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Latecomers to Reform? Catholic Activism in the Wake of the French Wars of Religion

100 years after Martin Luther wrote his Ninety-Five theses, France found itself on the cusp of an extraordinary period of Catholic ascendancy. From the violence and bloodshed of four decades of civil war came an age of Bourbon rule and Catholic reform, during which numerous Catholic activists sought to shape religious devotion and discipline for a new age. Commonly referred to as *dévots*, these channelled their religious enthusiasm into a wide variety of causes, from the foundation of multiple new religious orders and monasteries to the organisation of missions and the patronage of charitable works.¹ The reform movement reached levels of intensity and creativity that were unmatched in any other region, and ultimately made distinctive and lasting contributions to Catholic religious life well beyond France.

On some counts, France was a latecomer to the Catholic Reformation, though it is clear that a type of 'Counter-Reformation' had sprang into action much earlier. By the time that the Council of Trent was held, France was on the road to a devastating religious war between the Catholic majority and a Protestant, or Huguenot, minority. The clashes reached gruesome heights on many occasions – especially on Saint Bartholomew's Day in August 1572. Subsequently, the militant Catholic League continued the fight. As well as battles, it made itself felt in an extraordinarily militant piety amongst ordinary people: processions of armed clergy and robed penitents walking the streets of Paris, aggressive sermons from the city's pulpits, shots fired in the air, and cries of prayer for the defeat of Protestants on the battlefield. It also gave rise to a wave of penitential anguish that saw men and women in Paris and other cities controlled by it engage in severe ascetic and penitential practices to atone for the sins of heresy and plead for God's mercy. In effect, they interiorised violence, and imposed suffering on themselves as well as on Huguenots.

We might assume that this extraordinarily bloody turmoil and polarising sectarianism would be sufficient to define the Catholic reforms that developed in France. But this was not the case; other factors also exercised influence on the path of the reform movement as it developed, determining its character, achievements, and limitations. Clearly, the pace and character of reform in France was particularised by context – religious, political, and social – and a unique conjuncture of circumstances pertained there as the new century dawned.

II

The first of these was the fallout from the war itself. France was led into the seventeenth century by a Catholic convert, the former Huguenot, Henri IV, who had switched to Catholicism in order to take the throne. He was determined to impose peace on royal terms of justice and authority, and to win the loyalty of former opponents who suspected that his conversion to Catholicism hid a Protestant heart. They were not reassured by Henri's decision to grant freedom of belief and worship to the Huguenots under the terms of the Edict of Nantes in 1598. But most received it grudgingly, as the price paid for peace, and submitted at least outwardly, hiding their reservations of conscience. Their unease may have been soothed by another of the king's tactics: from the early 1600s, he lavished favours on new Catholic foundations and works in a bid to convince Catholics of his credibility as king, to reassure them of the Catholic character of the Bourbon monarchy, and to enhance royal control over the ecclesiastical domain. For example, he founded the famous Jesuit College of La Flèche in 1604 and five Capuchin friaries, as well as giving generous grants to an assortment of other orders, some of which had been among his most vociferous opponents during the wars.

¹ The term *dévo*t can also have political significance. Some *dévots* were highly and explicitly political, heavily involved, for instance, in the efforts to dislodge Cardinal Richelieu and redirect crown policy regarding the Habsburgs and the Huguenots in the 1620s (culminating in the failed coup led by the queen mother in November 1630). But they did not all share a common political perspective. Indeed, many were not overtly political at all, and it is on the social engagement of the grouping at large that this essay concentrates.

As a result, although some may have supported the unstable individual who stabbed the king to death in a Paris street in 1610, his achievements were recognised on his death, publicly at least. He was mourned by funeral orators as ‘the eldest son of the Church, a father of his people, and, after God, a saviour of his country.’ One orator, the bishop of Montpellier, asserted that the late king had favoured those ‘who had been the most opposed to him’, and had thus enabled the defeated to reconcile with the new regime.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this process is the degree to which members of the royal family actually channelled initiatives to develop Catholic devotion and discipline that had originally emerged independently of them. From the 1590s, a new phenomenon emerged, whereby many of the younger members of the social elite began to recoil from familial expectations and responsibilities and to retreat to monastic life - sometimes in response to the trauma of the Wars, sometimes in rejection of the new Bourbon regime. New and existing orders attracted large numbers of novices from the best French families. The young François Leclerc du Tremblay, for instance, underwent an overwhelming transformation in 1599 which involved his absolute renunciation of the family responsibilities left to his care after his father’s death in 1598 (including the recovery of the family fortune and his mother’s carefully crafted plan for his marriage), in favour of the ascetic regime of a Capuchin friary. His experience was far from unique in this climate. Rather caustically, the diarist Pierre de L’Estoile commented that the orders recruited the foolish, confused, simple, and lazy. But even he was forced to acknowledge that by 1606 ‘the latest novelty, in Paris and elsewhere, was for sons and daughters of good families, men and women of high standing, to join these new orders of Feuillants, Recollects, Carmelites, and Capuchins’.

