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Nicole Lemaitre, Ed. *Histoire des curés*. Paris: Fayard, 2002. 523 pp. Notes, glossary, and index. 23.00 €. ISBN 35-1412-2.

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When Henri Grégoire and the *Évêques réunis* attempted to rebuild the constitutional church after the Terror, they wrote in their Second Encyclical Letter: "Le Christianisme a fait présent aux hommes de la sublime institution des Curés. Cette classe de prêtres citoyens est répandue sur le sol de la France; ils vivent au milieu des hommes, sans autre famille que leurs paroissiens, au bonheur desquels ils dévouent leur existence. Un berger, à la tête de son troupeau, est l'image d'un Curé conduisant sa paroisse. Il donne l'exemple et la leçon. Sa science consiste surtout à bien faire. Son habillement est modeste; la vie frugale. . . . Les divertissemens publics, les amusemens du monde sont interdits à des Prêtres qui doivent trouver leur délassemens dans les oeuvres de charité." [1]

The *bon curé* had been one of the principal images of the early revolution and, labeled *Le curé patriote*, had figured as the frontispiece of the first issue of *La Feuille villageoise*—a publication of impeccable revolutionary credentials founded by an ex-Jesuit. No surprise here, however, for all who know the powerful image of the parish priest worked out and developed by eighteenth-century deists and philosophers. [2] This stylized French pastor of a territorial parish is the subject of *Histoire des Curés*, or at least the authors wanted to make him such. Right at the start, they suggest that the curé of today is a peripheral, close to invisible, figure; that there was a heyday of the visible curé; and that the earlier history of the priest and pastoral care can serve as an introduction to this. The work is chronologically divided into four sections: "Naissance et développement de la cure des âmes," "Entre réforme et contre-réforme," "Entre cléricisme et anticléricisme," and "Des curés tridentins aux nouveaux curés," written by Catherine Vincent, Nicole Lemaitre, Michel Lagrée, and Luc Perrin respectively.

Scanting the identity and mission of the New Testament presbyter, Catherine Vincent sets out in part one to trace the "progression territoriale" (p. 17) of pastoral care as it subsequently emerged in city and country, determined by, or perhaps only in tandem with, local community structures. Pastoral goals and clear roles were assigned to the bishop, the priest, and the deacon by the fourth century (before this time we must mainly conjecture the prerogatives and tasks of the New Testament *episcopoi*, *presbyteroi*, and *diaconoi*). [3] The evidence is limited but appears to be representative: papal Rome, monastic Ireland, parts of Gaul. Data is often derived from sermon collections of the noted bishops, liturgical sources, and archeological remains.

The parish priest as such had his origins in the eighth century, according to Vincent, when *systems* of parishes were developed but took several hundred years to become institutionalized. In the last testament of Charlemagne there is provision made for metropolitan churches. This was for the center; outlying areas of Europe had only recently been converted to Christianity. Writings from the Carolingian era portray the parish priest as a model of pastoral concern and personal holiness. Here, monks, canons, and other priestly functionaries were as likely to staff parishes as much as some kind of

“pure” parish priest. In fact, the “curé” in the strict sense of the word, with a system of parish priests under the bishop (to go with an already long existing system of randomly staffed parishes), was a development of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There were new challenges, such as the Waldensian heresy, and strict controls, such as the laws on priestly residence and behavior that emanated from the Lateran Councils. William of St. Thierry, the Canons of St. Victor, and great monks such as St. Bernard contributed to the development of a high spirituality for priests, who were to administer sacraments, teach by word and example, and watch out for the general spiritual well-being of their people—in short, the standard for full time, resident pastors for subsequent centuries.

A nicely set up parish was a *benefice* for priests, economically and socially, but a professional, salaried clergy brought both new efficiency and new problems. Men would use the parish as a financial home base rather than a pastoral home base. And so began the problem of the absentee pastor and the mélange of itinerant priestly characters who ran parishes in the meantime. Good bishops tried to maintain discipline, but an appropriate anti-clerical literature took the lackadaisical to task. The response to inferior clergy was pious lay antagonism. Lay committees, *fabriques*, charged with the administration of the physical parish, were created, a phenomenon that would revive in France in modern times and be an issue in controversies about parish control after the Law of Separation of Church and State. In the earlier era, clergy who had little to do with administering a parish proliferated. This was considered acceptable if they took care of people in some concrete way, but not so acceptable if they administered nothing at all beyond prayers for the dead. By the fifteenth century—the pre-Reformation era—the comportment of a wide range of priestly types was a cause for reform, indeed, perhaps for despair.

