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Bernard Pujo, *Vincent de Paul, the Trailblazer*. Translated by Gertrud Graubert Champe. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003. xi + 327 pp. Images, chronology, notes, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-268-04361-2.

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Bernard Pujo, historian and author of several books including *Le Grand Condé* (Albin Michel, 1995), *Le général Pujo et la naissance de l'aviation française* (Service historique de l'armée de l'air, 1988), and *Juin, maréchal de France* (Albin Michel, 2000), published his biography of Vincent de Paul in 1998 as *Vincent de Paul, le précurseur*. This is his first book that has been translated into English.

Pujo's book examines the life of de Paul as an actor in seventeenth-century France, a nation experiencing political upheavals, economic distress, religious struggles, and wars, both civil and foreign. Vincent de Paul was a younger son of a better-off peasant family that sent him to be educated by a local priest and then to the University of Toulouse. Once his education was complete, he became a priest, teacher and, eventually, the tutor to the sons of two major figures in the *dévo*t party: Françoise-Marguerite de Silly and Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, the General of the Galleys and lieutenant general of the king (p. 51). De Paul then went on to found and direct several new religious establishments, all of which were committed to helping the poor.

Pujo has two principle aims for his book. First, he seeks to illuminate the transformation of de Paul from a callow young man who sought to enrich himself through church benefices, to a man who found a true calling in serving the needs of the poor—a calling that ultimately led to his canonization as a saint. Second, he seeks to place the life of Vincent de Paul into the political, social, ecclesiastical, economic and cultural context of his times. The author writes a book that is an informative and thoughtful examination of this remarkable saint from his peasant origins to his position as a powerful broker of Catholic Reformation good works. His ultimate goal is to produce a critical biography, instead of a work of hagiography. For the most part, Pujo is successful.

Pujo's efforts to chronicle de Paul's spiritual transformation, of course, are quite understandably colored both by the limitations of the documentary record, as well as by three hundred year's worth of religious writing on the subject. Pujo himself accounts for de Paul's inner transformation by crediting providence as well as temporal circumstance. Thus, Pujo frames de Paul's early life in terms of de Paul's own search for a meaningful life. For example, the author claims that by 1616 de Paul possessed several benefices and titles, but was not satisfied with his achievements (p. 56). Pujo then traces de Paul's transformation to his 1616 visits to the poor on the estates of the Gondi family. At this time, de Paul began to preach his first great sermons on sin and confession. In these, he expressed genuine horror that many souls were at risk of eternal damnation because local priests were unable or unwilling to serve them, or because the poor refused to confess to their local clergy (p. 61). Pujo sees this time as the critical juncture in his career. He asserts that de Paul "was constantly confronted with misery, both physical and spiritual. This brought him an interior illumination, an understanding that his personal vocation was to place himself at the service of the poor and the sick where they were most abandoned, in the countryside" (p. 67).

Shaped by his preaching experience, Pujo argues, de Paul began to increasingly focus his ministry upon the poor. In particular, he grew committed to the notion of creating a religious community for men who

wanted to preach to, and hear the confessions of the indigent. To this end, in 1625, de Paul founded Congregation of Mission (85). De Paul also had a great deal of help from the Gondi family, especially Madame Gondi who was committed to the missions. In the following year, the archbishop of Paris, Jean-François de Gondi (the family's youngest son), gave official approval to the Congregation of the Mission and de Paul deeded to his family all his possessions and formally relinquished the benefices that he still held. In 1633, Urban VIII signed the bull officially recognizing the Congregation of the Mission after five years of wrangling over the details of the foundation. Pujo illuminates the evolution of de Paul from 1616 to 1633 allowing his reader to appreciate the radical changes of this life. However, Pujo's willingness to credit providence does not always help him construct a convincing argument. The writings of de Paul demonstrate the difficulties he faced in building the Congregation of the Mission, and crediting "divine will" instead of engaging more fully with the correspondence leaves the reader without a complete appreciation of the struggle that de Paul undertook. This is an interesting omission, as de Paul's struggles surely bear witness to his spiritual commitment and perseverance in the face of opposition, and yield, perhaps, better testimonies of faith than do bland statements of divine agency.

