

# 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.

And yet, as Judith Pollmann points out, ‘while recognizing what Catholics did for the Dutch Revolt, scholars have [...] done far less to explore what the Revolt did to Netherlandish Catholics’. What work has been done has focused primarily on the Catholic minority that persisted in the North. The impact on Catholic culture in the South, which began as the area where the new religion was strongest but ended as a bastion of Counter-Reformation Catholicism, has received less attention. Pollmann’s *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands* seeks to fill this gap.<sup>1</sup>

For Pollmann, the political grievances that caused Catholics to support – or at least to accept – the Revolt in its initial stages do not suffice to explain just why they were so slow to actively oppose the spread of heresy in the Netherlands. Nor can the phenomenon be explained as the product of weak faith or lax practice. Quite the contrary, as in other parts of late medieval Europe, Netherlandish Christians engaged enthusiastically in a variety of religious practices that had meaning and importance in their lives. Their participation in religious services, confraternities, processions and festivals can be judged defective only by wrongly applying the very different standards of the post-Tridentine church. The question of why these Catholic believers, who appear to have been quite pious by the standards of their times, did not more actively defend their faith thus remains for Pollmann a pertinent one. Answering it is the first of her book’s two aims. The second is to explain just why, after decades of relative passivity, Catholics in the Southern Netherlands adopted a new activism in the late 1570s and used this to launch a Catholic revival so powerful that, by the early seventeenth century, the cultural divide between North and South made reunification impossible.

Pollmann finds the key to these apparently contradictory phenomena of passivity and activism in the changing relationship between clergy and laity in the Netherlands. In the early stages of the Protestant Reformation, she argues, Netherlandish clerics encouraged passivity instead of resistance on the part of their parishioners. Fighting heresy, they said, was the task of the church and not of the people, who should instead ponder their own moral failings, ask why God was punishing them with the scourge of heresy, and adopt an attitude of pious penitence. Religious authorities forbade lay people to discuss matters of doctrine with one another, and, rather than helping to fortify the people’s faith by religious instruction, also forbade priests not schooled in theology to discuss scripture or argue against heresy. They knew that even many Catholics wanted church reform and feared that encouraging discussion of doctrinal issues would only bolster a desire for change. When authorities did attempt reform, creating new bishoprics in 1566 with the intention of providing effective leadership for top-down diocesan reform, the process was

1 Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635* (Oxford 2011).

so badly managed that the new bishops had little credibility, and a climate of suspicion inhibited further reforms.

### **The emergence of Catholic identity**

Pollmann argues that the passivity of lay Catholics could only change when the clergy allowed the laity a significant role in the defense of the church. The Catholic revival, she contends, was the product of a new partnership between clergy and laity born of a recognition on the part of the clergy that only by welcoming the collaboration of lay people could they revive a church seriously weakened by the Revolt. Pollmann attributes an important role in the Catholic revival that subsequently occurred in the South to the return of Catholic exiles who had fled Flanders and Brabant for Cologne and other securely Catholic lands when the Calvinists seized (or threatened to seize) their home towns. As other scholars have recognized, the experience of exile plays an important role in identity formation. Those who fled their country because of their faith nurtured an increasingly strong sense of Catholic identity during their exile. Enthusiastic participants in the new opportunities for lay religious engagement they encountered abroad, on their return they introduced the Jesuit sodalities of which they had become members to the Low Countries, but also took a leading role in restoring damaged churches, commissioning new religious art and founding reformed religious orders in their home cities. Establishing themselves as a new lay Catholic elite, they helped nurture a powerful new Catholic identity in the Habsburg Netherlands.

Netherlandish Catholics did not, in Pollmann's view, initially experience the Revolt primarily as a war of religion. Only in the course of the revolt did traditional notions of community give way to identification with parties, and so to identities in which religion played a predominant role. Catholic identity thus only emerged during the Revolt, and it was only after this emergence that Catholics began to see surrender to Spain as preferable to the loss of religious identity that further engagement in the Revolt now seemed to entail.

Pollmann's thesis on the emergence of Catholic identity in the Habsburg Netherlands is based on a sensitive reading of memoirs, chronicles and other personal records left by participants and witnesses to the Revolt. She provides enough of a narrative account of the Revolt to provide context for the shifting views revealed in these records, but her focus remains fixed on the question of how Netherlandish Catholics, particularly those in the Dutch-speaking portions of the Southern Netherlands, experienced both the Revolt and their Catholic faith. The argument is persuasive and raises interesting questions from a comparative perspective, especially for historians of France (myself included) who have tended to see the religious violence that swept that country into civil war as a perhaps inevitable consequence of the fracturing

of community that occurred with religious schism. Pollmann suggests that it is not the Netherlandish but rather the French response to the Reformation that is exceptional (197). For the most part, Catholics in Germany, England and Scotland also responded to Protestant aggression with distress, but largely without violence.

