

Planting the Cross: Catholic Reform and Renewal in Sixteenth-Century France

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France is a land of roadside crosses. Most of these date from the 19th and 20th centuries, ‘planted’ during Roman Catholic revival missions, or as thanksgivings and memorials for liberation from war or adversity. Planting crosses is a very old tradition. In the medieval and early modern periods, it was the custom of religious orders founding new churches and of missionaries working in domestic and overseas territories, to claim the site for Christ by planting ceremonially a large wooden cross. This is referenced in the title of Barbara Diefendorf’s new study of Catholic religious orders and their efforts to reinvigorate the faith in the towns of France at the turn of the 17th century, following 40 years of confessional conflict with Protestantism. As Diefendorf states in her introduction, the cross was a contended symbol in the religious conflicts of the 16th century. Protestants tore them down as symbols of popery and Catholics retaliated by erecting dozens more (p. 1). Thus, ‘planting the cross’ is used as a metaphor for what is generally called the Counter and Catholic Reformations, comprising anti-Protestant actions and Catholic spiritual renewal. The book takes six case studies—or microhistories—of attempts by different religious congregations to grow or to reform in France and, by so doing, to plant the seeds of Catholic revival in divided communities.

Planting the Cross is, in many ways, a sequel to Diefendorf’s work on women’s religious orders and devotional change in early 17th-century Paris, published as *From Penitence to Charity*.⁽¹⁾ This itself followed a seminal study of Paris during the wars of religion, *Beneath the Cross*, which examines the nature, course, and consequences of religious conflict in the French capital across the later 16th century.⁽²⁾ The new work widens Diefendorf’s scope of enquiry, to include men’s religious orders and a provincial perspective, the Midi, as well as Paris. It is based on extensive research in the archives of Provence and Languedoc as well as those of the French capital. With this geographical range, Diefendorf includes ardently Catholic places—Paris, Provence—and Languedoc, where Protestantism was at its strongest. The six studies examine the origins and struggles of Catholic reform at specific places and times. They illustrate how contemporary ideas and events affected each institution and community differently, demonstrating the local diversity of the impact of the French religious wars.

The first three studies focus on religious communities which were directly in the path of war. Chapter one charts the experiences of three long-established communities of nuns in Montpellier, across the period of the

religious conflict. These were the Poor Clares—latterly under Benedictine rule—of Notre Dame de Paradis; Dominican nuns at Saint-Guilhem; and Augustinian nuns at Saint-Gilles. It is difficult to know the status of these female communities of the early 16th century in terms of discipline and membership, for their archives were destroyed during the religious wars. There seem to have been financial problems even at that point. The conflicts saw their patrimony destroyed. Montpellier was a Protestant stronghold for much of the period from 1562 to 1620 and the convents within its walls were damaged, their residents expelled, and their resources captured or confiscated. The nuns made numerous attempts to re-found their houses and restore their finances—particularly the prioress of Saint-Guilhem—but the cost and effort was too great. By the 1620s, when peace returned to the city, no one was interested in these old orders and two of them finally folded. The only one to survive did so by inviting members of a neighbouring reformed convent to take over their leadership. Elite patrons, such as the bishop of Montpellier, had new interests and priorities, preferring to support ‘modern’ congregations such as the Visitandines and Ursulines, with their contemporary forms of spirituality and activism. The ancient female communities had had their day.

The second chapter focuses on Paris in the 1590s, and on the Feuillant house of reformed Cistercians. In 1589, the brothers rebelled against their superior and founder of the congregation, Jean de la Barrière. They refused to obey their prior’s order to support Henri IV, supporting instead the ultra-Catholic League. The brothers also considered la Barrière’s ascetic mandates for their lifestyles too severe. Under the leadership of Bernard de Montgaillard, the house appealed to the papacy and to the wider Cistercian order for mediation. A new prior was appointed for Paris, who attempted to restore peace through ‘moving on’ recalcitrant monks and restoring a discipline that was less severe—although still ascetic—on the house. The third chapter examines the efforts of the Capuchin order to plant their congregation and to convert Protestants in Languedoc. Their first house was founded in Toulouse in 1582, from which they hoped to reconquer the south for Catholicism, through preaching, rituals, and committed public service. They also gained support and admiration through the public exhibition of their mortified lives. However, they were not able to overcome Protestant resistance. Their main successes lay not in converting heretics but in promoting a renewal of piety among the faithful, and their successful new houses were all in Catholic towns.

