
H-France Review Vol. 17 (April 2017), No. 66

Seán Alexander Smith, *Fealty and Fidelity: The Lazarists of Bourbon France, 1660-1736*. Farnham Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2015. viii + 227 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$124.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4724-4478-3.

Review by Linda Lierheimer, Hawai'i Pacific University.

The death of Vincent de Paul in 1660 ushered in a new era in the history of the congregation he had founded. During the four decades that followed, the Lazarists, also known as the Congregation of the Mission, grew from twenty-six to over fifty houses, and then to more than triple that number during the following century. Such rapid growth required his successors to confront difficult questions. How were they to ensure the continuation of de Paul's legacy in his absence? How could they remain faithful to his ideals, while expanding their mission within France and overseas? Drawing on concepts from Roland Mousnier's classic study of the institutions of the French absolutist state [1], Seán Smith explores the conflict between "spiritual fidelity" and "temporal fealty" for the Lazarists during the eight decades following their founder's death, and how the evolution of the congregation in these years shaped its relationship to its original mission. During this period, the Lazarists' increasingly close relationship with the French crown was often in tension with their identity as missionaries to the poor, and "fidelity" to their founder's legacy had to be adapted to expectations of "fealty" to the king.

The Congregation of the Mission was established in 1625 for the express purpose of serving the rural poor and galley convicts. When de Paul died, he left behind a set of common rules and institutional structures meant to perpetuate the company's original mission and identity. These included an internal seminary to train Lazarist priests and inculcate in them the core values of the community. This structure, along with the memory of de Paul himself, ensured the continuation of the congregation's *esprit primitif*. In the years that followed, the company struggled to maintain its identity and fidelity to his vision as it expanded and took on new functions. Even during the founder's lifetime, the increasing pastoral duties of the congregation, which included running diocesan seminaries and supplying parish priests, had sometimes clashed with the Lazarists' vision of themselves as "priests of the countryside" (p. 49). After his death, however, the conflict shifted from internal to external as new duties led to competing demands on the group's loyalties.

The book is organized around specific examples of Lazarist activities in the years 1660-1736 that challenged their institutional autonomy and involved collisions between serving the French state and adhering to the congregation's original ideals. Their first test of fidelity was a mission to Madagascar, launched in 1648 while de Paul was still alive. Embarking on a global mission meant adapting the Lazarists' mission to a vastly different environment and to their new role as "auxiliaries of empire" (p. 51). Though initially reluctant, de Paul gradually came around to the position that such a mission was compatible with the community's identity and function, with the indigenous people of Madagascar standing in for the poor in the French countryside. The reality on the ground was much more complex, however, and the new missionaries were unprepared for a situation in which their flock identified them with colonial violence and aggression. Their efforts were thwarted by lack of resources, ongoing warfare

between the natives and the French colonists, and the murder of one of the missionaries in 1664. The Madagascar mission was officially terminated in 1671, and the few remaining priests returned home.

The failure of the Madagascar mission led the Lazarists to turn away from foreign endeavors and develop a new “strategy for fidelity” (p. 12) to refocus on their original mission to the poor at home. However, back in France, their fidelity faced new and different challenges. Beginning in the 1670s, royal patronage sparked an identity crisis over how to remain faithful to the company’s *esprit primitive* and still fulfill their duties to the king. In 1672, Louis XIV chose the Lazarists as parish priests of Versailles, and royal patronage led to numerous other appointments, including serving as spiritual directors at St-Cyr, Madame de Maintenon’s school for the daughters of poor nobles. Their position as court favorites was a far cry from de Paul’s vision of his priests as “men of lowly birth, learning and virtue, the dregs, the sweepings, the rejects of the world” (p. 81). While the king chose them precisely because of their moral purity and aloofness from politics and the court, his patronage inevitably set up a conflict between the congregation’s values and its duty to the king. Fealty to the king required giving up a measure of autonomy and led to the Lazarists’ increasing identification not only with the monarchy, but with France. When delegates of the congregation assembled in 1697 to elect a new superior general, the king vetoed the chosen candidate because he was a Savoyard, much to the chagrin of the Polish and Italian priests. Louis clearly did not want the parish priests of Versailles taking orders from a foreigner.

