

The Catholic Laity and the Development of Catholic Identity

MARC R. FORSTER

In her new book *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635*, Judith Pollmann uses diaries and journals to bring an individual perspective to the development of Catholic identity in the Southern Netherlands. This perspective provides valuable insights for historians of Catholic Germany, while also showing many similarities to developments in the German-speaking lands. Most importantly, Pollmann, like recent historians of Catholicism elsewhere, emphasizes the role of the laity in early modern Catholicism. The urban character of society in the Southern Netherlands does contrast with the rural character of most of Catholic Germany. Pollmann's insightful emphasis on clergy-lay relations may cause her to downplay the role of the Jesuits and other orders.

The title of Judith Pollmann's new book – *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635* – is very well chosen.¹ This book is really two related and intertwined studies. The first is a new interpretation of the Dutch Revolt of 1566-1585, focusing primarily on the experience of the Southern Netherlands, augmented by a further discussion of political and military developments in the Spanish Netherlands until the 1620s. The second is a study of the development of Catholic identity across the whole period from 1520 to 1635, with a focus on the central role of clergy-lay relations in both the initial failure of Catholics to respond aggressively to the Protestant challenge and in the Catholic revival after 1585.

Pollmann explicitly couches the second of these studies in comparative terms, and I will focus my discussion of the book in this area. I also found this aspect of the book more original and thought-provoking than the discussion of the Revolt. Pollmann's analysis of lay-clerical relations provides many points of comparison for historians of the German-speaking lands in this period. Most importantly, Pollmann uses the lay-clerical issue to connect together the nature of pre-Reformation piety, the initial appeal of Protestantism, and the subsequent development of confessional identity across the century from 1520 to 1635. Her ability to find a common thread throughout this period would be instructive to historians of Germany, who

often continue to sharply distinguish the field of Reformation History (1517-1555) from the study of the Confessional Age (1555-1618).

Pollmann draws on 'diaries and chronicles, poems and songs, pamphlets and tracts' (11) to analyze the attitudes of both the Catholic clergy and, particularly, the lay Catholic elite. Her focus is on the laity and these sources often open interesting windows on their attitudes. The memoir of Marcus van Vaernewijck, a burgher of Ghent, reveals the attitude of a Catholic layman toward the Catholic clergy, traditional piety and the iconoclasm of 1566. Van Vaernewijck was clearly knowledgeable about political and religious developments at mid-century, and Pollmann uses him extensively in the first two chapters. The *Dagboek* (Diary) of Jan De Pottre, a Brussels merchant, gives Pollmann an example of a 'Netherlandish patriot' who over the course of the 1570s and 1580s develops a new identity as a Catholic in the context of religious conflict and war. Willem Weijdts, tailor of Bruges, was radicalized by the anti-Catholic policies of the 'Calvinist republics' of Flanders in the 1570s and became a strong supporter of the Catholic Spanish monarchy. Each of these figures, along with several others, such as the poet Katherina Boudewyns and the Augustian Brother Wouter Jacobsz, give the story the personal flavor and immediacy of the best kind of historical writing.

Points of Comparison: Catholic Germany and the Southern Netherlands

The central argument of *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands* is that the Catholics failed to defend their Church and their religious practices because of the problematic nature of clergy-lay relations in the early sixteenth century. The Catholic hierarchy and much of the clergy considered the Protestant challenge a matter of theological debate and not something laypeople should get involved in. Laypeople, particularly the male urban elite, had been influenced strongly by humanism (particularly Erasmus) and often exhibited strong anti-clerical views, leading them to consider Protestant-Catholic disputes as a kind of conflict between clergymen, and thus none of their business. Laypeople in the middle of the sixteenth century often had family members and neighbors with Protestant sympathies and believed that people with a variety of religious viewpoints could coexist within a united civil community.

1 Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635* (The Past and Present Book Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 272 pp., ISBN 978 0 19 960991 8).

Pollmann shows how the experiences of 1566 to 1585 ended this belief in co-existence and moderation in religious matters. The iconoclasm of 1566 horrified committed Catholics and the militancy of returning Calvinist exiles greatly heightened religious tensions. The ongoing Revolt, with its accompanying repression, taxes, extortion, plundering and mutinies, radicalized all sides in the conflict. This experience also led to a change in lay-clergy relations, as Catholic communities were often left without clerical leadership – priests, monks, and nuns often had to flee Calvinist armies – and laypeople took a greater role organizing devotions and leading congregations.

