

## THE ASSAULT ON STE.-FERME (1615): DESECRATION AND DIVINE WRATH IN A LATE EPISODE OF THE WARS OF RELIGION

Alisa A. PLANT

Tulane University, University College, New Orleans, LA 70118, USA

e-mail: aplant@tulane.edu

### ABSTRACT

*In late 1615, a Huguenot army mounted a raid on the Benedictine monastery of Ste.-Ferme in Guyenne. Although vastly outnumbered, the monks were ultimately able to drive out the attackers, who then burned the town adjacent to the monastery. A published account of the assault appeared almost immediately. Contemporary interest was clearly high, for the vivid and detailed narrative was reprinted three times (once in 1615 and twice in 1616, including a Paris edition). The anonymous narrator reported that while pillaging the church, three Huguenots were struck dead as they tried to approach the Eucharist to desecrate it. The sudden intrusion of the active wrath of God into the narrative is both surprising and significant. The paper will investigate this curious episode in terms of the persistence of the fanatical religious violence that characterized the Wars of Religion, but which many historians have seen as having greatly diminished in the aftermath of the Edict of Nantes.*

*Key words: violence, eucharist, Huguenots, catholics, wars of religion, France*

### L'ASSALTO DEL SAINT FERME (1615): PROFANAZIONE E COLLERA DIVINA IN UNO DEGLI ULTIMI EPISODI DELLE GUERRE DI RELIGIONE

### SINTESI

*Verso la fine del 1615 un'armata degli Ugonotti fece irruzione nel monastero benedettino di Ste.-Ferme, nella zona di Guyenne. Nonostante i monaci fossero in numero nettamente inferiore, essi riuscirono comunque a respingere gli assaltatori che dettero poi fuoco alla città adiacente al monastero. Un resoconto dell'assalto venne pubblicato quasi immediatamente dopo l'accaduto, cosa che dimostra come l'interesse contemporaneo fosse notevole, dal momento che il racconto dettagliato venne ristampato ben tre volte (una prima volta nel 1615 e due volte nel 1616, compresa un'edizione di Parigi). Il narratore anonimo riportò che mentre gli Ugonotti*

*saccheggiavano la chiesa, tre di loro vennero colti da morte improvvisa mentre tentavano di avvicinarsi all'Eucaristia per profanarla. La repentina comparsa della collera divina nella narrazione è tanto insolita quanto significativa. L'articolo analizzerà perciò questo curioso episodio secondo la persistenza della violenza fanatica religiosa che ha caratterizzato le Guerre di Religione, ma che molti storici hanno dichiarato in forte diminuzione dopo l'Editto di Nantes.*

*Parole chiave: violenza, eucaristia, Ugonotti, cattolici, guerre di religione, Francia*

In the years of Louis XIII's minority, there were widespread fears across France of a renewal of the civil wars that had caused such devastation in the second half of the sixteenth century. These fears were particularly acute in the south of France, where Protestantism had made the most headway, and where many Huguenots still lived. The Edict of Nantes, promulgated in 1598, had guaranteed religious toleration to members of the Reformed faith; the smallness of their overall numbers (roughly a million people, or no more than 6 percent of the French population) was offset by the political clout of their leaders, many of whom were prominent nobles (Benedict, 1991, 75-76). Still, most of the kingdom remained staunchly Catholic, as exemplified in the popular contemporary slogan, "une foi, une loi, un roi" – one faith, one law, one king. Thus it is not entirely surprising that the announcement of a pair of royal marriage alliances between France and ultra-Catholic Spain led to a spasm of religious violence in the southern part of the kingdom. Driven by the relative weakness of the French crown to seek a rapprochement with its former (and future) enemy, the queen regent, Marie de' Medici, brokered a double marriage in which young King Louis XIII was betrothed to the Spanish Habsburg infantina Anne of Austria, and Louis's younger sister, Elisabeth, was promised to the future Spanish king Philip IV. Many French Huguenots believed that these marriage alliances portended the impending suppression of their religion, and they quickly took defensive action. Faced with armed rebellion, Marie de' Medici was forced to call an Estates General (1614) to quell dissent in the realm.<sup>1</sup>

