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Catholic Women and Mexican Politics, 1750–1940. By Margaret Chowning. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp. 362. \$45.00 cloth; \$31.50 e-Book.
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Margaret Chowning, a leading scholar in nineteenth-century Mexican history and the intersection of gender, women, and religion in Latin America, presents an ambitious study in this book. The work seeks to unravel the persistence of Catholicism in Mexican public and private spheres and the pivotal role women played in this narrative, despite male-dominated Church hierarchies and a press that often weaponized social expectations to challenge their political involvement. Chowning's central questions are compelling: How have religion and churches thrived since the 19th century, and what insights does a gendered perspective provide?

The book examines female-dominated lay associations beginning in the 1840s and ending with the Porfiriato, arguing that women were crucial in maintaining the Church as a political force amidst liberal efforts to diminish its influence. Chowning combines social history with political analysis, presenting Catholic women as significant agents of public political change. She delves into their motivations and everyday lives, contending that gendered political discourses become more comprehensible when paired with gendered social and institutional history. Chowning suggests that examining key historical moments can shed light on the cultural values and conflicts taking place in both public and private spaces. She draws a parallel with contemporary cultural battles, where debates over issues such as marriage, state intervention in family life, and religious freedom often become highly political, even without armed conflict. These dynamics were also present in Mexico's historical narrative of continuity and rupture.

By focusing on the role of women in the Church, Chowning challenges the marginalization of women in Mexican history, which traditionally argues that significant political engagement by women only began with the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Covering three distinct historical periods in larger *mestizo* towns and urban centers, Chowning traces the evolving relationship between women and the Church, contending that women's political engagement predates the Mexican Revolution. The

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book challenges the conventional focus on the Revolution, instead highlighting earlier periods such as the Reforma as critical turning points. It also questions the dominant liberal, secular narrative that has shaped national histories in Latin America, a perspective that has been largely accepted by both revolutionaries and progressives. This narrative often marginalizes the role of women as political actors. Chowning's work provides a genealogy for the militant and highly visible Catholic activism, showing that women's political activism in the decades after the 1910 revolution was not entirely new but rooted in earlier efforts.

One of the book's significant conclusions, drawn from extensive archival research, is that women began taking prominent roles in the Church in the 1840s through active participation in lay associations. Through this public advocacy, local parish women aimed to improve and preserve their material, social, and spiritual conditions, despite facing criticism from both conservative and liberal rhetoric.

Another innovative aspect of this book is its organization. While the initial sections follow a chronological order, sections II and III alternate between social history and political narrative. Chowning alternates chapters on changes in women's relationship to the Church and lay associations with chapters on the political roles played by Catholic women and lay associations. She believes that the social and political realms constantly influenced each other, and thus the book's structure reflects the interchange between women's social practices and their political activities.

This work is a valuable contribution to the field, notably for centering the experiences of Catholic women in Mexico and acknowledging their nascent political power. Written in an accessible and concise style, it serves as a valuable resource for scholars across various disciplines and graduate courses focused on archives and Mexican history. The book's meticulous use of archival material, innovative combination of social history with gendered political discourse, decentering of the Mexican Revolution as the start of women's political activism, and focus on underappreciated historical actors have earned it an honorable mention from the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) in 2024.

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