

THE POLITICS OF PIETY
FRANCISCAN PREACHERS DURING
THE WARS OF RELIGION, 1560–1600

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INTRODUCTION

It is the conviction of monks and preachers during these times, that parricides and the most horrible assassinations are greeted as miracles and the works of God.”¹ Pierre de L’Estoile’s scathing denunciation of the preachers who celebrated the assassination of Henry III in August 1589 was very much in character. Even though he was at times harshly critical of Henry III, L’Estoile came from a magisterial family, and he naturally associated political stability with the monarchy. That anyone could celebrate such a blow to public order was unfathomable to him. The preachers who celebrated the assassination of Henry III, however, clearly disagreed. Many of them were closely affiliated with the Paris-based Catholic League, a radical political association that had emerged in 1585 to prevent the succession of the Protestant Henry of Navarre to the French throne. These clerics were convinced that the death of Henry III in 1589 was necessary for the salvation of France. For fifteen years they and other French Catholics watched in dismay as the monarch they once thought would crush French Protestantism negotiated with Calvinist leaders and even permitted some Calvinist worship. The death of Henry III’s brother François-Hercule in 1584 left Navarre as heir presumptive, a situation that not only accelerated confessional division in France but also threw open for public debate the very nature of the French monarchy itself. The French monarchy was a Christian institution to be sure, but was not a Christian institution necessarily Catholic? Could a Protestant occupy the French throne without jeopardizing the souls of all good Catholics? For the preachers of the League, the answer to this last question was obvious: A heretical monarch threatened the salvation of all French men and women. But for the historian, what is so intriguing about the final years of the Wars of Religion is that an essentially medieval understanding of the French body politic triumphed. French Catholics listened to the League preachers as they pounded home the dangers posed by a Protestant succession to their own salvation, and emphasized the inherently Catholic nature of the French state and its true subjects. Because of these preachers, French Catholics refused to countenance a Protestant King. By 1593, Henry of Navarre realized that only his conversion to Catholicism would allow him to claim the French throne.

The League’s success in selling a medieval understanding of the body politic pivoted on the support of its many preachers, and none were more zealous than the Franciscans. Here and there we catch glimpses in the historical records of the friars at work. The grey habit of the Paris friars peers from behind helmets,

halbeards, and curasses in the paintings of League processions during the siege of Paris in 1590. In Orleans, we find Maurice Hylaret denouncing the local bishop from the pulpits of the convent for his political moderation. Much further to the south, friar Guillaume Taxle decides on a more direct approach to spreading League authority and leads an armed assault on a nearby royalist stronghold. Wantonly mixing political polemics and violence with their traditional cache of spiritual weapons, the French Franciscans of the Wars of Religion recognized few boundaries in their pursuit of a Catholic monarchy. What is more, they were influential. Thousands of people thronged to hear their sermons in League-controlled cities across France. By 1593, L'Estoile was so fearful of Franciscan influence that he believed a wild rumor that two hundred Franciscans were marching on the city of Paris.²

L'Estoile's willingness to countenance that an army of Franciscans roamed the roads of France reveals profound anxiety about the growing militancy of this religious order, and along with it, their political influence. These friars proved over and over again that they were not about to submit to Protestant rule, and that they were ready and willing to use any tactics necessary to defeat Navarre. The primary intention of this book is to show how a medieval spiritual tradition (the Observant Franciscan), in the particular context of late-sixteenth century France, became an agent of political change. Prior to the Reformation, French men and women accepted the essentially Christian and, it turns out, Catholic nature of the monarchy. However, confessional division after 1540 thrust the religious character of the French throne into the political spotlight. Navarre's conversion to Catholicism in 1593 marked a dramatic turning point in the nature of the early modern French state. From this point on, the Catholic nature of the French monarchy became a defining ideological characteristic of this institution. I argue that the political activism of the Franciscans, alongside other supporters of the Catholic League, ensured that by the end of the Wars of Religion, religion, as well as gender and bloodlines (Salic Law), became a critical factor in determining who became king. Private and familial interests, municipal politics, the emergence of new elites and a changing economy were undeniably formative in shaping the early modern French polity, but the political activism of the Franciscans reminds us that early modern individuals also shaped their institutions in relation to religious belief.³

The friars, I argue, far from being simple handmaids of the League, provided a critical foundation upon which the association built its authority because their spiritual tradition remained enormously popular. While the Franciscan alliance with the League underscores the centrality of religion in early modern conceptions of the state, it also illuminates the continuing potency of one particular medieval spiritual tradition in early modern France. The Franciscans generated their understanding of spiritual perfection from

the teachings of their thirteenth-century founder, Francis of Assisi, and this understanding informed their role as spiritual leaders throughout the Wars of Religion. The friars believed above all in a Christian body politic that privileged a central role for the cleric in the preservation of the kingdom, a role that they insisted legitimated political opposition to their ruler. Furthermore, the French Franciscans were members of a venerable Catholic missionary order that traversed political frontiers and was actively engaged throughout the sixteenth century in a global war on spiritual impurity. Informed by the missionary character of their own tradition and their own distinctive understanding of the body politic, and galvanized into action by the spread of heresy into France, the French Franciscans earned a reputation as tireless enemies of Calvinism even before the start of the first civil war in 1562. Moreover, the Franciscan preachers who plied their ministry during the Wars were usually university trained and many enjoyed close ties with the social and political elite of France. Whether the League could have exercised the authority it did after 1588 without the support of these respected religious leaders is consequently open to debate, since the friars gave substantial spiritual and political legitimacy to the radical association.

The long-term political activism of the friars in France thus politicized the League, and in doing so, transformed the French monarchy. How and why the Franciscans came to exert political influence in France during the Wars of Religion, and the implications of their political activism for understanding early modern French political and religious culture are the questions driving this investigation. This is a study, in other words, not of state institutions but of modes of political action and the values, particularly religious values, that informed them. Specifically, it is a study of the Observant Franciscans. There were four orders of mendicant clergy—Dominican, Augustinian, Carmelite, and Franciscan. The largest of three Franciscan branches at the time of the Wars (Conventual, Observant, Capuchin), the Observant Franciscans were more numerous and just as active as the Jesuits, and they are among the most visible mendicant clergy in contemporary Protestant and Catholic accounts of these years. The majority of the friars in this investigation, many of whom spent time studying theology in Paris, left only vague traces of their own individuality in historical records. Personal correspondence and memoirs, for example, are virtually nonexistent for this period. Even so, a wide variety of sources including internal Franciscan documents, notarial contracts, the civil and criminal registers of the Parlement of Paris, Franciscan writings as well as contemporary accounts make it possible to reconstruct a corporate identity. Since the monastic life has always been predicated on the abnegation of the self, monastic traditions such as the Franciscan are particularly amenable to such corporate investigations. These documents make it clear that the friars considered themselves first and foremost followers of Saint Francis, and only

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secondarily the offspring of particular families and products of a particular region.⁴

Reconstructing their Franciscan identity is critical for understanding their political and spiritual behavior throughout the Wars of Religion, and their appeal for French men and women living at this time. Four interlocking factors help to explain the success of the Franciscans at situating themselves as political as well as spiritual leaders in France over the course of the Wars of Religion: a revitalized Franciscan missionary zeal, the timeliness of the Franciscan message of spiritual reform, the adaptability and versatility of the Franciscan spiritual tradition, and ecclesiastical and political support. Chapter 1 situates the political activism of the Franciscans in the broader religious and political context of the Wars of Religion. Late sixteenth-century France was a time of spiritual crisis, a time when the traditional sources of spiritual authority—the papacy and the monarchy—were under attack. In this environment, the Franciscans and other mendicant clergy quickly became the voices of spiritual truth for many French Catholics. Chapter 2 examines the ideological hold of Franciscan spirituality upon its members in order to understand their spiritual zealotry during the Wars of Religion. Situating the zealotry of the French Franciscans in a global context, I argue that the sixteenth century witnessed a revitalization of Franciscan missionary zeal across Europe in response not only to the expansion of Europe, the rise of the Ottoman Turks, and the spread of Protestantism, but also to internal reform. I show how such internal reform, while often divisive, was also a rejuvenating force in the Franciscan order. In France, the efforts of the Franciscan administration to reform the French communities focused the attention of the French Franciscans upon the nature of their own spiritual tradition, in the process reinforcing their identity as followers of Francis of Assisi. What this reform instantiated above all was Franciscan conviction that their duty to God came before that to any other authority, a conviction that helps to explain their political activism throughout the Wars of Religion, and their alliance with the League after 1588.