The planned marriages went ahead nonetheless, and as the date for the exchange of princesses approached, the threat of violence again arose in the south. The prince of Condé issued a call to revolt in August 1615, and Huguenots across the kingdom tensely debated whether once again take up arms against their king. After "many

1 The tensions surrounding the Spanish marriages were only one part of a larger power struggle between the crown and the Huguenot princes. See Tapié, 1984, 68-78; Holt, 1995, 174-7.

meetings, public as well as secret," a Huguenot army under the leadership of the duke of Rohan assembled in the town of Sainte-Foy, which had been a Protestant stronghold throughout the Wars of Religion (*Discours veritable*, 5). Meanwhile, Louis XIII – now technically reigning in his own right – traveled to Bordeaux in early October to meet his Spanish bride. The king and his party arrived in the city without mishap on October 7, and the marriages were solemnized by proxy on October 18 (Kleinman, 1985, 22-24).<sup>2</sup> By all accounts Louis eagerly awaited his nuptials, but intervening events served to remind him of the persistent dangers of both religious factionalism and the Spanish alliance. The Huguenot army was on the move toward Tonneins (southeast of Bordeaux), seizing garrisoned towns with little resistance (Clarke, 1966, 57). On October 12, only a few days after Louis's arrival in the south, the Huguenots mounted a raid against the Benedictine abbey of Ste.-Ferme, which was less than thirty miles from Bordeaux and only a few miles from Sainte-Foy.

Knowledge of this episode survives because of an anonymous pamphlet that was published in Bordeaux soon after the attack, bearing the longwinded title: "True relation of the first exploit of arms in Guyenne in the abbey of Sainte Ferme, October 12, 1615, by some pretended reformers of state, containing their horoscope, and the marvel of God that appeared on the subject."<sup>3</sup> The wealth of detail in this narrative suggests that its author was almost certainly an eyewitness, and quite possibly a participant, in the events he described (Lantenay, 1879, 10). Written from a Catholic viewpoint, the text recounts a broad spectrum of violence, ranging from familial betrayal to murder, plunder, arson, and divine wrath.

Yet the anonymous author was not content to understand the raid on Ste.-Ferme solely as an expression of sectarian struggle; he was also concerned with issues of political authority, as he made clear in his very first sentence: "There is a natural subordination of the state to religion, just as the body is subordinate to the soul, natural virtues to moral ones, and those to Christian virtues: thus the entire temporal regime is subject to the spiritual to such a degree that one cannot act against the soul except at the prejudice of the body. Likewise it is impossible to act against the true religion in any manner whatsoever without shocking the temporal state" (*Discours veritable*, 3). For this writer, the abortive "reformation" of the previous century, which had "bathed France in its own blood," provided ample demonstration of this organic metaphor (*Discours veritable*, 3). The Huguenots' violence was so worrisome precisely because it evoked memories of the all-too-recent civil wars and the collapse of royal authority in the 1580s and early 1590s. The specter of confessional violence thus had newly politicized resonances that were all the stronger because the royal

2 The actual exchange of princesses took place on the French-Spanish frontier, in the middle of the Bidasoa River, on November 9.

3 The "Discours veritable" was likely part of the larger pamphlet war that accompanied the struggle for control of the regency government. See Sawyer, 1990.

government was already weak: a return to war could mean a return to near-anarchy. The narrator's explication of the multiple levels of violence at Ste.-Ferme must be understood in terms of the connections between his political and religious concerns.

The Huguenot assault on Ste.-Ferme was far from spontaneous. The monastery was chosen as a target for a number of reasons: it was richly furnished and well provisioned; it was peopled by monks and well-to-do villagers, who presumably would offer little resistance; and its buildings were so sturdy that, once taken, the abbey could serve both as a meeting place and (if necessary) as a defensive stronghold for Huguenots. The primary motives behind the raid were thus greed and the desire for a secure refuge, not an intent of physical violence against the monks themselves. The army's leaders tried to leave little to chance, even sending a spy – a relative of one of the monks in the abbey – to reconnoiter. His findings were so encouraging that within hours of his report, the Huguenot army – comprised of five thousand men, both infantry and cavalry – was at the gates of the monastery (*Discours veritable*, 6-7).

