

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

In the previous chapters, we have laid out what can be known about the Confraternity of Our Lady in the parish of Saint-Martin-en-Ile. The organization thus revealed is an association incorporating all the social ranks of the parish except the very highest, providing a common framework for pious acts and a shelter from conflict. Under their elected leaders, who were also among the lay leaders of the parish, the confraternity ensured the use of a substantial and increasing body of resources for those religious activities favored by the householders of the parish.

Moreover, the confraternity's activities manifest a change in the focus of piety in the 1520s and 1530s from those activities typical of the medieval Church to those typical of the Catholic Reformation. The confraternity concentrates less on funerals and more on services that edify the living, less on inward-looking activities and more on those that include the parish as a whole. This change coincides with the advent of a better-educated, more sophisticated, and probably more prosperous generation of confraternity brothers. The same period also sees the formation at Saint-Martin-en-Ile of a more inclusive Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament on the new Catholic Reformation model, in which the members of the Confraternity of Our Lady joined with their neighbors.

Turning from the detailed study of a single confraternity to place it in its context, two broad sets of conclusions emerge. The first is the question of the Reformation in Liège. The local events of Saint-Martin-en-Ile and in the lives of the members of the Confraternity of Our Lady are not the ones for which the early sixteenth century is particularly noted. The ferment of reform in the Church, which soon became a battle between opposing groups of reformers, was going on throughout Europe at the same time. The ways in which it affected the community we are studying, and even more the ways that it did not, illustrate the role of the confraternity in the Church, and provide a direction for understanding the Reformation in general.

The second set of conclusions concerns the confraternity and its role in the Church, and more broadly the medieval and early modern parish. We began, in the first chapter, with three theses on the confraternity and the parish. The first is John Bossy's contention that the medieval Church was made up of "active men." The second, taken from Gabriel Lebras, and which Bossy also supports, is that the confraternity constituted a "consensual parish" in competition with the official parish. In the third, based on the work of Jacques Toussaert, Bossy asserts that the medieval Church was not a parochially-based institution. Each of these theses is to some degree illustrated or modified by our study of the present confraternity and parish.

The Reformation in Liège

The Protestant Reformation

Liège is unusual among Northern cities in the degree to which it was unaffected by Protestantism. Liège never had an organized Protestant movement, or one that posed any kind of threat to the established Church order. This was not the result of strenuous persecution or bloody

repression; indeed almost none of either occurred. It appears that for the overwhelming majority of Liégeois, Protestantism had no appeal.

It is, of course, risky to speculate on the non-existence of historical events. The rarity of references to Protestant activity in the records may reflect only successful repression or selective chronicling, but such an explanation is unlikely. Neither the archives nor any of the Catholic Liégeois chronicles record more than a handful of prosecutions. Crespin's Protestant martyrology records the death of Thomas Wathelet (1562), but his is the only account from Liège in that voluminous work. There was, at any rate, less Protestantism than in neighboring Cologne, which, one historian notes, "alone of all the imperial cities never experienced a crisis of faith."¹ While the governing élite of Cologne never moved toward Protestantism, a "communal disturbance" in 1525 involved some clearly Lutheran demands, and there were other incidents of lower-class religious dissent that the city government repressed.² In Liège, on the contrary, there is no evidence of any such disturbance. The guilds' successful protests against the Edict of Worms and other measures included no pro-Lutheran language, and was followed by their cooperation in more constitutional methods of prosecution. This is not to say that there was no Protestantism to repress, but the Protestants of Liège were merely a handful of individuals.

The prince-bishop Erard de la Marck, although Erasmus had suspected he might favor Luther, was in fact one of the early leaders of the opposition to him.³ It was to Liège that Jerome Aleander, who had been Erard's chancellor, came to introduce the bull *Exsurge Domine* in the Empire; Erard himself promulgated the Empire's first anti-Lutheran edict. The first effects of the firm stand of the prince-bishop came at first in the outlying parts of the diocese and principality. In fact, before 1530, no one was punished for heresy in the city of Liège.⁴

The prospect of new laws designed to combat heresy, which might strengthen the bishop's princely prerogatives, provoked opposition among the guilds of Liège. The Estates of the principality, led by the city of Liège, resisted the application of the Edict of Worms until 1527, since they claimed it violated the privileges of citizenship. The resistance of the guilds to this and to other efforts of Erard centered around the insistence that citizens of Liège could only be judged "par loi et franchise," that is, by the *échevins* of Liège and the city Council. The articles of their protestation against a proposed edict of 1532 demand that heretics be tried by their proper judges, that they not be kept in prison before trial, and that false accusers of heresy suffer the same fate as heretics. One point on which the guilds especially insisted was that the goods of convicted heretics should not be confiscated, but should go to their innocent relatives.⁵

The prince and the city arrived at a compromise in 1533. A new edict provided that Lutherans and other heretics should be punished "par loi et franchise."⁶ This edict also proclaimed the banishment of eight Lutherans, together with the exceptional confiscation of their goods by the

¹ R. W. Scribner, "Why Was There No Reformation in Cologne?" *Bulletin of the Institute for Historical Research* (London University) 49 (1976): 217.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 235-36, 240.