The next three chapters look at strategies utilized by the Franciscans to sell their ministry in France during the Wars. Chapter 3 illuminates Franciscan reliance on ecclesiastical support, in particular that of the papacy, to promote their preaching in pulpits across France and to give them international credibility as spiritual reformers. I show here that the French clergy and the papacy recognized the specific utility of the mobile preaching ministry of the French Franciscans for challenging Calvinist preaching. Furthermore, at a time of spiritual crisis and European expansion, the papacy saw in this mobile preaching ministry a useful vehicle for extending its authority both within and without Europe. Relying on notarial contracts and the internal records of the Paris friary, chapter 4 links economic, social and political support of the

Franciscan tradition to the particular appeal of the Franciscan message of spiritual reform. French patrons, women as well as men, found in Franciscan spirituality an understanding of spiritual perfection that made even ordinary believers into agents of spiritual rejuvenation in French society. At a time of political and spiritual crisis such as the Wars of Religion, the Franciscan message of spiritual reform was timely indeed. Chapter 5 examines the role of the University of Paris in the intellectual and spiritual formation of Observant Franciscan preachers during the Wars. I argue here that the friars used the University as a way to reach the intellectual and political elite of France with their understanding of spiritual perfection. Years studying at the University gave the Franciscans intellectual as well as religious credibility among their contemporaries. As theologians attached to the Faculty of Theology, furthermore, Franciscans consulted with magistrates, kings, and popes on important religious issues including the Catholicity of the monarchy. The University of Paris also acted as a venue for the reinterpretation of Franciscan missionary strategies. Just as Franciscans relied on indigenous languages and iconography to reach out to people of the newly encountered lands, their brothers living during the Wars of Religion believed that the humanist scholarly and linguistic strategies they encountered at the University would be useful for undermining Protestant doctrine as well as selling Franciscan spirituality to literate French audiences.

Chapter 6 confronts the increasing politicization and radicalization of the Franciscans throughout the Wars, arguing that growing suspicion of the religious agenda of the French monarchy galvanized them into outright political opposition after 1588. Looking specifically at Franciscan sermons, polemics, and devotional treatises, I suggest that underlying Franciscan activism was a distinctively Franciscan understanding of the French body politic, one that not only posited the essentially Catholic nature of the French state and subject but also a critical role for the preacher as a pillar of a politically stable society. Confident in the perfection of their own tradition and their role as God's servants, the Franciscans of the Wars showed that they recognized no boundaries in their pursuit of a spiritually pure society, not even political resistance to their king.

AN AGE OF SPIRITUAL CRISIS: THE WARS OF RELIGION

On December 23, 1588, Henry III invited the Catholic Duke of Guise, Henry, and his brother Louis de Lorraine, the Cardinal of Guise, to his château, ostensibly for the purpose of negotiation. The Guise brothers were warned not to accept the king's invitation, since he was still extremely angry over their recent political behavior. Several months earlier in May, the Catholic League, the radical political organization of which they were titular leaders, had seized control of Paris. Henry managed to elude capture and retreated to his palace at Blois, but seven months later he was no closer to regaining control of the most important city of France. Brushing off concerns about the safety of such a visit, the Guise brothers made their way to the château at Blois where, perhaps to their own astonishment or perhaps not, they were met by the royal guards. The duke of Guise died immediately, and his brother the following day.

Since the League openly declared its opposition to a Protestant succession to the French throne (Henry of Navarre), and the Guise family eagerly vied with other noble clans for control of the same institution, one can well understand why Henry III considered these men a threat to his authority. But for French subjects who were already suspicious of the religious motivations of their own ruler, the assassinations of the Guise brothers looked much more like tyranny in action than political justice. The brutal deaths of the popular Guise brothers shook Catholic confidence in their own ruler, and dramatically intensified the atmosphere of crisis then permeating France. Over the course of the next weeks, French men and women draped their houses and churches in black cloth, and rushed to their parish churches for consolation. At night time, candlelight emanating from innumerable spontaneous processions gave the streets of Paris and other cities a melancholic glow.¹ These processions of barefoot men, women, and children became one of the most familiar sights during the weeks following the assassinations, vivid testimony to the importance of the Guise as symbols of the Catholic cause.² In the months that followed, Henry III soon discovered that killing the two leaders only

confirmed the suspicions of many French Catholics that he was out to subvert rather than preserve the truth faith. On January 7, 1589, the regent doctors of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris formally excommunicated their monarch, and declared subjects absolved of their obedience.³ Preachers publicly called Henry III “tyrant” and “hypocrite” from pulpits across France and encouraged violent overthrow of his regime.⁴ Across France, angry Catholics tore down and destroyed images of the king and his royalist supporters in an iconoclastic frenzy.⁵

Joining the angry throngs in December 1588 were the Observant Franciscans and other orders of mendicant clergy, and from this point onward we find these friars using their considerable talents as spiritual advisors and controversialists to arouse popular support for the Catholic League. What made the Franciscans in particular such effective agents of the League is the focus of this investigation, and without question their long-standing zealotry against Protestantism was one critical factor. The rapid penetration of Protestantism into the French body politic after 1521, economic dislocation, and conflicts among nobles all created an atmosphere of spiritual crisis in France that the traditional bastions of spiritual authority were ill-equipped to resolve. Into this void stepped the Franciscans and the other orders of mendicant clergy with their distinctive religious traditions. Already by the 1550s, the Franciscans enjoyed reputations as vehement opponents of Calvinism and outspoken critics of political leaders in matters of faith. Viewed from the perspective of the friars plying their ministry after 1588, the alliance between the Franciscans and the League was merely the most recent in a long line of political strategies used to secure the purification of their heresy-beleaguered kingdom, and the League the fortunate recipient of their hard-won reputations as spiritual reformers.

A Society in Transition

The emergence of new social and political elites and the expansion of state authority were important long-term forces at work in sixteenth century France, but more destabilizing from the perspective of ordinary French men and women was a contracting economy.⁶ Economic contraction was characteristic of many cities across Europe at this time, and so France was by no means unusual.⁷ The high wages urban workers enjoyed for most of the fifteenth century declined as growing urban populations increased competition for jobs. Rising inflation also meant that wages did not stretch as far as they once did. Foreign competition in the textile industries hit the southern regions of France particularly hard, while chronic bad harvests during the 1570s and 1580s along with episodic warfare eroded the ability of the peasantry as well as ordinary urban wage earners to support their families throughout the period of the Wars of Religion.⁸

The economic difficulties explain some of the mounting discontent we find in cities such as Lyon, Nantes, and Paris during this period. This discontent at times took the form of riots and strikes, two traditional methods used by those without access to institutional authority to show their displeasure at municipal as well as royal policies.⁹ Particularly hard hit were regions in the south-east. The peasant revolts that swept the regions of the Dauphiné and Vivarais during the 1570s as well as the riot that began in Romans during Carnival in 1580 were all signs of a population pushed to the limits by heavy taxation and marauding soldiers, among other economic burdens.¹⁰ Still, the level of interpersonal violence as well as mounting public questioning and criticism of the king that we find throughout French society over the course of the second half of the sixteenth century was of such an intensity that it points to other destabilizing forces operating in France above and beyond economic dislocation.¹¹ Noble factionalism, the spread of Protestantism, and growing suspicion of the king gnawed at French loyalty to the monarchy, and rapidly transformed general discontent into civil war by 1562.

The importance of the sword nobility in the outbreak of civil conflict in 1562 is well known. Even as new elites slowly emerged to challenge the dominance of the old families, the sword nobles remained enormously powerful in French society throughout the sixteenth century. The great sword families in particular owned vast tracts of land and monopolized the highest political offices. Their patronage networks penetrated deeply into society, rivaling even that of the Valois monarchy.¹² Given that the nobility were fractious by nature, and prone to use their private armies in personal wars against noble rivals, we can well understand why appeasing the great families was a constant preoccupation of the Crown. One only has to look at the alignment of noble families during the Wars to see that these conflicts were to some extent a more full-blown and violent expression of the long-standing feud between the Guise and Condé families. Christophe de Cheffontaine (Chessefontaine) certainly thought so. Mulling over the causes of the civil wars, the one-time minister general of the Franciscan Observant order accused French nobles of causing much of the conflict. The nobility were also too quick to draw swords, he argued, in the name of personal honor: "They are persuaded that it will dishonor them to endure a lie without drawing a dagger, or take up arms, to kill the one who has given them such injury." Such rashness, Cheffontaine said, made them unworthy of the name "*gentil-homme*."¹³

Compounding the threat posed to public order by noble factionalism was religious conflict. While contemporary accounts show that Cheffontaine was not alone in blaming the conflicts on a feuding nobility, let alone other interest groups in society, many French people interpreted the events of the late sixteenth century in terms of religion even when religion was only one factor.¹⁴ This "spiritualization" of the conflicts was perfectly understandable, since

for the first time in several hundred years Europeans were faced by serious division in the Christian Church. Martin Luther's public disavowal of the Church in 1521 sent shock waves throughout Europe, and France was no more immune than other nations to the lure of the Protestant ideologies emerging at this time. Lutheran and Zwinglian ideas began circulating throughout France by the 1520s, though it was the spread of Calvinism after 1540 that was largely responsible for the sudden shift of religion to center stage in French political life. The architect of this new religion was the Frenchman Jean Calvin, a former student at the University of Paris who fled France in 1534 following the Affair of the Placards. The Affair of the Placards was a pivotal moment in the history of the French Reformation because it marked a dramatic change in royal policy regarding the public discussion of religious ideas. Prior to this event, Francis I (1515–1547) largely tolerated such discussion as long as it steered clear of overt attacks on Catholic doctrine. The decision of a few brash sacramentarians to paste a placard denouncing transubstantiation on the very door of the king's bedchamber on October 18, 1534, ended this period of open discussion. Francis I's subsequent repression of suspected Lutherans encouraged many to flee the country, including Calvin.