New religious orders, particularly the Jesuits and Capuchins, reinforced this trend toward a more active and engaged laity. Jesuit sodalities brought educated Catholic men together for prayer, processions, sermons and devotional reading. Laypeople, supported by the new orders, built and rebuilt churches, organized processions and pilgrimages, supported confraternities, and went more frequently to confession and communion. All of this activity led to a real Catholic revival after 1585, as the political and military situation stabilized. Pollmann argues convincingly that the Catholic revival in the Southern Netherlands was the result of lay initiatives in the context of a failure of the clergy to respond effectively to the Reformation. It was, Pollmann says, a religious revival ‘from the middle’ (6), led by laypeople, particularly the middle classes in the cities.

Pollmann’s examination of lay-clergy relations in the Southern Netherlands over the *longue durée* makes for interesting comparisons for historians of the German-speaking lands. In her discussion of pre-Reformation Christianity, Pollmann draws extensively on the work of historians of Germany such as Bob Scribner. Her conclusion – that Netherlanders were a pious people in the century before Luther burst on the scene – conforms to recent scholarship on late medieval Christianity in Germany (and elsewhere, particularly England). She points out that one important attraction of the new evangelical ideas in the towns was that they fit with the new self-confidence of urban elites and their sense that the ‘knowledge gap’ between the clergy and the laity was shrinking.

Historians of Catholic Germany will also recognize the slow, disorganized, and feeble response of the Church hierarchy and the Catholic elite to the Reformation. Pollmann’s emphasis on the unwillingness of Church leaders to mobilize the laity is useful in examining this Catholic response. In Cologne, for example, the lay Catholic elite did organize resistance to Protestantism, turning the city into a ‘citadel of Catholicism’. In another Catholic bastion, Bavaria, the Dukes led a reform movement that mobilized the population around a revived pilgrimage piety. On the other hand, in much of the Holy Roman Empire, church leaders relied on the traditional defense of privilege and tradition to counter Lutheran challenges; for example in Franconia, the Rhine Valley, and in the cities. In these places, Catholic devotional life languished from the 1530s on, the number of clergymen declined, and monasteries emptied. Here, a Catholic revival did not develop

until after about 1570, with the arrival of the Jesuits and the activities of reformist bishops.

Traditionally, historians of Catholic Germany have focused on the role of these groups – the Jesuits and reforming bishops – in the revival of Catholicism in Germany, crediting above all the Council of Trent and Papal leadership for reviving Catholicism. Here, Pollmann’s call to examine lay-clergy relations can help reorient this view. As Pollmann recognizes in the case of the Southern Netherlands, the Catholic revival is in fact a complicated story; even more complicated perhaps in Germany than in the Catholic parts of the Netherlands. Part of this complexity comes from the political structure of the Holy Roman Empire and the particular place of the *Reichskirche* – the Imperial Church – in that structure. A second characteristic of German Catholicism after the Reformation was its strongly rural character.

Pollmann recognizes that the particular trajectory of Catholic history in the Southern Netherlands is related to the political history of the Spanish Netherlands between 1520 and 1635. For this reason, a significant portion of her book is taken up with describing the twists and turns of political and military history. The traditional institutions of the Church were certainly, like in Germany, part of the reason for the initial failure of reform in the Netherlands, but over the course of the sixteenth century the Habsburg state was able to reorganize the episcopacy in ways that were unimaginable in the Empire. In the Empire, the secular power of the upper clergy was a source of Catholic resilience, but also a traditional force that limited the role of laypeople in ecclesiastical territories. Before the Thirty Years’ War, places that most closely resembled the Spanish Netherlands – such as Bavaria, where strong Catholic secular princes led Catholic resistance to the Reformation and the later Catholic religious revival – were the exception rather than the rule.

Catholic Germany was predominantly rural, particularly after the majority of the cities converted to Lutheranism. This was another difference from the Netherlands, which was already heavily urbanized. Pollmann’s book only touches on developments in the countryside, and her analysis of clergy-lay relations needs some adjustment as we move into the German countryside. The Catholic revival in the German countryside did depend on the active participation of the laity, and often on the leadership of local village elites. It also depended on the willingness of parish priests to work with and accommodate the devotional needs of the villagers. This dynamic was not firmly in place in much of Catholic Germany until after 1650, but in the next century this caused a full flowering of Baroque Catholicism.

These points of comparison make me wonder about several aspects of Pollmann’s argument. Is it possible that she has downplayed elements of what has traditionally been called Tridentine reform? In this area, the Jesuits loom large. As Pollmann recognizes, the Jesuits were very important in mobilizing the Catholic elite and bringing them into the Church Militant. But the Jesuits, as Louis Châtellier and John O’Malley have shown, were also active in training

and energizing the secular clergy. Did this happen in the Netherlands, and if so what role did these Jesuit-inspired priests play in the Catholic revival? The role of the secular clergy is also not clear in Pollmann's study. Historians of Catholic Germany (as well as historians of Spain and Italy) have studied the central role of this group in Baroque Catholicism after 1650. Did they adopt the role of the good pastor, and did they support a 'religion of the poor', which Louis Châtellier has shown gained importance in parts of France and Italy?

