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Pierre Benoist, *Le Père Joseph. L'Éminence grise de Richelieu*. Paris. Perrin, 2007. 476 pp. Notes, genealogies, bibliography, index. 24 € (ci). ISBN 978-2-262-02244-0.

Review by Joseph Bergin, University of Manchester, UK.

This substantial study comes hot on the heels of the author's 500-page *La Bure et le Sceptre. La Congrégation des Feuillants dans l'affirmation des états et des pouvoirs princiers (vers 1560 — vers 1660)* (Paris 2006), an extremely thorough study of a relatively small reformed congregation founded during the wars of religion, not least because it took more seriously than most historians the importance of political patronage and princely projects in the history of the religious orders. The book under review draws upon this close familiarity with the reform of the orders and its political ramifications, in order to examine the career of possibly the most famous Capuchin monk of seventeenth-century Europe, who rose to a position where he was being touted as a possible successor to Richelieu as chief minister to Louis XIII during the 1630s. The Capuchins themselves were a new religious order, an offshoot of the Franciscans as the Feuillants were an offshoot of the Cistercians, but their demotic lifestyle and proximity to the lower social groups would not seem to have predestined their members to high-flying careers, political or otherwise.

Yet this is precisely one of the order's paradoxes, and not just in France, where members drawn from prominent aristocratic families often enjoyed important positions within — and beyond — the order itself. Moreover, the 1620s and 1630s witnessed Capuchin go-betweens, diplomats, fixers, and informants busy at work from Vienna and Munich to Paris and Rome. Père Joseph (1575-1638) is a classic example of this pattern: as the eldest son of a family that had both 'robe' and 'sword' antecedents right down to his own parents, he was the perfect model of the hooded monk-politician who served the great and the good of his time, living in the courts of princes and driving around in a carriage while presumably wearing the monk's rough garb and sandals. It is hardly any wonder that such a figure should have exercised the imaginations of writers as diverse as Dumas or Aldous Huxley!

Yet Pierre's is the first major historical work on Père Joseph since those of Fagniez and Dedouvres written between the 1880s and the 1920s roughly. He relies more heavily on Fagniez than on Dedouvres, whose work tended to exaggerate the Capuchin's literary and spiritual output, whereas Fagniez privileged his politics and especially his connections with Richelieu. However, Pierre has not simply 'updated' a familiar story, but has gone in search of both new sources and new explanations of Père Joseph's truly extraordinary odyssey. How could a Capuchin of all people appear to be one of France's top political figures in the midst of the Thirty Years' War?

Perhaps the most important contribution Pierre makes towards understanding père Joseph's entire career and mindset is in reconstituting his early years (prior to his entry into the Capuchin order in 1599) and the family divisions that were partly

responsible for his change of career. He has delved into the Le Clerc family's history, using notarial and related sources not readily available a century ago, identified collateral branches, and distinguished between members with identical names; he has traced the shifting primacy of 'robe' and 'sword' preferences within a family that, like so many others at the time, struggled to maximize the benefits of its double genealogy; the role of its clerical members is also stressed, because it became a major source of family strife by the mid-sixteenth century.

Pierre sees two factors as decisive for turning François Le Clerc du Tremblay, baron de Maffliers, aspiring courtier and soldier, into Père Joseph de Paris. By the later 1590s, the wider politico-religious context was one in which the loss of religious unity was acutely felt by Père Joseph's generation, regardless of whether they had adhered to the Catholic League or not (his family had not). But it took more than that, and Pierre argues that the impact of the Le Clerc family's own 'guerres de religion domestiques' was crucial, making him un 'homme déchiré' who was subject to diabolical visions, existential anguish and, possibly, a repressed penchant for violence. His entry into the Capuchins (not his first choice, as he initially favoured the Carthusians and then the Récollets) in 1599, when he was twenty-two years old, was a flight from responsibility on several fronts. He was the eldest of his family and had already succeeded his father as family head, so his decision left his mother to face family feuds largely alone. But the two were soon reconciled, and within a few years the monk was busy advising his mother how to deal with family members, while also guiding her along the road to 'devotion' of the kind that was all the rage around 1600.

Pierre traces Joseph's life-long quest for religious unity to this 'original' crisis which was personal, familial and politico-religious. The enormous energy that characterised him in later life, and which exhausted a legion of assistants who could simply not stick his pace, was already manifest in these years, and he doubtless made the right decision in choosing the outgoing Capuchins over the Carthusians or Récollets. It was during these early Capuchin years that he absorbed the teachings and mystical trends of the Parisian dévot circles that he had frequented even before 1599. Within a short time, he had developed an approach to mysticism – one he then taught to the Capuchin novices under his direction, and later to the Benedictine nuns of his congregation of Notre Dame du Calvaire — which combined the different 'classic' approaches in such a way that made them open to further evolution; 'abstract' mysticism leading to withdrawal and contemplation needed to be subsumed into one that opened the way to action in the world. The 'unitive way' towards God was central to him: it would seek unity not just within the individual soul, but above all among Christians. As Pierre aptly puts it, '[il] voulait unifier le monde et réformer les moeurs de son temps par une bonne méthode d'oraison. Son ambition était globale et son apostolat collectif' (pp. 116-17). He was not alone among his contemporaries in his convictions, which are so difficult to penetrate now, several centuries later.