Chapters five and six focus on the self-reforms of older religious orders fallen into decay. In chapter five, Sebastien Michaëlis’s efforts to reform the Dominicans of Occitanie are explored. He was active in reforming a number of houses, notably Clermont-l’Hérault, Toulouse, Béziers and Saint-Maximin in Provence. He framed his reform, as did many others, as a return to original practices, although he drew ideas from the Jesuits as well. Michaëlis was not without critics, especially at the latter convent, where there was local refusal to comply with his ideas. Diefendorf argues that we see in his tactics practices that were to become standard in the 17th century: commencing reform with small and ruined houses; denying to those who resisted the right to take novices; and appeal to higher ecclesiastical and secular authorities when challenged by superiors in the order (p. 109). During Michaëlis’s time at Saint-Maximin, the notorious case of demonic possession known as the Gaufridy affair arose, about which he wrote an apologetic account. Diefendorf argues that he did so in order to save the reform programmes of associated religious houses, fearing that the taint of scandal might curb their reorganisation. Chapter six also examines the restructuring of a mendicant order, the Trinitarians of Provence, who were originally founded to redeem Christian captives held by Muslims. The Trinitarians underwent decline in the later 16th century, as the fight against Protestantism rather than Islam was foregrounded. They attempted to stem their decline with self-reform from the bottom up; this was done to reboost their position, and was driven by a genuine interest in self-improvement. To enact this reform, they emulated many of the features of new congregations. Traditional hierarchical leadership was replaced with a more collaborative structure; the training of members, especially priests, was augmented, and a more spiritualised community emerged.

The final chapter revisits a topic from *Penitence and Charity*; the plantation of French female Carmelite houses from Spain after 1602. Two convents were founded in quick succession, at Paris and Pontoise, each of which created a conventual culture that each considered to reflect best the legacy of St Theresa, creating rivalry between the two over their vision and direction. While the Parisian convent and its high-profile supporters such as Barbe Acarie are well known, Diefendorf here examines the sister house at Pontoise, and

its attempts to claim an independent and distinct role in the Teresian tradition.

Diefendorf draws a number of conclusions from the case studies. There has long been debate about the state of monastic life on the eve of the French Wars of Religion, with a pessimistic view generally prevailing. What is striking is the level of destruction of religious houses during the confessional conflict. Communities in the countryside were unfortified and vulnerable, but urban convents were also targets of iconoclasm and victims of soldiery seeking food and booty, both Catholic and Protestant. As many as one-third of Cistercian houses—largely rural—were destroyed or damaged, as were up to a quarter of Dominican convents, most of which were found in towns. Abbeys, such as the 11th-century foundation of Maillezais near to La Rochelle, never recovered.

Particularly significant for the long-term viability of religious houses was the loss of resources on which their lives had been based. Even before the wars, many communities faced financial problems as inflation eroded fixed incomes created in earlier centuries, and fewer donors were interested in giving substantial gifts. This was exacerbated by the widespread practice of commendation, whereby the French king granted monasteries to favoured aristocrats, who took most of the revenues and left the monks to survive on a pittance. Poor, shabby, and badly led, religious houses saw their membership as well as patronage decline. This was undermined further by evangelical Catholic as well as Protestant criticism of the utility of the religious life. Then, during the wars, property was destroyed, stolen, and expropriated. Monks and nuns fled or were killed. Houses emerged from the conflicts low in numbers, poor in resources, and lacking in discipline and direction. It was, as Diefendorf states, very difficult for these institutions to compete with new congregations unhindered by debt and unburdened by past abuses.

