

Barbara B. Diefendorf. *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. xiv + 340 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-509582-1.

*From Penitence to Charity:
Pious Women and the
Catholic Reformation
in Paris*

BARBARA B. DIEFENDORF

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In her third monograph, Diefendorf presents the reader with a study of lay and clerical female piety as it emerged in the wake of the French Wars of Religion and the propagandistic agitations of the Catholic League in the early seventeenth century.[1] This brief review can hardly do justice to a book that includes a number of gripping stories and intriguing details on its way to a successful, convincing synthetic approach to recent scholarly debates on women's experiences of the developing piety of the Counter-Reformation. Throughout the book, women run away to convents to avoid unwanted marriages, discipline themselves not to love their children but to focus on God, strew ashes over their food to limit the pleasures of eating, and abstain from the sacrament of communion in order to increase their desire and gratitude for it. At the same time, however, they correspond with princes, carry out massive fund-raising campaigns, superintend construction projects, and organize educational endeavors. By showing this wide range of pious activity, Diefendorf wishes to qualify the arguments of those scholars who have argued that the Tridentine movement toward enclosure of female or-

ders (one with wide-ranging results) was a movement hostile to women or taken up against their desires or interests. It is her position not only that women actively embraced enclosure, but that the lives of the cloistered also made an important impact on the piety and religious experiences of the uncloistered laity. She also wishes to redress the balance of research on the Counter-Reformation, which focuses on Italy and Spain. By examining women's experiences in one particular city, Diefendorf effectively underlines the local character of almost all early modern religious reform, which was dependent not only on dictates from above but their reception in the social, political and religious networks of any particular community. Paris is an interesting case study in this regard because of its role as an intersection between the extreme piety of the Catholic League and the initially more moderate Catholicism of the early Bourbon court.

Diefendorf begins her narrative with the experience of the Holy League and its effects on spirituality, moving on to discuss lay female asceticism before the establishment of the Carmelite

order in Paris (1604). The story of Barbe Acarie, who experienced the 1590 siege of Paris as "a golden age," takes the foreground here, as the narrative demonstrates the way in which League dominance of the city at a moment of severe political and religious crisis offered unique opportunities for women to express their spirituality (p. 27). It seems to have unleashed a movement toward mystic visions and apocalyptic piety that touched many Parisian women. Arguing against the position that French asceticism stressed an abstract passivity, Diefendorf describes the strenuous activity to which French women were moved, particularly following the example of Acarie. The author argues against a body of scholarship that has accepted outsiders' statements at face value, showing instead that Parisian piety, following upon its late medieval antecedents, was intensely Christocentric. The efforts of Acarie and numerous women like her were essential to the establishment of the Discalced Carmelites, Capucines, and Ursulines in Paris and elsewhere in France. These orders responded to a lack of truly ascetic female monastic foundations in the city. Their foundations came as a response to the impulses cultivated by laity to League piety. They provided a centering location for the more intensified practice of lay activities that were conducted in the chapels and living rooms of the city's devotees. As imports, these institutions had to be transformed to correspond to their local situations, an alteration whose features were largely determined by the influential women who sponsored the new groups. By 1640, contemplative convents were proliferating rapidly and their members had eagerly embraced strict enclosure. The reputations of these foundations and the women who led them guaranteed the necessary financial support for their activities, at least at first. Even in non-contemplative foundations, however, the goals of enclosure in terms of fostering greater devotion, particularly among lay women, could be met—as Diefendorf shows in the case of the Visitandines and similar orders. When the wave of enthusiasm

for asceticism faltered in the 1630s, however, many of these convents were forced to take on paying boarders for their survival, which again transformed their fulfillment of the ascetic ideal that had originally motivated their founders. Diefendorf ends her narrative with the response of female lay piety to the economic difficulties of the 1630s and foundations like the Ladies of Charity. When the provision of charity became such a widespread need that it moved from private to public hands, it finally ceased to fall within the purview of female charity.

The book interweaves its rereading of the institutional histories of the orders discussed effectively with the personal anecdotes of the religious women who moved the orders and their religious, social, and political networks. A great deal of evidence is drawn from the spiritual biographies of the women whose piety is described in Diefendorf's pages. If I have one question about the resulting narrative, however, it is that I would like to have read more detailed and complex consideration of the problems of these sources. Diefendorf remarks of a genre composed both by male and female authors, and that "on the whole ... differences in both substance and style between male-authored and female-authored or autobiographical accounts provide less significance than I originally anticipated," a surprising conclusion that might have merited more explanation (p. 21). While this introduction shows a great deal of consideration for the difficulties of these sources, it would have been helpful to read more source criticism throughout the chapters of the book. One frequently finds oneself wondering what effect the role of these sources as devotional literature had on the accounts of the lives of the pious people whose activities they described.

Aside from its contributions to ongoing debates in the field, the true triumph of the picture of Catholic women's piety that emerges in this book is the fact that it could be read sympathetically both by secular scholars of the field and in-

interested religious readers. By inaugurating chapters with individual stories and personal anecdotes, Diefendorf injects an often affecting narrative flow into the points of her analysis. The thrust of the book, in showing the ways in which the emergence of a specifically Parisian Tridentine piety served as a tool of empowerment for the religious and lay people who followed is finally too convincing to be written off as revisionism. The volume also includes a great deal of material that will be useful for lecturers and teachers. One hopes that a cheaper paperback edition will be available soon.

Note

[1]. Her earlier books are *Paris City Councilors in the Sixteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), a solidly argued quantitative social history about the city's administrative ruling class, and *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth Century Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), a classic on the topic of religious violence which integrated social and cultural history, and is now frequently taught in graduate surveys.

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