Cornelius Michael Buckley

Stephen Larigaudelle Dubuisson, S.J. (1786–1864) and the Reform of the American Jesuits. New York: University Press of America, 2013. Pp. 326. Hb, \$80.00.

In this deeply researched and engaging biography, Cornelius Michael Buckley offers a richly contextualized portrait of Stephen Dubuisson (1786–1864), the Jesuit who, despite a lifetime of emotional fragility, came to be known as the “Chief Pillar of the American Mission.” The book illuminates not only Dubuisson’s long and dramatic life, but the broader struggle to create a sustainable American Catholic Church and a revived, well-governed Society of Jesus in Maryland during decades of geopolitical transformation.

Buckley deftly traces the Atlantic milieu of the Dubuisson family, who lived near the top of the brutal and ultimately unstable pyramid created by Haiti’s sugar economy. Young Stephen was sent to Nantes in 1791, just ahead of Haiti’s cataclysmic slave rebellion. In France, the child faced “the horror of the Revolution in his adopted home.” “Would it be an exaggeration to conclude,” Buckley asks, with the gently penetrating tone characteristic of this work, “that [...] a permanent scar of fear and unarticulated anxiety stayed branded on Stephen Dubuisson’s psyche?” (8). Receiving only a spotty formal education, he nonetheless became proficient in seven languages and found employment in Napoleon’s government. He also began to participate in La Congregation, a Catholic fraternity not officially proscribed but somewhat suspect in the eyes of the emperor. Dubuisson recalled that as part of La Congregation, he “savored a most pure joy in visiting the hospitals with a few other young men and with Viscount, now Duke Matthieu de Montmorency, Count Alexis de Noailles, M. Bordier, etc.” (26). Delight in serving humanity while enjoying the company of the well-born would characterize the rest of Dubuisson’s life.

In Buckley’s fascinating account, Dubuisson found his way to the Jesuits, after the fall of Napoleon, with the help of a trio of French Sulpician priests: one gave him Alfonso Rodríguez’s *The Practice and Perfection of Christian Virtues*; another, Simon Brute, told him stories of Georgetown; and a third counseled him to go to America and join the Society. Excitedly, Dubuisson caught up with the traveling Brute and sailed for New York, “without,” he later wrote, “even saying good-bye to my family” (52). Accepted into the fledgling American Jesuit novitiate, Dubuisson entered as an awkward young man of few social graces. His reminiscence that he had a “love [for the Society] that was not only ardent, but also profound [...]. Everyone I met seemed to take a liking for me” prompts one of Buckley’s usefully mordant observations: “One need not be versed in ascetical theology or human psychology to realize that such sentimental raptures are not long sustained, nor are they gladly endured

by peers" (68). Despite the astute guidance of master of novices Anthony Kohlmann, the disaster in fact came quickly. Asked to become the prefect of Georgetown College's boisterous boys, Dubuisson proved so inept it was thought he might have to leave the novitiate entirely. With his customary mix of anxiety and tenacity, Dubuisson persisted, pronouncing his vows as a scholastic at the end of 1817.

Through years of continuing self-doubt, Dubuisson soldiered on, even escaping a half-baked murder plot by his charges at Georgetown, and was appointed *manuductor* of the other scholastics, "a kind of temple policeman among his peers" (91). Dubuisson's critical nature led him to be both the best and worst possible enactor of Kohlmann's effort to instill Ignatian discipline in the troublesome Maryland province. "I suffered a veritable martyrdom," he later wrote (92). In the 1820s, after he had been ordained a priest, an event occurred that brought him joy and purpose, but also more conflict. Mrs. Ann Carberry Mattingly, a socially prominent widow in Washington, had long suffered from a panoply of seemingly mortal ailments. Dubuisson solicited the help of Prince Hohenlohe, a Bavarian priest and healer; he and Kohlmann also organized two hundred people to pray a novena on the woman's behalf. On the final day of the novena, the same day that Prince Hohenlohe prayed for the sick in America, Mrs. Mattingly rose from her bed, cured.