Calvin eventually made his way to the city that became his model of spiritual perfection, Geneva, but not before publishing the work that would make him famous. The *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) introduced the world to Calvin's distinctive interpretation of Protestant doctrine. Equally importantly, it provided a model of a religious community that could be easily adapted by followers in other parts of Europe. The *Institutes* laid the basis for the formation of French Calvinist communities, but Calvin's organization of a mission also played a crucial role in spreading the new faith in France. Beginning in 1555, teams of French-speaking reformers, trained in Geneva, arrived in France, targeting in particular the regions to the east and south. Within two years the missions were regularized to such an extent that they were a routine part of the business of the Company of Pastors, the governing body of the Calvinist Church in Geneva.¹⁵ The Calvinist presence in France was large enough to warrant the holding of a national synod in Paris in 1559.

One can well understand why the holding of this synod in the largest city of France, a city that had long considered itself a bastion of spiritual purity, traumatized many Catholics.¹⁶ They could hardly have felt otherwise given long-standing insistence in European thought about the interdependency of religion and the politics. Medieval and early modern political treatises routinely invoked the medieval theory of the *corpus mysticum* as the divinely established model of the state even as preachers interpreted signs of political disorder as evidence of spiritual impurity. Europeans understood that good government implied rule according to the law of God since God was the ultimate ruler of all earthly kingdoms. European discussions about the nature

of society consequently linked Concord—political stability, peace, and religious purity—with godly rule, and its opposite, Discord, with the absence of godly rule.¹⁷ The spiritual character of the polity was a particularly prominent characteristic of French political discourse from the eleventh century onward. French political theorists loudly proclaimed the special devotion of the French people, which they insisted marked out their elect status on earth as a “un peuple saint.” Over the course of the next two centuries, the elect status of the French people came to define their monarchy as well, a transformation embodied in the cherished title “Most Christian king” first given to Louis the Pius by the papacy in 1239. By the end of the thirteenth century, theorists writing under Philippe IV argued that France was the first pillar of the Catholic Church, without which the entire structure would collapse. The signs of France’s special religious devotion were everywhere, they said: in the bones of its many martyrs, absence of heresy, participation in the crusades, magnificent cathedrals and abbeys and the renown of its theologians.¹⁸

Given these deeply rooted assumptions about the spiritual purity of the French kingdom and the special devotion of its people, we can appreciate the profound psychological effect of religious division upon the Catholic psyche by the middle of the sixteenth century. Religious division struck at the very heart of French identity, because French men and women believed that there could be only one true faith. Spiritual division made a lie of French claims to spiritual purity, and just as devastatingly it threatened the political unity of the French body. French Catholics looking for confirmation of the interdependency of spiritual uniformity and political stability only had to look at the rapid political fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire in the wake of Luther’s break from Rome. Of course, not all Catholics believed the rupture in the Christian community of France was irreparable by 1559. Pamphlets emerging from the French presses in subsequent years actively debated a variety of solutions for the religious crisis, ranging from outright extermination to church reform and even freedom of worship.¹⁹ A meeting of the king’s council in 1561 during the time of the Estates-General evoked a similar breadth of opinion, and even considered the convocation of a national ecclesiastical council under the authority of the king to seek some sort of religious accommodation. This suggestion of a national council may well have come from Michel de l’Hôpital, the Chancellor of France, since it was he who organized the Colloquy of Poissy held a year later. The Colloquy of Poissy (1561) showed that many Catholics still believed the differences between the two faiths were not so substantial that they could not be healed through debate and negotiation. Perhaps the most radical suggestion of all, and one that the historian Jean de Montigny says ultimately won over the royal council, was that of religious coexistence.²⁰ Emphasizing the king’s duty to foster the spiritual development of his subjects as well as their economic prosperity, a spokesman for the Re-

formed religion insisted that persuasion rather than violence was the solution to ending religious division.²¹ The size of the Calvinist community was now such, furthermore, that outright violence would only devastate the king's forces and the French economy: "The number of those belonging to the new faith is so large at present and so widely distributed throughout the kingdom, and includes so many great and important personages," he said, "that it would be not only politically disruptive but also impossible to uproot something which has such strong roots. . . ." ²²

Political pragmatism rather than ideological insistence upon individual religious autonomy underpins this Calvinist request for royal protection, and for understandable reasons: Catholics were perhaps willing to endure (*tolérer*) the presence of Protestants in their midst for the sake of peace, but they were far from ready to recognize the legitimacy of the other faith.²³ The cahier presented by the Estates of Pontoise to the Estates-General in 1561 reflects just such a willingness to suffer Protestant presence, at least for the time being. The cahier urged the king to ban nighttime gatherings of Protestants because such seemingly secretive gatherings raised Catholic fears of sedition. This association of sedition with Protestant gatherings was consistent with Catholic perceptions of heresy as politically as well as spiritually divisive. A loyal French subject must follow the true faith, and to do otherwise was to make oneself an enemy of the king as well as an enemy of God. The delegates of the Estates of Pontoise might well have believed these meetings were truly seditious, but their first concern, they argued, was public order. Nighttime meetings of Protestants had become occasions for Protestant-Catholic violence, even massacre. Disputing the utility of violence in conversion, these officials instead proposed that members of the reformed tradition meet at the same place (temple) and in daylight "so that each (religious tradition) could understand and see what the other was doing, and to comfort themselves that nothing was being done against the honor of God or the king let alone public tranquility."²⁴

These delegates were willing to allow a degree of freedom of worship to Protestants, at least temporarily, in exchange for an end to confessional violence. Continuing civil warfare after this time nevertheless suggests that the delegates of Pontoise did not fully represent Catholic opinion on the issue of religious coexistence. In fact, Denis Crouzet shows that the early 1560s marked a dramatic transformation in the nature of confessional interactions as Catholic and Protestants alike increasingly came to view the other as a serious threat to the political as well as spiritual health of France. While ongoing debate over the religious crisis in France destabilized the idea of religious truth for some Catholics, for many others, including the Franciscans, it reinforced their view of the new tradition as a dangerous cancer in the French spiritual body. Disease metaphors abound in sixteenth-century French political discourses

because many Catholics were convinced that heresy, like disease, posed a threat to the healthy parts of the body when not “treated” effectively. A cahier from the nobility to the Estates-General of 1561 invokes this disease metaphor when it urges the king to heal his kingdom: “We believe the health of our society depends upon one principle point, that is a Reformation, and because the sickness of its particular limbs causes such alteration commonly to the entire body leading it ultimately to fall into decay and finally, perdition, it seems necessary to encourage sincerely the preservation of the three columns of your Republic in their purity and splendour, that is our Religion, Justice and Obedience.”²⁵ The very salvation of good Catholics, in other words, rode on their ability to restore the infected limbs of the Christian body to perfect health, and if necessary, even remove them altogether.

Members of the Reformed Church were no less convinced about the legitimacy of their own understanding of spiritual perfection. Desperate to rid their community of spiritual pestilence and convinced of their own righteousness, Catholics and Protestants alike resorted to iconoclasm, the burning of books, the destruction of churches and meeting houses, the mutilation of bodies, and the purgation of the dead by fire and water.²⁶ For most people of the sixteenth century, the division of France into rival religious traditions was a sign of a nation in serious spiritual trouble, indeed gripped by the Devil, since there could be only one truth faith. Religious division in consequence only intensified French anxiety about the state of France because it gave an intellectual and religious explanation for rising political and economic disorder. What it also did was give legitimacy to noble factionalism. Indeed, it is in the volatile combination of noble factionalism and religious division that we find the catalyst for the seven civil wars that erupted episodically after 1562. A number of noble families, including the Condé, adopted the new faith, and in doing so not only gave the fledgling religion powerful protectors but also confessionalized pre-existing noble disputes. By the time of the first civil war, the Condé had emerged as leaders of the Protestant nobility and the Guise of the Catholic. The first civil war began in 1562 when Henri de Condé took over a number of cities including Orléans and Blois. It ended in 1563, but was followed by a second civil war four years later in 1567. That conflict was barely over before the third war began (1568–70). Four more civil wars would follow, not ending until 1598.²⁷

The rapid disintegration of France after 1562 into political and confessional division could perhaps had been prevented had France had more effective rulers. Unfortunately, the three sons of Henry II (1547–1559) were not such leaders. The unexpected death of Henry II in 1559 left a sickly and impressionable boy in the royal seat, Francis II (1559–1560). The young king was married to Mary of Guise, the future queen of Scotland, and he quickly came under the political influence of the Guise family. Although Francis did

not long outlive his father, the ascendancy of the Guise family under his rule escalated noble rivalry among the great families, rivalry that intensified during the reigns of the next two Valois monarchs Charles IX (1560–1574) and Henry III (1574–1589). Oscillations in royal policy during these years from persecution to negotiation with Protestant factions also raised concerns among French Catholics and Protestants alike about the trustworthiness of the monarchy. Catherine de Médicis, who ruled as regent during the early years of the reign of her son Charles IX organized the Colloquy of Poissy alongside Michel de l'Hôpital, for example, to end spiritual discord. A year later, however, Catherine reluctantly endorsed repression following the outbreak of the first civil war in 1562. In a similar fashion, the marriage of Henry of Navarre with Marguerite de Valois, the sister of Charles IX, that was supposed to mark a truce between Protestant and Catholic factions in 1572, became instead the stage for the infamous massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day.