Collaboration with the monarchy also included serving as chaplains in royal galleys. The galleys were an important part of the French penal system as well as Louis XIV’s plan to become “master of the Mediterranean” (p. 125). Serving galley convicts had been part of the congregation’s founding mission. In 1619, Louis XIII appointed Vincent de Paul royal chaplain of the galleys, and the monarchy permanently assigned this role to Lazarist superior generals in 1644. The nature of this mission changed, however, after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, when convicted Huguenots swelled the ranks of the galleys. Lazarist supervision was transformed from caring for the spiritual needs of convicts to enforcing the king’s religious policy, and the monarchy’s micromanagement undermined the congregation’s authority and independence. During the affair of the *bonnet rouge* in the 1690s, when Huguenot galley convicts in Marseille refused to remove their caps as a sign of respect for the Mass, the Lazarists’ reputation was tarnished by accusations of abuse. Smith blames the monarchy for the violent treatment of Huguenot convicts and argues that it scapegoated the Lazarists who did nothing more than “faithfully implement the Crown’s policies” (p. 144). While the extent of their complicity is debatable, serving as agents of the monarchy certainly had its costs.

In the final chapter of the book, Smith examines the eighteenth-century Lazarist mission to the Mascareignes Islands, where French settlers and commercial interests had relocated after abandoning Madagascar in 1674. This was an opportunity to reestablish and “wipe away the stain” (p. 153) of the earlier failed mission. The new superior general, Jean Bonnet, elected in 1711, was determined not to make the same mistakes as before and negotiated terms to guarantee that the missionaries had adequate support and would retain their independence. These terms included granting the priests land, which was cultivated by slaves. As landowners and slaveholders, the Lazarists became deeply imbedded in colonial life. Whereas previously they had developed a reputation for fighting the evils of slavery, in the Mascareignes they became active participants in upholding slavery as an institution. In the end, this mission was successful in avoiding the mistakes of the previous one, but not always in ways that were faithful to the congregation’s corporate values. In contrast to the Madagascar mission, which had been undermined by the missionaries’ poverty and deprivation, the Mascareignes priests were accused of extravagance. Although the mission endured up to the Revolution of 1789, the priests had limited success in converting the inhabitants of the islands, who were mostly slaves, and, Smith concludes, “much of the process of resurrecting Madagascar was, in the final analysis, disappointing” (p. 185).

This study makes an important contribution to our understanding of early modern religious organizations and their relationships with the absolutist state (as Smith points out, de Paul’s death

corresponded almost exactly to the beginning of Louis XIV's personal rule). The Lazarists have not received the same scholarly attention as groups like the Jesuits, even though their ideals and organizational structure were just as innovative and their influence as great. Moreover, most studies of the new religious congregations created in the wake of the Catholic Reformation have focused on their early, heroic years, and the Lazarists are no exception. Less attention has been paid to how these congregations developed and became institutionalized, and the challenge of adapting their original ideals to the realities of religious politics and social expectations. While the scholarly literature on de Paul is voluminous, there is surprisingly little work on his legacy, though some recent studies have examined his impact on women.[2]

Smith places the Lazarists within the wider context of the proliferation of fidelity ties in early modern Europe, and the royal project of elevating fealty to the sovereign over all other ties. Like other religious congregations, the Lazarists had to adapt their ideals to the realities and demands of pursuing their mission under the early modern state. However, the dense prose and narrow focus sometimes make it difficult to see the forest for the trees, and while the book is meticulously researched, Smith might have widened his lens to draw connections to some of the broader historical developments of the period. His claim that "Mousnier's call for further examination of the fidelity of religious agents, especially between their spiritual fidelity on the one hand, and the temporal fealty owed by all subjects on the other, remains largely unfulfilled" (p. 2) seems strange considering recent scholarship on the Jansenist controversy and the resistance of the Port-Royal nuns to the religious policy of Louis XIV.[3] While the challenges faced by the Lazarists in their attempt to remain faithful to the values of their founder was less dramatic and involved a different "strategy for fidelity"—adaptation rather than resistance—a more comparative approach would highlight the significance of the Lazarists in the context of widespread conflicts between political and religious loyalties during the reign of Louis XIV.

NOTES:

[1] Roland Mousnier, *Les institutions de la France sous la monarchie absolue, 1598-1789*, vol. 1, *Société et état* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974).

[2] Susan E. Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006); and Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[3] For example, Daniella Kostroun, *Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism: Louis XIV and the Port-Royal Nuns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Linda Lierheimer
Hawai'i Pacific University
llierheimer@hpu.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