Upon seeing the army, the abbey's sentry raised the alarm. The monks, "overcome with fright, hastily threw themselves into the church, pursued so quickly that they barely had time to shut themselves in" (*Discours veritable*, 7). Yet the church provided no safe haven. As the narrator observed, "The heretic, no less equipped with arms than with malice, attacks the Church everywhere, even unto the strongest site and the final refuge" (*Discours veritable*, 7). In this case, the assault was literal: the Huguenots blew in the church door with explosives. The little band of monks and others in the church, only fifteen strong, fled to the upper vaults. Interestingly, although the narrator suggests that the abbey was completely surprised by the Huguenot raid, a few of the abbey's defenders had the time (and presence of mind) to arm themselves with harquebuses.

The church became a shooting gallery, as the desperate monks began firing at the intruders below. Here the narrator revealed the first intimation of divine displeasure at the Huguenots, for God (acting through the intervention of the abbey's guardian angel) "directed their blows so helpfully" that the monks shot nearly everyone they aimed at – almost always with fatal results (*Discours veritable*, 8). Despite this carnage, however, some of the Huguenots remained firm in their original resolve to loot the church. They began pillaging the altar, seizing valuable chalices and other ornaments. At that point, one unlucky Huguenot noticed a monstrance containing the Host – which, of course, Catholics regarded as the physical body of Christ. As the anonymous author reported, "He ran to ravish it. With great difficulty he raised his hand to this effect, when from above was sent to him a benediction so dry, and so hard, that it instantly tore out his sacrilegious soul" (*Discours veritable*, 9). A second Huguenot, and then a third, also tried to seize the Eucharist, with no better luck. As the anonymous author triumphantly recorded, "Voilà, three corpses under the holy Sacrament" (*Discours veritable*, 9). Shocked by the untimely deaths of their corelig-

ionists, the remaining Huguenots apparently decided to turn their attentions to lesser objects, "since the cost of the Host was prohibitively high" (*Discours veritable*, 9).

The sudden intrusion of the active wrath of God into the narrative is jarring, to say the least. Recognizing this, the author quickly moved to bolster his credibility by citing biblical examples of God's anger mortally let loose on earth. He related one story in the first book of Kings in which Ahab, king of Israel, was intent on launching a military campaign to conquer the land of Ramoth-gilead. Disregarding a prophetic warning that God had decreed his death if he persevered in his plans, Ahab went ahead with the attack and was fatally wounded by a random arrow (1 Kings 22:1-38). By implication, the Huguenots in Ste.-Ferme equally deserved to die. They had not only disobeyed God but had literally tried to assault Him. Curiously, the author was not content merely to adduce examples from the Bible of men who went against God's will and paid for their temerity with their lives. He also acknowledged that God sometimes used the "most desperate men ... idolaters and very vicious" to "reduce his people to faith and to chastise their excesses" (*Discours veritable*, 9). From this perspective, the rise of Protestantism in France and the ensuing civil wars were proof of God's divine plan – a plan that not only apportioned righteous vengeance to heretics, but also used them as a kind of pedagogical tool to stimulate moral and religious reform.

But by the early seventeenth century, God no longer needed the Huguenots as a corrective force, or so the narrator rather paradoxically asserted. His divine mercy was evident in the "wise governance of Henry the grand of happy memory, of Louis XIII reigning now ... and the happy guidance and counsel of the Queen Mother, as well as in the vigilance of so many good prelates that [Louis] cried to the good God to arouse in his Church" (*Discours veritable*, 10). These rather shopworn phrases of approbation for the monarchs are bolstered by the inclusion of ecclesiastics; it is as if the "good prelates" are to provide a moral and spiritual backbone for the kingdom in tandem with royal rule. Indeed, the narrator had earlier characterized French kings as being "disposed by nature to love their subjects, but much too readily willing to pardon mutineers and rebels" – reproaching them, albeit in the most effusive way, for being too lenient towards the Huguenot princes (*Discours veritable*, 4; also see Lan-tenay, 1879, 33 n. 2). The monarchy needed to take a firmer stand against those who threatened the stability of the state.

