Séan Alexander Smith

Fealty and Fidelity: The Lazarists of Bourbon France, 1660–1736. New York: Routledge, 2015. Pp. xii + 227. Hb, \$124.95.

Distilled from a doctoral dissertation supervised by Alison Forrestal, this book examines the efforts of the Congregation of the Mission (Lazarists), founded by Vincent de Paul (1581–1660), to remain faithful to his vision in the years from his death to the year before his canonization. Séan Smith does an excellent job of showing how appeals for fidelity to the *esprit primitif* of the Lazarists and their founder were in no small tension with pressure for fealty to the Bourbon monarchs, Louis XIV in particular.

Readers of the *Journal of Jesuit Studies* will find very interesting the way Smith contrasts Lazarists and Jesuits. While the former were of French origin and continued to be based in Paris even as they spread elsewhere, the Jesuits struggled in France with being perceived as foreign and thus perhaps not really trustworthy or loyal subjects of the French kings. Though Jesuits served as royal confessors in France, in many other ways the Lazarists enjoyed greater favor than the sons of Ignatius, and were also subject to greater expectations and control from the French state. In 1697, Louis XIV vetoed a possible superior general for the Lazarists because he was *Savoyard* rather than French. If the Jesuits tended to focus on cities and towns, the Lazarists were supposed to emphasize ministry to the rural poor. The Lazarists, in their preaching, often chose a very simple style, while the Jesuits relied on “songs, mnemonic devices, or costume processions” (30). Yet readers should be cautious in accepting everything Smith says about the Jesuits as he mistakenly attributes to Louis XVI (r.1774–92) the dissolution of the Society in France (13) that was decreed and carried out under Louis XV in the 1760s.

It was out of fealty to the monarchy, Smith implies, that the Lazarists accepted royal appointments in places such as Fontainebleau and Versailles. In 1661, they took on responsibility for the Fontainebleau parish that included the royal palace; this “was the first major test of the Congregation’s ability to remain faithful to its core values in the post-de Paul era” (43). And more tests would follow. In 1672, Lazarists were made parish priests in Versailles, and in 1682 they began to staff the private chapel in the royal palace at Versailles as well. Yet Smith argues, persuasively, that they did not abandon their original ethos, despite working at times seemingly far from the rural poor, in part because charity for the poor remained a key part of their work, charity supported by the monarch and his court.

Smith also points out that after 1660 the running of French seminaries for the training of priests took a large portion of Lazarist energy. But he gives

relatively little attention to this topic and instead examines at length some examples of Lazarist missions outside Europe, in Madagascar and in the Mascareigne islands. In these missionary endeavors, Smith finds very large gaps between Lazarist ideals and what they actually did or achieved. In Madagascar from 1648, the Lazarists were “auxiliaries of empire” (51) and employees of the Compagnie des Indes orientales at least as much as they were priests among the poor; engaged in various conflicts with both the native populations and with French colonists, the Lazarists pulled out in 1674 after a quarter century of failures. In the early eighteenth century, Lazarists went to the islands now known as Réunion and Mauritius; there they became wealthy slave owners, not unlike Jesuits in Martinique and Dominicans in Guadeloupe. Not surprisingly, the Lazarists soon found that the slaves were little interested in converting to Christianity. As Smith rightly suggests, the gap between Lazarist rhetoric and reality had become very large indeed. He finds a similar gap operative in Lazarist chaplaincies for the king’s galleys, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, though Vincent de Paul himself had earlier served for a time as such a chaplain. After 1685, among those forced into rowing on the galleys were Huguenots that refused to convert to Catholicism. Commenting on the cruelty involved in this, Smith asserts that “the judgement that the Lazarists had lost their charity was not extravagant” (148).

Some matters could use more attention than Smith gives to them. He mentions several times, but only in passing, the Daughters of Charity, founded by Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in 1634. It would be helpful to know if the Daughters also had to struggle with tensions between an *esprit primitif* and the expectations and temptations of the post-1660 era. Smith states that the Congregation of the Mission was designed by Vincent de Paul not as a religious order but a congregation of secular priests with vows: poverty, chastity, obedience, and a fourth vow “which bound its members to service of the poor” (31). It would be pertinent to the topic of this book to include discussion of whether or not this unusual arrangement was itself under stress in the decades after the death of the founder. Smith explains that one reason why the monarchy remained so favorable to the Lazarists is that they avoided any taint of Jansenism, even as they “followed a policy of non-belligerence when it came to doctrinal disputes” (89). Just how such a policy was possible in the midst of very heated debates between Jesuits and Jansenists, throughout the period Smith examines, he does not explain. Was there a kind of third way? Perhaps more research could tell us.

This volume engages a broad range of questions concerning the complex interaction of religious ideals and political and human realities in the era of

Louis XIV and Louis XV. It merits a wide readership, including specialists in Jesuit history.

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