

Women and the Counter-Reformation in Early Modern Munster

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The past two decades have seen a flourishing of scholarship devoted to female Catholic piety in early modern Europe, which has helped to balance the substantial historiography on women and the Protestant Reformation. Historians such as Barbara Diefendorf, Mary Laven, Silvia Evangelisti, Elizabeth Rapley and Susan Dinan have revealed the importance of women to the Catholic revival after the Council of Trent and the ways in which they pioneered spiritual renewal across Europe.⁽¹⁾ To date, studies have centred largely on convent life and the growth of female religious orders, particularly teaching congregations, as well as the charitable endeavours of lay confraternities.

A recent theme underlying this scholarship has been the move away from a traditional narrative which told of the 'little women' (p.171) of the period and their attempts to overcome a repressive Tridentine Church. Simone Laqua-O'Donnell's book reflects this disciplinary shift and, in many ways, advances it. She argues convincingly how women in 17th-century Münster often used their civic identities and social status to negotiate their own spaces for religious expression. Her approach is more attuned to the practicalities of social life than many previous studies and the ways in which this shaped female piety in an early modern urban context. Indeed, one of the strengths of this book is not only its attentiveness to the 'local' – now a prevalent theme in most studies of the Counter Reformation in Europe and beyond – but its focus on the civic.

As the author explains in the introduction, Münster – 'the northernmost stronghold of the Counter Reformation in Germany' (p. 5) – presents us with a unique case study, as a city with a radical, Anabaptist

past. A period of toleration and ‘confessional haziness’ (p. 9) followed the Radical Reformation, before the election of the Catholic bishop Ernst von Bayern to the see in 1585, succeeded by his nephew Ferdinand von Bayern in 1612. Under these reforming bishops, the decrees of the Council of Trent were to be implemented with rigour. The Jesuits arrived in Münster in 1588 and an ecclesiastical council (the *Geistlicher Rat*) was established to oversee the city clergy. Although, as the author explains, attempts to carry out Tridentine reforms were frequently met with opposition by the civic authorities and other competing ‘power brokers’ (p. 11); this era marked the beginning of ‘Counter Reformation’ in early modern Münster.

It is in this context that Laqua-O’Donnell aims to trace the impact of Trent on the lives of women and to establish ‘how they negotiated their lives within the parameters of patriarchy, social status, gender expectations, and Catholic religious reform’ (p. 12). The book is premised on the observation that the category ‘gender’ has not been used thoroughly enough by historians of the Counter Reformation as an interpretative tool (p. 4). Whilst I think we do know more about the Counter Reformation and how it ‘affected women’ (p. 4) than the author suggests, the scope of this book represents a valuable contribution to the existing literature in the field, which has been largely limited to the study of the female elite. The book recovers the experiences of laywomen, female religious, unmarried women and even concubines. In doing so, it offers a fuller picture of how women from a range of social backgrounds engaged with the Tridentine reforms in a variety of ways: from challenges, to adaptation and appropriation.

A thread running through the book is the intention to recapture how Trent worked in practice, or ‘in detail and in the local context’ (p. 14). This is particularly pronounced in the first chapter which explores how urban convents responded to the Tridentine call for enclosure. In 1563, the Council of Trent made enclosure mandatory for female religious houses which – in theory at least – transformed the relationships between religious women and the broader communities they lived among. In this chapter, Laqua-O’Donnell reveals that women in the convents of Münster resisted these changes in a number of ways, some with more success than others. The Observants of the convent of Ringe, for example, used the heritage and traditions of their order to protest against enclosure in 1613 – supported by the city guilds. The Ringe nuns were integrated into the urban community in Münster: they were accustomed to hearing mass with the parishioners of the St Ludgeri parish church and offered prayers, charitable aid and alms to the local sick. Eventually, in 1621, they were instructed by Rome to submit to enclosure, but succeeded in retaining the rights to select their own confessors and the deacon of the Church of St Ludgeri continued to oversee the convent.

Women in the Benedictine convent of Überwasser were more successful in their attempts. The study of Visitations presented in this first chapter uncovers an extraordinary process of negotiation and networking in which the Überwasser nuns used their elite social status as ‘members of the noble class’ (p. 30) to challenge the reform of their convent and secure an exemption from enclosure for their ‘old nuns’. The author concludes the first chapter judiciously: ‘In their ability to handle the different powers in the city, Münster’s nuns revealed themselves as more than silent brides of Christ ... Rather they saw themselves as representatives of their family, of their social group and of their city’.

This attentiveness to the workings of social status is continued in chapter two which examines the piety of lay women. The basis for the discussions in this chapter is a study of 600 wills made between 1600 and 1650. The sample includes some male testators for comparative purposes. The first part of the chapter is concerning with patterns in gift-giving and (perhaps unsurprisingly) finds that bequests to the Church, and particularly to the poor, remained popular across the period. The author concludes that bequests were shaped by gender and social position, as testators selected beneficiaries that ‘reflected their social position in the community’ (p. 74). A richer analysis is offered in the discussion of women and parish life, through a study of the paintings commissioned in the parish church of St Ludgeri, and the extraordinary activities of the *lichtmutter* (‘mothers of light’). *Lichtmutter* were pious lay women of varying social status whose initial functions were to oversee the provision of candles in the parish church, but who came to fulfil a range of duties including the collection of alms and church maintenance.

The exclusive use of testamentary bequests in the second chapter means there is little consideration of personal female spirituality or devotional practices – beyond some discussion of the city confraternities (pp.