³ Léon-Ernest Halkin, *Le Cardinal de la Marck, prince-évêque de Liège* (Liège: Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, 1930), pp. 131-32.

⁴ The execution cited in 1528 by Halkin, *Le Cardinal*, pp. 161-62, probably never happened; the only chronicle that mentions it is very likely in error. See Paul Harsin, "Les Premières Manifestations de la réforme luthérienne dans le diocèse de Liège" *Académie royale de Belgique. Bulletin de la classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques*, Fifth series, vol. 48 (1962): 273-294.

⁵ Halkin, *Le Cardinal*, pp. 148-55; Emile Fairon, "La Repression de l'hérésie et la question constitutionnelle dans la principauté de Liège pendant le XVI^e siècle" in *Miscellanées historiques* (Liège: L. Gothier, 1945), pp. 95-122.

⁶ The text of the edict is given in *Recueil des ordonnances de la principauté de Liège*, ed. Mathieu-Lambert Polain, Second ser., vol. 1 (Brussels, 1869), p. 94.

city. The same day, nineteen more publicly abjured heresy, followed by seventeen a week later.⁷ There was only one more banishment, probably the following year, accompanied by confiscation of goods, this time involving seven persons. Later in 1533 the ecclesiastical court handed over jurisdiction over lay persons in heresy cases to the civil court, retaining jurisdiction only over clergy and religious.⁸ Before this, the ecclesiastical court had dealt with only one case involving citizens, in 1532, when it assigned penances to two men and two women who had renounced heresy.⁹

Thereafter, all prosecutions of citizens for heresy followed “loi et franchise.” There were very few for the city of Liège, mostly in 1534-36, although the sources are vague and contradictory as to how many actually were punished, or whether they were in fact were inhabitants of Liège. The cases from the city itself usually ended in banishment. Most of the executions were of Anabaptists, and concern the Dutch-speaking portions of the principality.¹⁰

The attitude of the city of Liège is apparent in the events surrounding the execution of Thomas Wathelet de Becco in 1562.¹¹ He came from the Marquisate of Franchimont, a part of the principality to the southeast of the capital, where Protestantism was more prevalent than in Liège itself. His father and his brother, however, were citizens of Liège, members of the smiths’ guild. Thomas was arrested in 1558 and held in prison for four years, first in the ecclesiastical prison, while the inquisitors examined him as to his beliefs, and then in the civil prison. Not being himself a citizen of Liège, he was tried only by the *échevins*, not by the city Council.

Just before Thomas’s execution, the prince-bishop Robert de Berghes issued a new edict designed to prevent the infiltration of Protestants into the city and the principality. This edict included no provision not previously accepted in Liégeois law, and insisted that all citizens should be tried by “loi et franchise” as in the days of Erard de la Marck. Nevertheless, the guilds of Liège protested that this edict was null and void, and that it should not be permitted to interfere with their rights as citizens. The guilds protested not because of any provision of the edict itself, but probably because it was issued solely on the authority of the prince-bishop without the approval of the burgomasters and city Council.¹² The afternoon of the very day that the guilds rendered their protest, eleven members of the smiths’ guild presented themselves before the *échevins* to record their disagreement with their own guild, saying that they were good Catholics, and desired to see all heretics punished according to the canons of the Church. Among the eleven was Wathelet le Maréchal, brother of Thomas Wathelet.¹³

In his study of these events, Fernand Lemaire draws the unpleasant conclusion that Wathelet joined the other smiths in order to have his brother put to death so that he could lay hands on the inheritance.¹⁴ Be that as it may, the other ten did not have brothers on trial for heresy. Their protest is remarkable, considering the long tradition of attachment by citizens of Liège to their

⁷ Halkin, *Le Cardinal*, pp. 172-73.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-68.

¹⁰ Halkin, *Le Cardinal*, pp. 174-88; cf. his *Histoire religieuse des règnes de Corneille de Berghes et de Georges d’Autriche, princes-évêques de Liège (1538-1557)* (Liège: Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, 1936).

¹¹ Fernand Lemaire, “Le Procès et l’exécution du protestant liégeois Thomas Watlet (1562)” *Académie royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique. Commission royale d’histoire. Bulletin* 115 (1950): 219-283.

¹² The text is given in *Recueil des ordonnances*, pp. 271-73.

¹³ Lemaire, pp. 240-42.

