

**Catholic Women and Mexican Politics, 1750–1940.** By Margaret Chowning. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. xiii + 362 pp. \$45.00 cloth.

Margaret Chowning's *Catholic Women and Mexican Politics, 1750–1940* is a brilliant analysis of the long history of Catholic women's activism in Mexico, examining how religion and the Catholic Church "survived and even thrived during the nineteenth century" due to the enduring faith and political activism of Mexican women (2). Chowning argues that lay associations provided the most important vehicles for Catholic women's spiritual and political activities, allowing them to revitalize the Catholic Church from the ground up. The book takes a novel approach to combining social and political history—odd-numbered chapters focus on the social history of women's involvement in Catholic lay associations during a particular time period, and even-numbered chapters examine the political consequences of the social changes detailed in the odd chapters, as Catholic women and lay associations entered into national political debates in defense of the Catholic Church. The result is an excellent work of history that shows how the political life of the Catholic Church cannot be separated from the ways in which women lived out their faith in local communities.

*Catholic Women and Mexican Politics* shines in its analysis of the dynamics of the local Catholic parish, and Chowning convincingly argues that the parish was the privileged space where Catholic women maintained, revitalized, and defended Catholic faith and institutions during times of crisis and conflict. After the wars for independence caused immense damage to the traditional *cofradías* that had dominated Catholic lay life during the colonial period, women became even more essential to parish organizations as they not only participated in, but also organized and sustained, new lay associations in the years to follow. Chowning emphasizes the important role that priests played in this process, initially giving hesitant and begrudging support to Catholic women's associations, and later becoming key allies and supporters in the growth and founding of new groups. Priests came to understand that women were powerful and essential allies to have when attempting to revitalize parish life; and while Chowning notes that conflicts and power struggles between Catholic women leaders and priests were a common part of parish life, she shows that their collaboration formed the foundation of Catholic political movements throughout the nineteenth century.

While the lay associations that sustained religious life in local parishes may not have had overtly political missions, Chowning demonstrates that they played key roles in the development of Catholic politics throughout the nineteenth century. At first glance, devotional associations such as the Vela Perpetua, whose stated mission was to provide the Eucharist with perpetual accompaniment by organizing vigils in the parish church, and social service associations, such as the Ladies of Charity and the Sociedad Católica, were not political organizations. And yet Chowning shows how these associations were essential to the emergence of a politically minded Catholic citizenry that was committed to defending the Catholic Church from anticlerical attacks. In times of crisis, particularly during periods of heightened church-state conflict during *La Reforma*, Catholic women organized themselves and took part in national debates about religious tolerance and anticlerical legislation. Chowning focuses specifically on Catholic women's

petition campaigns undertaken in 1849, 1856, and 1875, which sparked a great deal of debate in the Mexican national press. Conservative men were compelled—at first reluctantly, and later with more active enthusiasm—to support women entering the political sphere, ultimately coming to see women as valuable Catholic warriors who were fighting alongside men in the war against liberal anticlericals. The liberal press, on the other hand, attacked the political activism of Catholic women not merely for its conservative content, but more broadly for the supposed threat that *any* women’s activism, not only that of conservative Catholic women, posed to the stability of the Mexican family and nation. In doing so, liberal men made it more difficult for liberal women to develop as political actors. Chowning thus demonstrates that Catholic women’s political activism was so consequential during the nineteenth century that it profoundly changed the course of the broader Mexican feminist movement, as liberal Mexican women had less space for their own public political actions due to liberal men’s “idealization of the liberal woman who stayed home and stayed out of politics” (170).

*Catholic Women and Mexican Politics* masterfully demonstrates that even during periods of supposed conciliation between Church and state in Mexico, such as the Porfiriato, many Catholics—especially Catholic women—were still militant in their defense of the Church. Here again, the local space of the parish is central, as Chowning shows how religious conflict in Mexico cannot be defined merely by what was happening between the hierarchy of the Church and state officials. Instead, Chowning demonstrates that religious conflict can be better understood as a “culture war” between Catholics and liberals that often played out at the local level and was largely led by women. As the Catholic Church began to see its political project focused more on a Romanizing revitalization of Catholic culture, women’s everyday religious actions gained political importance. Women who were teaching catechism to children, decorating their houses for religious celebrations, wearing the medallions of their lay associations, and supporting Catholic media were doing so with the express intention of participating in the Catholic Church’s broader struggle against liberal secular culture.

By focusing on the seemingly “private” faith of local parish women, Chowning has uncovered a deep and constant undercurrent of political activism that “can move into the public arena when it perceives itself to be threatened” (251). In doing so, *Catholic Women and Mexican Politics* reframes our understanding of broader narratives of Mexican religious politics and Catholic women’s activism. This is especially apparent in the epilogue’s reevaluation of Catholic women’s activism during the Revolution, which did not, as some past scholars assumed, suddenly appear for the first time but was instead yet another historical moment in which Catholic women, during a time of intensified church-state conflict, moved their activism into the public arena. *Catholic Women and Mexican Politics* profoundly transforms our understanding of the relationship between religion, gender, and politics in modern Mexican history, and it is thus a must-read for students and scholars alike.

Erika Helgen  
Yale Divinity School  
doi:10.1017/S0009640723002512