

The Reconquest of 'Heretic' Lands: Roman Strategies of Conversion in Switzerland and the Holy Roman Empire in the Seventeenth Century

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From the late sixteenth century on, the Catholic reconquest of 'heretic' European lands, especially in the Holy Roman Empire and in Switzerland, was the prominent aim of the papal politics. This goal is fully evident in the Instructions (*Istruzioni*) for papal nuncios at imperial courts and for missionaries as Jesuits and Capucins, but it also appears in the rich correspondence between nuncios and Roman congregations as the Holy Office and the Propaganda Fide. This rich documentation allows to underline the gap between the Roman instructions and the local realities nuncios and missionaries had to face, and to analyse the different conversion strategies related with imperial and local politics, privileges of nobility, resistance of the local clergy, and other difficulties. It was sometimes impossible to apply the Roman directives when they were not supported by the Emperor and the local nobilities. Nevertheless, during the Thirty Years War, conversions, especially of German princes, noblemen and evangelic clergymen, took on a clear political and symbolic meaning, which was instrumented by the Catholic and imperial propaganda.

The paper will not only focus on the conversions of noblemen and princes, but will also analyse the attitudes of 'common people' in the face of conversions. As the most recent historiography underlines, confessional boundaries were often crossed in everyday life. This becomes evident in the devotional practice, in the use of the Bible, of songs and prayers that appeared suspect to the Catholic Church and were therefore forbidden. The usage of prohibited devotional practices was a very critical problem for the local Catholic clergy and the Roman congregations alike. What was the reaction of the Roman hierarchies to popular devotion that did not conform to the Catholic dogmas? Which strategies of persuasion were adopted by missionaries? How did Roman conversion politics change during the seventeenth century? How important was the experience of Pope Alexander VII during his previous office in Germany for the readjustment of the Roman conversion strategies?