¹⁴ He did, in fact, try to disinherit his brother’s widow, but the courts upheld her rights; see Lemaire, pp. 253-54. Lemaire’s conclusion may be doubted, however, because death was the penalty for heresy even without Robert’s edict. Wathelet was more likely trying to exculpate himself.

privileges. In breaking with their own guild, they publicly proclaimed their willingness to condone a possible violation of their political independence for the sake of the Catholic faith. The guilds' original protest, moreover, had no effect and was not pursued. A rescript of the Emperor Ferdinand confirmed Robert's edict, and the execution of Thomas Wathelet went ahead without public opposition.¹⁵

The guilds' attitude, reflected in the reply to Erard of 1532 or the surviving resolutions of individual guilds, does not at all favor Protestantism.¹⁶ Rather it is the typical response of people concerned mainly with local and immediate problems. The heretics, most of them, were far away in Germany; the bishop, however, was nearby, and his predecessors' attempts to destroy civic autonomy were still within living memory in 1532. It is a testimony to the political skill of Erard and his successors that they did not, by a policy of *placards* and bloody repression like that used to the north, drive the populace to revolt and into the arms of the Protestants.

It is hard enough to say, in the cases of cities that adopted Protestantism, why they did; it is even harder to say why a city like Liège did not. The full answer to this question is beyond the scope of this study. One could point to the city's traditional loyalty to the see of St. Lambert, but this would beg the question. Besides, the citizens of Liège had often enough been in rebellion against that see. The anticlericalism of medieval Liège accompanied a real piety, however. Even against its bishop, the city militia marched under the banner of the Blessed Virgin and St. Lambert. Yet this tradition, not unique in the Empire, did not lead the Liégeois to adopt the new ideas that appealed so strongly to many other urban populations.

Certainly some circumstances influenced the Liégeois. The German origin of Lutheran ideas made them alien and suspect in traditionally particularist Liège. The early and firm stand of the bishop doubtless carried some weight. The recent destruction of the city had weakened the rebellious tendencies of medieval Liège to which Protestant propagandists might have appealed. If the city had been suffering through an economic crisis or if an important section of society had been frustrated in its ambitions, they might have seen the need to take the radical and dangerous step of breaking with their bishop, pope, and emperor in order to regain God's favor. But no crisis appeared. Any spiritual difficulty they might face could be dealt with by a more assiduous application of the teaching they had already received. Lutheran ideas were perhaps superfluous, and certainly would have interfered with what the Liégeois needed most—peace and order.

No one could doubt the sincere piety of the governing élite of Liège; not in the face of example like Baldwin de Scagier and his four clerical sons or Johan le Cock's heavy expense to make his son a theologian. If the Liégeois had been indifferent to religion, they would not have founded convents and chantries in such abundance, or joined confraternities, as they did. In many wills beside the conventional formulas invoking God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints, one frequently finds, in both the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the protestation that the testator is dying a loyal Catholic. Some wills show the effect of a more extensive spiritual teaching. In their 1519 will, the merchant Johan Dary and his wife, parents of Pirette who joined the Confraternity of Our Lady as the widow of Maître Giles de Fanchon, look forward to death

Thinking of the salvation of our poor souls, created in the image and likeness of God their creator, and of the holy undivided Trinity, redeemed so preciously from eternal death and

¹⁵ The text of the rescript is given in *Recueil des ordonnances*, p. 273; Lemaire discusses its authenticity and its effects, pp. 245-46.

¹⁶ The resolutions (*sieultes*) of the mercers are found in Archives de l'Etat, Liège, Métiers (Merciers), reg. 151, ff. 12v, 14, 18v, 21.

damnation by the painful, bitter, and agonizing Passion of Jesus Christ, Son of God, and endowed with the gifts and graces of the blessed Holy Spirit.¹⁷

Perhaps there those who did not care about the salvation of their “poor souls,” but those who did find an adequate answer in the sacraments, prayers, and discipline of the Roman Catholic Church. Those who were indifferent to religion would hardly be looking for a change; it would interfere with business as usual. The business of Liège, was, after all, business. Guarding their precious neutrality, even in the war between Spain and the Dutch rebels, its merchants sold arms to both sides and carried on a profitable commerce with Holland. An eighteenth-century writer proclaimed the Church and city of Liège a “maiden entirely virgin,” unpolluted by heresy;¹⁸ but one early seventeenth-century merchant, Louis de Geer, a Catholic at home, where he founded a beguinage, was a Calvinist when he visited Dordrecht.¹⁹

The Confraternity and Protestantism

The details of the Reformation in Liège are beyond the scope of this study, but they do provide a background for the few connections between early Protestants and the members of the Confraternity of Our Lady. In fact there is only one case in which a member is directly involved in the events just recounted. Raes de Laminnes, a lawyer and a member of the Confraternity of Our Lady, bought at public auction a house “au Treit” formerly the property of the glazier Rigal Hoesman, who had been banished for heresy in 1532. This is in fact the only record we have of the fate of any confiscated property.²⁰

Rigal Hoesman was a glazier, and so was William Wipart, who abjured heresy in 1532. So too were a number of members of the Confraternity of Our Lady in the same period. In general, members of the Confraternity of Our Lady were of the social and economic level often associated with the Protestant Reformation.²¹ The most suggestive case concerns the family of De Bure, one of whom, Idelette, married John Calvin in Geneva in 1540. This family includes Lambert junior who was banished in 1532, and Lambert senior, probably his father, who abjured the same year.²² The elder Lambert, a mercer, is very likely the son of Everard de Bure, a brewer who lived in the parish of Saint-Martin-en-Ile. Everard’s name appears in the records of Saint-Martin-en-Ile as paying a *cens* due to the church from the Confraternity of Our Lady.²³ Although his name nowhere appears among the records of the confraternity, his occupation and residence in the parish suggest that this Protestant family was joined at the root with a Catholic confraternity.

