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ARTICLES:

- Sacraments for the Faithful of the New World, Jews, and Eastern-Rite Christians: Roman Legislation from Paul III to Benedict XIV (1537–1758)
Maria Teresa Fattori 687
- The First Vatican Council, Archbishop Henry Manning, and Papal Infallibility
Christian D. Washburn 712
- A Church of Two Steeples: Catholicism, Labor, and Ethnicity in Industrial New England, 1869–90
Patrick Lacroix 746
- Who Bombed the Vatican? The Argentinean Connection
Patricia M. McGoldrick 771

FORUM ESSAY:

- The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe.* (David I. Kertzer)
Kevin P. Spicer, C.S.C.; Lucia Ceci; Roy Domenico; Raffaella Perin; Robert A. Ventresca; and David I. Kertzer 799

REVIEW ESSAY:

- Reforming Reform: Steven Vanderputten's Monastic Histories
John Howe 814
- BOOK REVIEWS 820
- NOTES AND COMMENTS 876
- PERIODICAL LITERATURE 883
- OTHER BOOKS RECEIVED 900

Review Essay
**Reforming Reform: Steven Vanderputten's
Monastic Histories**

JOHN HOWE*

- Ecclesia in Medio Nationis: Reflections on the Study of Monasticism in the Central Middle Ages / Réflexions sur l'étude du monachisme au moyen âge central.* Edited by Steven Vanderputten and Brigitte Meijns. [Mediaevalia Lovaniensia, ser. 1, studia 42.] (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2011. Pp. 215. €45,00. ISBN 978-90-5867-887-4.)
- Reform, Conflict, and the Shaping of Corporate Identities: Collected Studies on Benedictine Monasticism, 1050–1150.* By Steven Vanderputten. [Vita Regularis: Ordnungen und Deutungen religiösen Lebens im Mittelalter, Abhandlungen 54.] (Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2013. €34,90. ISBN 978-3-643-90429-4.)
- Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representations in Medieval Flanders, 900–1100.* By Steven Vanderputten. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv, 247. \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-8014-5171-3.)
- Imagining Religious Leadership in the Middle Ages: Richard of Saint-Vanne and the Politics of Reform.* By Steven Vanderputten. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015. Pp. xvi, 244. \$49.95. ISBN 978-0-8014-5377-9.)

Reform is rarely defined. Nevertheless, it was an important concept to Latin Church Fathers, particularly to St. Augustine, whose fascination with the early chapters of Genesis led him to meditate on how, after the fall, human beings necessarily needed to be reformed—an act that, thanks to the Incarnation, would be a *reformatio ad melius*. That patristic tradition was famously analyzed at the time of the Second Vatican Council in Gerhart Ladner's *The Idea of Reform*, which presented reform as a leitmotif of ecclesiastical history, or “the free, intentional and ever perfectible, multiple, prolonged and ever repeated efforts by man to reassert and augment values pre-existent in the spiritual-material compound of the

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world.”¹ For Ladner, reform was always progressive and always “in progress.” He himself never completed his general history of the idea of reform, but his work spawned a small school of reform studies, more successful with the later Middle Ages that were saturated with reform discussions than with the central Middle Ages where post-Carolingian monks and Roman reformers often preferred different terminology.² Reform in the modern world has evolved into a vague model for gradual, positive change, usually employed without the same level of scrutiny given to parallel paradigms of change such as *renaissance* or *revolution*.³

Medieval reform narratives are getting new attention, thanks to the work of Steven Vanderputten. Starting with a doctoral dissertation on medieval monastic historiography (University of Ghent, 2000),⁴ he has been urging a reexamination of the whole paradigm of monastic reform. His publications, aided by major fellowships and research professorships, are extraordinarily numerous. He even coordinated 220 conference sessions and roundtable discussions on “Reform and Renewal” at the 2015 Leeds International Medieval Congress. In contrast to earlier reform historiography, however, “reform” often now appears within “scare quotes” or accompanied by hints that it has acquired so much dysfunctional baggage that perhaps it ought to be abandoned as a research paradigm.

Does reform now obscure more than illuminate? To clarify the issues, it may be helpful to introduce four of Vanderputten’s recent books. The earliest is *Ecclesia in Medio Nationis: Reflections on the Study of Monasticism*, an edited volume stemming from a 2009 conference at the University of Leuven that sought to showcase current scholarship on Western religious communities of 900–1050, focusing especially on their relationships

1. Gerhart B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers*, rev. ed. (New York, 1967), p. 35.

2. See Christopher M. Bellitto and David Zachariah Flanagin, eds., *Reassessing Reform: A Historical Investigation into Church Renewal* (Washington, DC, 2012); and Lester L. Field Jr., *Gerhard Ladner and the Idea of Reform: A Modern Historian’s Quest for Ancient and Medieval Truth* (Lewiston, NY, 2015), esp. pp. 353–416.

