



PROJECT MUSE®

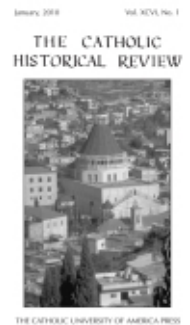
*La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul au XIX e siècle
(1833-1871): Un fleuron du catholicisme social (review)*

Carol E. Harrison

The Catholic Historical Review, Volume 96, Number 1, January 2010,
pp. 151-152 (Review)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cat.0.0650>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/369485>

La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul au XIX^e siècle (1833–1871): Un fleuron du catholicisme social. By Mathieu Brejon de Lavergnée. [Historie religieuse de la France, Vol. 34.] (Paris: Éditions du Cerf. 2008. Pp. 713. €29,00 paperback. ISBN 978-2-204-08609-7.)

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, founded in Paris in 1833 by a handful of students, grew rapidly across the next half century; by 1872, 1765 branches of the society had organized thousands of lay Frenchmen who wished to “join together in prayer and participate in charitable works” (p. 47). The movement challenges historians’ view of the nineteenth century as a period of secularization, especially among men, and of a civil society pulverized between bourgeois individualism and an overbearing state.

Mathieu Brejon de Lavergnée’s research is far ranging and impressive. He has used the society’s own extensive records, notably minutes of meetings of its general council and of Parisian branches, and he has assembled a detailed prosopographical database of the 809 men who held office in Paris throughout the period. Analyzing this “charitable elite,” Brejon de Lavergnée aims to assess levels of fervor, thus moving beyond a religious sociology that has traditionally focused on levels of practice.

The book begins with a chapter on the foundation of the society that situates it socially in networks of bourgeois provincials studying in Paris and intellectually in the aftermath of the condemnation of Félicité de Lamennais. Chapter 2 examines the geographical spread of the society, both in Paris and across France. The following two chapters analyze the society at work, focusing on the Paris branches. Chapter 3 discusses the bureaucratic structures that made it possible to expand without abandoning members’ sense that “communion” rather than regulations governed their activities, and chapter 4 focuses on finances, including an account of the society’s response to the changing nature of poverty in Haussmann’s Paris. Chapters 5 through 7 dig into the database of members to examine their social origins and trajectories. The leadership of the society was predominantly bourgeois (60 percent), although many nobles (20 percent) and sons of the petty bourgeoisie and laboring class (20 percent) found their way into its ranks. The final chapter (8) focuses on the rhetoric and practice of charity, arguing that members elaborated an “altruistic spirituality” oriented around visiting the homes of the poor to discover the image of Christ among the needy (p. 598).

Brejon de Lavergnée is cautious in his conclusions. Although his sample is completely masculine, he offers no analysis of religion and gender roles. Nor is he willing to take on arguments about secularization, although much of his research might lend itself to a reconsideration of how thoroughly secular French society was.

Instead, Brejon de Lavergnée locates the Society of St. Vincent de Paul within a tradition of French antimodernism that rejected the French Revolution’s “displacement of religion in favor of politics as society’s struc-

turing element" (p. 576). He convincingly argues that this antimodernism was a conventional position in bourgeois society. Far from being concentrated in traditionally pious areas such as Brittany, the society flourished in the same towns where other bourgeois associations took root. The careful prosopography indicates that members were ordinary bourgeois men. They fathered larger families than their contemporaries (or their own parents), and they were more likely than the general population to raise a child with a religious vocation, but, on the whole, their educational aspirations, professional achievements, and private lives were unremarkable. In the practice of charity, the Catholics of Brejon de Lavergnée's sample learned to live the Catholic critique of the Revolution at the same time as many of their fellow Frenchmen were internalizing the practices and values of the republic. The Vincentian contribution to the nineteenth-century project of "recreating a society between the State and the individual" was to insist that any meaningful society had to create both horizontal and vertical ties—linking individuals to one another and to God (p. 538).

University of South Carolina

CAROL E. HARRISON

Cornelia Connelly's Innovations in Female Education, 1846-1864: Revolutionizing the School Curriculum for Girls. By Roseanne McDougall. [Hors série.] (Lewistown, NY: Edwin Mellen Press. 2008. Pp. 288. \$109.95. ISBN 978-0-773-45187-2.)

Sister Roseanne McDougall, S.H.C.J., assistant professor of religion at La Salle University, has produced a masterly work on educator Cornelia Peacock Connelly, published in the bicentennial year of Cornelia's birth in Philadelphia. During the eighteen-year period studied in this book, Cornelia offered a solid education to girls from all walks of life: the poor, teachers-in-training, the middle classes, and the upper class, beginning in Derby, England.

Cornelia had received most of her experience of American Protestant education in Philadelphia between 1809 and 1831. Education for girls was important in that city of intellectual and artistic vitality. Married to the Reverend Pierce Connelly in 1831, Cornelia accompanied him to Natchez, Mississippi, to take up her role as wife of the Episcopal minister of Trinity Church. Their first two children, Mercer and Adeline, were born in Natchez.

Studying the attacks against Catholics during the Nativist movement in the United States, the couple came to know and embrace the Catholic faith. En route to Rome in 1835, they stopped in New Orleans. As their ship was delayed, Cornelia was received into the Catholic Church and received her First Communion from Bishop Anthony Blanc in St. Louis Cathedral.

Pierce made his profession of faith in the Catholic Church in Rome, and both were confirmed. English Catholics whom they met in Rome would later call Cornelia to her educational apostolate in England in 1846. Financial mat-