¹⁷ “Pensans et cogittans au salut de noz poeures ames crees a limage et semblant de Dieu leur createur et de la saite Trinite indivisee, rachaptees tant precieusement de la mort et dampnation eternele par la doloireuse passion amere et angoissieuz de Jhesucrist fil de Dieu et dotees de dons et grasces de benoite Saint Esperit.” Archives de l’Etat, Liège, Echevins de Liège, Convenances et Testaments, reg. 27, f. 237v. This formulation clearly looks to Thomas à Kempis rather than to Luther, considering both the date (13 August 1519) and the provision of legacies to confraternities and the foundation of several anniversary masses in the will.

¹⁸ “L’Eglise et la Cité de Liège est une pucelle du tout vierge et impollüe que nulle hérésie a sçu jusques ores inquier ou fouiller”; Th. Bouille, *Histoire de la ville et du pais de Liège* (Liège, 1751) quoted in Jean Lejeune, “Religion, morale et capitalisme dans la société liégeoise du XVIIe siècle” *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 22 (1943): 116.

¹⁹ Lejeune, “Religion, morale et capitalisme,” p. 124.

²⁰ Archives de l’Etat, Liège, Echevins de Liège, Oeuvres, reg. 128, ff. 136-137v.

²¹ As by Steven E. Ozment in *The Reformation in the Cities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 123-24.

²² See Jean Rey, “Note sur l’origine liégeoise d’Idelette de Bure, femme de Calvin” *Bulletin de la Société d’histoire du protestantisme belge*, Second series, vol. 3 (1922): 111-23.

²³ Archives de l’Etat, Liège, Saint-Martin-en-Ile, reg. 112, f. 110v.

In March, 1571, the provost of Liège made his regular visitation of the parish of Saint-Martin-en-Ile. The vicar and churchwardens reported that in the house of Johan Lagace (who by the way had not been regularly coming to church), Symon “de Tribus Gradibus” had said in the presence of witnesses, “I am a Calvinist and I want to die a Calvinist” (“Je suys Calvin et je veulx mourir Calvin”). He had added that the Franciscan preacher at Saint-Martin-en-Ile had cited passages from Scripture that neither he nor his wife could find in their Bibles.²⁴ This Symon is very likely Simon Damerier or de Trois Gres, son of the Simon junior who was a member of the Confraternity of Our Lady, and whose 1574 will includes a most un-Calvinist collection of saints and angels.²⁵ Johan Lagace, and another witness to this act of disloyalty, Fleuris de l’Angle, were probably also descendants of members of the Confraternity of Our Lady in our period. There is no evidence that any of them was ever prosecuted for heresy.

If the confraternity members and the handful of Liégeois Protestants came from similar social and economic backgrounds, we may consider that the confraternity was in a sense a substitute for Protestantism. That is, it substituted socially. Whatever needs prompted others to become Protestants were satisfied in the Catholic Church for the members of the Confraternity of Our Lady. These needs may be broadly apportioned between the socially weak and the socially strong. The weak needed compassion, love, and shelter; the strong needed a place to express their faith and to be of service.

The activity of the confraternity went beyond the performance of pious acts under the supervision of the clergy; it was first of all a social group, providing real solace and shelter in the midst of changing economic times and their accompanying difficulties. Widows, battered wives, those exposed and vulnerable to the hostility of the world might well seek out the confraternity for support, for identity, for committed fellowship. Elsewhere such people sought out heretical conventicles for similar assurance and love; in Liège they could find it within the Catholic Church.

It was not only the weak who might have similar motivations to join either the confraternity or a group of Protestants. Laymen, especially those in new and independent professions, needed a place to express their religious aspirations, their desire to serve God and their neighbors. The confraternity provided a meaningful mechanism for this expression. In the early sixteenth century, the laity aspired to reform. They wanted renewal, a Church and a world made over, God’s will expressed in action. In Lübeck, the leaders of the Protestant Reformation in the 1530s could be found among the younger members of a religious confraternity of merchants, the Leonardsbruderschaft.²⁶ In Liège, at least one confraternity also spearheaded the Reformation, in this case Catholic.

The Catholic Reformation

From an organizational point of view the Catholic Reformation arrived in Liège late. The decrees of the Council of Trent only began to take effect in the diocese after 1580 under Ernest of Bavaria, and subsequently under the nuncios of Cologne, who backed their reforms with legatine powers.²⁷ The reason for this delay was that the cathedral and collegial chapters were exempt from

²⁴ Archives de l’Etat, Liège, Prévôté, reg. 13, f. 13.