3. There is no comprehensive study of the concept of reform. On aspects, see Richard Kieckhefer, “Reform, Idea of,” *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 13 vols. (New York, 1982–89), 10:281–88; “Riforme,” *Dizionario degli istituti di perfezione*, 10 vols. (Rome, 1974–2003), 7:1748–63; and Julia Barrow, “Ideas and Applications of Reform,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Vol. 3: *Early Medieval Christianities, 600–1100*, ed. Thomas F. X. Noble and Julia H. Smith, (New York, 2008), pp. 345–62.

4. Steven Vanderputten, *Sociale perceptie en maatschappelijke positionering in de middeleeuwse monastieke geschiedschrijving (8ste–15de eeuw)*, 2 vols. (Brussels, 2001).

to the outside world. Here, five papers in French and two in English demonstrate that “the historiography of the first monastic reforms has been profoundly renewed over the course of the last twenty years” (34). Particularly distinguished are Isabelle Rosé on monastic community life from the ninth through the twelfth centuries (pp. 11–45) and Florian Mazel on the relationship between monasticism and the aristocracy in the tenth and eleventh centuries (pp. 47–75). When juxtaposed with Vanderputten’s introduction to *Reform, Conflict, and the Shaping of Corporate Identities* (pp. ix–xxxii), a volume containing ten of his collected studies that focus specifically on central medieval Flemish monasticism, they offer an overview of the increasingly sophisticated regional history that Vanderputten has been developing and disseminating.

Two recent books from Cornell University Press present his conclusions about reform narratives. In the first, *Monastic Reform as Process*, Vanderputten studies “the so-called Lotharingian reform” (p. 9; note also pp. 81–82, 133, 187–88). He examines seven monasteries in tenth- and eleventh-century Flanders: Saint-Bertin, Bergues-Saint-Winnoc, Marchiennes, Saint-Amand, Saint-Bavo, Saint Peter at Ghent, and Saint-Vaast. Few would contest his belief that monastic change was “processual” in nature, not a series of “flashpoints” in which charismatic abbots suddenly turned chaotic monasteries into models of reform (p. 9). His source analyses illuminate tangential matters such as abbatial leadership (pp. 193–202), Saint-Bertin’s connections with England (pp. ii, 69–71), hagiography’s role in reform (pp. 73–76), and books available at the Abbey of Marchiennes in the second quarter of the eleventh century (pp. 203–04). The main purpose, however, is to deconstruct traditional reform narratives systematically, especially by signaling gaps in contemporary monastic records, highlighting their vagueness about what “good abbots” actually did, and stressing how local politics shaped each monastery’s unique development. Some readers might consider this a little tendentious inasmuch as *argumenta ex silentio* are rarely decisive when dealing with medieval sources. Vanderputten himself sometimes fills in the blank spaces, as when, for example, he states that “actual evidence of lay patronage to these institutions is scarce but, particularly in the case of Saint-Bertin, the lack of charter evidence is misleading” (p. 62). His useful cautions against the homogenizing effects of general models (pp. 3, 99) may be somewhat undercut by his contrasts between first- and second-generation monastic reformers (pp. 102–03, 126, 154) and his foreshadowing of a third wave of reforms in the early-twelfth century (pp. 166, 183). He concludes that historians have often been led astray by reform narratives and that “reform remains something of a black hole” into which all sorts of historical reality can get sucked—a “literary theme”

whose plotlines of decline and renewal obscure the unique historical circumstances of ecclesiastical institutions (pp. 186–89).