It would be fastidious to discuss all of the successive activities in which père Joseph became involved, but the combination of boundless physical energy and the conviction that it was his mission to reunite everything that was torn apart seem to be the key to understanding them. Anything that contributed to healing and uniting Christendom was worth attempting, because it was too multifaceted to be reducible to a single form of action. Hence the energy he invested in the preaching of Capuchin missions to Poitou's Protestants in the 1610s, the expansion of the Capuchin order across western France, or the reform of the female Benedictine

order. The best-known of his life-long missions was the crusade to free the Holy Places of Palestine from the Infidel, for which the union of Christians and especially of Europe's different states was a prior necessity. His role in helping to found the *Milice Chrétienne* with the duc de Nevers in 1616 was perhaps the first clear demonstration of his knowledge of European politics, derived from his mastery of several languages and his travels throughout the continent since his 'grand tour' of 1596. By 1616, he was on the brink of becoming the hooded diplomat of later years, energetic and useful in both internal and (later) external politics, and he was increasingly familiar to the political elite of the day.

The history of père Joseph's relations and co-operation with Richelieu is well-known, especially since Fagniez's account, but Pierre shows himself far more sensitive to the successive shifts in that relationship. The two men's common stomping ground in the 1610s was Poitou, with the problem of how to deal with France's Protestants at the centre of their exchanges. The Huguenot wars of the 1620s, with their international ramifications, entailed action rather than discussion, especially after Richelieu's accession to ministerial office in 1624. But Pierre argues, successfully in my opinion, that at this juncture père Joseph was not just another *créature* of Richelieu's, but a relatively independent collaborator, with his own projects and attitudes towards political events. He sees the treaty of Ratisbon of 1630, which père Joseph negotiated but which Richelieu angrily rejected, as the Capuchin's own Day of the Dupes, his prompt apology to Richelieu for his mistake saving him from the disgrace that fell on Marie de Medici, Marillac and many others. Only after this ordeal, argues Pierre, can père Joseph be regarded as a trusted Richelieu man; only after it did he fall in line with the Cardinal's policies and become the full-time 'eminence grise' who played an increasingly prominent role in relations with Germany and northern Europe — precisely those Protestant countries which Richelieu had kept him well clear of during the 1620s!

The most novel aspect of Pierre's account of these years is the focus on père Joseph's own thinking, which did not simply stop or switch to questions of political or diplomatic tactics. Drawing heavily upon his correspondence with his Calvairienne nuns, and especially his appeals to them for their prayers, he has tried to uncover the shifts in the Capuchin's thought about Christian unity and the projected crusade, which he increasingly placed under the aegis of the king of France, given Habsburg ill-will and hegemonic ambitions. Thinking of politics through a mystical lens, père Joseph conceived the king of France as the true *dévo*t king who would lead Christendom back to unity once the obstacles to the crusade had been set aside within Europe. Serving a king who was God's anointed and with a special mission led père Joseph to articulate a kind of mystical absolutism, which brooked no obstacles to the unfurling of God's purpose for France nor, needless to say, to the exercise of royal power.

By the end, it seems as though policies or courses of action were laudable because undertaken by the king of France, and not the reverse. Because Joseph de Paris continued to preach the reunification of Christendom at the same time as he was spending most of his time pursuing alliances with Europe's Protestant powers, it is not difficult to see why several commentators (some of them former collaborators of Richelieu) thought of him as a hypocrite who must have been driven by personal ambition. Surprisingly perhaps, Pierre scarcely says anything about his 'nomination' as France's candidate for the red hat, which was unique for the entire ancien regime, and which might have revealed more of how contemporaries judged the 'eminence grise' in his final years.

What emerges from this book is a far more credible portrait of a characteristically complex figure of the early seventeenth century, a mystic who was as 'active' as anyone of his (very active) generation, and who was robust enough psychologically to continue to defend idealistic projects despite gradually mutating into an 'homme de pouvoir'. As already mentioned, Pierre's arguments are founded on extensive new research, and he has skilfully used the Calvairien archives as a way of tracking père Joseph's own reading of events and challenges as they happened, rather than relying on third-party or even his own subsequent accounts. The result is a biography in which the tension between action and reflection is rendered unusually palpable. It is also written in a language that is clear and accessible — not always the case when it comes to works dealing with mysticism or crusading. Its references to its sources are ample, and they should be read in tandem with the text. It is perhaps only in his treatment of Joseph's diplomatic activities that Pierre relies mainly on older works, especially Fagniez. And it is only when it comes to some German names that the author's usual reliability drops somewhat — so we get Glezel for Khlesl, Tzerklas for T'Serclaes and Eckembourg for Eggenburg. And Mazarin did not become a cardinal just after père Joseph's death in 1638; he only succeeded him as France's candidate and would have to wait three more years for success. These few blemishes in no way detract from the value of a very welcome book which will remain the standard account for many years to come.

NOTES

[1] Gustave Fagniez, *Le père Joseph et Richelieu*, 2 vols (Paris: Picard, 1894) is the main summary of Fagniez's writings beginnings in the 1860s. Louis Dedouvres, *Politique et apôtre. Le père Joseph de Paris capuchin, Éminence grise*, 2 vols (Paris: Beauchesne, 1932), which summarises studies published by him since the 1890s.

[2] Père Joseph merits a chapter in Robert Sauzet's recent study, *Au Grand siècle des âmes. Guerre sainte et paix chrétienne en France au xvii siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), chapter two.

Joseph Bergin
University of Manchester, UK
j.bergin@manchester.ac.uk