The interconnectedness of religion and politics in the perceptions of French men and women helps to explain the excessively violent character of certain episodes of the Wars. For Protestants and Catholics alike, salvation was at stake in these conflicts. Massacres, in addition to individual and group episodes of confessional violence, became a recognized feature of the Wars, especially in the first two decades. As many as three to four thousand people died in Toulouse as a result of confessional conflict just as the first civil war broke out in May 1562, and urban massacres also occurred in the Vassy and Sens the same year.²⁸ Unquestionably the most violent episode of confessional violence was the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day (1572), an event that saw thousands of Protestants slaughtered by fearful Catholics in Paris and many other cities over the course of a few days. This massacre followed on the heels of an assassination plot against the Protestant leader, Gaspard de Coligny, who was in Paris for the wedding of Navarre and Catherine's daughter Marguerite.²⁹ As Admiral of France and close advisor to Charles IX, Coligny was a threat to the authority not only of the Guise family but also Catherine de Médicis. The ringing of the tocsin at midnight following the wedding was to be the signal for Guise and their allies to initiate the assassination of the Admiral. Instead, in a city swept by rumors of a Protestant plot, the sounding of the tocsin ignited Catholic fear that a Protestant massacre of Catholics was underway. Over the course of six days, Catholics brutally hunted down and slaughtered Protestant neighbors and guests attending the royal wedding. Henry of Navarre and his cousin Condé were spared because of their royal blood and because they agreed to convert. This was not an option for their noble followers, most of whom were killed in the royal palace of the Louvre by the forces of Guise. Soon other cities heard of the massacre and followed suit.

The massacre struck hard at Protestant confidence, and in subsequent weeks fear of more violence drove thousands of members of the Reformed tradition

back into the bosom of the Catholic church. Across Europe, Catholics welcomed the event as a sign of divine favor, and two years later French Catholics rejoiced again as Henry III stepped onto the throne.³⁰ Physically stronger than his brothers, intelligent, an experienced military leader, and a prominent participant in the massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day, Henry III seemed to possess all the qualities of leadership necessary to cleanse France once and for all of heresy. Unfortunately for Henry, the optimism that greeted his succession quickly dissipated. It was during his reign that the political and confessional disorders reached their peak of intensity, and along with it, criticism of the king. Much of this disillusionment lay with Henry III's treatment of the Protestant community. Rather than exterminating the faith once and for all, Henry followed in the footsteps of his mother by alternating policies of persecution with toleration of Protestant worship. Hardline Catholics naturally viewed such oscillation as a sign of weakness, but Henry III was wrestling with a profoundly difficult political situation. While the Massacre had drastically reduced the number of Protestants in 1572, it created in the end a much more intransigent Protestant community because it acted as powerful symbol of religious persecution and martyrdom. This is the community that Henry III faced upon his succession to the throne in 1574. Noble factionalism, furthermore, continued to hamper royal efforts to assert authority throughout France. Mounting debts, the influx of mercenary troops, and an untrustworthy brother only added to Henry's troubles.³¹

Under better circumstances, Henry III would likely have been a very effective ruler, but he inherited a political situation that would have tested the ability of even the most talented monarchs. By the 1580s, scurrilous tracts attacking Henry III's character and sexuality as well as his policies circulated throughout France. Public questioning of Henry III only intensified in the months following the death of his last remaining brother, François-Hercule, in 1584. Henry III was childless, and to the dismay of many Catholics, he showed all the signs of recognizing his Protestant cousin Navarre as heir presumptive.³² The emergence of the Catholic League in Paris in 1585 showed that some members of French society questioned the ability of Henry III to restore France to spiritual unity and political health, and they were willing to take on this responsibility themselves. The popularity of the League among many French Catholics in Paris was enough to turn the city mutinous in May 1588, when rumors spread that Henry III might try to crush the League by force. On May 12, better known as the Day of the Barricades, Catholics set up barricades throughout Paris to hamper royal arrests.³³ At this point the League effectively took control of the city government by establishing its own administration and hunting down royalist supporters. Henry III fled to Blois after the Day of the Barricades, and it was here at his château that he would later assassinate the Guise brothers.

Crisis of Spiritual Authority

Political instability, a worsening economic situation, and intensifying religious anxiety fueled the formation of an increasingly radicalized political culture in late sixteenth-century France, one in which the Franciscans and other mendicant clergy would soon emerge as political leaders. The friars were by no means the only clerics to exercise political authority in this period, but they were without question among the most influential. This is hardly surprising, because sixteenth-century France was in the throes of a spiritual crisis, a crisis that found such traditional bastions of spiritual authority as the monarchy, episcopacy, and papacy unable or unwilling to provide ordinary believers with much needed spiritual guidance.

The reigns of Francis I and Henry II show that the ineffectiveness of Valois spiritual leadership during the civil wars was symptomatic of sixteenth-century French rule more generally, and largely for reasons of political expediency. Francis I sheltered Christian humanists and suspected Lutherans from the attacks of the magistracy and the Faculty of Theology during the 1520s in part because he was sympathetic to their criticisms of church corruption and in part because he saw in Protestant ideas a useful counterpoint to papal authority in France. Francis was particularly solicitous of the Circle of Meaux, the renowned group of humanist reformers patronized by the bishop of Meaux, Guillaume Briçonnet. These reformers were closely associated with the king's own sister, Marguerite de Navarre, and Francis was not about to tolerate accusations of spiritual deformity that edged so closely to the throne.³⁴ The Affair of the Placards (1534) finally convinced him that Protestant ideas posed a threat to the political stability of France and he sanctioned much more stringent persecution of suspected heretics after this time. Even so, concern about French alliances with the Ottoman Turks and Protestant princes made Francis I reluctant at times to pursue intensively signs of heresy.³⁵ His son, Henry II (1547–1559), was much more vocal and insistent upon the need to cleanse France of spiritual impurity, and it was during his reign that the Parlement established a new tribunal to judge heresy in 1547, the infamous “burning court” (*chambre ardente*). And yet, even Henry II placed religious reform on the backburner when more pressing political matters necessitated doing so. The monarch resisted the pressure of his own clerics, for example, and refused to recognize the Council of Trent (1545–1563). The Council was the most important general council of the sixteenth century, and promised to cleanse the Catholic Church of abuses and resolve doctrinal inconsistencies. It was nevertheless organized by the papacy, and Henry worried that the general council would elevate the pontiff's authority over French ecclesiastic institutions. The magistrates of the Parlement of Paris were equally alarmed about papal authority in France and encouraged the king's resistance to pub-

lication of the tridentine decrees. Henry, in other words, was not alone in his desire to limit papal influence in France. Even so, as monarch of France Henry II was a powerful spiritual authority, and his rejection of the decrees in their entirety meant that these reforming initiatives did not penetrate France during his reign. Once again, politics trumped religion.

Intermittent spiritual leadership from the monarchy throughout the sixteenth century was also matched by intermittent leadership from the French episcopacy. Jean de Rély's famous comment at the Estates-General of 1484 that the French Church was "entirely corrupt," while an exaggeration, still applied a century later.³⁶ To be sure, the reform movements that swept through many of the monastic orders, including the Franciscan, during the early sixteenth century introduced greater rigor into many communities. The secular clergy were an altogether different situation. The zealotry of many Parisian clerics throughout the Wars and in particular during the time of the League was not necessarily replicated in other parts of France. The training, ability, and diligence of parish priests varied enormously, depending upon the wealth of the prebend, remoteness of the parish, and above all, episcopal supervision. Since absenteeism was a chronic problem throughout the sixteenth century, episcopal supervision was, needless to say, often minimal.³⁷ Simony, pluralism, and nepotism also remained entrenched practices at the highest levels of ecclesiastical authority in France, practices that did little to stimulate episcopal interest in the performance of spiritual duties. Cahiers presented before the Estates Generals of 1561 and 1576 show that concern about the poor state of the episcopacy was widespread in French society. Delegates attending the Estates-General of Blois in 1576, for example, asked Henry III to appoint men who demonstrated a genuine spiritual calling to the office of bishop. "We beg that . . . in the ecclesiastical estate bishops and other ministers of God be appointed who understand the will of God, and administer the sacraments according to the gospel (*en sa parolle*) by demonstrating good doctrine, reverence, discipline and Christian behavior." Persistent episcopal abuses that required immediate attention included nonresidence, venality, and infrequent diocesan visitations.³⁸