Yet the narrator's explicit reference to the monarchy suggests another perspective on the active wrath of God at Ste.-Ferme, one in which the Huguenots' attempt to defile the Eucharist was clearly violence against the state, which had forged and aimed to preserve the religious truce. In this reading, the Huguenots' actions at Ste. Ferme were simply of a piece with their behavior before and during the Wars of Religion. On the eve of the civil wars, Huguenots had burned the preserved heart of King Francis II (d. 1562) and had destroyed the tomb of King Louis XI (d. 1483) (Elwood,

1999, 161).<sup>4</sup> After the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in 1572, Huguenot writers such as François Hotman had begun advocating open resistance to "tyrants" – that is, the Valois monarchs. Attacks on the French crown – and by extension, French society as a whole – were inherent in the so-called Reformed religion, or so Catholics believed (no matter that the Bourbon line had come to the throne as recently disavowed champions of Calvinism). If Huguenots would assault God Himself, why would they falter at earthly kings?

Yet the episode at Ste.-Ferme has other layers of meaning as well. Most notably, it is powerfully resonant of the bitter divisions of the Wars of Religion. Throughout those wars, many Huguenots deliberately profaned the Eucharist as a supreme insult to Catholics and in order to demonstrate that objects in themselves were not sacred (Davis, 1975). For Catholics, ritual objects – such as the Eucharist, or statues of saints – were not merely representations of power; they were manifestations of sacrality in the earthly world. The Huguenots' assault on the Host at Ste.-Ferme powerfully demonstrates the persistence of religious zealotry. It also suggests the continuation into the seventeenth century in France – after the presumed pacification of the kingdom – of a style and language of conflict that had characterized the earlier religious wars.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, although vastly outnumbered, the monks of Ste.-Ferme were able to expel the Huguenots from the abbey. Smarting with shame from their defeat, the attackers in an "extremity of rage" then burned the town adjacent to the monastery, including the houses of the abbot, the monks, and nearly all the inhabitants. One Huguenot, fearing that the town was not burning well enough, went to investigate; the anonymous author reported that his corpse was found the next day among the ruins of the fire, "his breastplate having served as a tureen for him, his stinking body fluids as broth, and his rotten flesh reduced and consumed down to the bone." He added ironically that the dead man was a "[b]rave warrior who had the courage to roast among the spoils that he claimed to ravish" (*Discours veritable*, 11). In their rage, Huguenots brutally murdered a "poor boy" in the house of a monk; coming upon some pigs and a sleeping dog, they massacred the animals as well (*Discours veritable*, 11-12). This senseless butchery contrasts starkly with an earlier incident in the narrative, when a Huguenot leader was in mortal danger and would have been slain "without the natural compassion of a good Monk, more nourished in piety than in carnage, and more accustomed to the sound of clocks than to the fright of battle" (*Discours veritable*, 8). Catholic mercy and compassion (and, implicitly, the sense of order represented by clocks) are set in sharp relief to the blind, out-of-control vio-

4 Francis II's reign had been dominated by the ultra-Catholic Guise party, while Louis XI was seen as overly authoritarian and centralizing.

5 The secondary literature on violence in the Wars of Religion is vast. See: Crouzet, 1990; Davis, 1975; Diefendorf, 1991.

lence of the Huguenots, who are depicted here in stereotypical imagery that might have been drawn directly from Catholic polemic of the previous century. As one Catholic polemicist wrote in the late sixteenth century, "The heretic snoops, seizes, pillages, plunders, steals all that he can find in the house of God and in its ceremonies, only using that which he can be sure to turn to his advantage, casting it all into a figment of his imagination, forming a sect adorned with beautiful pretexts. Under cover of the Gospel he worships his own fantasies" (Raemond, 1623, 956). Nothing about the Reformed religion is orderly, reverential, or deferential; instead, all is chaos and self-indulgence.