²⁵ This will, in Archives de l’Etat, Liège, Saint-Martin-en-Ile, ptf. 9, mentions a deceased son Simon, for whom he founded an anniversary mass, and another Simon, his youngest son.

²⁶ Monika Zmyslony, *Bruderschaften in Lübeck bis zur Reformation* (Kiel: W. Mühlen Verlag, 1977), pp. 149-151.

²⁷ F. Willocx, *L’Introduction des décrets du Concile de Trente dans les Pays-Bas et dans la principauté de Liège* (Louvain: Librairie Universitaire, 1929), pp. 230-248.

episcopal jurisdiction, and fought any attempt to limit their privileges or to submit them to discipline. Erard de la Marck, in spite of his strenuous attempts to reform the life of his diocese, failed to overcome the opposition of these privileged institutions. Insofar as he could, however, Erard worked hard to bring about the needed reform of discipline and organization within his diocese.²⁸

There was more to the Catholic Reformation, however, than merely new decrees and reorganization. It was a general movement of spiritual renewal, parallel, as historians are now realizing, to the Protestant Reformation.²⁹ Both sought to purify the doctrine of the Church, the former by prosecuting, the latter by adopting, Protestantism. Both sought a better-educated and more professional clergy. Both sought to convert the world visibly to Christ, and to this end, both advocated religious expressions which were active and outgoing. The confraternity was one means the Catholic Reformation used to achieve this end; in social—though of course not in theological—terms it corresponds to the gathered Church of the Protestants.

We have seen the Confraternity of Our Lady adopt new forms of piety just at the point when the distinction between the Reformations becomes critical in Liège, when Protestants are banished and new confraternities are founded. This is the Catholic Reformation taking hold, not at the level of bishops and their legislation, but among the active and pious laity. These are the patrons and the parents of the reforming clergy.

Grégoire Sylvius, O. P., auxiliary bishop of Liège, is an example of this connection.³⁰ Although the contention that he was the son of Baldwin de Scagier, churchwarden of Saint-Martin-en-Ile, is certainly false, his father and mother were both members of the Confraternity of Our Lady.³¹ His sister Pirette married another confrere, the cooper Wilhem Beeckman. Grégoire joined the Dominicans of Liège in 1519, and studied first at Bourges and then at Louvain, where he took a doctorate in theology in 1538. By 1543 he was prior of his home convent.³² The prince-bishop Corneille de Berghes (1538-44) made him inquisitor, and bishop George of Austria (1544-57) sent him to the Council of Trent as his representative in 1552. He returned from the Council a bishop, and served as auxiliary of Liège from 1552 until his death in 1578.³³

As a son of the parish and a member of the nearby Dominican convent, Sylvius retained a connection with Saint-Martin-en-Ile. Well-known as a preacher, he probably preached in the parish as well as elsewhere. He joined the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament along with many other

²⁸ Halkin, *Le Cardinal*, pp. 63-108, 189-253.

²⁹ The parallels are clearly discussed in the work of Jean Delumeau, *Naissance et affirmation de la Réforme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de la France, 1965) and *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de la France, 1971).

³⁰ Paul Ansiaux, “Grégoire Sylvius, inquisiteur et évêque auxiliaire liégeois (1502-1578)” *Bulletin de la société d’art et d’histoire du diocèse de Liège* 26 (1935): 1-20.

³¹ Ansiaux claims he is Baldwin’s son, following [Joseph Abry], *Recueil héraldique des bourgmestres de la noble cité de Liège. . . depuis l’an 1200 jusques en 1720* (Liège: J. P. Gramme, 1720), p. 358. The origin of this error seems to be that Sylvius was the brother-in-law of Wilhem Beeckman de Tonnelet, husband of Pirette de Scagier (Archives de l’Etat, Liège, Echevins de Liège, Oeuvres, reg. 122, f. 158). Pirette, however, was the daughter not of Baldwin but of Johan de Scagier (Archives de l’Etat, Liège, Echevins de Liège, Conventions et Testaments, reg. 29, ff. 140-41). Johan died in 1502, and his wife Francheuse remarried Jacques de Falcomot, or de Tonnelet, who died in 1520 (Archives de l’Etat, Liège, Echevins de Liège, Oeuvres, reg. 129, f. 155v; cf. membership records of the Confraternity of Our Lady). Thus either Johan or Jacques was Grégoire’s father, probably the former; both were members of the Confraternity of Our Lady. Wilhem inherited the “Tonnelet” house and name from his mother-in-law Francheuse when he married Pirette in 1521. It is not clear how Grégoire came to be called “Sylvius”; in the records of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament he is called “Gregoire de Tonnelet.”

³² Ansiaux, pp. 9-10.