During the first half of the century, seventy-two new convents, friaries, and monasteries appeared in Paris (forty-eight of which were for women), transforming the capital’s landscape. Leading families forged bonds with these that often lasted several generations. For example, the parents of Hélène-Angelique Luillier bestowed 45,000l on the first Visitation convent to be founded in Paris in 1620 when she entered it, which enabled her lay sister and niece to enjoy special privileges there for years.² The rapidly expanding Order of the Visitation alone had three monasteries in the capital by 1660, having been founded only a half century before in Annecy by François de Sales and Jeanne Frémiot de Chantal. These formed centres of devotion and sociability for those attracted to the spirituality of François de Sales, including influential reformers like Vincent de Paul. He went on to found the clerical association of missionaries known as the Congregation of the Mission or Lazarists in 1625.

A second factor to bear influence on the nature and pace of reform activism was the ecclesio-political doctrine of Gallicanism. It is best known for its association with the doctrine of divine right and royal absolutism, but it also concerned a set of loosely defined ‘liberties’ of the French Church, which proponents used to limit papal jurisdiction in France. It therefore lay behind older rights that the French crown continued to claim in the seventeenth century, such as the power of the king to nominate bishops to vacant dioceses and to claim income from these. But it also meant that the crown was unwilling to incorporate the decrees of the Council of Trent into French law, since jurists believed that this would provide the pope with opportunities to extend his power over French religious affairs. This refusal had two effects. Firstly, it left the Church’s bishops with little legal support from the crown if they attempted to introduce the Council’s regulations on clerical residency, preaching, and so on in their dioceses. Secondly, the ambiguity of the Council’s status provided opportunities for innovation and adaptability amongst the determined and creative, as did the fact that there were many areas of religious organisation and devotion on which the Council had been relatively or totally silent.

² The first monastery, Saint-Antoine, was located in what is now commonly known as the Marais, and was converted into a Protestant temple in 1801. This is still its function today.

III

Who were these determined and creative? With a few exceptions, the early energy for reform did not emanate from the French episcopate. There were several reasons for this, not least the absence of suitable training for potential bishops in the early part of the century, and the crown's tendency to appoint bishops for political reasons as much as religious. In addition, some were hampered by the divisions about papal jurisdiction in France. As the century progressed, Gallicanism increasingly affected relations between the episcopate and the papacy, with bishops arguing that their ability to reform their dioceses was hampered by papal efforts to undermine their jurisdiction in them. It was not only the crown representatives who favoured significant autonomy for the French Church even as it remained within the Catholic Church. It was a mainstream position that was held by many of the clergy too.

One of the signs of change by the 1640s in the episcopate and the clergy at large was the development of seminaries, the French approach to which left an indelible mark on clerical formation far beyond France. The Council of Trent had recommended that some form of school for clerical training should be established in each diocese, but this bare instruction allowed the French considerable latitude (Sess. XXIV). Only about sixteen of the seminaries established before 1620 survived into the mid-1600s, as the effects of war, disrupted incomes, and lack of sufficient personnel took their toll. Right into the middle of the century, many bishops had to improvise, by asking the groups like the Lazarists to run short retreats for ordinands. In 1618, the bishop of Paris obtained letters patent for a diocesan seminary in the abbey of Saint-Magloire, and confided its direction to the Oratorians, a new congregation of secular priests recently founded by Pierre de Bérulle. But financial problems meant that it was twenty-four years before the seminary accepted its first cohort. Yet by the latter half of the seventeenth century, France was generally far in advance of other Catholic regions in the use of diocesan seminaries, and its model was transferred abroad by the Lazarists, Oratorians, Sulpicians and others.