At Ste.-Ferme, the narrator contended, divine intervention put an end to the heretical attack – an intervention that even the Huguenots themselves were forced to recognize. After their "noble exploits of arms," the Huguenots "immediately felt themselves battered with a terror so strange – whether out of fear (which is natural to cruel and sacrilegious souls) or out of a just punishment from above – that they fled in utter disarray" (*Discours veritable*, 13). If any doubt remained that God was a Catholic, the author sought to adduce the final proof by describing a miraculous vision that appeared in the evening sky on the day before the attack and then again on the day of the Huguenot defeat. Over Ste. Ferme appeared a "flaming cross ... [and] the figure of a man all shining, holding in his hand a flaming sword, which sometimes seemed to change into a lance" (*Discours veritable*, 13-14). The author noted that material was being gathered for an investigation into the veracity of this miracle, but his own view was readily apparent. "Is God's mercy and providence less than in previous centuries?" he asked rhetorically, warning the Huguenots to "[t]ake care of yourself; it is no longer your season. God will no longer permit your furies to spread among His faithful. ... Henceforth you can no longer trick our kings, nor do in affairs of state what you have done in matters of religion" (*Discours veritable*, 14-15). In other words, no matter how much violence the Huguenots wreaked, the royal authority of the Most Christian Kings of France would not succumb to the depredations of heresy. For this author, at least, despite the equivocal and putatively irenic nature of the settlement of 1598, Huguenots were purely and simply heretics, and as always ought to be equated with treasonous subjects of the crown.

We do not know when Louis XIII was told of the attack on Ste.-Ferme, though he seems to have been kept informed about the progress and activities of the Huguenot army; an officer of the royal guard had been sent to the duke of Rohan to learn his grievances and intentions. On November 10, 1615, the day after Anne of Austria arrived in France, the king issued a declaration ordering the Huguenots to lay down their arms (Lantenay, 1879, 14 n. 2). Despite Huguenot opposition to his marriage, Louis wed his Spanish bride in the cathedral of St.-André on November 25. The royal party left Bordeaux in December, wending its slow way back to Paris. On January 23, 1616, a peace accord was signed at Loudun between the crown and the

rebels. The duke of Rohan, representing Condé, gained the governorship of Poitou; Condé received, among other things, the governorship of Berry. Aside from these personal gains, however, the Huguenot party won no significant concessions (Clarke, 1966, 58). The status quo persisted.

In conclusion, the account of the assault on Ste.-Ferme reveals an uneasy tension in early seventeenth-century French society. Despite overall gains in political stability, fanatical religious violence persisted well after the Edict of Nantes and into an era when many historians believe other features to have been more prominent in the French religious landscape. The depth of sectarian rivalry – a conflict that in essence comprised a primal argument about whose God was stronger – remained. The odd 1615 episode at Ste.-Ferme, and the way it was cast in the contemporary relation, serve to remind us that even as the state was poised to grow stronger, the bitterness of religious violence showed few signs of weakening. We should not be surprised that profound sectarian hatred knows no tidy chronological limits.

## NASKOK NA SAINTE-FERME, 1615: OSKRUNJENJE IN JEZA BOŽJA V ENI ZADNJIH EPIZOD VERSKIH VOJN

Alisa A. PLANT

Univerza v Tulanu, University College, New Orleans, LA 70118, USA

e-mail: aplant@tulane.edu

### POVZETEK

*Ob koncu leta 1615 so se hugenoti na jugu Francije dvignili v kratkotrajnem, a krčevitem nasilju, predvsem zaradi nasprotovanja tesni zvezi med Francijo in Španijo, za katero so bili prepričani, da napovedujejo izgubo njihove verske svobode. V začetku oktobra je v Bordeaux pripotoval Ludvik XIII., da bi se tam sestal s svojo habsburško nevesto, Ano Avstrijsko. Nekaj dni po kraljevem prihodu na jug je hugenotska vojska pet tisočih mož napadla benediktinski samostan Sainte-Ferme v mestu Guyenne slabih 50 kilometrov od Bordeauxa. Hugenoti so oplenili cerkev, toda menihom se je kljub neprimerno manjšemu številu vendarle posrečilo pregnati napadalce, ki so potem zažgali mesto, meječe na samostan. Skoraj takoj zatem je bila objavljena pripoved o napadu. Tedanji interesi so bili očitno veliki, kajti žrva in izčrpna pripoved je bila natisnjena trikrat (enkrat leta 1615 in dvakrat leta 1616, tudi v pariški izdaji).*