³³ Halkin, *Histoire religieuse*, pp. 58-59.

members of his convent in 1541,³⁴ and continued even after he became bishop in 1552.³⁵ His brother-in-law was a leading member of the Confraternity of Our Lady, and he himself is probably the “docteur des prescheurs” who was honored at the confraternity’s banquets in 1547 and 1548.³⁶ One day he prayed, ate, and drank with brewers and glaziers; another day with cardinals and bishops: he is in his person a link between Saint-Martin-en-Ile and the great age of Church reform.

The Confraternity and the Parish

The tradition beginning in the earliest Christian centuries, continuing with the ascetics, the penitents, and the later medieval revivals, endured into the sixteenth century. The confraternity remained what it had always been: the basis of new religious life, a laboratory for new forms of piety. The Catholic Reformation, like so many other renewal movements, began and grew with groups of like-minded and committed lay people. Moreover, the pious laity passed their devotion on to their children, so that the confraternity was also a nursery of priests and bishops to serve as leaders in the reform. The two elements of reform constantly called for in the fifteenth century, “head and members,” could not exist one without the other, and it was through the bonds of brotherhood that united both the local community and the entire body of the Church that this reform proceeded.

Having examined this example of a confraternity functioning within a parish, we are ready to test the three theses that we borrowed to begin this study.

Active Laity

John Bossy takes issue with some earlier historians who declared that the layman in the medieval Church was inactive. If this had been true, he says, “the Counter-Reformation would have had a far less exacting task before it.”³⁷ The laymen whom we have been studying were certainly active. Their activity did not take only the forms that Bossy describes, but could also be, as in the example of Saint-Martin-en-Ile, in line with the efforts of the Catholic Reformation. Bossy emphasizes the difficulty of turning a society bound by kinship and subject to endemic feuds into a system of well-disciplined parishes; but this struggle was not one of cleric against layman, since there were laymen (and clerics) on both sides.

Not only were the supposed “inactive men” of the medieval laity not inactive, they were not all men. Women played a significant role in the medieval parish, most visibly as donors. But the present study reveals a subtler and more important distortion in the traditional view of the medieval parish than the omission of the ubiquitous wealthy widow. The governing roles in the parish were filled by men, to be sure; but in the case we have been studying at least, they were almost always married men. Behind every married man is necessarily a woman, and usually some children as well. The married men of the parish governed as the representatives of families, families in which women played a necessary role. The tradition of Whiggery that has given us the “two-tiered” model of religion needs also to be corrected in this: that the medieval community was a network of families, not of individual men.

It was lay activity, centered in the family, that assured the survival of all Church organizations. Parents inspired, or simply contributed, their sons, who became the religious, the

³⁴ Archives de l’Evêché, Liège, reg. H. III. 6.

³⁵ Archives de l’Etat, Liège, Saint-Martin-en-Ile, reg. 124bis.

³⁶ Archives de l’Etat, Liège, Saint-Martin-en-Ile, reg. 128, ff. 135, 139v. The earlier of these banquets was held in the “maison de Tonnelet,” Sylvius’s childhood home.

³⁷ John Bossy, “The Counter-Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe” *Past and Present* 47 (1970): 54.

priests, and the bishops, and their daughters, who became the nuns and the beguines. Pious lay people endowed the altars, the chantries, the convents, and the parishes that constituted the medieval Church; and then they themselves often administered them. They also founded the confraternities whose lines of spiritual kinship cut across the lines of blood kinship. In the example we have been studying, this spiritual relation centered around the parish.

Moreover, the movement of reform in the Catholic Church that attempted to rationalize and to discipline the “conglomerate of autonomous communities”³⁸ that was the medieval Church also involved lay activity. The same impulse produced similar results in the churches in Protestant lands, as well as in the various spheres of activity of the civil administration. In the area of public welfare, where civil and ecclesiastical activities overlapped, this pattern can be most clearly seen. Paul Bonenfant saw this change beginning in 1525-30 in Belgium; he called it unconscious Lutheranism, but it is in fact simply the temper of the times.³⁹

Liège, where destruction, migration, and economic growth had disrupted the older ties of kinship, might more easily receive spiritual brotherhood as a substitute for blood. One would expect religious reform to proceed more easily there as well. The foregoing characterization would to some extent apply to cities in general, and both the Protestant and Catholic Reformations had their first success in the cities. The villages whence Bossy draws many of his examples were in general slower to adopt reform. Therefore we must in the main agree with Bossy: an active laity, yes, but not, or not necessarily, one to impede the Catholic Reformation.