### Comparisons with France

So why was France different? Pollmann identifies preaching as a key variable. French preachers encouraged Catholic activism by denouncing Protestantism as a pollution that needed to be purged in order to avoid divine retribution (68-69). They also were strongly critical of authorities who failed to take action against heresy (72). This argument, developed in greater detail in a 2006 article, is certainly valid.<sup>2</sup> There is good evidence that many incidents of popular violence in France followed hot on the heels of fiery sermons. Historians of France, who have tended to take such inflammatory sermons as a natural response to religious schism, will have to give more thought to this assumption in light of the more moderate response of clergy in the Netherlands. At the same time, it is clear that any explanation of popular religious violence (or its absence) must consider both the broader and the more local political contexts, as well as the message from the pulpit. The contrasting patterns of behavior that Pollmann brings to our attention raise thought-provoking questions for historians working on both sides of the border. The unexpected death of Henri II in 1559, which deprived France of a mature, adult king, clearly provoked a new uncertainty about the ability of the Crown to deal with the problem of heresy. This is evident, for example, in the proliferation of sermons deploring the 'curse' of having a child for a king.<sup>3</sup> Such sermons encouraged French Catholics to see the monarchy as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. The situation in the Netherlands was quite different. Whatever grievances Netherlandish Catholics had against Philip II, they knew him to be a strong defender of the faith and so may have been more inclined than French Catholics to leave it to the civil authorities to put an end to heresy. French religious violence, already on the increase, increased still more after Catherine de Medici assumed the regency for young Charles IX in late 1560 and, in an attempt to calm religious tensions, moved toward greater tolerance of the Calvinists. The wave of iconoclasm that swept the Netherlands in 1566 also occurred when a regent was experimenting

2 Judith Pollmann, 'Countering the Reformation in France and the Netherlands: Clerical Leadership and Catholic Violence 1560-1585', *Past and Present* no. 190 (February 2006) 83-120.

3 Larissa Taylor, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France* (New York, Oxford 1992) 224.

with tolerance as a means of preserving an increasingly fragile peace. If Netherlandish Catholics did not respond with violence at this juncture, as French Catholics had, it may indeed represent an internalization of their preachers' injunction not to meddle in religious affairs, but might it not also have resulted from a continued confidence that authorities would step in to punish the iconoclasts – as they did, if belatedly and more harshly than many Netherlandish Catholics might have hoped?

### **Wallonia and women: Special Cases or Part of the Pattern?**

Pollmann does not deny the importance of such questions, even if the book's tight focus on the emergence of a distinct Catholic religious identity makes it impossible adequately to address these questions within the context of this study. It will be up to future scholars to identify regional variations in the patterns Pollmann brings to our attention and determine just how political and religious identities intersected at different times and in different places. Wallonia in particular deserves closer study. Although Pollmann does use several Walloon memoirs, she gives little attention to French-speaking provinces, while these borderlands would seem to offer a particularly good testing ground for her thesis. According to Jonathan Israel, 'In Walloon towns, such as Lille, Liège, Namur, and Douai, Catholics resisted the Protestant challenge with a vigour comparable to that shown in Northern France'.<sup>4</sup> Was this indeed the case? And if so, how do we explain it? We might assume that Wallonia, by reason of its language, was more open to French influence than the Dutch-speaking North (or even those parts of the South where only elites spoke French). Its residents did not need to wait for Dutch translations of the radical tracts and sermons produced by French clerics; surely word-of-mouth news also quickly crossed the porous border. And yet such French influence, as a possible factor, should not be exaggerated. There was a lot of local variation in both the appeal of Protestantism and the Catholic reaction in the Walloon Netherlands, and the question of why some towns remained passive in the face of Protestant activism while others opposed this more forcibly deserves further study. Were Catholic citizens in the towns that remained passive receiving the same non-confrontational message from the pulpit that Pollmann describes for the Dutch-speaking Netherlands? Were they simply waiting for their sovereign to repress the heresy? Or should we look rather to the actions of local authorities, as Robert DuPlessis has argued for Lille, which remained calm when many other Walloon towns were swept up in the iconoclastic fury of 1566?<sup>5</sup>

4 Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (1995) 150.

5 Robert S. Duplessis, *Lille and the Dutch Revolt: Urban Stability in an Era of Revolution, 1500-1582* (Cambridge 1991).

