Confessional Mobility, English Catholics, and the Southern Netherlands, c. 1660-1720

This dissertation analyses English Catholics in the Southern Netherlands and their ideas and practices of confessional mobility in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. English Catholics abroad have mostly been studied as ‘exiles’. However, this characterisation is not always helpful and distorts our interpretation by its narrow focus on flight from persecution and its implications of isolation, victimhood, and passivity. Therefore, ‘confessional mobility’ includes a wide spectrum of English Catholics who crossed the Channel; English Catholics abroad were not only exiles: they were students, grand tourists, pilgrims, scholars, and fugitives. Taken together, they constituted a flexible and non-territorial community.

Approaching the expatriate community in terms of confessional mobility sheds light on communities which were not defined by residence and opens perspectives on the advantages of going abroad. Looking beyond migration and settlement at mobility sidesteps the mistaken assumptions that departure was definite. English Catholics moved back and forth, kept up communication, and shaped a community which disregarded natural and territorial borders. Furthermore, mobility undermines the notion that Catholic migration was passive withdrawal, which inevitably led to slow integration within the newly adopted home society. In contrast with this static interpretation, going abroad was a transformative experience, and was actively employed to aid in the development of individuals and the community as a whole. Looking at development and growth, this thesis reveals a much more vibrant expatriate community than historians have previously assumed.

In order to convey the diversity of confessional mobility, each chapter captures one facet by considering a particular type of mobile Catholic. The first part, on ‘Distance’, encourages a more flexible understanding of belonging than ‘migration’, which has a strong connotation of departure and separation. Physical distance did not mean mental absence. English Catholics maintained continuous contact, moved back and forth, and shaped their presence abroad often in relation to their home country. The two chapters in this section therefore analyse how expatriates negotiated distance and belonging. ‘The Exile’ looks at the understanding of mobility within the Catholic community itself and argues that Catholics developed specific interpretations in line with Catholic theology and ecclesiology. The figure of ‘The Fugitive’ highlights the relationship between exit and allegiance, lending nuance to the assumption that leaving England equalled either resistance or passive submission, and instead points towards Catholics’ active negotiation of loyalty.
The second part, ‘Mobility’, questions the common focus on the static. Even scholarship on migration confines the role of movement solely to the moment of migration. However, expatriate life was dynamic and in flux; going abroad was transformative. Two types of expatriate Catholics make this case most clearly. Focusing on 'The Educational Traveller' shows how going abroad was less an alienation from England, than a means to integrate closer into polite English society by gaining necessary skills. 'The Pilgrim' reflects on 'retreat' as a deliberate and formative choice.

The third part, ‘Orientation’, focuses on English Catholics’ positioning within the wider Counter-Reformation culture. 'The Intercessor' highlights the ways in which Catholics on both sides of the Channel upheld mutual obligations regardless of physical distance. 'The Record Keeper' offers the opportunity to counter common perceptions that English Catholics were outside mainstream Catholicism, and to show that they took part in broad scholarly developments on the Continent.

Together, the various angles revealed by these chapters add up to a multifaceted picture of the expatriate community. They ensure that its discussion is no longer a self-contained narrative, only of relevance to the study of English Catholic exiles. Rather, the diversity and dynamics of confessional mobility help to reconfigure how we think about both exile and the Counter-Reformation.