The Consensual Parish

Gabriel Lebras characterized the confraternity as a “consensual parish” within or above the legal parish. Therefore, he argued, the “natural independence” of confraternities has led to conflicts that divided the confraternity from the pastor or the parish council.⁴⁰ Certainly there have been examples of conflicts between confraternities and their parishes up to the present time. Confraternities have also argued with religious houses that sponsored them, over such issues as the use of buildings and other facilities.⁴¹

In the present case Lebras’s thesis, in the form he gives it, does not hold. The Confraternity of Our Lady at Saint-Martin-en-Ile did not in fact oppose or compete with the pastor and lay leaders of the parish. Indeed it incorporated them as its own leaders. In the use of the parish’s and the confraternity’s resources, there was not conflict but cooperation. The parish deeded property to the confraternity; the confraternity maintained liturgical services, kept the sanctuary lamp burning, and employed many of the parish staff. One certainly cannot say of this confraternity that it “disturbed the Church by its natural independence and frequent disorders.”⁴²

One cannot, however, simply discard the notion of a “consensual parish.” To have a consensual group within the parish does not necessarily entail conflict. As in the present case, it can as easily prevent it, if the parish and the confraternity are both sufficiently flexible to incorporate all of those who would potentially be in conflict. In fact, at Saint-Martin-en-Ile it was

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Paul Bonenfant, “Les Origines et le caractère de la réforme de la bienfaisance publique aux Pays-Bas sous le règne de Charles-Quint” *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 5 (1926): 887-904, 6 (1927): 207-230.

⁴⁰ Gabriel Lebras, “Les Confréries chrétiennes. Problèmes et propositions,” in *Etudes de sociologie religieuse*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de la France, 1955-56), 2: 454

⁴¹ For examples, see Giles-Gerard Meersseman, “Etudes sur les anciennes confréries dominicaines. Les Confréries de Saint Dominique” *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 20 (1950): 5-113.

⁴² Lebras, *Etudes*, 2: 454.

not the confraternity that was or was not independent of the parish; the parish was in effect dependent on the group of leaders assembled in the confraternity.

The Parochial Basis

Jacques Toussaert, after examining the irregularity with which the Flemish populace in the later Middle Ages carried out the religious duties prescribed by the Church, concluded that many of their deficiencies stemmed from a lack of religious fervor. John Bossy argues that this lack of regularity showed “not. . .that the peasants and weavers of fifteenth-century Flanders had no religion, but that the Church of the late medieval centuries was not in fact a parochially-grounded institution.”⁴³ He follows Lebras in describing confraternities as the “alternative model of the Church” that was used in the later Middle Ages. The efforts of Tridentine reformers to enforce parochial conformity, he argues, in the end destroyed confraternities, or at least those involving lay initiative.⁴⁴

This thesis must be modified in some important respects. First of all, we must refine the notion that Tridentine reform destroyed lay initiative by its new, more highly organized type of confraternity incorporating a more active leadership of the clergy. This may in fact have been what the lay people wanted; certainly they joined—and patronized—such confraternities in great number, when they did not actually found them. In our present example, where lay initiative cannot be doubted, a significant new activity involved having a choir, perforce of clerics, to sing Vespers. If laymen wanted sermons, it would be priests who gave them; if they wanted spiritual direction, they would have to take it from priests. Thus clerical leadership and lay initiative, or at least cooperation, are not incompatible.

In general, historians have underestimated the degree of popular acceptance of the Catholic Reformation. It is one of the legacies of the “two-tiered” model of religion that sees the effects of reform only among the élites. Contemporary sources, usually the very churchmen who are calling urgently for reform, also tend to overemphasize the abuses of the “vulgar.” The success of the Catholic Reformation was not perfect; but the degree of its success required the active acceptance of a large mass of the laity. The southern Low Countries were one of the regions where this success was most dramatic and enduring.⁴⁵

Furthermore, the notion that the medieval Church was not “parochially-grounded” may explain less than it seems. Almost all the legislation relating to parish control that Trent reinforced was already in effect beforehand, especially the central decree of IV Lateran Council that all Christians must confess once a year to their own parish priests.⁴⁶ It was, however, not so well enforced as it was after the Reformation. Bossy’s argument is that other patterns of loyalty were able to prevail over the standards to be enforced by the Church, in the parish.

That the Tridentine reformers had greater success in bringing about conformity—as their Protestant counterparts also did—is indubitable. The reforming bishops, like their predecessors, were simply trying to enforce the traditional set of Christian religious and moral standards. That they placed a greater emphasis on the parish as the means to enforce them may simply indicate

⁴³ Bossy, “The Counter-Reformation and the People,” p. 53.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

⁴⁵ See Alain Lottin, “Contre-Réforme et religion populaire: un mariage difficile mais réussi aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles en Flandre et en Hainaut?” in *La Religion populaire* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1979), pp. 53-63.

⁴⁶ The medieval penitential system is spelled out in detail in Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

greater faith in administrative structures. It is more a question of technique than of theology, of emphasis rather than fundamental belief.

We cannot, after examining the workings of Saint-Martin-en-Ile, dismiss the medieval parish. It is not, however, much like a unit in an army, as in the attitude of St. Charles Borromeo, quoted by Bossy.⁴⁷ It is a far more passive institution, a framework ready to be built upon by the initiative of those who composed it. At times indeed it functioned very well. We see at Saint-Martin-en-Ile that the leaders of the community were the leaders of the parish, and not only of the parish, but of the confraternity of their peers. They actively assisted the pastor in administering the resources that had been left to them by earlier generations. While they may also have been involved in other religious activities, their parish was significant in their lives. The Catholic Reformation could only enhance this tendency. Indeed parochially-minded laymen would demand a stronger parish system. In an age where rationalizing bureaucrats and administrators were coming to power in all areas, would one not expect bishops and priests to imitate in the Church what their fathers and brothers were doing in the State?