*Anonimni pripovedovalec je poročal, kako so bili ubiti trije hugenoti, ko so se približali evharistiji z namenom, da jo oskrunijo. Nenadni "vdor" aktivne jeze božje v pripoved je neskladen. Pričujoči članek preučuje nenavadno epizodo nezadržnega fanatičnega verskega nasilja, ki je bilo značilno za verske vojne, a je po mnenju*



*mnogih zgodovinarjev močno uplahnelo, potem ko je bil izdan natski edikt. Pripoved o napadu na Saint-Ferme govori ne le o vztrajnosti, marveč tudi o globini sektaškega rivalstva – konflikti, katerega osnovni argument je bil pravzaprav vprašanje, čigav bog je močnejši. Huguenotov po dolgih desetletjih nasilja še vedno ni minila želja po oskrnjanju katoliških lokalitet in obrednih predmetov, katolikov pa želja po povezo-  
vanju takšnih dejavnosti z aktivno jezo božjo.*

*Ključne besede: nasilje, evkaristija, katoliki, verske vojne, Francija*

#### REFERENCES

- Anonymous (1615):** Discours veritable du premier exploit d'armes fait en Guienne, en l'Abbaye de Sainte Ferme, le 12 Octobre 1615, par quelques pretendus Reformateurs d'Estat, contenant leur Horoscope, & la merueille de Dieu qui a paru sur ce sujet. Paris, chez Louys Hebert, rue S. Jacques, au soufflet verd.
- Benedict, Ph. (1991):** The Huguenot Population of France, 1600-1685: The Demographic Fate and Customs of a Religious Minority. Philadelphia, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 81, Part 5.
- Bercé, Y.-M. (1990):** History of Peasant Revolts: The Social Origins of Rebellion in Early Modern France (trans. Amanda Whitmore). Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press.
- Clarke, J. A. (1966):** Huguenot Warrior: The Life and Times of Henri de Rohan, 1579-1638. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff.
- Crouzet, D. (1990):** Les guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525-vers 1610. 2 vols. Paris, Champ Vallon.
- Davis, N. Z. (1975):** The Rites of Violence. In: Society and Culture in Early Modern France. Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Diefendorf, B. (1991):** Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Elwood, C. (1999):** The Body Broken: The Calvinist Doctrine of the Eucharist and the Symbolization of Power in Sixteenth-Century France. New York, Oxford University Press.
- García, C. (1979):** La oposicion y conjuncion de los dos grandes luminaires de la tierra, o, La Antipatía de Franceses y Españoles (1617). Alberta, Canada, Alta Press.
- Ginzburg, C. (ed.) and Bologna Seminar (1991):** Ritual Pillages: A Preface to Research in Progress. In: Muir, E., Ruggiero, G. (eds.): Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press.

- Hanlon, G. (1993):** *Confession and Community in Seventeenth-Century France: Catholic and Protestant Coexistence in Aquitaine*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Holt, M. P. (1995):** *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Jouanna, A. (1989):** *La devoir de révolte: La noblesse française et la gestation de l'État moderne, 1559-1661*. Paris, Fayard.
- Kleinman, R. (1985):** *Anne of Austria, Queen of France*. Columbus, Ohio State University Press.
- Lantenay de A. (1879):** Préface, Discours véritable du premier exploit d'armes faict en Guienne, en l'Abaye de Sainte Ferme, le 12 October 1615, par quelques pretendus Reformateurs d'Estat, contenant leur Horoscope, et la merveille de Dieu qui a paru sur ce sujet. Bordeaux, Féret et fils.
- Muir, E. (1997):** *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Raemon F. de (ed.) (1623):** *L'histoire de la naissance, progrèz, et décadence de l'hérésie de ce siècle*. Rouen, Jean Berthelin.
- Rubin, M. (1991):** *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Sawyer, J. K. (1990):** *Printed Poison: Pamphlet Propaganda, Faction Politics, and the Public Sphere in Early Seventeenth-Century France*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Tapié, V.-L. (1974, 1984):** *France in the Age of Louis XIII and Richelieu* (trans. D. McN. Lockie). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.