Until a pattern of episcopal leadership began to emerge, the field was wide open to what can be called non-institutional, informal, and unofficial attempts to bring about changes in religious organisation and discipline, and it is here that we find the greatest energy and initiative in the first three decades of the century. The stand-out feature is a remarkable degree of lay agency, so much so that this is a defining feature of the entire Catholic Reformation in France. For example, the foundation of Vincent de Paul's association of secular missionary clerics in 1625 rested on an enormous endowment of 45,000l from the devout noble couple Philippe-Emmanuele and Marguerite de Gondi, and its members relied almost exclusively on the donations of wealthy noble laypersons to carry out their missions in rural parishes until the 1640s. It was only in this decade that bishops began to appear in the list of benefactors regularly, paying for missions and providing resources for the Lazarists to run diocesan seminaries. In total, by the time that de Paul died in 1660, the Lazarists had twenty-one houses in France,³ of which twelve contained seminaries, most established in collaboration with bishops.

In an environment so open to independent action by those with resources and influence, patronage could be applied to almost any endeavour. For the Lazarists, these were endowed missions, usually on the country estates of noble families. But lay *dévots* were not content simply to supply the money and leave clerical missionaries to it. By the early 1630s, there were several prominent organisations either dominated by or open only to lay members. These offered opportunities for collective action that was often outside the control or even knowledge of local bishops. For instance, the interests of the all-male and very large Company of the Holy Sacrament were all-encompassing, ranging from improvements to liturgical practice to eradication of public drunkenness, prostitution, and duelling. Another, the male Company of the Propagation of the Faith was an offshoot of this, and founded by the Capuchin *Père* Hyacinthe in 1632 specifically

³ This assumes that their two sites in Paris should be counted as two.

‘to aid the conversion of heretics and the subvention of the newly converted.’ Still another was the female confraternity of charity known as the Ladies of Charity of the Hôtel-Dieu, established in 1633, whose members were highly active in assisting the sick and poor around Paris.

All of these groups could lay claim to reform, but their individual qualities and priorities show the different ways in which it was pursued as French society emerged from the war years. In the first place, both the Company of the Holy Sacrament and the Company of the Propagation of the Faith were highly and explicitly anti-Protestant, with the second in particular taking Protestant conversion as its primary purpose. These groups had roots deep in the militancy of the wars, and it is clear that with the ending of military activity many Catholics articulated their wish to rid France of Huguenots by turning their attention aggressively towards their conversion. It was in this area that orders like the Jesuits and Capuchins found particular opportunities, often with the active co-operation of lay confreres of the two groups.

The transregional aspects of the Catholic reform movement are particularly obvious in the Jesuits and Capuchins as well: both groups had arrived in France during the later sixteenth century, and the Capuchins in particular had been to the fore during the League years as aggressive promoters of violence against Huguenots. Both also went on to grow dramatically in the seventeenth century. As early as 1610, the number of Jesuit foundations in France stood at 45, while the Capuchins had 285 foundations in France by 1643. Furthermore, they simply adapted the tactics that they used elsewhere, both to encourage conversions from Protestantism and to bolster the faith of Catholics. They mixed appeals to reason and emotion on the formal missions that they organised: Huguenots witnessed their ministers tackled in debates over the accuracy of Huguenot Bibles, and were confronted by polemical preaching that unpicked their doctrines. For Catholics, the missionaries adopted theatrical techniques such as processions and ceremonial planting of crosses at parish limits accompanied by shots fired in the air (reminiscent of the shots fired during League processions), ‘forty hours’ devotions (comprising three days of preaching, prayers, torchlight eucharistic processions and veneration), and public acts of penance, such as the trailing of the tongue along the ground, to press home their messages of repentance and conversion. They sought to demoralise Protestants, pressure them into converting, and draw a clear line of demarcation between the faiths in local communities.

Secondly, however, it should be acknowledged not all manifestations of reform were overtly militant and triumphal; for some, the wars had the opposite effect, causing them to turn their attention exclusively to the devotion of Catholics, and to avoid any activity that might unsettle relations between the faiths again. Amongst missionaries, de Paul forbade the Lazarists to engage in confrontations of any kind with Huguenots, and devised tactics for their Catholic audiences that did not rely on theatrics. They also spent more time than other missionaries on catechesis, and positioned humility at the centre of their approach to conversion.

One of the major influences on this approach was the teaching of François de Sales on compassion, gentleness, and charity. But the impact of this was also felt elsewhere, particularly amongst lay women. Before he died in 1622, de Sales had been the Catholic bishop of Geneva but had earned fame mainly as a spiritual advisor. He was a hugely popular figure, whose sermons had been thronged whenever he visited Paris - so much so that he had been forced on one occasion to reach the pulpit by climbing through a window of the church! He had also promoted his teaching in ‘bestseller’ books: in 1609, his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, was published to instant acclaim and widespread circulation amongst *dévots* in France. In it, de Sales taught that ‘Devotion must be exercised in different ways by the gentleman, the worker, the servant, the prince, the widow, the young girl, and the married woman...the practice of devotion must also be

adapted to the strength, activities, and duties of each particular person' – in effect, he sought to draw attention to the value of vocations beyond the priesthood and religious life.⁴