Particularly at the end of the sixteenth century, a small but active sector of the episcopacy was diligent in the performance of this office. Marc Venard finds a "new model of bishop" emerging after 1580 that was decidedly more zealous in the pursuit of diocesan reform. Charles de Bourbon, the [*future*] Charles X of France, was one of these men. Bourbon held a diocesan synod in 1581 that quietly introduced a number of tridentine initiatives. François, Cardinal de Joyeuse, similarly initiated Borromean-inspired reforms in his diocese of Toulouse after 1583.³⁹ Even so, the vast majority of French ecclesiastics hardly lived up to their examples. The impotence of legislation produced by the ecclesiastical assemblies underlines the lukewarm nature of episcopal

leadership during the Wars of Religion. The Assemblies of Poissy (1561), Blois (1576), and Melun (1579) all proposed internal reform of the Church, even venturing into discussion of the thorny issues of pluralism and venality.⁴⁰ The assemblies also called upon the king to publish the tridentine decrees to prepare the way for such reform.⁴¹ Even so, there is little evidence to suggest that any of this legislation was officially implemented. The bishops all clamored for eradication of heresy and church reform but they were unwilling or incapable of taking on that reforming role themselves. Given that the leaders of the French Church were resistant to internal reform, we can understand why the tridentine influence we find seeping into the dioceses in Italy after 1563 would hardly make itself felt at the parochial level in France until the seventeenth century.⁴² The Council of Trent placed pressure on the episcopacy to play a more active role in supervising and training their clergy by establishing a model of spiritual behavior and preaching, but such reforms threatened the very nature of the sixteenth-century French episcopate. As Frederick Baumgartner says, “perhaps more than in any other era, the French bishops of the sixteenth century were largely political operatives more concerned with other matters than their own spiritual well-being and that of their flocks.”⁴³

With few exceptions, the episcopacy would not assert its role as spiritual leader until the end of the Wars of Religion.⁴⁴ Signs of corruption and laxity in the French Catholic Church were one reason why a growing number of French men and women were receptive to Christian humanist cries for ecclesiastical reform early in the sixteenth century, and later on turned to the new faith of Calvinism. For those French men and women who stayed in the Catholic fold, however, the spread of Calvinism made it clear to all that the existing leadership of the French Church was incapable of meeting this latest challenge. Discouraged Catholics discovered that the papacy at least offered a more viable model of religious leadership. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the papacy was finally overcoming the taint of corruption that had besmirched its reputation since the fourteenth century, and the unexpected challenge to its own authority offered by Luther in 1521. Under the helm of men such as Paul III (1534–1549), Paul IV (1555–1559), Pius V (1566–1572), Gregory XIII (1572–1585), and the Franciscan Sixtus V (1585–1590), the papacy flexed its muscles as a strong spiritual leader determined to recapture its former place as the leader of Western Christendom.⁴⁵ The organization of the Council of Trent was the hallmark of this new energized leadership, and its legislation laid the basis for widespread reform of the Church after 1563.

Papal leadership of French Catholics was nevertheless hampered by its distance from France and, even more importantly, by a French state convinced that papal authority posed a threat to political stability. Valois monarchs worried that unfettered papal authority in French religious life would undermine royal efforts to control the small but powerful Protestant faction, because the

papacy was hardly sympathetic to the Calvinists and might aggravate relations. Equally worrisome for the king and his magistrates was the revitalization of papal authority across Europe at this time. The French monarchy had profited enormously from the decline of papal authority during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, managing to wrestle greater control over its own religious institutions. The Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges (1438) officially recognized French control over episcopal nominations, among other rights, and this document consequently became the foundation stone of Gallican political thought—that is, the ideological assertion of an independent French Church under the authority of a French monarch.⁴⁶ Although the Concordat of Bologna (1516) later minimized the independent nature of the French Church, the magistracy and monarchy remained ever alert to signs of the expansion of papal authority in France.

Needless to say, the organization of a general council and other signs of a more vigorous papacy by the 1530s and 1540s made French magistrates nervous.⁴⁷ Limiting papal authority consequently was a central concern of the French state, with the result that the reform initiatives of the Council of Trent were not officially recognized in France until the seventeenth century. The state fought papal influence in other ways as well, even curtailing the spiritual authority of particular legates.⁴⁸ The upshot of Gallican resistance during these years was that papal influence during the Wars of Religion, while important, remained limited. Papal excommunication of Henry III and Henry of Navarre gave ideological impetus to Catholic resistance, and papal legate communiqués also show that these officials worked closely with the Guise and other Catholic leaders throughout the Wars. Even so, the papacy was unable to provide its French clergy with the close supervision and training they needed to be effective spiritual leaders, nor could it exercise direct authority over French spiritual life even in the matter of heresy.

Growing disillusionment with these traditional bastions of spiritual authority fueled the rise of the Franciscans and the other orders of mendicant clergy to political and spiritual prominence during the second half of the sixteenth century. Recent discussion of the slow but sure penetration of tridentine reform in certain dioceses, and the influence of the Jesuits and other recently arrived traditions in France should not obscure the fact that many French Catholics of the Wars of Religion continued to find spiritual authority in medieval religious traditions. This continuing interest in older traditions was to be expected, because, generally speaking, medieval and early modern Christians found spiritual authenticity in what was old. The prognosticative sciences, mysticism, apocalypticism, and sorcery were also popular responses to crisis, and only seemed to grow in influence during the later middle ages. Christian Humanism and Protestantism similarly found spiritual sustenance in the scriptures and patristic fathers, rejecting many later accretions

to Christian thought as erroneous. That these reformers ultimately articulated new spiritual conceptions on the basis of older textual sources was the unintended consequence of their zeal, because for them what was old was more perfect. Reform was about reclaiming past perfection, not creating something new. This quest for past perfection fueled three of the more influential Catholic responses during the Wars of Religion as well, namely Gallicanism, lay devotion, and Franciscan spirituality.⁴⁹

Gallicanism justified state resistance to papal authority from the fifteenth century onward, but during the sixteenth century it also became a useful rationalization for enhanced state (in particular magisterial) intervention in French spiritual life. The complex nature of Gallican thought prevents detailed examination here. However, one element that proved particularly useful for magisterial intervention in French religious life deserves a brief discussion, and that was its understanding of the king as both a spiritual and political leader. This medieval theocratic conception of the monarchy was a core element of Gallican ideology from the fourteenth century, used to bolster royal claim to jurisdiction over episcopal sees.⁵⁰ By the sixteenth century, magisterial understanding of the spiritual authority of the monarchy stretched to embrace even doctrine. Since the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges (1438) substantially increased royal authority over French ecclesiastical institutions, the Parlement's intervention into ecclesiastical affairs as an agent of royal authority was not new to the sixteenth century. In fact, the Concordat of Bologna of 1516 purportedly restored much of papal authority over the administration of these institutions. One would expect, if anything, to find the Parlement of the sixteenth century less interventionist than in times past. This was clearly not the case, for the registers of the Parlement chart growing interest on the part of the magistracy in a variety of religious matters, above all doctrine and ecclesiastical discipline.⁵¹ With regard to heresy, the earliest targets were mostly Christian Humanists, including Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, and suspected Protestants. Parliamentary authority to punish heresy expanded with the support of the monarchy following the Affair of the Placards. Particularly important was the Villers-Cotterets criminal code of 1539, which increased the authority of the regional Parlements in the investigation of religious crimes at the expense of lower court jurisdictions, as well as broadened judicial latitude both in magisterial investigation of the suspect and range of penalties.⁵² In 1540, the king ratified the enhanced authority of the Parlements over religious crimes by transferring jurisdiction over heresy from the ecclesiastical courts to the Parlement. The result of this transference of jurisdiction was a dramatic escalation in trials and executions of heretics over the course of the next decade, reaching its peak in 1546.

The authority of the Parlement of Paris over heresy reached its greatest height during the reign of Henry II with the establishment of the *chambre*

ardente in 1547/48. This court lasted only two years, falling victim to public revulsion and resistance from many local judicial officials, although factional politics in the Parlement of Paris was also undeniably an important factor.⁵³ The collapse of the *chambre ardente* did not spell an end to the magistracy's interest in spiritual reform, however, because it was at about the same time that the magistracy began showing greater interest in cleansing the French Church of obvious signs of corruption. Clerical laxity, immorality, and institutionalized abusive practices all attracted the attention of the court. To the dismay of the papacy, the Parlement increasingly opened its chambers to cases involving disorderly religious communities even though such disputes traditionally went before ecclesiastical courts.⁵⁴ Even more unusual was the magistracy's declared interest in developing a broad-based program of church reform. The Ordinances of Blois (1580) was one particularly important initiative that developed out of discussions between Christophe de Thou, the president of the Parlement, and other magistrates as well as ecclesiastics attending the Assembly of Melun (1579). The proposals for reform touched on a variety of issues, ranging from such abusive practices as pluralism to the training of parish clergy and the eradication of heresy.⁵⁵

Since several cahiers presented at the Estates-Generals of 1561 and 1576 called for state-led church reform, the magistracy knew they had broad-based support for such legislative action.⁵⁶ Even so, we can understand why many members of the clergy were unhappy about the court's intervention in ecclesiastical affairs, because they believed heresy and ecclesiastical discipline were clerical matters. They accepted that the king could punish heretics and restore religious communities to order, but only at the behest of the Church.⁵⁷ The magistrates of the Parlement of Paris clearly disagreed. They took on a more active reformist role during the sixteenth century, because they continued to cling to the understanding of monarchical authority as enshrined in the Pragmatic Sanction and because they were convinced that confessional division and the poor state of the French Church threatened the political stability of France. Like their contemporaries, the magistracy of France associated political stability with religious uniformity and purity. Heresy, ecclesiastical corruption—these were signs of a society in serious spiritual as well as political disorder.

