

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



McNamara, Celeste. The Bishop's Burden: Reforming the Catholic Church in Early Modern Italy

Jennifer Mara Desilva

Volume 44, Number 2, Spring 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082721ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i2.37550>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Desilva, J. (2021). Review of [McNamara, Celeste. The Bishop's Burden: Reforming the Catholic Church in Early Modern Italy]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(2), 259–261.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i2.37550>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2021

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

McNamara, Celeste.

The Bishop's Burden: Reforming the Catholic Church in Early Modern Italy.

Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2020. Pp. xv, 297 + 1 map. ISBN 978-0-8132-3357-4 (hardcover) US\$75.

Traditionally, studies of reforming bishops have produced a type of local history that establishes a link between the diocese and Rome, to the exclusion of other areas. Celeste McNamara's study of St. Gregorio Barbarigo (1625–97), bishop of Padua, profitably avoids this stereotype. Over five chapters, Barbarigo's life and work are clearly analyzed and amply contextualized within the scope of contemporary Catholic reform and missions. McNamara eschews hagiography, weighs Barbarigo's strategies and achievements, and often finds limited success. In this process, McNamara marshals an enormous amount of archival material, revealing how widely spread Catholic bishops could be and how important and illuminating a full perspective of their work is to a field that stretches from 1400 through 1700.

Three big ideas recur across the book: First, that Barbarigo's upbringing as a Venetian patrician influenced his understanding of the imminent threats to Catholicism and ideal organizational models. Second, that the Council of Trent (1545–63) identified the need to reinvigorate many beliefs and practices but did not detail strategies by which to achieve these goals. Third, that Barbarigo was deeply influenced by Carlo Borromeo in Milan, Francis de Sales in Geneva, and Pietro Barozzi and Niccolò Ormaneto, both in Padua. McNamara weaves these ideas throughout the book to show how Barbarigo crafted strategies to reform his diocese, support the Catholic Church's larger ambitions, and align his work with the Venetian *Signoria*.

Chapters 1 and 2 situate Barbarigo as the bishop of Padua (1664–97). The predominant extant archival material relates to the two episcopal visitations that he conducted personally of his three hundred extra-urban parishes. This documentation extends to more than twenty thousand folios and provides a fascinating and substantial foundation for McNamara's analysis. Most clergy were trained by senior priests, might have had little formal education, remained integrated with lay society, and often were judged by Barbarigo as lacking a vocation. In the first visitation, Barbarigo found that one-third of the parochial clergy had committed infractions. While the laity did not always evaluate clerical behaviour with Barbarigo's criteria, they did employ his language (*scandalo*)

to draw his attention. McNamara's use of visitation records, the incomplete *vicari foranei* reports (only thirty reports remains of the thousands he should have received), and Barbarigo's letter book is exceptional. Infractions are discussed by category and contextualized amid the substantial historiography on European bishops. Also, given that so few of the vicarial reports survive, McNamara has found creative ways to evaluate Barbarigo's system. For example, she compares reports claiming all was fine to disastrous situations when the bishop finally visited, or to repeated and escalating complaints and punishments across decades. Notably, to ameliorate the situation and cultivate reform, Barbarigo had to entrench his own authority and battle resistance from collegiate and regular clergy, local nobility, and parish communities. The bishop was not always successful, which speaks to the tyranny of distance, the agency of privileged groups and institutions, and the difficulty of implementing a top-down reform program.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore how Barbarigo sought to solve the problems that he identified in diocesan clergy. McNamara offers a useful discussion of how Barbarigo avoided Borromeo's strict discipline and opted for de Sales's hopeful kindness, with disappointing results. Not only did clergy not change their ways permanently, but infractions persisted sometimes for decades. Even when Tridentine decrees articulated a path for disciplinary action, Barbarigo rarely moved beyond suspending clergy, with the result that death or retirement were more likely solutions to clerical immorality and negligence than episcopal intervention. Aside from Barbarigo's reluctance, these chapters show how reform was a process that took generations and could be stymied by local resistance. Even Padua's ample financial resources, the bishop's frequent communications, and free copies of Bellarmine's small catechism could not solve all problems. While Barbarigo's seminary could accommodate a hundred clergy, there were a thousand clergy in the diocese. The foundation of a preparatory school, the Collegio del Treviso in 1671, reveals how the bishop hoped to combine religious education with the needs of elite Paduan families. McNamara uses this discussion to highlight Barbarigo's larger relationship with the Society of Jesus to great effect. His sojourn in Rome had led to close friendships with Jesuits, and his admiration for the *ratio studiorum* and the Spiritual Exercises was reflected in his educational (and re-educational) projects.

As Barbarigo's reform efforts show, the Catholic Church continued to implement the Council of Trent's decrees through the seventeenth century. This

long reform period underscores chapter 5's argument that "diocesan reform was but a smaller part of the Catholic Church's global goal in the early modern period" (278). Barbarigo's struggle to banish ignorance from his diocese, so that theological orthodoxy and moral understanding could flourish, was the local reflection of Catholic missionary activities further afield. Barbarigo's Venetian background focused his attention on the Ottoman Empire and the Greek Christians in the *stato da mare*. In addition to his own efforts to guide and protect converts in Padua, the seminary sheltered priests expelled from their Eastern European dioceses and educated missionaries. The press that Barbarigo founded was modelled on the Roman Polyglot Press and printed works for use in missionary training and to distribute to potential converts. Ludovico Marracci's Latin translation of the Qu'ran (1698) is one example.

In sum, this is an excellent primer on Catholic reform and its historiography. Not only does McNamara's book introduce an important seventeenth-century figure to English-speaking audiences, but it models best practices of working with large amounts of varied and sometimes incomplete historical data. This study also shows Italy at the ecclesiastical centre looking outward and valuing the reform of its own people as much as its close neighbours and newly encountered peoples. Celeste McNamara's essential study has shown how one individual can reflect the priorities and prejudices of an entire class and period.

JENNIFER MARA DESILVA

Ball State University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i2.37550>

Muller, Aislinn.

The Excommunication of Elizabeth I: Faith, Politics, and Resistance in Post-Reformation England, 1570–1603.

Leiden: Brill, 2020. Pp. x, 242 + 5 ill. ISBN 978-90-04-42599-6 (hardcover) €125.

History, we are often told, is recursive. In 1570, a long period of English social, cultural, and religious individuation ended in a decisive break from a European organization deemed, to varying degrees, interfering, overbearing, and tyrannical. On 25 February, Elizabeth I, the reigning monarch and leader