Dubuisson and Kohlmann believed it was a miracle; Archbishop Marechal, unconvinced and worried that talk of miraculous cures would bring contempt from Protestant countrymen, was more cautious. Dubuisson was nonetheless allowed to publish an account of the event, and the Mattingly Miracle, as it became known, drew both wonder and mockery, the latter not only from non-Catholics but from some within the Jesuit ranks. Dubuisson spoke and wrote of the Mattingly Miracle throughout the rest of his life. Buckley demonstrates the ways in which disputes over claims of supernatural intervention emerged in part from cultural differences among the Jesuits in Maryland. "Catholics in the English-speaking world," he explains, were "braced for either preserving or defending the faith" and had not participated in "the spiritual florescence of Catholic Europe" (115). Continental-born Jesuits' "otherworldliness" and emphasis on sin "contrasted sharply with the optimism and anti-intellectualism, the independence and practical common sense of the American spirit," a spirit that "resonated with other native-English speakers, particularly the Irish" (116). Buckley does not hesitate to portray Dubuisson stoking the tensions, such as when he attacked an Irish Jesuit for, among other things, praising "the licentious poet Byron." Yet his analysis is always sympathetic: "Dubuisson was too close to the Revolution," Buckley writes, to be able to separate Byron's poetry "from an attack on all social order" (117). Buckley also consistently draws

the readers' attention to the way these disputes reflected "differing views of what may be called the Ignatian spirit" (119). To ascribe them simply to culture or personality, he persuasively argues, misses their deepest meaning to the participants.

Buckley limns Dubuisson's long and varied career from his brief and unsatisfying term as president of Georgetown—appointed, Buckley notes, "for the simple reason that there was no one else available to assume the position" (122)—through his mix of pastoral positions in the United States and extended "begging" tours among the Catholic aristocrats of Europe. The first of those tours was prompted by the hope of Dubuisson's superior that a sojourn in Rome might cure him of what the superior considered his "malady": a tendency to "become immediately upset and seek a place in isolation from others" when confronted with the inevitable faults of his peers (125). The fundraising was largely a failure, but that deeper purpose was met. After living in community with committed, harmonious Jesuits in Rome, Dubuisson was more "at peace with the world and with himself" (132). He also embarked on what would become a decades-long relation with the formidable Father Jan Roothan, then beginning his years as superior general. Buckley uses Dubuisson's reports to Roothan about the Maryland province and other topics to illuminate both Dubuisson's character and the country in which he lived. As Dubuisson matured, his criticisms of the province became less personal and more useful; in one report he described the American people as possessed of "a generous character that allows them to embrace religion with considerable fervor, but at the same time the great strength of their ingenuity propels them to cherish freedom in every aspect of life" (135). Over the years, his idiosyncratic analysis and advocacy became integral to the province's growth and even survival.

After returning to America, Dubuisson was sent to northeastern Pennsylvania, where he contributed pastorally and developed into "the gentle, friendly man" who "won the hearts of his parishioners by his understanding and acceptance of their background" (185). Yet he did not completely outgrow either anxiety or controversy, and both flourished when his growing "talent for sniffing out potential donors" brought him back to Europe. There he was "in his element immersed—all for the glory of God and the good of the Church and the society in North America—in a dizzy whirl of encounters, conversations, lectures, receptions, teas, soirees, etc." (199). Despite the shower of donations that resulted, Father Roothan was uneasy. Mistrust of the Jesuit order surged with its increasing numbers. "You know that everything Jesuits do is watched," he cautioned the exuberant Dubuisson (200). Buckley relates the continuing worries of Roothan and adventures of Dubuisson—not least under the patronage of Constance, the imperious daughter of Joseph de Maistre—in a way that

illuminates Dubuisson's character with gentle humor, while also depicting the contours of European Catholic aristocratic life and the continuing challenges faced by the Society.

Buckley's research is rich and deep; his bibliography alone, detailing archival and secondary sources in several languages, is an education. In addition to offering a remarkably complete portrait of an individual, the biography also adds significantly to our knowledge of subjects ranging from conflict among clergy and faculty in the early national church, to the tragic causes and consequences of Jesuit slaveholding, to controversy over mesmerism. At times, Buckley's analysis is distinct from more secular treatments of the early American church. "[Dubuisson] would yet have to learn," he writes, "what Rodriguez could not teach, namely that the man who believes he has learned obedience and has made it a habit must see it become actual and then relearn it from the start" (121). Some readers will find such moments add to their understanding of Dubuisson; those who do not will nonetheless find that Buckley's research and writing also offers the rigor and rewards of secular scholarship. Over the course of this delightful and impressive book, the reader is left with the feeling of having spent time in the company of fascinating Jesuits of both the past and the present.

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