Concerned as it was about the spiritual state of France, the magistracy also worried about the expansion of papal influence in French religious life. Gallicanism offered a decidedly French solution to the spiraling disorder because it argued in no uncertain terms for an independent French Church that recognized the French monarch as well as the pope as a spiritual authority. Going beyond simple reliance on legal precedent, the Gallicanist magistrates of the sixteenth century emphasized the divinely instituted nature of the monarchy to justify the enhancement of the Parlement's authority over French

religious life. Nor did the magistrates have to rely solely on the Pragmatic Sanction for their claim to such jurisdiction. Royal ritual was soaked in medieval assertions of the double authority of the monarchy. Once anointed with holy oil, the monarch became a spiritual as well as political leader. The language of the coronation oath, furthermore, made the king responsible for defending the Church from heresy.⁵⁸ Sixteenth-century magistrates found further evidence of the spiritual authority of the monarch and thus his magistrates in medieval legal precedent that made heresy along with blasphemy, witchcraft, and sodomy treasonous behavior. Heresy was a form of divine treason (*cas enormes*), because the heretic challenged the authority of God, and in consequence that of his representative the monarch.⁵⁹ Though they did not consider them a *cas enormes*, disorderly religious communities were also a matter of state concern because they posed problems to public order. We can see this in the response of the Parlement to criticisms of internal dissension among members of the Paris Dominican convent in 1557. The court “has been warned about rebellions, quarrels, irreverence and insolence at the convent of the friar preachers called the Jacobins, something indecent and offensive particularly during this time of troubles, tumults and sedition.”⁶⁰ As the “official interpreter and guardian of the double authority of the king in spiritual and temporal matters,” the Parlement argued that it had a responsibility to pursue heresy as well as ecclesiastical reform to maintain public order.⁶¹ The magistrate Jean Le Guesle makes just this connection between state authority and ecclesiastical reform in a treatise published in 1584. The Parlement should reform religious institutions, he said, so that these clerics could “lead their flock in the true path, and . . . draw back to the fold those who through schism and heresy have lost their way.”⁶²

At the same time that the magistracy was claiming legal authority over heresy and ecclesiastical reform, ordinary Catholics were turning to tried and true religious practices for a solution to the deepening spiritual crisis in France. The intense nature of lay piety throughout the sixteenth century is one of the striking features of the Wars of Religion. While Phillip Benedict is correct to caution against accepting contemporary accounts at face value, there is substantial evidence to suggest that many French men and women believed devotional practices were useful responses to the existing spiritual crisis.⁶³ Religious processions, pilgrimages, masses for the dead, charity, the formation of penitential confraternities—these and other devotional practices were all on the rise throughout the sixteenth century. Lay believers lapped up the lives of saints, pilgrimage accounts, martyrologies, devotional treatises, and vernacular bibles as aids to private prayer and contemplation. In the century after the invention of printing, interest in lay devotion kept religious texts on the bestseller lists of Europe.⁶⁴

Recent studies of lay piety note the use of religious ritual to mark the identities of French men and women as members of distinct religious communi-

ties. Catholics made the sign of the cross, and paraded the host through Protestant streets while psalm-singing Protestants looked on and mocked their “heathenish” practices. As these examples show, religious division supercharged ordinary religious practices with special meaning. Relics, religious oaths, prayers, and psalms as well as the body of Christ all marked Protestants and Catholics as members of distinct religious communities within the larger Christian body of France.⁶⁵ While this reinterpretation of devotional practices to mark confessional identity was a distinguishing characteristic of sixteenth-century lay piety, Catholic reliance on familiar medieval practices made them participants in a long tradition of lay devotion. The Christocentric nature of Protestant and Catholic interactions is particularly evocative of fifteenth-century spiritual devotion, a time when the cult of the eucharist reached its height of popularity, images of the bleeding Christ hung over altars in churches across France, female mystics expressed their mystical union with Christ, and ordinary believers made the *Imitatio Christi* of Thomas à Kempis the most popular devotional work in Europe.⁶⁶

Like their fifteenth-century ancestors, the French Catholics of the Wars of Religion turned to traditional devotional practices not only for consolation but also to restore themselves and their society to spiritual purity. Since only God could cleanse the believer of sin, Catholics did not view these practices as spiritually efficacious in themselves but rather as vehicles for accessing divine authority. Lay desire for direct access to God helps to explain why much of Catholic devotion was experiential by nature. Visiting sites imbued with sacral authority, fasting and flagellation, contemplating one’s manifold sins, and showing compassion for fellow Christians through acts of charity—all of these activities helped one eat away at the blackened parts of his/her own soul—the deformed parts—and live a more holy life while still on earth.⁶⁷ The appeal of such an understanding of spiritual purification for the laity is readily understandable, and may explain why the majority of French men and women remained Catholic in the wake of the Reformation. Protestant theologians challenged the efficacy of such practices, while Catholic authorities, though often uncomfortable with lay-driven devotion, accepted their spiritual utility. Lay devotional rites were doubly appealing, furthermore, because they made the journey to spiritual perfection possible even for those without clerical training and authority.

The intensification of Catholic devotional practices over the course of the sixteenth century shows that for many lay Catholics of the Wars of Religion, Calvinism was just such a manifestation of a sinning society, one that could be purged through the usual devotional practices. The ritual dismemberment of friar Jean Bossu in 1567 suggests that even many Protestants clung to the purgative and restorative functions of Catholic ritual. His death evokes, in a particularly brutal fashion, the Catholic expiatory procession. Bossu was then

guardian of the convent of Beaunes in Burgundy. According to this account, he was captured by an angry mob of Protestants who then put him in a wagon. After placing irons on his hands and feet, they slowly drove him through the city.

At the gate of Saint Antoine they cut off his right ear, and from there returned near the gate de la Barre and cut off the left ear. Arriving at the square named the cour de Prevoste, they cut off his nose, then coming to the gate of Bourgneuf, right in front of the convent, they cut off the ends of his fingers. . . .⁶⁸

In the end, the Protestants hanged Bossu, dragged his body to the bridge, and threw it into the water. The purgative and restorative function of Bossu's death is impossible to ignore—a ritual procession of the spiritual offender through the town, removal through dismemberment, and final purification of the city through water. The Catholic ritual was reinterpreted in Protestant hands, but it nevertheless hearkened back to a medieval practice and notions of purification.⁶⁹

The importance of the magistracy and ordinary believers as sources of spiritual authority during the Wars of Religion shows that many French Catholics were not about to sit by idly as spiritual division engulfed their society. Their reliance respectively upon medieval notions of kingship and traditional devotional practices shows, furthermore, that these Catholics still found medieval spiritual traditions viable. The mendicant traditions similarly illuminate the continuing potency of medieval spirituality in early modern France, and it was through the agency of these orders of preachers that the Catholic League came to exercise enormous political influence after 1588. One could well ask whether the League could have risen to the political heights it did had it not had the support of the friars, if only because the long-standing zealotry of the friars against Protestantism and mobile preaching ministry gave them welcome access to pulpits across France. The Franciscans in particular enjoyed reputations as ardent opponents of the new faith, traceable back to their battles with the prominent Christian humanist Guillaume Briçonnet. Briçonnet used his episcopal office to promote religious reform in his diocese, but the Franciscans of Meaux were soon suspicious of his orthodoxy. In 1525, the guardian of the Meaux friary, Jean Corion, challenged Briçonnet's teaching from the pulpit of his own community. In doing so, Corion attracted the ire of the humanist bishop but also the support of the equally conservative Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris.⁷⁰

The Franciscans criticized Briçonnet for the same reason as did many other conservative Catholics at the time: they were convinced that humanist scholarship and criticism of the Catholic Church had opened the door to Luther's defection in 1521. Since Luther was not himself a Humanist, the accusation

was, to say the least, false. Even so, such an association between Humanism and Lutheranism is easy enough to understand because many Christian Humanists, like Luther, were critical of certain facets of church authority and religious practice. The friars may also have had legitimate concerns about the Circle of Meaux, since there is some evidence that certain members trampled on the frontiers of Catholic orthodoxy. Prominent members of this group, including Pierre Caroli and Jacques Pavannes, denounced many traditional religious practices such as fasting, prayers to the saints, and the veneration of relics as heretical.⁷¹ With Calvinism, of course, the friars had (to their minds) undeniable evidence of doctrinal error. They were, consequently, among the most visible opponents from the first arrival of the new faith, a visibility that is reflected in the Calvinist *Histoire ecclésiastique*.