The Brotherhood in the Community

That acute observer of the nineteenth-century English church and society, Anthony Trollope, clearly perceived the importance of the desires of the laity in religious organization. In *The Vicar of Bullhampton*, the hard-headed Lord Saint George explains to his father the Marquis the genesis of religious dissent:

We can't prevent it, because, in religion as in everything else, men like to manage themselves. This farmer or that tradesman becomes a dissenter because he can be somebody in the management of his chapel, and would be nobody in regard to the parish church.⁴⁸

The Marquis and his son, on the other hand, did not become dissenters, since they belonged to that privileged class whose exclusive property the Established Church had become.

The principle is not limited to the problem of class and religion in nineteenth-century England. The medieval parish, and even more the confraternity, provided a means whereby the laity could "manage themselves." Theologically and even organizationally medieval confraternities and nineteenth-century Methodist chapels are far apart; but they do have in common that their members have a clear role in guaranteeing their continued existence. The members, able to make a real contribution, thereby derive a continued experience of brotherhood.

This is why popular and institutional religion cannot be separated; this is why the history of the Church is the history of the laity: because the story of Christianity is the story of a brotherhood in a community. Preachers would not preach, priests would not celebrate, monks would not pray, bishops would not rule, except as part of a larger Church that includes them. It also includes, by overwhelming numerical majority, all those who for lack of any other name are called lay people. As members of this Church have sought to live out more consciously the teaching they have received from the Christian tradition, they have separated themselves in some way from the surrounding community as a brotherhood, following the model of brotherhood that they found in that tradition. These are the monks, the canons, the friars; these are also the confraternities.

⁴⁷ Bossy, "The Counter-Reformation and the People," p. 59.

⁴⁸ Anthony Trollope, *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870) "The World's Classics" ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 306.

The urge to perfection does not stop, and has never stopped, there. The brotherhood potentially includes all mankind, and therefore those who have sought to live Christianity more fully have also tried to extend their vision to the community. Sometimes this has produced renewal, sometimes schism; the examples are as numerous as familiar. The original impulse, however, has always been to live out the teachings of Christianity individually and as a group, in response to changes that threatened the functioning of earlier means to this end.

The sixteenth century was such a time. The pressures of modernization made it necessary to organize Christian life in new ways. The same kinds of adjustments had to come in all parts of the Christian West, and within about a hundred years, they did. Although competing visions of renewal meant that by the end of the period the Church was divided into mutually hostile confessions, they all resembled one another more than any resembled the Church of the Middle Ages. This is true in many ways, but in none so much as the way in which the Church tried to use its own structures, whether Borromean bishops or Genevan elders, to bring about uniform submission among all who called themselves Christians. William Monter's description of Geneva, that it "was in theory governed by God through a balance of spiritual and secular powers, through clergy and magistrates acting in harmony,"⁴⁹ could apply to all of Christian society. Not only priests and pastors, but laymen as well—kings, princes, burghers, village elders—supported this vision of a renewed Christendom.

In this new Church there was no place for the old type of confraternity. Protestants went further, abolishing not only lay confraternities but monastic institutions as well. While Catholics did retain, and indeed renew, both monastic orders and lay confraternities, they were now harnessed to a united, centralized pastoral strategy as spelled out in the decrees of the Council of Trent. In the martial metaphor of Borromeo or St. Ignatius Loyola, they were mobilized to fight heresy, to reform morals, to educate the ignorant, and to convert the heathen. Nor did this integration of brotherhoods into the renewed Church negate lay leadership; at every level, laymen as well as clerics promoted it. The lay leaders of Saint-Martin-en-Ile, turning their confraternity to greater support of the public worship of the Church, followed in a small way the same impulse as a Protestant city government dissolving monasteries to support Protestant schools. On both sides, the primary brotherhood was the Church, and other brotherhoods were to be abolished as a hindrance or subordinated as tools. The brotherhood became the community, at least in the theory of the overall western Christian Reformation.

In the short run—except for the glaring defect of confessional divisions—the attempt succeeded. But it could not prevent, in the long term, the general de-Christianization of Western society. As the major directions of Western society have become become less and less compatible with Christian teaching, a Church informed by the vision of socially all-inclusive brotherhood has weakened and faltered. The Christian Church is now more and more in the position it held in the Roman Empire: a minority at variance with the outside world, at worst persecuted, at best ignored. In those days it survived as a network of firmly united, well-defined brotherhoods. Recovering such a vision of brotherhood and community could be its salvation today.

⁴⁹ E. William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967), p. 144.