo's career and involvement with the Inquisition.

The recipient of a Cambridge doctorate and a research diploma from the European University Institute

in Florence (where she began this project), Liebreich has worked more recently as a television documentary researcher and producer for the BBC and the History Channel. Reflecting this dual background, her book is aimed more at a general audience than a scholarly one. Nevertheless, she maintains a calm, even-handed tone throughout the work, allowing the devastating documents that she has unearthed to speak for themselves. One unfortunate aspect of the book is her inclusion of overly dramatic cliffhangers at the end of each chapter, a technique more appropriate for a Dan Brown novel than a serious work of scholarship. The title is also puzzling: despite the mention of Galileo and Caravaggio in the subtitle, neither is central to the story, while the identity of the Piarist order is not mentioned on the book's cover.

Comparing the Piarists to their Jesuit brethren can be illuminating. Both orders featured a charismatic Spanish founder who wrote thousands of letters detailing how his organization was to be run; both suffered from overexpansion and sometimes accepted unqualified candidates;

both were deeply involved in Vatican (and European) politics. Both orders have extensive archives, and both were suspended by the pope (albeit for different reasons and in different centuries). Both, of course, have been leaders in training thousands of students during the past four centuries, and boast of their famous alumni. Yet while both demanded discipline from their members, Calasanz seemed unable or unwilling to enforce his will upon the more obstinate (and well-connected) members of his order. Another crucial difference between the Jesuits and the Piarists concerned their relationship to the emerging science of this period; several Piarist fathers worked closely with Galileo, while the Jesuits are (unfairly, perhaps) viewed as enforcing more orthodox views. In recent decades, Jesuit historiography has blossomed as non-Jesuit historians have plumbed its archival documents, while the Piarists have remained in the shadows. Liebreich's book should remedy the latter, even as it paints a damning picture of the early decades of the Piarist order.

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Citation: Christopher Carlsmith. Review of Liebreich, Karen, *Fallen Order: Intrigue, Heresy, and Scandal in the Rome of Galileo and Caravaggio*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. May, 2009.

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