Traditionally attributed to Theodore Beza, the *Histoire* situates Franciscan preachers on the frontlines of Catholic resistance from the 1540s onward. The author was clearly very worried about the zealotry of certain friars in particular, including Toussaint Hemard and Melchior de Flavin. Flavin (d. 1580) was one of the most prominent Observant Franciscans during the first two decades of the Wars of Religion, a man who exercised both the office of royal preacher for Henry II and the guardianship of the prestigious Observant convent at Toulouse.⁷² Flavin appears several times in the *Histoire*, a somewhat backhanded tribute to his effectiveness as an enemy of Calvinism. Interestingly, Flavin and many of the other friars mentioned here emerge as outspoken critics of the monarchy as well as of the new faith. In one particular instance, the *Histoire* portrays Flavin along with Toussaint Hemard accusing the government from a pulpit in Toulouse of not pursuing heretics aggressively. These friars “cried with full vigor against the magistrates, sparing not even the king or his council, encouraging the people to all disobedience.”⁷³ Hemard later purportedly criticized the sister of Francis I, Marguerite de Navarre, in a sermon given in the city of Issoudon in 1547. Hemard was then guardian of the convent of that city, and apparently known as much for his immorality as his Catholic virulence—at least according to the *Histoire*.⁷⁴ The author’s evident delight in reporting Hemard’s association with a pregnant *Cordelière* shows that Calvinist chroniclers were no more above slinging mud in the name of their cause than many of their Catholic counterparts.⁷⁵

The next generation of friars produced its fair share of zealous reformers as well, including Simon de Porta. De Porta’s fiery orations led the *Histoire* to label him one “of the two trumpets of the murdering band of the city [of Troyes]”; the other was another mendicant, a Dominican named des Rieux.⁷⁶ Franciscan sources understandably give a much more sympathetic reading of de Porta’s role during the Wars. It is telling of Franciscan concern about their role as spiritual reformers during this period that de Porta’s obituary focused less on his distinguished administrative career in the Franciscan order than

on his influence as a preacher. According to the obituary, de Porta embodied the Franciscan ideal because he was a brilliant preacher and tireless opponent of heresy in the city of Troyes: "Despite the many oppositions of [the bishop] Antoine de Melphie . . . who was a Calvinist, [de Porta] continued his preaching with the same fervor." True to his Franciscan roots, de Porta continued to preach almost up until the hour of his death. He died on April 5, 1575, a mere eight days after finishing the grueling round of daily Lenten sermons.⁷⁷

Other friars joining de Porta as perfect exponents of Franciscan spirituality during the first decades of the civil wars included the "scourge of heretics," Denis Rollot, a Rheims-based preacher, Matthew Pasquinot, who died while preaching in Avallon during Advent in 1569, and the famous royal preacher Jacques Hugonis.⁷⁸ The zealotry of these and other Franciscan preachers throughout the Wars of Religion impressed many contemporaries, all the more so since their zeal made them popular targets of Protestant rage. Especially in the war-torn region of Aquitaine, a number of Franciscan communities were destroyed by Protestant armies and urban mobs during the first two decades of the Wars, and those located in regions further north fared little better. Gonzaga's history of the Franciscan order records several convents destroyed in the province of France. This largest of the ultramontane Franciscan provinces included communities in Normandy, Picardy, and Champagne as well as some to the north of Paris. According to Gonzaga, ten of the thirty-nine communities in the province were either partially or completely destroyed between 1561 and 1568, including those of Troyes (1568) and Chartres (1568).⁷⁹ Many Franciscan preachers also suffered physical injuries and even death at the hands of angry Protestant listeners. A Lenten sermon given by the same Flavin in the city of Albi became a life-and-death matter for the preacher in 1551 when a riot broke out, and the author of the *Histoire* suggests that only the timely intervention of the magistrates saved the preacher's life. Not all friars were so fortunate, however.⁸⁰ Othon de Pavie mentions a massacre of Franciscans at the convent of Realmont in the diocese of Albi in 1560, and the destruction of the convent of Paulmiers six years later.⁸¹ A Protestant mob also reportedly hanged Nicholas Lorrain mid-sermon in 1581, and other Franciscan preachers killed in the same year included Pierre Pichet, Jean Benoit, and Pierre de Ghuet.⁸²

The zealotry of the Franciscans against Protestantism translated into open opposition to royal authority after 1588 when the assassinations of Blois convinced the friars that their own monarch posed a threat to the spiritual purity of France. It was at this point that the friars in large numbers across France joined forces with the League. Pierre de L'Estoile mentions that the Paris friars lent the steps of their Church to the harangues of the mother of the murdered Guise brothers, the Duchess of Nemours, against the "tyrant" Henry III.⁸³ Franciscan polemics and sermons denouncing Henry III and Henry of

Navarre, including Francesco Panigarola's *Malheurs et inconveniens qui adviendront aux Catholiques faisant paix avec l'heretique*, poured from League-controlled presses between 1589 and 1594.⁸⁴ In one of the most dramatic episodes of the League years, Franciscans slung armour over their habits and bore weapons in a procession of 1300 clerics through the streets of Paris during Navarre's siege of the city in 1590.⁸⁵ The procession shocked contemporaries, and spawned at least three paintings of the event.⁸⁶ The organization of confraternities also marked Franciscan-League relations after 1589. Mendicant communities, and particularly the Franciscan, were always popular hosts of lay devotional confraternities in France as well as other parts of Europe, and after 1588 the Franciscans were closely associated with several that were openly affiliated with the League. These included not only the Holy Name of Jesus, a Paris-based lay devotional fraternity that also established a branch in Orléans, but also the "white" penitents and the Confraternity of Saint Bonaventure in Lyon.⁸⁷

Certain members of the Observant tradition even ventured into outright conspiracy. What the friars Nicolas Chevreul and Pierre Saumian did in 1594 to warrant a stay at the royal prison in the Conciergerie is unclear, but the severity of the punishments and their arrest during the months after Henry IV's entry into Paris point to their involvement in anti-government activity. Chevreul, a member of the Paris convent, was whipped and banished in perpetuity from the region of Paris, while Saumian was forced to stand at the door of the cathedral of Notre Dame with "the cord around his neck . . . wearing a chemise holding a wax candle (torche) and . . . condemned to end his days in prison."⁸⁸ More specific information on conspiratorial activities exists for particular friars. Guillaume Taxle's decision to lead a militarized band in Provence seems particularly brash and daring for a cleric, but Garin and Chessé were no less willing to reinvent their definition of the Franciscan ministry to spread the influence of the League.⁸⁹ Jean Garin held meetings with chief officers of the Paris League in his cell at the Paris friar, no doubt with the full support of his guardian, François Feuarent.⁹⁰ It was also during Feuarent's tenure as guardian (1590–1593) that the friary agreed to act as a weapons depot for the League, yet another sign of the community's complicity with the radical association.⁹¹ Robert Chessé's former position as guardian at the Paris friary (1587–1590) might also explain his resort to conspiracy as a spiritual tactic, but he focused his efforts on the city of Tours rather than Paris. He was one of a number of ringleaders who wished to replace the existing royalist regime in the city with that of the League in 1589. Unfortunately for Chessé, Henry of Navarre tracked him down in the city of Vendôme, where he was publicly executed for his troubles.⁹²

The increasing radicalization of the friars after 1588 is impossible to ignore, but in many respects the alliance between the friars and the League was

simply another strategy in the Franciscan war on spiritual corruption. It is also important to understand that the League could not have asked for more effective allies in its struggle to preserve a Catholic throne, because their reputation as zealous reformers, along with the itinerant preaching tradition, made the Franciscans and other friars perfect vehicles of League authority throughout France. The utility of their itinerant ministries for the League becomes clear when we trace the movement of friars between the Paris *studium generale* and the provinces. This *studium generale* was the most important Franciscan center of theological study in France, and one of the two most prestigious in the entire order.⁹³ The most promising students came from across France to study here, leaving for their home provinces to preach at Lent and Advent, during summer vacation, and then for good at the end of their studies. The importance of the Paris *studium generale* meant that every friary in the Observant branch of the order in France likely had a few members who had spent time studying there, while the more important friaries such as those of Troyes and Rouen had several.⁹⁴ Equally importantly, the studium enjoyed close ties with the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris, a well-known bastion of League authority. Many of the preachers who returned to the provinces had studied theology at the Faculty, and knew personally Jean Boucher, Guillaume Rose, and other League members of the Faculty.⁹⁵

Whether the Paris friary directed a concerted Franciscan front on behalf of the League is impossible to say for sure. And yet, there is no question that it played a critical role as a vehicle of Leaguer influence within the Observant Franciscan body of France by fostering personal relations and frequent interaction between members of that tradition. The potential influence of the Paris friary in shaping Franciscan response across France to the League is all the more apparent when we consider that mendicants with a theology degree from Paris frequently rose to the top of the political ladder in their own communities, and at the very least earned reputations locally as respected preachers.⁹⁶ The itinerant nature of the Franciscan tradition ensured, furthermore, that leaving the Paris studium after finishing their studies did not put an end to personal relationships because traveling friars stayed in Observant communities while on the road.⁹⁷ The itinerant ministry of the friars made for a relatively close-knit religious order, especially in comparison to the cloistered traditions. This axis of communication between the Paris friary and other Observant communities explains, furthermore, why every Observant friary became potentially a base for League activism, and why Robert Harding considers the mendicant confraternities formed on behalf of the League “effective cells of political insurgency” in towns across France. He cites in particular the confraternity of the Holy Name of Jesus established in Orléans by Maurice Hylaret in 1590.

