Massimo C. Giannini, ed.


This is an interesting collection of essays by a team of scholars from Spain, Italy, France, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. All the essays concern Catholic religious orders and the papacy in the early modern period. Many discuss how popes tried to increase control over the orders and their missionary activities, and how this sometimes brought them into conflict with secular powers. Such conflict was often successfully defused by negotiation and compromise.

The Jesuits make a number of appearances in the course of these essays. In his introduction, Massimo Giannini dispels the myth that the Society was “a docile arm in the direct and absolute service of the papacy” (11), and in the course of the volume we encounter evidence that the orders were not passive instruments of the pope, or of Catholic monarchs. We also learn that they were often divided in outlook, and that they could be remarkably skillful in adapting to shifting political circumstances. Esther Jiménez Pablo’s chapter on “The Evolution of the Society of Jesus during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: an Order that Favoured the Papacy or the Hispanic Monarchy?” argues that an important turning point in the history of the Jesuits occurred in 1572 when, on the wishes of the pope, a Walloon (and not a Spaniard) was appointed as general. Thereafter, it became increasingly common for Italians to replace Spaniards in leading the Jesuits. Ignasi Fernández Terricabras’s contribution is on “Surviving between Spain and France: Religious Orders and the Papacy in Catalonia (1640–1659).” It is sometimes supposed that the Jesuits in Catalonia sided largely with Spain in the years of the Catalan revolt and French occupation, while other orders supported the revolution. But the evidence presented here suggests that these claims are perhaps debatable, that most orders in Catalonia were divided, and that many of their members pursued neutral or non-committal policies, as did the papacy.

In “Bishops Are not Necessary for Reform: Religious Orders in the Catholic Reconquista of Bohemia and Moravia: Two Case Studies,” Tomáš Parma surveys the religious history of the two lands through the filter of a couple of debates. One during the 1670s and 1680s concerned the question of whether the bishop of Olomouc had the right to censor Jesuit publications. The second dated to early in the seventeenth century and was about whether the bishop had the right of visitation of Premonstratensian monasteries. Gaetano Platania discusses the Jesuits in Poland and also talks about efforts to establish Capuchin friars there: efforts which began in 1626 but did not bear fruit until 1692. In “Religious, the Pope, and the Kings of France during the Wars of Religion,”
Benoist Pierre argues that during the final decade of the French Religious Wars many of the orders “were deeply divided between Leaguist and loyalist tendencies” (43). Once the wars were over, a period of relative calm and reconciliation ensued, partly through the efforts of the king and the pope.

The Franciscans also appear frequently in these pages. Antal Molnár’s interesting study discusses the role of the Franciscans in the religious life of early modern Bosnia. In “The Franciscans of Mexico: Tracing Tensions between Rome and Madrid in the provincia del Santo Evangelio (1454–1622),” Boris Jeanne shows that popes at first granted the king of Spain very wide powers over ecclesiastical affairs in Spanish America. Later, popes attempted to assert greater control over the church in America and elsewhere, and a key event in this process was the establishment in 1622 of the Propaganda fide. This event features in a number of essays. In Mexico, the Franciscans played an especially important missionary role until they fell from royal favor in 1565 when some of them were implicated in a plot to set up an independent New Spain under Martin Cortés. Franciscans feature prominently in Aurélien Girard’s “Impossible Independence or Necessary Dependency? Missionaries in the Near East, the ‘Protection’ of the Catholic States, and the Roman Arbitrator.” This discusses missionary activities in Syria and Palestine. Despite the opposition of Venice and Spain, these missions were largely under French control, and the pope did little to undermine this, as he benefited from good relations between the French and the Turks.

The essay by the editor Massimo Giannini is about the Dominicans, and in particular the arrest and suspension on papal orders of their general master Niccolò Ridolfi in 1642. Soon after this two rival candidates were elected by different groups of Dominicans. One was backed by France, the other by the Habsburgs. A lengthy schism seemed possible. But in fact matters were smoothed over relatively speedily. The two rivals were given inviting alternative jobs, and in 1644 a new general master was elected. One reason why both France and Spain were willing to compromise at this juncture was that both were experiencing regime changes, with the death of Richelieu late in 1642, and the fall of Olivares in the following year. Like most of the essays in this volume, Giannini’s contribution is a subtle and nuanced analysis of the interplay between secular and ecclesiastical politics, and between the aims and aspirations of the papacy and the orders.

One problem with the essays in this book is that they are translated into English from other languages. It seems likely that the translators have not always fully comprehended the meaning of the authors, and consequently at times it is difficult for the reader to follow what is being said. We learn that during the first century of Ottoman rule “many of the Franciscan houses was (sic)
destroyed” (219). There are too many clumsy sentences like “Here is, for example, the case of a bundle on marriages among Philippines natives” (26). The “elder Sigismund I of Poland” (185) should evidently be “Sigismund I the Old.” Nevertheless, this volume will be of interest to scholars and graduate students working on early modern Catholicism, on church-state relations in the Catholic world, and on the history of the orders, including the Society of Jesus.

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