Pujo is more successful in the second goal of his work, namely, placing de Paul into the political world of seventeenth-century France. Pujo draws upon his knowledge of the era to enrich his biography and distinguish it from earlier ones that often focused on the saint, and excluded his world. Like all biographies of de Paul, Pujo relies upon Louis Abelly's 1668 biography, but builds upon it using the works of Pierre Coste published in the 1930s and other subsequent texts.<sup>[1]</sup> These are very rich sources and Pujo is an unusual and innovative biographer for going beyond them to include the broader political context.

Vincent de Paul founded two religious communities, the Congregation of the Mission in 1625 and the Company of the Daughters of Charity in 1633. Both groups were dedicated to providing relief to the poor and the sick. De Paul faced considerable obstacles in establishing these communities, and Pujo does a fine job explaining how he rose to the challenges he confronted. The priests of the Congregation of the Mission (called Lazarists because their seminary was located in Saint-Lazare) dedicated themselves to preaching and hearing the confessions of the poor. Secular priests opposed the community's foundation fearing that it would siphon away their revenues, and only yielded when de Paul promised that the Lazarists would serve only the rural poor.

De Paul recognized the great importance of religious vows and creatively designed those adopted by his religious communities. Pujo explains the careful work of de Paul in orchestrating for the Lazarists vows of stability. These vows ensured that they would not leave the Congregation to join another order. Strikingly, de Paul wrote the vows with the explicit intent that the vows did not resemble those of a religious order. In making such a distinction, de Paul assured that the priests were not directly declaring that they were subordinate to Rome, and as such, were independent of certain kinds of oversight that could jeopardize their vocational focus (p. 136). De Paul faced a similar dilemma with the Daughters of Charity, the community for women he founded with Louise de Marillac. Here the question of vows was also critical because the founders did not want the Daughters considered a religious order. Under church law, women's religious orders were required to be enclosed, and hence the Daughters of Charity would have been prevented from rendering services to the poor. The Daughters wanted to take vows to express their devotion, so they took simple and private ones. Moreover de Paul and de Marillac struggled to make certain that the Daughters would be perpetually under the direction of the Priests of the Mission and not local bishops who might demand their enclosure. Both examples demonstrate that de Paul was determined to create religious communities that could respond to the needs of the poor, and that his relationship with the established church had a political dimension. While de Paul was careful to maintain cordial relationships with the hierarchy, he also felt the need to circumvent Church rules at times. This is when de Paul is at his most interesting and Pujo offers a thoughtful analysis of these relationships.

Pujo is most convincing when he writes of de Paul's interactions with the court, which gave him the political and financial support needed to create his religious communities. De Paul was in favor with Anne of Austria after the death of Louis XIII because of his charitable work and her *dévot* inclinations (p. 150). Cardinal Mazarin and de Paul were often at odds, and, like other biographers of de Paul, Pujo blame's Mazarin's jealous determination to remain the Queen's confidant with causing him to dislike de Paul. De Paul's life at court changed dramatically during the Fronde when he found himself on the outs in Paris and at court and spent five months visiting provincial houses of the Lazarists and Daughters of Charity (p. 180). De Paul returned to court and alienated Anne of Austria when he asked her to send away Cardinal Mazarin (p. 204). Mazarin quickly removed him from the Council of Conscience and, by 1657, de Paul no longer had the connections at court that had helped him create and sustain his religious institutions (p. 206). However, at this point de Paul was well into his seventies and he was no longer founding new religious communities, so the impact of this situation on his establishments was not significant.