Hylaret was a former student in the Paris friary who arrived in Orléans in 1587. As a result of his time spent in the Paris friary and at the Faculty of

Theology, Hylaret would have known personally Jean Boucher and many of the other Paris preachers affiliated with the Catholic League, including the Franciscan François Feuardent. Harding argues that Hylaret's preaching before the confraters had already sparked more than a few anti-governmental riots in the city when in 1591 the bishop and governor of Orléans turned to the papacy for protection. These officials were justifiably worried because Hylaret, along with two other Franciscans, another Observant known as Picard, and the Capuchin Pierre Deschamps, were urging confraters of the Holy Name of Jesus to expel the bishop and governor by force.⁹⁸ The political radicalism of this confraternity is also discussed in Symphorien Guyon's seventeenth-century history of Orléans. Guyon makes no effort to hide his distaste for the political activism of Hylaret and other preachers during the time of the League, but his evident bias does not obscure the ties binding the Paris studium to the city of Orléans. His description of the association shows, above all, that Hylaret was interested in doing more than simply stimulating Orléannais devotional life when he formed the confraternity. According Guyon, Hylaret was "le principal auteur & directeur" of the confraternity. Members took an oath of loyalty to the superiors—in other words, the friars—and

they met, when advised to, whether during the day or at night, and [bearing] arms, in order to promptly execute their commands, without concern about losing either their means or their lives, and they did not forgive anyone, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, parents, friends . . . regardless of their quality or condition, who were opposed to God's cause and the preservation and advancement of the Catholic religion.⁹⁹

The case of Orléans vividly illustrates the role of certain friars as conduits of League authority in the provinces, a role made possible by the itinerant nature of their own tradition. Also critical to League success was their preaching. The League relied heavily on its preachers to mobilize popular support for its political agenda across France. This was particularly true in Paris, where the League managed to control the majority of the parish pulpits after 1588. There is some evidence, furthermore, that the League sent preachers on what were the equivalent of modern-day promotional tours to towns across France. Sources remain sketchy on this front. Harding suggests that many of the preachers who arrived in Nantes, Angers, and Rennes during this period may well have been sent by the Paris League.¹⁰⁰ Charles Labitte is somewhat more specific. He mentions in particular that Mayenne sent a number of preachers to nearby towns, including the Franciscans Picard (Picart) and Hylaret, who went to Orléans.¹⁰¹

The League's reliance on preachers to arouse support for its radical political agenda is understandable when we consider their influence during the

civil wars. The late sixteenth century was a great age of preaching, a time when those who had access to the pulpits of France wielded enormous political as well as spiritual influence.¹⁰² Even before the Wars began, Simon Vigor made a name for himself in Paris as a fierce critic of royal inaction against Protestantism, and preachers across France effectively fostered popular resentment of Valois negotiations with Protestants after 1562. The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day was also arguably a legacy of Catholic preaching in Paris, as preachers used the approaching wedding of the Protestant Navarre and the princess Marguerite to whip up Catholic fear of vengeful, massacring Protestants.¹⁰³ The League relied heavily on these clerics to stimulate popular support for its political agenda precisely because they were so effective at accessing the hearts and minds of Catholics. The particular utility of the mendicant clergy for sowing League support in the provinces becomes clear when we see that League authority outside of Paris was mostly urban-based, and mendicant communities were largely urban-based institutions. Furthermore, many League revolts in the provinces took place during the holy seasons of Lent and Advent, a time when the services of the mendicant clergy were in great demand across France.¹⁰⁴ Since mendicant preachers were masters of their trade, celebrated for their passionate sermons and rhetorical sophistication, they routinely attracted large crowds and even sparked riots, the case of the Franciscan Hylaret in Orléans being but one example.

Their visibility and popularity explains why Franciscan preachers and the other mendicant clergy were frequently targeted by royal authority for punishment during the League years. The Paris-based Franciscan René Subleau, for one, faced charges of seditious preaching on June 30, 1593, before the royalist Parlement of Tours. Though silent on the details, the registers indicate that the offending sermon was given from the pulpit of the parochial church of Saint-Michel in 1593.¹⁰⁵ The same entry in the register also ordered the arrest and imprisonment of Robert Conneau (Couneau), guardian of the convent of Angers, because members of the convent must be "contained . . . in the observance of their Rule" and "obedience to the King and Crown." A decree dated July 9, 1593, sheds further light on the situation in the convent of Angers. According to the magistrates, many superiors and provincial officials of the order "remain rebels." The court appointed friar Vierneau (Verneau), a doctor of theology, as the new guardian of the convent and asked him to visit and reform the Franciscan province of Touraine.¹⁰⁶ These brief entries give us little information on the substance of Subleau's sermons, let alone the political disobedience of the friars of Angers. More detailed are the entries on friars Gromard and Gourlet found in the registers of the royalist Parlement based in Châlons-sur-Marne in 1591. Friar Simon Gromard was guilty, the court said, "for not having preached what he ought, and that he ought to preach the obedience due the King and against the rebels who have

risen up against the state. . . .” The Parlement was not happy about his behavior, but since Gromard appeared six months later on similar charges, we have to assume his punishment was at best a reprimand. This time Gromard departed with another reprimand, and a promise to stay clear of political sedition in the future. Claude Gourlet received a harsher sentence, perhaps because the nature of his preaching was all the more reprehensible in the eyes of the court. Gourlet was sentenced to a public recantation and corporal punishment in August 1591 for “having uttered many seditious, scandalous and harmful statements against the memory of the king, as well as against the honor of the present king.”¹⁰⁷

Gourlet and Gromard were unfortunate enough to get caught by royal forces, but many friars managed to ply their anti-governmental ministry in relative peace because they worked in cities under League control. Porthaise, Trahy, and Hylaret each apparently had free reign in their respective cities of Poitiers, Auxerre, and Orléans for this reason.¹⁰⁸ In fact, Hylaret was so highly regarded by the municipal elite of Orléans—with the notable exception of the bishop and governor—that he received a civic funeral following his untimely death in December 1591. Hylaret’s success in Orléans illuminates the critical role played by the mendicant clergy in stimulating widespread support for the organization in the provinces of France. In Paris as well, the heartland of League authority, Franciscan preachers also wielded substantial authority. Pierre de l’Estoile’s journal notes with certain unease the continuing presence of the friars Feuardent and Garin in Saint-Jacques-de-la-Bouchérie and other Parisian pulpits even as League authority was on the wane.¹⁰⁹ Parisians continued to listen as these friars furiously attacked anyone showing signs of recognizing Henry IV. No one was spared, not even the pope. Jacques-Auguste de Thou mentions one particular sermon given by Jean Garin in 1593 in which the preacher “had the impudence . . . to exhort his listeners to pray to God so that the pope, who always rules by the holy spirit and who may never err in faith, remain unmoved by the prayers of the Bearnais [Henry IV] to grant him absolution.”¹¹⁰

The political radicalism of the Franciscans after 1588 was unusual to say the least, and not only because the friars were members of a religious order. Attacking and conspiring against the monarchy, encouraging popular violence—this was seditious behavior, worthy of public execution. Furthermore, the active participation of Feuardent, Panigarola, and Porthaise, among others, forces us to reject the notion that Franciscan opposition was simply the work of a few malcontents. These men were all theologians and respected preachers as well as important office-holders within the Franciscan family. The political radicalism of the Franciscans was informed by the contested nature of French society at the end of the sixteenth century, and their rise to political influence

as allies of the Catholic League underscores the absence of traditional bastions of spiritual authority during these years. By the time the League appeared on the political stage of France, Franciscans were already well-known enemies of the new faith and outspoken critics of royalist authority. Their itinerant ministry, furthermore, gave them access to pulpits across France. The zealotry of the friars throughout the civil wars suggests nevertheless that we have to look beyond the radicalized political culture of late sixteenth-century France to fully appreciate their rise to political prominence. One cannot help but notice, for example, that at the same time the French Franciscans were pounding the roads of France to eradicate Protestantism they were also undergoing internal reform. Just as French Catholics turned to them for spiritual guidance, the Franciscans of the sixteenth century were turning to their thirteenth-century founder, Francis of Assisi. As the following chapter will show, internal reform fostered Franciscan zealotry against Calvinism by reinforcing their identity as followers of Francis. What internal reform reinforced above all was Franciscan conviction that following God's will took precedence over political obedience, even that owed to a divinely constituted monarch.