The militant Catholic spirit engendered by the French religious wars favoured a return to the religious life. One of the clearest signs was the increased number of foundations of congregations and houses, particularly after 1598. The orders which spread first were those which zealously supported Catholicism during the wars, particularly the reformed Franciscans, Capuchins, Minims, and Recollects. Even more striking after the war's end was the growth of women's orders, Discalced Carmelites, Visitandines, and Ursulines, all of which were enclosed in this period. The urban landscape—these were city-based congregations—was transformed in the half-century after 1600, with large numbers of new convents. Paris gained at least 72 new houses and even Aix-en-Provence gained 15.

However, Diefendorf shows us that reforming an order from within was much more difficult than setting up a new congregation. Within all religious orders, old and new, disputes over the meaning of reform were apparent. Put succinctly, there were ongoing, irresolvable tensions between an understanding of reform as a return to the discipline of the existing rule—which most monastic orders understood as true reform—and new ideas of purity. Reformers of existing houses could not force members to comply, because of the protection of their vows. Only persuasion and quarantine, as with Michaëlis's efforts in Provence, could be used.

One of the main features of the revival of the religious life was the practice of penitentialism, for renewed spirituality had a strongly ascetic element. Diefendorf, along with Natalie Zemon Davis, Denis Crouzet and others, sees the trauma of civil war—interpreted by contemporaries as a sign of God's wrath—as generating an apocalyptic spirituality which found expression in personal and communal acts of atonement.⁽³⁾ Many pious Catholics used bodily mortification—'discipline'—as a platform for religious change. For example, the Capuchins gained much elite and popular support because of admiration for the saintliness of their humility. But it was also a lifestyle resisted by some, and caused tension when it was seen as excessive, as with the Paris Feuillants and Michaëlis's reforms of Dominicans.

There was also a tension inherent in ascetic monastic reform. Even strict observant and enclosed communities had to please patrons and benefactors in order to receive donations and material support for their lives. In order to do so, they had to allow their donors privileged access to their communities. As Diefendorf states, there was a paradox between promoting an air of unworldliness—which found favour with

religious supporters—and cultivating wealthy donors who had certain expectations of lifestyle and favours. This played out in individual ways in different communities.

The action that all reformers agreed on was the need to combat heresy. The renewal of French Catholicism had its origins in the perceived necessity to prevent the spread of Protestantism and to raise standards of Catholic—especially clerical—behaviour and spirituality. This was to be done through the example of holy lives and by teaching, in sermons, tracts, and catechisms. Even withdrawal into the convent, as with Carmelite nuns, offered a life of strict religious observance and prayer, as a way of combatting heresy. But the message that comes out of Diefendorf's work, above all others, is that there were many different viewpoints as to the routes that renewal should take. To be successful, movements 'needed to adapt to local circumstances and values. ... Reform was not something fixed or completed ... [but] an ongoing process ... Catholic renewal was a more diverse, experimental and experiential process' (pp. 1–2). It was often only partially successful.

This is a beautifully crafted work of great erudition. In the manner of a fine sermon, it offers exemplars from which to draw wider themes. It is also significant because it offers a history of post-Reformation religious orders which includes traditional congregations founded in the Middle Ages, on which there are relatively few recent works.⁽⁴⁾ In fact, the one limitation I would identify in the work comes from greed rather than criticism: I would have liked to see an exemplar drawn from one of the great, established religious orders based in the countryside or small towns: the Benedictines, Cistercians, or Augustinians. As Diefendorf herself points out, the current literature is richest on new congregations, for example on Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac and François de Sales, along with the Jesuits in France. We know relatively little about early modern reform in the great, ancient, houses, partly because of the loss of their archives. But in sum, this is an important work and one that is a delight to read.

Notes

1. Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity, From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford, New York, NY, 2004).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford, New York, NY, 1991).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Rites of violence: religious riot in sixteenth-century France', *Past & Present*, 69 (1973), pp. 51–91; Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu : La violence au temps des troubles de religion* (Paris, 1990).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Joe Bergin provides a synthesis and comment on the existing scholarship in *Church, Society and Religious Change in France 1580–1730* (New Haven, CT, 2009).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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