The author is less convincing when he credits de Paul for all of the work done by his organizations. Pujo continually reassures the reader that despite de Paul's myriad charitable undertaking he never forgets the galley slaves, the rural poor, the Lazarists or the Daughters of Charity (p. 138). While he certainly did not "forget" any of his causes, de Paul did prioritize certain projects at different times. What allowed them to grow and thrive despite de Paul's occasional neglect was their leadership and infrastructures. De Paul was very gifted at finding leaders for his charitable endeavors to whom he could turn over their affairs and know the institutions would continue to develop. For instance, Louise de Marillac ran the Daughters of Charity quite autonomously at times, and it was she who oversaw its day-to-day activities. Had she not been so capable running the Company, making decisions and managing personnel, this endeavor would have taken much more of de Paul's time and limited his ability to extend himself to other projects. Similarly, the Lazarists had capable and dynamic leaders. Here Pujo missed an opportunity to explore de Paul's brilliant ability to choose gifted colleagues, to support those colleagues when necessary, and to delegate authority to them rather than to try to remain in control of each foundation. By widening his discussion of those who oversaw the religious communities along with de Paul Pujo could have given his reader a better sense of the contributions of some of the people active in seventeenth-century charitable endeavors

Of course, this book does have some liabilities. Pujo does an excellent job of placing de Paul into the political and social milieu of the seventeenth century, so his reader is disappointed when he insufficiently grapples with difficulties in the historical record. Although not a hagiographical author, Pujo comes to this book with profound respect for his subject, and this means that some subjects are not examined critically. Most problematic is Pujo's handling of de Paul's disappearance from France between 1605 and 1607.

De Paul had many debts in 1605 when he went to Toulouse to claim an inheritance from a "good woman" he never identifies. The bequest appears to have been embezzled and de Paul states that he traveled around southern France in an effort to confront that man in possession of "his" inheritance. In a letter from 1607, de Paul claims that Turkish pirates had captured him and sold him into slavery in Tunis in 1605. De Paul recounts that he had four masters during the next two years before eventually escaping and returning to France (pp. 23-28). Abelly took de Paul's letter as a statement of fact, but subsequent biographers have raised doubts about its veracity. Pujo discusses this debate and quotes André Dodin, the official historian of the Congregation of the Mission, who asserted "numerous difficulties prevent even the least prejudiced minds from taking the captivity in Tunis as historic fact" (p. 29). De Paul's letter of 1607 does not convince Dodin, however instead of engaging with Dodin's criticism, Pujo simply writes, "So the hypothesis of a purely imagined story, invented to camouflage a long adventure, hardly rings true. In addition, there are few indeed who have hazarded a credible guess as to what else Vincent might have been doing during the two years he was missing" (p. 30). Just

because Dodin does not construct an alternative scenario hardly means that the serious historian should not doubt the letter of de Paul. It is here that Pujo's reverence for his subject makes him too unwilling to critique de Paul. Moreover, toward the end of his life de Paul sought to destroy the 1607 letter describing his enslavement, why he does not say. Pujo speculates that it is because he was concerned his dabbling with alchemy while a slave would hamper the progress of the Lazarists and the Daughters of Charity (pp. 243-5). It is not difficult to imagine that there might have been more obvious (and plausible) reasons that de Paul sought to destroy the letter, and it is a bit alarming that Pujo does not mention such interpretations.

It is equally alarming to discover that Pujo's seems to rely exclusively upon French sources, and his dependence upon French texts keeps him from engaging with some important authors. He does not engage with scholars writing in English including Elizabeth Rapley who has written about the Daughters of Charity.[2] Historians interested in the role that de Paul played in the creation and development of the Daughters of Charity should read Rapley's *The Dévotes* and Barbara Diefendorf's *From Penitence to Charity*, a book published well after Pujo's. While Pujo provides his readers with the rich context of seventeenth-century political life, Diefendorf offers an analysis of the context of the world of women religious.[3] Read together these books will give readers a clear sense of the place of de Paul in the world of seventeenth-century French politics and charitable endeavors.

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#### NOTES

[1] Louis Abelly, *Vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul instituteur et premier supérieur général de la Congrégation de la Mission* (Paris: F. Lambert, 1668) and Pierre Coste, *Le grand saint du grand siècle. Monsieur Vincent* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et cie, 1934).

[2] Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Buffalo, N.Y.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

[3] Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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