Nicole Lemaitre in part two presents documentation of the timid reforms of the fifteenth century through the revolutionary church of 1790-1802. Pastoral ideals needed constant promotion and promoters achieved international prominence: Jean Gerson of Paris, Jan Huss of Bohemia, Nicholas de Clamanges, and Vincent Ferrer. Cupidity and concubinage topped the fault list—and here there are good local data. Groups formed around astute reformers such as Lefèvre d’Étaples and his student Josse Clichtove. Leading Protestant reformers made clerical morals a priority, reshaping the identity and role of pastors to such extent that some long-term features of ministerial continuity were ignored. The Council of Trent then attempted to restate that (in the words of Lemaitre) “le prêtre est un médiateur entre les fidèles et Dieu; placé à part pour le ministère de l’eucharistie et du pardon, il doit s’identifier totalement au Christ médiateur, à la fois victime sacrificielle et intercesseur pour ses ouailles. Jusqu’au XXe siècle, l’homme de l’eucharistie passera avant le prédicateur chez les catholiques; dans un premier temps, pourtant, la charge de curé se trouve ainsi investie d’un sens bien plus sacrificiel que sacramentel” (pp. 182-183).

Lemaitre does not attempt to show the development of Tridentine theology but is very clear on the place of the priest in the reform program of the Catholic Reformation. Bishops were expected to ensure the quality of the new priest, and the records they kept reveal curé resistance to the reforms. The ultimate goal of clerical enlightenment was popular enlightenment. The old residency foibles were looked into, and attempts were made to monitor preaching (Tridentine reaction to Reformation emphasis upon the word did not go so far as to neglect the ministry of the Word). French royal persecution of the Huguenots received clerical support (though priests were often insufficiently instructed to argue with Protestant claims), yet in some places the Huguenots themselves would receive clerical support, or at least clerical grace, to behave in accord with their own lights.

Across the Jansenist and Gallican controversies and complications, the image of the Tridentine curé received a number of touch-ups. Here Lemaitre works with the standard studies of Jansenism/Gallicanism to emphasize that the curés “mettent de niveau le prêtre avec l’évêque et le laïque avec le prêtre” (p. 213). She uses the essential studies from Edmond Préclin through Catherine Maire to explore an enhancement of priestly prerogatives that would give the curé authority in his

parish corresponding to the authority of the bishop in his diocese.[4] Profiling post-Tridentine, spiritually conscious curés of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Lemaitre appropriately highlights the French case, but notes parallel movements and personalities elsewhere in Europe. In sum, the two broad influences on curés were Jansenism—an intellectual, open, but elitist Jansenism—and the French school of spirituality associated with the name of Cardinal de Bérulle. The latter combined ideals of sanctity and intellectual prowess with a concern for the masses of believers, inspiring the great spiritual directors, Louis Tronson, Jean-Jacques Olier, and the eminently effective mission preacher Louis Grignon de Montfort. Rétif de La Bretonne appreciated the success of these efforts; Stendahl, later, did not. The curé who came out of this tradition concerned himself with personal morality and broad social improvement. And this was the type of curé who showed at the meeting of the Estates General in 1789. In the revolutionary decade, the unfortunate split between the French priests who accepted the government-controlled reorganization of the clergy and those who did not (fearing that such reorganization would be a challenge to papal authority) engendered popular confusion and a host of clerical rivalries. To this was quickly added wholesale persecution by the government. The story of the revolutionary church is told quickly here; authors seemingly count on the accessibility of the major studies of the past generation—Tackett, Plongeron, Quiénart.[5]

With a leap across the Empire into the Restoration and a plunge into the vestiges of nineteenth-century Gallicanism and the shallow ultramontanistism of Lamennais, Michel Lagrée and Luc Perrin in parts three and four change the narrative rhythm altogether, offering more a study of church and society than a study of the curé.