Chronology and Sources

These issues may of course come down to chronology. Pollmann's choice to end her book in the 1630s reflects the traditions of Netherlandish historiography that may have more to do with political events than broad religious developments. Pollmann has identified patterns of devotion and a high level of lay engagement with Catholicism that looks like Catholic Germany in the period 1650-1750. Put another way, Catholicism in the Southern Netherlands experiences a revival at the same time as Cologne and Bavaria, which was earlier than in most parts of the Empire.

Pollmann's sources – the memoirs and diaries, poems and pamphlets – tell us more about the development of Catholic identity than they do about lay-clergy relations. Pollmann clearly identifies the changing attitudes of Catholics from the 1570s on, and her sources are very valuable here. There is less in them about the clergy than about local ceremonies, new devotions and the economic situation. The sources are also excellent for showing the interplay of military and political developments with the religious sentiments of the authors.

The sources that Pollmann mobilizes bring the reader closer to experiences, thoughts and emotions of early modern people than most books about Catholicism in this period. This perspective is valuable and worth emulating in the analysis of other parts of Catholic Europe. More importantly, her argument that the Catholic revival of the late sixteenth century was primarily the result of lay initiatives makes a powerful contribution to the historiography of Catholicism. Like a variety of historians of Italy, Spain, France, and Germany, she is contributing to a growing understanding that the Catholic revival was something created by and for regular folk, rather than being the result of a reform programme promulgated by the Papacy and the Church hierarchy. As Pollmann points out, the Church erased this aspect of Catholic history when clergymen wrote the history of Catholicism in the nineteenth century. Pollmann's book is part of the rewriting of that history that has taken place over the last fifty years. ◀

Marc R. Forster (1959) is Henry B. Plant Professor of History at Connecticut College, USA. He is interested in Early Modern Germany, religion and rural society. Publications: *Catholic Germany between the Reformation and the Enlightenment* (New York 2007); *Catholic Revival in the Age of the Baroque: Religious Identity in Southwest Germany, 1550-1750* (Cambridge 2001) and *The Counter-Reformation in the Villages: Religion and Reform in the Bishopric of Speyer, 1560-1720* (Ithaca, London 1992). Email: mrfor@conncoll.edu.



This image of the defence of the ship of the Church Militant shows how Catholic argumentative strategies had evolved to create a role for the laity.

Pieter van der Borcht, *The ship of the Catholic Church Militant*, late sixteenth century.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Vide Catholicæ Spectator, quam concinnò ordine Petri Nauticula adhuc in terra fortiter militans, à Petri Vicario gubernetur cunctisque sacris ministris, licet inimicis ventis et undis, fluctuans, Christi summi naucleri gubernaculo sanctorumque suorum triumphantium auxilio dirigatur.

Cum Erud. Buisson

Antuerpiae P. de For. D. 16.

Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands

A View from South of the Border

BARBARA B. DIEFENDORF

Judith Pollmann (*Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635*) argues persuasively that Netherlandish Catholics were slow to oppose the spread of heresy because their clergy encouraged passivity rather than resistance. This behavior contrasts strikingly with the active resistance posed to the spread of Calvinism in France and challenges French historians to question the assumption that violence was a natural response to the fracturing of community brought about by religious schism. Explanations of popular religious violence must nevertheless also consider their respective political contexts and the extent to which people trusted their rulers to suppress the threat of heresy. Pollmann's further argument that the stunning Catholic revival that occurred in the Southern Netherlands could only occur when the clergy accepted the need to collaborate with pious lay people is also persuasive but might have been enriched by more consideration of the emergence of Catholic identities in Wallonia and among women.

When French Calvinists attacked churches with iconoclastic fury in 1561-1562, Catholics responded with violence of their own. When Calvinists in the Netherlands began a similar wave of iconoclasm in the summer of 1566, Catholics stood by passively, even though they still outnumbered the Calvinists by a large margin in most places. This passivity continued even after rebels began to seize towns where they established Calvinist rule and forbade Catholic worship in 1572. Historians have offered a variety of explanations for the failure of Netherlandish Catholics to react more strongly to the challenge to their church and faith. Some have depicted the pre-Reformation church as so lax and corrupt that few were moved to defend it. Others have pointed to the number of reasons Catholics had for supporting the Dutch Revolt, at least in its initial stages. They were as angered as Calvinists by the repressive policies adopted by their Spanish sovereign, as fearful of the loss of traditional liberties and as burdened by new tax demands. Indeed, historians have long recognized that Catholic complicity in the Revolt was essential to its success.