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Xavier Maréchaux, *Noces révolutionnaires: Le mariage des prêtres en France, 1789-1815*, Paris: Vendémaire, 2017. 191 pp. Appendices, notes, and index. €19.50(pb). ISBN: 978-2-36358-153-2.

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Xavier Maréchaux's study of Catholic priests who renounced their vows of celibacy and married during the French Revolution, Consulate and Napoleonic Empire seeks to understand why priests married and left the Church and the consequences of their actions for themselves, the French state, the Church, and civil society. Despite the abundant archival sources that are available on the subject in the form of letters by married priests to Pope Pius VII as well as those addressed to Cardinal Caprara, who was sent to France by the Pope following the Concordat of 1801, priestly marriage remains a forgotten episode in the history of the Revolution.

The book is divided into an introduction, six chapters and a conclusion. While the priests' letters form the backbone of Maréchaux's documentation, especially those available in 21 cartons and microfilm housed in the Archives Nationales, he also uses local studies and departmental archives, which have allowed him to put together a biographical dictionary of 4,200 married priests. Indeed, the book's appendices provide graphs, tables, and maps on the social origin of married priests, their dates of birth, the number of married priests by department from 1791 and 1816, the professions that married priests pursued during the Consulate and Empire, and the civil status (separated, divorced, widowed) of priests who asked to reassume their priestly functions.

Maréchaux estimates that 5,918 priests married from 1789 to 1815. From 1791 to September 1793, when priests were allowed to marry, 8% of them chose to do so. When revolutionaries sought to abolish the Constitutional Church and its clergy and forced them to marry, during the "Dechristianization of the Year II," 70% did so. After the Terror, more than 90% of the priests who had been forced to marry remained married and continued to renounce their religious vocation, while only 2,7% appealed to Cardinal Caprara and claimed that their marriages were counterfeit. From 1795 to June 1815 another 22% of the priests married, when again, they could do so by choice.

Married priests in the nineteenth century were hardly portrayed in a flattering light, as evidenced in abbé Grégoire's scarcely remembered *Histoire du mariage des prêtres en France, particulièrement depuis 1789* (Paris, 1826), and they became the butt of an abundant anticlerical literature. Interestingly, Grégoire criticized them for blackening the reputation of the Constitutional Church, while anticlerical writers accused them of cynicism and immorality, while treating them with utter contempt. Maréchaux is intent on rehabilitating them, arguing that they deserve more than insult and neglect. He argues that they were sometimes the victims and at times the perpetrators of revolutionary violence, and that they abandoned their sacerdotal state for a matrimonial state freely in some instances and in others to avoid persecution.

The first chapter explores the state of the clergy in 1789 and why many priests took their vows. The motivations ranged from family pressure, the death of a lover, to true religious commitment. Chapter two assesses the fate of clergy during the early years of the French Revolution, and the extent to which priests who chose marriage had become “dechristianized priests.” Throughout the book Maréchaux suggests that the existence of married priests indicated the degree to which France had been affected by a process of secularization. Some priests married to become “citizen priests” and were shaped by Enlightenment ideas, and the majority of those who married before the Fall of 1793 clearly rejected their religious vocations.

Chapters four and five explore the marriage of priests under the Directory and Consulate, and Maréchaux asks why priests who had been forced to marry during Year II did not divorce. He offers the hypothesis that the renunciation of clerical celibacy had gained acceptance in French society and they had adapted well to their new roles, in spite of the turmoil of the Terror. Chapter 5 invites the readers into the private lives of the priests and their families through their letters, which constitute a rich and revealing trove of documentary evidence for the historian. They offer tantalizing insights into unhappy and happy marriages. Many of the letters in the Caprara archive attest to the latter and to the degree to which former priests willingly assumed a paternal role in their families. It is unfortunate that the archives have left so little information about the women whom the priests married, but Maréchaux makes a good case for supposing that most of them married women from their own social milieu. It is interesting to note that only 98 priests, or less than 4% of the married priests, married nuns, the anticlerical pre-Revolutionary caricatures depicting marriages between monks and nuns notwithstanding.

Despite the dearth of information about the spouses of married priests, Maréchaux does present a detailed account of three priests and their wives. Perhaps the most interesting is that of Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the former bishop of Autun and Napoleon's minister. A portrait of his wife, which was painted by the female portraitist Elisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun, hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It depicts a strikingly beautiful Madame de Talleyrand-Périgord, who was born in India in 1762 and who first married an Englishman before divorcing him, after engaging in an illicit and scandalous affair with another Englishman in Bengal. She returned to France before leaving for England in 1792 where she met Talleyrand. She renewed contact with him when she returned to France in 1797, at which time Talleyrand had become a minister for Napoleon. There was some speculation that Talleyrand was forced into marriage by Napoleon and that an illegitimate child was in play. This cannot be verified as he never actually mentions his wife in his memoirs, and the marriage appears to have been unhappy. As divorce was abolished by the Restoration, he finally negotiated a permanent separation.

Chapter 6 returns to the question of how the Vatican dealt with married priests after the Concordat of 1801 and the role of Cardinal Cabrara. Maréchaux concludes that if Cabrara's mission was to have the priests return to the fold, he failed. For most married priests the Revolution represented a permanent break with the Old Regime and presented them with new possibilities. In this sense, Maréchaux sides with the historians Claude Langlois, Michel Vovelle and Dominique Julia, rather than with those whom he calls the “christian historians”—Bernard Plongeron, John McManners, and Nigel Aston—in emphasizing how the phenomenon of married priests reflects the importance of the weakening hold of Catholic Church in civil society during the waning years of the Old Regime. Indeed, Maréchaux grounds his study in the debate about dechristianization between Plongeron, McManners, and Aston on the one side, and Langlois, Vovelle, Julia on the other.[1] While this slim volume presents a wealth of detail, this reader would have appreciated a consideration of this subject not only from the perspective of the history of Catholicism, but also from the perspective of gender and cultural history, as a number of interesting books and articles have appeared in the last twenty years on the evolution of the family, sexuality, and celibacy during this period. In addition to Claire Cage's *Unnatural Frenchmen: The Politics of Priestly Celibacy and Marriage, 1720-1815*, which Maréchaux cites, these works include, to name two,

Suzanne Desan's *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* and Anne Jacobsen Schutte, *By Force and Fear: Taking and Breaking Vows in Early Modern Europe*.^[2] This lacuna aside, *Noces révolutionnaires* presents a compelling insight into a world in transition and represents a valuable new contribution to the history of the Old Regime, Revolution and Napoleonic episode.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Bernard Plongeron, *Conscience religieuse en révolution* (Paris: Ed. A. et J. Picard, 1969) and Michel Vovelle, *Religion et révolution: la déchristianisation de l'an II* (Paris: Hachette, 1976).

[2] Claire Cage, *Unnatural Frenchmen: The Politics of Priestly Celibacy and Marriage, 1720-1815* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015); Suzanne Desan *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2006); Anne Jacobson Schutte, *By Force and Fear: Taking and Breaking Vows in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

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