

Margaret Chowning, *Catholic Women and Mexican Politics, 1750–1940*

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Catholic Women and Mexican Politics, 1750–1940, Margaret Chowning's richly impressive study of the female faithful from late colonial to revolutionary Mexico, sets a new standard in the historiography thanks to its scholarly depth, its ambitious, *longue durée* sweep, and its welcome attention to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century laywomen, not just religious women. Above all, the book stands out for its judiciousness, not least when scrutinising suggestive but difficult archival sources and assessing the evolving relationship between women's church lives and their political interventions across the 'very long' nineteenth century from late Bourbonism to the Revolution. Surveying this great arch, Chowning argues that Mexican women's political actions were predicated on associational and devotional antecedents that originated in the eighteenth century, and that these antecedents have constituted a deep reservoir of community and moral action – which is to say, informal power or inertia – upon which the Mexican Church has drawn or relied on throughout its modern history.

Across eight chapters grouped in three parts (Part 1 covering colony and independence; Part 2, the 'Era of Reform'; and Part 3, the Porfiriato), the book studies women's Catholic associationalism and its political as well as ecclesial implications by stages. Starting with the gradual feminisation of eighteenth-century *cofradías* (sodalities), the book works through successive iterations of Catholic women's associationalism. Thus it first studies the contemplative Eucharistic adoration club of the Vela Perpetua (Eternal Vigil), the roots of which are convincingly located in aristocratic New Spain; later chapters, meanwhile, track the development and Mexicanisation of charitable foundations created in the image of Saint Vincent de Paul (e.g. the Ladies of Charity), and the regimented, more universal, prayer societies that were popular in the late nineteenth century (e.g. the Apostolado de la Oración). Transversally, then, the book plots the growth of a spirit of Catholic association that rippled down and outwards, becoming increasingly in-the-world and socially militant, and that also saw women assume increasingly meaningful leadership and non-ceremonial roles within the Church. The book is also interested in showing how Catholic clergy tried to canalise, not suppress, this female religious energy, though laywomen's familial affinities with parish clergy (as members of ecclesiastical clans, especially in the Mexican west) is something that might be explored more.

In parallel with these core associational chapters (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 7), the book carefully tracks shifts in women's political engagements in its alternating chapters (4, 6, 8). These chapters stress religious women's increasingly headstrong political

interventions, for instance, as the vicarious or actual signatories of political petitions and editorial letters against moves towards religious tolerance in the 1850s Reforma, say, or the constitutionalisation of liberal laws by the 1870s Lerdo government. In the final chapter, the book tracks women's role under Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911) as culture warriors in the fields of religious education or Catholic welfarism. All told, the book traces a dialectic between the maturation of Mexican laywomen's ecclesial persona and their emergence as political actors. In this regard, the book theorises a kind of political great awakening for Catholic women ('a golden age') during the mid-century Reform. One sometimes wonders if matters of class or ethnicity, as well as region, were significant. Yet there is no other book on Catholic women's history in modern Mexico that has anything like this monumental scope or that integrates so many historical periods.

In a short review, it is not easy to do justice to so robust a work, but a few stand-out contributions must be mentioned. One, as stated, is the book's judiciousness. It is true, as the author says, that the literature has gone beyond the liberal fallacy of seeing women simply as priests' creatures; yet this, it is well argued, should not result in an exaggerated subalternity thesis in which women are *always*, perforce, exercising agency. Indeed, women chose to be agents in, and *of*, the Church. A real strength of the book is the way – from its cover photos of redoubtable laywomen onwards – that it dignifies a whole series of women's actions that most historians overlook: going door to door with petitions; cutting flowers and clothes for wooden saints; painting placards against public schooling; visiting the Host round the clock; joining organisations; working under priests who knew that they relied on them. It was this kind of ubiquitous *sub rosa* action that bound women to the Church down the generations, and vice versa, that was recognised (albeit reluctantly) by priests and prelates as being the Church's lifeblood, and that was also a significant reason for the Church's political competitiveness *vis à vis* the state into the twentieth century.

A second signal feature is the book's model empirical rigour and its artful methodological juxtapositions. To give one example (Chapters 1–3), the author uses multiple untapped sources pertaining to late New Spanish and early Mexican *cofradías* to challenge the old idea that these were masculine organisations, dominated by priests. Aggregating data on 62 *cofradías*, Chowning argues that this patriarchal image is an optical illusion generated by litigious, contractual and honorific sources in which men were pre-eminent as advocates or ceremonial leaders. Contrasting these sources with membership lists, however, the author shows that *cofradías* were male-led but female-dominated bodies, numerically at least, with women excluded from ceremonial roles like accompanying the Viaticum or parading religious images, but over-represented doing things that satisfied them within the terms of baroque religion, such as church beautification and adorning images. This was so, Chowning argues, because these tasks were experienced by women as important para-liturgical actions with a spiritual point, not housekeeping drudgery. This kind of skillful incorporation of new source material is a hallmark of the book. Another good example (Chapters 4 and 6) is the author's cautiously suggestive use of women's public petitions, in which it is often frustratingly uncertain whether women were presumptive or actual authors. Again, Chowning resists the temptation to over-determine women's political role, and as a result readers will find themselves trusting her judgement elsewhere when sources

fall silent or speculation is necessary. The author notes, for instance, an unspoken paradox that feels instinctively true in relation to women's political role: conservatives and clergy desired that women act politically *only* in defence of religion, whereas Mexican liberals desired that they be free to act *except* if this meant defending religion.

A third major contribution of the book is to create a new periodisation for Mexican laywomen's action. It is well known, for instance, that twentieth-century women Catholics were among the Church's most reliable defenders in Mexico, not least in the the 1920s Cristero War. Historians often tag this to the nineteenth-century 'feminisation' of religion when the Church is said to have resisted secularisation, nationalism and liberalism by developing a Catholic-style romanticism in order to mobilise women. Reading *Catholic Women*, however, it is apparent that the history of women and Catholic modernity in Mexico has been squeezed into a rather Eurocentric debate: in contrast, the book sets out a new, Mexico-centric reading or genealogy that shows how deeply rooted women's religious participation was in the corporate piety of colonial Mexico. In so doing, *Catholic Women* side-steps a tradition of older feminist scholarship that sees women's religious participation in Mexico as a default, least-worse option. The author disagrees, bringing women's participation *qua* Catholics vividly to life, and revealing its potential to impact the Church as a community of faith. *Catholic Women* is a major work that provides a new, deep-seated account of why the power of the Church in Mexico is, and for centuries has been, the power of churchwomen.

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Diego Armus (ed.), *Sanadores, parteras, curanderos y médicas: Las artes de curar en la Argentina moderna*

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The essays in this Spanish-language volume *Sanadores, parteras, curanderos y médicas* focus on the diverse social roles played by healers, curanderos and other men and women practising outside, or alongside, the formal medical professions in Argentina, from the late nineteenth century to the present. Editor Diego Armus has assembled an exemplary set of analyses by Argentine historians, social scientists and health practitioners that elucidate a 'gray zone' between conventional biomedicine and other healing arts. Each author examines the controversy surrounding a particular healer, or healing practice, placing the case study, whether in Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Jujuy or further afield, within political, social and cultural context. Considered on their own, the essays offer insightful perspectives on male and female healers' approaches to such folk maladies as 'empacho',