

Reforms of Christian Life in Sixteenth-Century Italy. By Querciolo Mazzonis. Translated by Laurence Steinman. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. viii + 272 pp. \$44.95 paper; \$160 hardback; \$44.95 e-book.

Querciolo Mazzonis' recent work, *Reforms of Christian Life in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, is a rich and sophisticated contribution to the study of Italian reform. At its heart is a reassessment of the beliefs and activities of three religious groups and their respective founders: the Barnabites and the Angelics (also known as the Paulines) founded by Battista da Crema (c. 1460–1534), the Ursulines founded by Angela Merici (c. 1474–1540), and the Somascans founded by Girolamo Miani (1486–1537). Mazzonis notes the uneasy position that these companies have heretofore occupied in the historiography, neither perfectly fitting the profile of Italian Evangelism and the *Spirituali*, nor that of the Catholic Reformation (although they have usually been grouped with the latter.) As such, Mazzonis aims to prove that these companies “institutionalised a distinct conception of Christian life, which represented a specific reforming current, alternative to the one aimed at the revitalization of the ecclesiastical institutional mediation of the sacred pursued by the Roman curia and to those centred on justification by faith, both of Lutheranism and of the circles of Evangelism and of the *Spirituali*” (6). As such, he asserts that the “reforming trends at the time were wider and more fluid than is normally assumed, and that the companies studied here. . . represent another ‘unconventional’ current which needs to be discussed within the context of Italian reformism” (6).

Mazzonis' study rests primarily on an analysis of the founders' (and other prominent members') writings, as well as texts that influenced the founders. Most important are the writings of Battista da Crema who not only formed the Paulines but who Mazzonis deems the “forefather” (27) of the Ursulines and Somascans. These companies were all part of the same “reforming current” thanks to their view of the Christian life, which Mazzonis characterizes as an “ascetic-mystical” approach grounded in fifteenth-century principles (9). It advocated the “mortification of self-love” (73) in order to move toward a state of spiritual perfection and unification with Christ via a “model of *scala perfectionis*” (6). Individuals were called to use their free will and conscience, in conjunction with the strength of God's grace, to continually and (often publicly) reject their worldly self-love and desires. Moreover, this was a path open to all equally, men and women alike. As such, one of the ways in which Mazzonis distinguishes the companies from other reforming efforts of the age is through their prioritization of individual and societal reform over that of ecclesiastical structures.

In addition to an introduction and brief conclusion, the book is composed of five chapters. Chapters 1–3 focus mostly on the development and ideas of the companies, while chapters 4–5 consider them in broader, comparative contexts with other religious developments and orders of the age. Chapter 1 introduces the three founders and provides the historical context for the formation of their companies. Particularly valuable here is Mazzonis' discussion of the companies' fifteenth-century roots, which he views as being grounded in the emergence of humanism, the *Devotio Moderna*, and the Observant movement.

Chapters 2 and 3 are arguably the heart of the book, as it is here that Mazzonis fully breaks down the “founders' concept of Christian life,” (66) and (in the latter chapter) their view of the Church and its ritual and ceremonial structures. In chapter 2, in addition to the discussion of the “mortification of self-love” and the roles played by free will,

the conscience and God's grace, Mazzonis discusses the importance of the active and contemplative life, as well as the companies' views of charity. Regarding the former, ideally individuals would engage in an active and contemplative life *simultaneously* in the world, as they worked towards spiritual perfection. Relatedly, charity was viewed less as an action that had redemptive value and more as a sign that one had arrived at a "state of grace" (104) and had achieved "purity of heart" (106). Chapter 3 examines numerous aspects of the Church including vows, sacraments, "prayers and penitence" (132), and "ceremonies and exterior devotion," (137) among others. The unifying concept here is that—while the companies did not entirely reject these external actions—they did subordinate them to a more internal, spiritual process. For example, mental prayer was seen as superior to "outward. . . performed devotion," (132) although the latter could direct an individual toward the importance of mental prayer. Indeed, when individuals did engage in physical rituals they acted as aids to further their progress along the *scala perfectionis*, until those rituals were no longer needed and could be abandoned. Relatedly, the companies rejected the idea that vows or clerical titles set clergy apart from the laity. Yet again, the only measure by which individuals could be distinguished from one another was through their position on the path to spiritual perfection.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the companies first in relation to other reforming efforts, particularly that of Italian Evangelism and the *Spirituali*, and later, in chapter 5, to other orders such as the Jesuits, the Oratorians, and the Theatines, among others. Regarding Italian Evangelism and the *Spirituali*, Mazzonis demonstrates the similarities between these groups and the companies, especially in regard to their belief in the "sanctification and union with God" (174). Conversely, they were distinguished from one another by their view on salvation. In chapter 5, we see the challenges faced by the companies in the increasingly hostile environment of the later sixteenth century. Nevertheless, Mazzonis aims to demonstrate that "the figures and ideas of the founders continued to exert a significant influence on the reformist projects of the Church and society" (187–188), even if the companies were reformed to accord more closely with the orthodoxy and hierarchy of the Church.

Mazzonis' work is a welcome study for specialists of Italian reform and—though not mentioned deeply in this review—for those interested in the contributions of women to these reform movements. It should be commended for the way in which it continues to further our understanding of this "religiously fluid" (8), diverse, and vibrant period in Italian history.

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Gallagher and Smither, editors of this collection of essays, offer the reader insightful historical and theological essays with the purpose of illustrating theologies and practices of