More attention to Walloon towns would have richly supported Pollmann's argument about the Catholic revival in the Habsburg Netherlands. The role played by Douai as an early center of Catholic renewal is mentioned only briefly; Alain Lottin's massive study of the Counter-Reformation in Lille does not even make it into the bibliography.<sup>6</sup> Lack of attention to the early and powerful Catholic revival in French-speaking lands leaves the reader with the regrettable impression that the triumph of Catholicism in the Habsburg Netherlands was largely a Flemish and Brabantine affair. Pollmann's treatment of the Catholic revival in the Habsburg Netherlands is nevertheless praiseworthy for the attention she gives to the laity's role in this movement. The Catholic Reformation is still too often treated as a top-down, clerically-driven movement. I would, however, have liked to have seen more discussion of the part women played in the Catholic revival in the Netherlands. Women were important as founders and patrons of reformed religious orders and as organizers of lay charity in France.<sup>7</sup> Their role is less visible than that of the men because they were not members of the Jesuit sodalities that Pollmann identifies as key to the creation of a new Catholic elite, but it would be worth asking whether these women engaged in religious patronage and adopted the devotional practices characteristic of the Catholic Reformation in the Netherlands with the same enthusiasm as in France.

The questions I have posed stem from a desire to know more and, as such, testify to the strengths, and not the weaknesses, of Pollmann's work. By framing her study in terms of the emergence of a Catholic identity but largely avoiding the language of 'confessionalization', she subtly displaces top-down models that view religious identities primarily as the product of a collaboration between church and state. Reminding us that there was a third party to this collaboration, Pollmann places the laity firmly back in this picture and challenges early modern historians to think more deeply about the circumstances that prompted lay people to initiate or resist religious change. The answers that emerge from studies that take up this challenge may complicate and will certainly nuance the model of lay-clerical relations that she attributes to the Southern Netherlands, but that too will be a measure of the book's success and a sign of the importance of the questions she asks. ◀

6 Alain Lottin, *Lille: citadelle de la Contre-Réforme?* (1598-1668) (Dunkerque 1984), originally published as the author's thesis in 1981.

7 Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in France* (New York, Oxford 2004).

**Barbara Diefendorf** (1946) is Professor of History at Boston University with a speciality in early modern France. She is the author of *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York, Oxford 2004) and *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (New York, Oxford 1991). 'Rites of Repair: Restoring Community in the French Religious Wars' will appear in *Ritual and Violence: Natalie Zemon Davis and Early Modern France*, edited by Graeme Murdock, Penny Roberts, and Andrew Spicer (Oxford: Past and Present Supplements, forthcoming 2012). Email: bdiefend@bu.edu.



Sanctus Augustinus libro de fide ad petrū  
diaconū: firmissime tene etc.

**G**hy catholische houet dat vast en wilt geen-  
sus daer aen twiffelen/als dat niet alle al-  
le ongheloouige maer oock Joden/ ketters  
en o ghesneden kerstenen die buuten der ca-  
tholischer kercken dit teghenwoordige leue volen-  
den dat si int ewich niet sulle gaen/ het welck bereyt  
is den hellschen viant en synen dienaren. Jae ooc dat  
elck ketter oft afghesneden kersten die daer ghedoopt  
is indē naem des Vaders en des soons en des heyligē  
geests/ ist dat hy niet verenicht en is met der catholi-  
scher kercken hoe veel helmoiffen dat hi doet En al-  
st dat hi jyn bloet stortet voor dē naem Christi/ noch-  
sans en mach hi gheensins salich wordē/want al diē

menschē die niet en hout die eenich der catholischer  
kercken dien en mach niet batē tot zinder salicheyt/  
noch theplich doopsel/ noch aelmoiffen/ noch ooc den  
doot dve voor den naem Christi gheleden wort/ alsoe  
langhe also dve boosheyt der kettersien oft der afghes-  
neder kercken in hem blijft. Item gock nyet al  
die gheene dve binnen der Catholischer kercken ghe-  
doopt sijn sullen ontfanghen dat ewich leuen/maer  
die nae thepliche doopsel doechdelich leue/ dat is die  
haer machtē van sonden en van dve begheerlichkeiten  
des vleyschs/want ghelijc die ongheloouige ketters  
en ofghesneden kerstenen dat rijk der hemel nyet  
en sullen besitten/also oock die quade valsche kerste-  
nen en moeghen dat rijk Gods niet besitten.  
**Mreecht dit wel aen.**

▲ Anonymus Catholic polemical print, *The devil firing heresies and unbelief at the Church*, c. 1560. This rare example of an early anti-Protestant print from the Netherlands shows the devil firing different heresies and schism at the Church. The latter seems to be tottering under the force of the blasts, but is being protected by a priest carrying a cross. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.