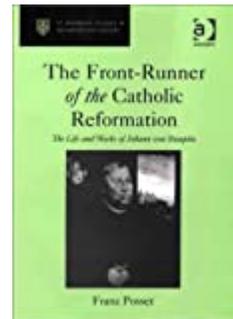


**Franz Posset.** *Front-Runner of the Catholic Reformation: The Life and Works of Johann von Staupitz.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003. xxii + 398 pp. \$104.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-0866-0.



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As an influential mentor of Martin Luther, Johann von Staupitz is a well-known figure for every Reformation historian. Many more outside the historical profession will probably associate the figure of Staupitz with the renowned German actor Bruno Ganz who portrayed him—impressively as always—in the recent movie about Luther. While generally this film was a rather ambiguous attempt at popularizing Reformation history, the contrary is true for Franz Posset’s scholarly, well-founded biographical and theological study of Staupitz as “the front-runner of Catholic Reformation” (p. xiii). Even though scholarly research over the last century has produced a considerable number of articles and books about Staupitz, as a bibliographical compilation published some years ago by Posset and Rudolf K. Markwald shows, Posset delivers the complete biography of this eminent church reformer and theologian of early modern Germany.[1] The author insists on having written “a theological biography written by a lay theologian for other theologians and for historians” and, furthermore, sees his main concern as “bring[ing] forth Staupitz’s ‘Catholic spirituality’” (p. xv). Due to his mainly chronological approach, he also provides the Reformation historian with interesting details and insights.

In retrospect one can see how closely Staupitz was connected with the context of the later Reformation from

his childhood on. Probably born between 1463 and 1468, he was educated at the same school for the local nobility at Grimma, Saxony, as the later duke of Saxony and elector Frederick the Wise—a circumstance obviously not without importance for the early Reformation. After studying at Leipzig and Cologne, Staupitz entered the Augustinian order, probably at the Munich friary, which belonged to its observant branch. Soon he revealed himself to be a skilled theologian and ambitious church politician. In 1497, he matriculated at the University of Tuebingen, where the university and the local Augustinian friary were in close cooperation. Only a year later, Staupitz had worked his way up to the office of prior. In 1504 Frederick the Wise called for his schoolmate Staupitz to help him develop the recently founded university at Wittenberg. Now Staupitz could hark back to his earlier experiences, for example, by taking the constitution of the University of Tuebingen as the model for Wittenberg. Besides his duties as professor for biblical studies at Wittenberg and his efforts in organizing the university—as well as converting the Augustinians’ outpost at Wittenberg into a full friary—Staupitz assumed from 1503 to 1520 the office of Vicar General of the Reformed (Observant) branch of the Augustinians. From 1509 to 1512 he simultaneously held the position of provincial of the conventual Augustinians of the Saxon province. In this function he had opportunities to act as patron to

younger members of his order by sending them, for example, to Wittenberg for their studies. For most historians Staupitz's reputation mainly derived from the fact that one of the younger friars sent from Erfurt to Wittenberg had been Martin Luther—who succeeded Staupitz as professor of biblical studies in Wittenberg. In addition to these positions within the order, Staupitz regularly assumed preaching responsibilities, mostly during Lent, in Nuremberg, Munich, and Salzburg. The latter gradually became his preferred residence.

From 1517 to 1520 Staupitz was directly involved in the early events of the Reformation due to his close relationship to Luther. Posset argues that even Luther's famous ninety-five theses on indulgences were probably inspired and supported by Staupitz, with whom Luther conducted intensive discussions during 1517 about the theological implications of the issue. Again, it was Staupitz who invited Luther to a disputation of his theology on the occasion of the Augustinian chapter meeting in April 1518. There Luther successfully presented his theological positions and gained his first supporters outside of Wittenberg, like Martin Bucer and Johannes Brenz. And once more, it was Staupitz (as Luther's patron and friend) who rushed to Augsburg, where Cardinal Cajetan as papal nuncio personally tried to convince Luther to recant his views as heretical. Seen more broadly, Staupitz paved the way for Luther by building a network of reform-minded younger Augustinian friars centered at Wittenberg, where about one hundred of them had studied. It is well-known that Augustinians stood in the forefront as preachers of the new Lutheran theology and reform ideas.

Most scholars have suggested the growth of a certain alienation between Staupitz and Luther as the Reformation movement gained momentum, a view apparently corroborated by Staupitz's abandonment of his position as vicar general and permanent settlement at Salzburg in 1520. In 1522, Staupitz left the order to become abbot of St. Peter's, an old and established Benedictine cloister there. Posset, in contrast, emphasizes that Staupitz and Luther formed a theological united front even after 1520. This argument was underlined by Luther himself, who held his friend in high regard for his entire life and repeatedly mentioned and praised him in his *Tischreden* as well as in his lectures. Such remarks documented how deeply Staupitz had impressed him. How the relationship between Luther and Staupitz might have developed in the long run can only be the topic of speculation, because only two years after his investiture as Benedictine Abbot, Staupitz died—on December 28, 1524. In con-

trast to Luther, Staupitz consciously remained within the old church. Even if he shared theological premises with Luther, Staupitz, as a member of the Saxon nobility, neither cut his ties with the social groups from which he originated nor with the old church. In general, he seemed more deliberate about his social position within the career framework of the Church. From 1514 to 1516, for example, he tried in vain to become successor of Berthold Pörstinger as bishop of Chiemsee and, as Posset speculates, he probably enjoyed being abbot of such a prestigious convent. While there, he also acted as official adviser to Cardinal Matthäus Lang.

Even if Posset puts some emphasis on Staupitz's contribution to the Lutheran Reformation, his main thesis is clearly outlined in the book's title: Staupitz was the front-runner of the Catholic Reformation (and not, one should note, of Catholic Reform). These events are to be considered a Reformation because Staupitz's main theological concepts and ideas about church reform were close to Luther's. They constitute a Catholic Reformation because Staupitz tried to realize his reform concepts within the constitutional framework of the Old Church and never thought about going beyond its boundaries. Staupitz failed even with his most modest plan, that of uniting the conventual and observantine branches of the Augustinian order, whereas Luther produced a fundamental upheaval of the Church and religion in early modern Europe.

What makes Posset's book worth reading for the historian is not only his thorough analysis of Staupitz's theology and concepts of reform concepts, but also the detailed documentation of Staupitz's close involvement in the early Reformation process. Along the way, by describing Staupitz as one of the most outstanding representatives of church reform in the beginning of the sixteenth century in Germany, the author shows how the organization of an order like the Augustinians worked in everyday life. He illuminates Staupitz not only as a theologian and preacher, but also as the busy manager and political leader of an early modern religious organization—a man who spent much more time travelling from monastery to monastery and hurrying from one preaching assignment to the next than in the tranquillity of a cloister. Moreover, we see how Staupitz worked and acted within a carefully woven social and political network of friars as well as nobles and patricians of larger cities. In Nuremberg, for example, the existence of a Staupitz sodality which included such outstanding figures as Willibald Pirckheimer, Christoph Scheurl, or Albrecht Dürer points to the importance of an accurate as-

essment of Johann von Staupitz's historical impact. For all these reasons, this "theological biography" deserves the interest of historians as well.

Note

[1]. Rudolf K. Markwald and Franz Posset, *125 years of Staupitz Research (since 1867). An Annotated Bibliography of Studies on Johannes von Staupitz (C.1468 - 1524)* (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1995).

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