Timothy G. Pearson

Becoming Holy in Early Canada. Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University-Press, 2014. Pp. 320. Pb, \$32.95 CAD.

Becoming Holy in Early Canada is a study of religious culture in New France from its beginnings as an evangelical outpost in the seventeenth century to its coalescence as agrarian society by the middle of the eighteenth. Timothy Pearson's book, product of his 2008 PhD dissertation, looks at a group of individuals "reputed holy," a category that overlaps with but is not restricted to the canonized, who include the Jesuit martyrs (1930) and more recently Marguerite Bourgeoys (1982), Marie-Marguerite d'Youville (1990), and Kateri Tekakwitha (2012). Pearson's focus includes other holy individuals, including the mystic Catherine de St-Augustin (1632–68), the anchorite Jeanne Le Ber (1662–1714), and the Franciscan Didace Pelletier (1657–99) who were not, in the end, canonized, but in whose lifetimes and beyond, were nonetheless "reputed holy" in the changing society of New France. "Becoming" in this book's title indicates its preoccupation with process. How did an individual achieve recognition for holiness, and what were the steps by which such recognition was promoted beyond the local, and towards the universal, as contained in the category of "saint"? Such attention to process resonates with the current state of the study of early modern religion. No longer captive to confessional militancy and triumphalism, historians now seek to understand the experience of religion and religious understanding. Alec Ryrie's recent *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) conveys similar interest in process—note the use of the gerunds "being" and "becoming" in these recent titles.

Pearson engages a rich body of theoretical literature on holiness. He describes piety, and especially the extreme piousness which typically marked the holy person, as "performance," a term which recurs with considerable frequency. Pearson links the traditions of sacrifice, mortification, martyrdom, and post-mortem intercessory power long-established in the history of the Catholic Church to the biographies of pious individuals of note on the New France frontier. More problematic is the use of the term "performance" as a measure of sanctity. Pearson judges "performance" as successful or not, depending, it appears, on the retrospective appearance of a hagiographical account, if not actual canonization. In the case of Jeanne Mance (1606–73) a conventionally pious person who devoted tremendous energy and capacity to building the Hopital-Dieu de Montreal, its chief charitable agency, Pearson detects "failure." Mance's "performance" in holiness was "unsuccessful": she did not write a spiritual diary, she did not seek out a confessor to guide her interpretations of

dreams and visions, and, for all we know, had no such visions herself. Yet her contribution to the health and survival of the colony were widely lauded, and have been long and continuously remembered in street names, postage stamps, schools, and so on. Mance's case suggests a tendentious aspect of Pearson's argument. Our notions of "performance"—self-conscious, and staged—are not those of the early modern Catholic world. While it is helpful to understand the process of transcription and shaping of ecstatic vision, for example, under the direction of a male confessor, the holy woman did not at same time indicate that her actions were aimed at achieving goal of sainthood, much less part of a "performance." It is reductionist, I think, to assert that early modern Catholic understandings of mortification—physical self-denial and punishment, such as practiced by Catherine de St-Augustin and interpreted by her Jesuit advisor Paul Ragueneau wherein bodily suffering pushes the individual to a liminal state—participate in the simulation implicit in "performance." Nor is the "secrecy" that surrounded the dramatic austerity of Catherine de St-Augustin, for example, of which her own convent sisters apparently had no idea, as stagey as Pearson makes it sound.

Becoming Holy is a welcome addition to an emerging historiography which addresses, in English, and in non-confessional, non-hagiographical terms, Catholic culture in early Canada—despite its tendency towards capacious categories "performance," or "faith community" (190), for example. It joins Emma Anderson's *Death and Afterlife of the North American Martyrs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) and Alan Greer's *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) as a window into the distinctive Catholic practices of piety that shaped New France and Canada itself. All evidence points to the enormous stress of the early decades, under the double threat of economic collapse and death or captivity at the hands of the Haudenosaunee of the St. Lawrence. Embrace of the heroic and the martyr mark these early years, even if the news barely trickled out to the wider world. Jesuit François du Creux, author of a Latin *Historia Canadensis*, presented the martyr-rich Canadian environment to a European audience in 1664, but the grisly deaths of the Canadian martyrs of 1642–48 were not assigned universal significance until 1930, nearly four hundred years later. The cases of stalled or incomplete sanctification studied by Pearson, meanwhile, show that the fledgling colony, as it survived decades of uncertainty, rallied around its local holy persons. Progress towards canonization was affected by changing currents of church politics—the intrusion of the anti-Jansenist campaign of *Unigenitus* against the campaign for Didace Pelletier, Recollect (and supposed sympathizer of rigorism) in 1719, for example, or the general hostility towards Jesuits in the 1670s, hobbling promotion of Catherine de St-Augustin.

Pearson also shows that the normative model of holiness changed as well: in the embattled colony of the seventeenth century, the heroic model of suffering and sacrifice resonated, while in the relatively stable (apart from the menace from the English) colony of the eighteenth century, holiness arose in contexts of service and charitable initiative. This insight, alongside the detailed observation of the careers of holy women particularly, show how exemplary piety and mysticism were fields of opportunity for religious women—for whom Tridentine Christianity was otherwise restricted—positioning *Becoming Holy* as a useful addition to the historiography of sainthood and sanctity in the early modern world.

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