

Ann Power, *The Brigidine Sisters in Ireland, America, Australia and New Zealand, 1807-1922*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2018. 54 euros, ISBN 978-1-84682-739-6 (hardback), pp. 464

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During the nineteenth century, the Pope continued to lose his temporal power. This process culminated in the Papal States being decimated in 1870. The response by the Church was a vigorous assertion of exclusive claims to truth and authority, accompanied by political conservatism, an exaltation of papal authority, an acceptance of a dogmatic, combative theology, and a highly-organised and centralised system of ecclesiastical administration. The work of the religious orders in schooling the 'masses' - which was made possible by the emergence and growth of a host of new socially active orders alongside those based on older traditions - had been developing concurrently. This led not only to an expansion of Catholic schools in traditionally Catholic countries, but also to a great new wave of missionary work in the evangelisation of non-Christians in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Another movement on the part of the Church was its extensive outreach to emigrant communities, or to predominantly Christian countries.

Ireland is one country where the religious orders, and particularly female religious, were involved in the various ways noted above. Many of these orders have been written about, some in hagiographic style. In more recent works, while such a style has been deliberately obscured, it continues to shine through, not least in the use of a discourse of sisters 'giving service' and having had 'real vocations'. This is to be expected since authors are usually positioned such that they show, from the outset, sympathy to the Catholic position. At the same time, the approach in some of the works in question is better than in others, especially in terms of placing matters within a social context. This particular volume by Ann Power under review here is by far the best of its type I have read over the last decade.

Power's account of the Brigidine Sisters is particularly refreshing since - while the book discusses the power and dominance of a patriarchal Church - the story of this order constitutes a badly-needed negative case that forces one away from grand narratives on the matter. The order was, in fact, established by a male, Bishop Delaney, Bishop of Kildare, in 1807. His expressed motive was that the order would work to provide elementary education amongst the wretched poor of his diocese. There is also no tradition within the order of trying to write Delaney out of its history in terms of recognising his founding role and replacing him with some of the early sisters. On the contrary, members have been clear at all times about what they have seen as their indebtedness to Delaney's vision.

Power's book is also to be lauded for how she delineates the extent to which the order taught both poor children and those of the middle classes; those in both cohorts were taught separately. What is clear, even if not made explicit, is that in doing so the members of the order were interested in maintaining the class distinctions and privileges (or lack thereof) in Irish society and in those overseas

countries where they worked. In both cases, the intention was that Catholics of all types would be raised above their current status in life, but there was no attention given to the possibility of all working together for social reconstruction. At the same time, the author does not shy away from class issues that arose for the order in both Ireland and Australia.

It would also be wrong to give the impression that the Sisters did not meet with opposition from controlling bishops in those overseas countries where they worked. Such opposition was certainly experienced, and often it was unpleasant. What we do not get in this book, however, as in so many other works of its kind (though none as good) is that male religious orders both of priests and of teaching Brothers (including the Irish Christian Brothers) were subjected to as much opposition and hostility. Thus, one needs to question the current interpretations of some (though not of Power), that bishops' opposition to female orders was simply misogyny.

The account throughout of the growth and spread of the order is excellent. It is lengthy but never boring. It is written in a most engaging style, with no ambiguities presenting themselves at any stage. It is all based on an outstanding set of primary sources obtained from a very large number of archives.

For me the most powerful section in the book is that which deals with lay sisters. Indeed, this is the best and most honest account I have ever read on this group of still largely 'hidden' group of sisters. Some recent works do not (when they should) even mention them. Others portray them as they were portrayed, somewhat perversely, in the rules and constitutions of many orders as having a more elevated status in the eyes of God because they did the humble work of cooking, washing, milking cows, and scrubbing floors. Power, however, 'tells it' as close as possible to how it was. This includes the reason for the separate existence of lay sisters, the work they did, how they were perceived by others (including their peers who were deemed to be more exalted), and how they perceived themselves.

While female religious orders including the Brigidine Sisters recruited girls from all social classes, usually only those who were able to bring a dowry into the convent with them were permitted to become 'choir sisters' and 'train' to become teachers or nurses. Those from poorer homes became 'lay sisters', wore more humble garb and were restricted to domestic work within the confines of the cloister. In the case of some orders - and certainly in the case of those in the Presentation Order community in the small town in which I grew up in Ireland and in whose church I regularly 'served' at Mass as an altar boy - they were not even allowed to sit in the main body of the church in the presence of the choir sisters. Rather, they had to remain hidden from view in a dimly-lit corridor leading into the main body of the church from the sacristy. Here, as I made my way onto the main altar followed by the priest, I used to pass them as they knelt in prayer.

Now, of course, it can be pointed out that the situation regarding lay sisters was no more than a reflection of the supposedly natural order of things in Irish society in general. Power, however, makes it clear that it was not without controversy and was accompanied by quite a deal of hurt. She points to the great sense of superiority that choir sisters had, how they looked down on their lay sister peers, and how their attitudes travelled with them across continents. Indeed, more than one male religious viewed

the attitude towards lay sisters as bordering on cruel and the work demands of them as being excessive. It is testament to the maturity of the order at the present time that it is pleased to be associated with Power's work, including what she has to say on these matters.

To conclude, more works like that of Power are badly needed in order to facilitate engagement in a more secular approach to the history of Catholic religious teaching orders and to go beyond accepting notions that their numbers increased because so many women felt 'called by God'. In particular, such works could help us to explore why such 'calling was not widespread prior to the advent of the convent movement dominated by active' orders. They could also help in arriving at explanations as to why such a great numerical decline has taken place in these orders since the late 1960s. Equally welcome would be similar works on religious brothers like the Brigidine Sisters, and particularly on how they responded to changes over the same period.