Emily Michelson

The Pulpit and the Press in Reformation Italy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. 262. Hb, \$42.

In this thoughtful and well-researched study, Emily Michelson analyzes the activities of Italian preachers in the sixteenth century, a group she calls “the barely known mainstream” of Catholic reform (10). Indeed, despite the flourishing of scholarship on early modern Catholicism in recent years, much remains to be known about these preachers, and this book makes a valuable contribution to the field.

The middle decades of the sixteenth century saw the rapid expansion of Protestant churches across Europe, and Italy was not immune to these changes. As the author notes, Italian preachers were convinced Protestantism posed a grave threat to their audiences. It was in this climate that they displayed great creativity to counter the religious changes surrounding them and redoubled their efforts to minister to the laity. Despite a lack of guidance from the Council of Trent—at least initially—and disagreements among themselves, preachers “sought to create a new religious culture that would survive in an unprecedented atmosphere of competition and religious choice” (2).

The specific challenge posed by Protestantism regarded scripture, or the notion that lay people could access the Bible directly, without the guidance of apostolic tradition or clerical direction. This, Michelson explains, was the conundrum facing Catholic preachers in the sixteenth century: how to spread the message of scripture without giving the laity unrestricted access to it, as Protestant reformers had done. Their solution was to allow lay people “not to read but to hear scripture” (111). Girolamo Seripando’s sermons were therefore “based on scripture, but they were not intended to teach scripture” (103); mendicant sermons were likewise meant “to teach scripture without actually handing Bibles to laypeople” (161). This was the delicate line preachers attempted to walk.

The first chapter of the book is the most useful to a general reader. Here, the author outlines two different forms of preaching that had developed by the time the Reformation began, differentiated both by style and the individuals who delivered them. The first type of preaching was that of the mendicants (Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and others) who gave long, ornate sermons, while the second type of preaching, that of bishops and their diocesan assistants, was marked by simpler and more direct homilies. Although it is difficult to recreate the experience of hearing these sermons as they were actually delivered, Michelson notes the importance of gestures, intonations, and

other aspects of public speaking that preachers would have used in their performances. She also explains how preachers increasingly turned to the printing press during this period. Some of the most interesting sections of this book are when Michelson analyzes the material history of printed sermons, exploring differences in publication style and their intended audiences. She also provides several revealing graphs based on information gathered from online databases that trace the production of printed sermons during the sixteenth century. From these one can see the rise of vernacular literature and the explosion of printed sermons beginning in the 1540s and continuing until the end of the century.

The next two chapters explore these preaching styles in more detail, examining, in turn, sermons by mendicants and diocesan bishops. The second chapter examines Cornelio Musso and Franceschino Visdomini, two Conventual Franciscans who were present at the Council of Trent and thus familiar with debates about how to teach scripture to the laity. The third focuses on Luigi Lippomano and Girolamo Seripando, who were likewise involved at Trent and sought to bring the council's reforms back to their dioceses. In both of these chapters, Michelson does an admirable job highlighting the complexity of Catholic thinking about scripture, since even after the council, clerics held differing opinions over how to best teach scripture to the laity. While concerns about access to scripture and the use of vernacular languages were widespread, most preachers moved to embrace the vernacular, at least out of necessity.

The next chapter examines treatises written by preachers for laypeople, which Michelson identifies as a "distinct and significant genre" (113). However, in many cases these books nominally aimed at "simple" folks became unwieldy, too long and full of details to be easily accessible. As a result, the author proposes that such treatises were actually meant to be read by other clerics. The last chapter examines mendicants' attempts to adapt to the changing religious environment of the late sixteenth century. While some turned to give even more elaborate sermons, most focused on educating the laity and ensuring they properly understood scripture—though they still believed lay people should not read it themselves.

Throughout the book Michelson highlights Italian preachers' anxiety over the Reformation, or more specifically, the possibility of Protestant heretics living in their midst. The author hammers home the "threats," "danger," and "crisis" that preachers claimed to face throughout this study, but one wonders whether we should take these preachers at their word. Historians have shown, beyond a doubt, the existence of heterodoxy in early modern Italy. But is it not possible that these preachers exaggerated the threat at hand? One is

reminded of Alexandra Walsham's study of "recusant propaganda" in England during the same period, in which she suggests that polemical authors may have "invented" a nonconformist tradition which modern historians have taken as fact (*Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity, and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* [Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1993], 49). It seems plausible that these preachers may have done something similar, invoking an exaggerated threat of Protestantism to further their own catechetical and pastoral agendas. Put differently, what the author has shown in this book—and shown well—is Italian preachers' concerns about Protestantism, but the actual existence of said Protestants, let alone the threat they posed, is something else altogether. This need not negate her argument, but it is worth considering, and it could add further detail to her already nuanced study.

While Jesuits are not discussed at length, readers of this journal will find Michelson's book useful to understand the pastoral context in which the early Italian Jesuits worked and preached, given that preaching was one of their chief ministries from the beginning. This is an important book, one that scholars in a variety of fields should make use of.

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