Exactly 100 years after Luther produced his theses, Vincent de Paul began to establish confraternities of charity in parishes, which quickly became extremely popular with women. Confraternities were traditional vehicles for organising Catholic devotion, but were given a new lease of life during the Catholic Reformation. In Rome alone, for instance, sixty confraternities were founded between 1540 and 1600, mainly by Jesuits. Drawing explicitly on de Sales' teaching, de Paul used the confraternal structure to provide a formal means for Catholic laywomen to express their faith through the practise of charity, pursue their own salvation and that of others, and participate in public welfare. The Lazarists established the associations at the close of their missions in rural parishes, but at least twenty were also in operation in Paris by the 1640s.

In essence, de Paul realised that both Church and society were missing a trick: womanpower was a huge underused resource. For social and ecclesiastical reasons, women were not normally permitted to have public roles: what is known as the 'circle of exclusions' restricted their access to most positions of early modern civil, political, and ecclesiastical leadership in society. Moreover, if not at home looking after children, Catholic women were usually nuns in convents, enclosed and 'cloistered' away from the rest of society. And Trent had certainly sought to reinforce that tradition (Sess. XXV).

Furthermore, de Paul put decision-making in the groups overwhelmingly in the hands of the women themselves, and suggested daringly to them that they were like the deaconesses of the early Church, who taught the faith and cared for the poor: indeed, he made it clear that he saw the confreres as heirs to and restorers of public female leadership and service. He also rejected the common interpretation of Saint Paul's words (Cor14:34-6;1Tim2:12), which were assumed to order not only that women should remain silent in churches but that they should not teach at all.

The flexible model of the confraternity offered new opportunities for women of different social groups to care for the sick and poor (though obviously the poorest in society were simply recipients rather than providers). In Paris, one in particular, the Ladies of Charity of the *Hôtel-Dieu* hospital, became particularly popular with female aristocrats, merchant's wives and so on. In 1652, for instance, the president was Marie Fouquet, whose husband was a councillor of state; of their twelve surviving children (fifteen in total), the second eldest became superintendent of finances in 1653, two others were raised to the episcopate, and five entered the Visitation order. Likewise, almost every female member of another major legal family, the Lamoignon, was an active member - the matriarch Marie, two of her daughters and her daughter-in-law. De Paul understood perfectly the potential that lay in such family relationships when they were interlaced with spiritual kinship, telling members that women who impassioned their daughters, nieces, and daughters-in-law through their words and example, rendered them all like 'burning coals that are united together.'

In 1633, de Paul and the widow Louise de Marillac established another variation of the group, known as the Daughters of Charity. The majority of these came from lower society – the daughters of peasants, and often only learned to read and write only after they joined the association. The Daughters lived in religious community, and worked locally, but were not nuns – very unconventional at the time. Imaginatively and rather daringly, to avoid pressure to have them turned into enclosed nuns, de Paul and Marillac insisted that the Daughters were not a religious order but a confraternity whose member took private, simple, and renewable vows annually: as well as vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, these included a fourth to serve the sick poor, which de Paul took verbatim from the vows taken by the Camillians, a society of priests founded

⁴ Though independently insightful, this view mined a seam of spirituality contained in the fifteenth-century works of the Spanish Dominican Louis of Granada: *The Sinner's Guide* and the *Memorial of a Christian Life*. De Sales and de Paul recommended these books in their circles, and they were very popular with *dévo*t readers.

by Camillus de Lellis in Italy in 1584. With the street as their cloister – in the famous rallying call of de Paul – the group was the largest female religious organisation in France by turn of the century, and a major precursor of the direction in which female religious life would move in the nineteenth century.

It would be naive to argue that these confraternities broke through the ‘circle of exclusions’ that restricted female access to most positions of early modern civil, political, and ecclesiastical leadership in early modern society. Yet they were certainly unusual in the extent to which they advocated for the active and formal agency of laywomen in public devotional expression, and illustrate particularly vividly the vibrancy of female religiosity in these years, as well as the potential for innovation in religious thinking and practice. *Dévo*t activism in the early seventeenth century was a multi-faceted phenomenon, with a broad set of actors and resources, united in their quest for Catholic reform and renewal, but varied in the suppositions and methods that they applied to it. Mixing tradition with novelty, they were determinedly conservative and transformative, all of them begrudgingly enduring a regime of religious toleration while seeking to ensure that parity of esteem did not enter the lexicon.