68–9) and the notable absence of ‘Marian veneration’ (p. 65). It is perhaps also the sole focus on these transactions which leads Laqua-O’Donnell to the conclusion that ‘Catholic piety was therefore just as much about practical considerations as it was about religious devotion, and money formed an important part of it’ (p. 74). Finances and other practicalities were undoubtedly central to will-making – which in most cases tended to centre upon the ‘practical’ and the ‘local’ – but this should not be overstated. The emphasis on the place of the parish and communal piety in this chapter nevertheless seems pertinent; and the research constitutes another important contribution to the existing historical literature on the kinds of ‘visible roles’ (p. 75) women played in the early modern Catholic revival.

The author turns her attention to the sacrament of marriage and its meanings for the couples of 17th-century Münster in the third chapter. Using records kept by the city court, including council protocols, criminal records and wills, this section of the book investigates the regulation of marriage according to the Tridentine decrees, and attitudes towards sexual morality. As the author outlines, in Münster, the Church shared its jurisdiction over the sacrament of marriage with the secular authorities. This meant that the laity could turn to the city as well as ecclesiastical courts on issues of matrimony. The chapter goes on to argue that these competing jurisdictions resulted in a gradual, and lax, implementation of the Tridentine decrees on marriage. Thus Münster is revealed to buck many of the trends which other scholars have identified elsewhere in early modern Germany where marriage was strictly regulated by the state.

The sources analysed in this chapter also disclose a different attitude to betrothal than historians have observed elsewhere. The Tridentine aim was to make marriage a precursor to sexual relations, yet in Münster couples continued to adhere to a more traditional practice of longer pre-marital courtships with ‘sexual intimacies’ (p. 96). According to Laqua-O’Donnell, this again evidences the ‘limited success’ (p. 97) of Tridentine measures on the sacrament in Münster, where the city courts merely tried to ‘channel’ pre-marital sexual intercourse into ‘socially acceptable’ forms (p. 97). When they did marry, couples are shown to have been bound by love and friendship but their unions were also characterised by mundane, everyday issues over the household economy.

Even if religious morality seemed an ‘afterthought’ (p. 97) in the case of marriage, the honour of women in 17th-century Münster was measured against their morality and social reputations, as Chapter Four explicates. This chapter finds that female morality was policed informally by the wider community, through gossip and rumours; the secular authorities only usually stepped in following formal complaints when they would ‘negotiate, correct and punish’ (p. 133).

A number of case studies examining servant girls, fallen women and mothers guilty of infanticide uphold this strong claim that ‘far more dangerous than the condemnation of the city council was the wrath of one’s neighbour’ (p. 112). In a section on married women, for instance, the case of Christina Volmers is used to illustrate the damage that a bad reputation could do when neighbours were consulted in court. In 1621, when Christina and her second husband were accused of fraud, their neighbours quickly appeared in court to condemn Christina’s obstinacy, belligerence and unneighbourly behaviour. Like Christina, others regarded as of unsavoury character or questionable morals were rarely exonerated by their neighbours and allegations against them often reappeared. As Laqua-O’Donnell neatly puts it: ‘early modern society had an elephantine memory’ (p. 126). Importantly, the chapter succeeds in showing how women – whose ‘bodies were so easily violated’ (p. 132) – were especially vulnerable to such denunciations and smears. Yet it is not entirely clear whether such neighbourly moral policing predated the Counter-Reformation era or not, or whether the moral stringency associated with the Catholic revival really resonated with the city’s inhabitants.

The final chapter deals with priestly concubinage during the episcopate of Ferdinand von Bayern. Using a range of archival materials, it painstakingly reconstructs the experiences of women and clerics, as well as the attitudes of the Church towards these transgressions. Bishop Ferdinand was faced with the challenge of instilling clerical celibacy in Münster, following the decrees of the Church Fathers at Trent on priestly morality and on 28 June 1612 issued his first injunction against concubinage. With the help of visitations by his vicar general, Ferdinand sought to correct the morality of local clergymen living with concubines. Women were to be removed from these residences and even from the same towns as their clerical partners.

This did not always work in practice, however, as concubines often returned to their lovers. Ferdinand's efforts were also thwarted by a lack of cooperation from his archdeacons and a host of 'practical limitations' with his attempts to prosecute concubinage (p. 151).

This chapter also finds that Tridentine ideals clashed with the 'realities of clerical life' (p. 155). This claim is substantiated using the case study of a priest from Appenhülst – Johannes Kerlvinck – who formed a lasting friendship with the maid responsible for running his household. As the author points out, 'in reality, priests were living and practising their profession embedded within a local community. Emotional attachments between the two sexes outside the confessional relationship were bound to form' (p. 156). Particularly impressive in this part of the book is the recovery of the personal experiences and self-perceptions of the concubines themselves. Their own testimonies reveal that concubines were often not morally 'loose' women, but partners, nurses, carers and even mothers who made strong objections to being separated from their households.

This emphasis on the lived experiences of the Counter Reformation in Münster in the final chapter is a strong theme throughout the book, as this review has tried to foreground. This is a refreshing approach and a welcome contribution to the existing literature on the Counter Reformation which still largely tends to concentrate on the prescription, rather than practice, of reform. Using an array of manuscript sources to construct a range of detailed case studies, Simone Laqua-O'Donnell has allowed us to glimpse the ways in which the Counter Reformation played out in one city in northern Germany. The book will be of particular interest to scholars and students interested in women's history and Catholic Reformation Europe, as well as urban history.

Notes

1. See, for example, B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford, 2004); E. Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal, 1990); E. Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime* (Montreal, 2001); S. Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life 1450–1700* (Oxford, 2007); and M. Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Enclosed Lives and Broken Vows in the Renaissance Convent* (London, 2002). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The author accepts this review and does not wish to comment further.

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