In *Imagining Religious Leadership . . . Richard of Saint-Vanne and the Politics of Reform*, Vanderputten continues his argument by deconstructing the medieval and modern biographies of Richard of Saint-Vanne (d. 1046), one of the most famous monastic reformers of Flanders. He carefully dates and analyzes the literary sources to document how Richard was imagined and reimagined over the centuries (pp. 14–41). He claims that Richard “did not conceive of himself in the first place as a monastic reformer, an abbot, or even a monk” (p. 10). Richard allegedly identified himself as a Christian ruler and leader, not as an abbot, a thesis supported by his departure on a pilgrimage, his flirtation with eremitical withdrawal, and his ruling through “word and deed”—a model of Christian leadership associated by Vanderputten with the secular clergy described in St. Gregory the Great’s *Pastoral Care* (pp. 15, 47–49, 51). This is not too convincing in the light of similar conduct by many contemporary abbots and of Vanderputten’s failure to note that all abbots had been specifically enjoined to teach through “word and deed” by Benedict himself.⁵ Vanderputten doubts that Richard considered himself a reformer, because his political alliances with local bishops and counts allegedly clashed with Benedictine withdrawal from the world (pp. 143–44, 160). Moreover, he finds “no evidence” that Richard pursued a reform program that proposed coherent innovative approaches to monastic discipline or government (pp. 102, 115, 123, 138), implicitly eliminating as reform activity Richard’s achievements in reinforcing existing monastic best practices, promoting prosperity, assembling libraries, and securing pious donations. Vanderputten concludes that Richard’s “stature as a great ‘apostle of reform’ is doubtful, that he did not initiate a true reform movement, and that his involvement in changing lay morality was less confrontational, and less selfless, than some have thought” (p. 160). Even readers who are not completely convinced will welcome the helpful appendices that include a “Chronology of Major Events in Richard’s Life” (pp. 165–67), an edition and translation of the *Vita Rodingi* attributed to Richard (pp. 169–85), “Monastic Reading at Saint-Vanne” (pp. 187–89), an “Overview of Richard’s Priors” (p. 201), and an “Overview of Richard’s Successors” (p. 203).

How does skepticism about the monastic reform paradigm relate to reform’s broader use in historiography, ecclesiastical and otherwise?

5. *Rule of Saint Benedict* ii, ed. and trans. Bruce L. Venardi, [Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 6], (Cambridge, MA, 2011), pp. 22–23.

Because Vanderputten's monastic history approaches reform questions from the bottom up, not from the top down, it has generated better source editions and analyses.⁶ It promotes revisions that are necessary insofar as the traditional sweeping reform narratives of Ernst Sackur, Kassius Hallinger, and others sometimes seemed to present changes in monastic practice and identity as spontaneous manifestations of some sort of monastic "general will," obscuring local factors such as the decisive roles played by monastic patrons. But flawed applications do not necessarily invalidate the reform model itself.

It might be useful to step back and acknowledge the existence of broader reform discussions. Vanderputten, in the books reviewed here, nowhere cites the work of Ladner. Nor did the Leeds sessions dedicated to reform that he coordinated, none of which were devoted to normative late-medieval reform debates (although several did examine reform aspects of late-medieval heresies). Vanderputten's *Monastic Reform* does include a general footnote reference to Giles Constable's *Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (New York, 1996) but not to its more universal perspective on reform. Obviously the early-modern Reformation is not irrelevant. Christians in the central Middle Ages, like other medieval Christians, attempted to organize their churches aided and guided by selected readings from the Bible, the Fathers, ancient monastic rules, late antique and Carolingian ecclesiastical legislation, and increasingly sophisticated canon law. Without recognizing this more general reform dynamic, of which monastic reform was one subspecies, it becomes more difficult to evaluate how Christian reform traditions influenced the oddly progressive mentality of the Western world or whether, and if so how, reform models might be applied to other civilizations.

One danger with not engaging thoroughly with broader reform discussions is that some of their earlier preconceptions can linger on. Today, scholars generally recognize that reform initiatives in the tenth and eleventh centuries were sponsored by kings, nobles, and bishops who rebuilt churches and monasteries and sought out impresarios of reform to help them train or recruit the personnel they needed to staff them. This supersedes an earlier reform narrative, dominant through the mid-twenti-

6. Examples include *Acta Synodi Atrebatensis, Vita Autberti, Vita Gaugerici; Varia scripta ex officina Gerardi exstantia*, ed. Steven Vanderputten and Diane J. Riley, [Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalia 270], (Turnhout, Belgium, 2015); *Vita, miracula, translatio et alia hagiographica sancti Arnulphi episcopi Suessionensis*, ed. Renée Nip, [Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalia 285], (Turnhout, Belgium, 2015).

eth century, which had defined reform as an attempt by churchmen to liberate themselves from feudal ties and to free the Church from the hands of the laity. When Vanderputten assumes that lay patronage was antithetical to the spirit of Benedictine monastic reform, he is accepting a dichotomy of dubious applicability to pre-Gregorian reforms and to some later ones. Reform narratives are less problematic once it is recognized that, in the post-Carolingian world, lay and clerical reformers often worked together as partners in piety and profit.