Michel Lagrée attends to modern anti-clericalisms, with special attention to reactionary anti-clericalism during the Second Empire. By catering to catholic support groups, Napoleon III's government unwittingly (for the most part) promoted an incipient anti-clericalism that took three forms: secular first Empire, positivist-materialist, and revolutionary socialist (with its simple but gross nastiness). High profile novelists were among the critics of supposedly dull and selfish clergy. There is another leap across the decades with a slide into the beginning of the twentieth century and the law of separation of church and state. Statistics on ordinations, the social status of priest, and their preparation to meet the intellectual and ideological challenges of the last part of the century constitute the central chapter of Part III, "Le temps des bons prêtres," the idea being that priests were decent and harmless types, somewhat magicalized when Mass celebration took priority over other activities involving direct, priest to people, teaching, caring, helping. The author offers an aside on the devotional revolution in Ireland, chronicled a generation ago by Emmet Larkin: a stark contrast to the situation in France (in fact, Larkin's admirably appointed and sustained thesis stands in stark contrast to parts three and four of *Histoire des curés*).[6] Lagrée's subsequent chapters continue to highlight France and show parallels elsewhere in Europe. Catholic charitable and professional organizations were partially clericalized. Individual regions had their own combinations of local and national loyalty: where there was local resistance to national politics there would often be adherence to local catholicism. Protection of local languages was another clerical mission because local languages (Alsatian German, Flemish, Breton) were an effective safeguard against the highly secularized national government. World War I brought the marginalized clergy into the maelstrom of war and the center of life. Priests' engagement here brought major acceptance by the end of the war and thereafter. Ideas and movements that began in the World War I era—pastoral, educational, and liturgical—consolidated between the wars, matured on site during and after the World War II era, and finally made their world-wide debut at the Second Council of the Vatican. (To be sure, German priests and religious were at least as influential as the French here, and in fact, initiated some major reforms).

Luc Perrin expands the field of vision to include much of the Catholic Action activity already extensively covered in the classic Cholvy-Hilaire text.[7] Here more than anywhere else we constantly lose sight of the *bon curé* in the Europe-wide, social-history shuffle. Anti-clerical revolution in Spain, Catholic Boy Scouts, everything gets its due. Since priests are involved in all of this, we are still doing a

history of pastoral functioning, but curé profiling just about disappears. The author concludes with sobering *bilan* of the diminished priestly numbers in Central and Western Europe and pessimistic reflections on two parallel, not necessarily opposed, solutions to the priest crisis: either you have non-priests doing the pastoring or you have non-clergy (people working in regular society) ordained as priests. In either case, of course, the image of the curé of late medieval and modern times would change considerably.

This book would have worked either as a study of the changing roles of the New Testament presbyter in late Roman, medieval, and modern times or as a study of the post-Tridentine curé (the distinguished and amiable figure pictured on the front cover of *Histoire des curés*, in black *soutane* and cloak, walking along the hedges and flowers, his charming cottage in the background). Either give us the history of New Testament and early church presbyters, their later acquisition of Old Testament priestly attributes, the differentiation of tasks among priests, the development of episcopal authority, and the evolution of the specifically clerical state (paid “professionals” instead of church workers who have their own worldly occupation). All of these data/issues would be integral to any study of the Christian priesthood because we need to know better what those men really *did* for the church and for a living. Or give us, well, a real *histoire des curés*, profiling, for example, the similarities and differences between the curé of the Council of Trent and the curé of the *Évêques réunis*. In the era where clear data does exist for a history of the territorial pastor,[8] the authors of parts three and four of the present book expanded their enterprise into a social history of early modern and modern catholicism—Europe-wide catholicism.

There is still too much unresolved about the history of the Christian priesthood to project the post-Tridentine curé back into it. Consequently, we still await both a clearly conceptualized institutional history of the Christian priesthood and a clearly focused social history of the modern curé.

NOTES

[1] *Seconde Lettre Encyclique de plusieurs Évêques de France, réunis à Paris, à leurs Confrères les autres Évêques, et aux Églises veuves: Contenant un Règlement pour servir au rétablissement de la discipline de l'Église Gallicane* (Paris: Librairie chrétienne, 1795): 115.

[2] *La Feuille villageoise*, I (1790): frontispiece. See Melvin Allen Edelstein, *La Feuille villageoise: Communication et modernisation dans les régions rurales pendant la Révolution* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1977), and John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), II: 358-383.

[3] See Hans Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, trans. by J. A. Baker, 1st German ed. 1953 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969). For general orientation, see John Jay Hughes, “Christian Priesthood,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 11: 536-539; and for an ecumenical catholic view, see Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970).

[4] Catherine Maire, *De la cause de Dieu à la cause de la Nation: Le Jansénisme au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); Edmond Préclin, *Jansénistes du XVIIIe siècle et la Constitution civile du clergé: le développement du richérisme, sa propagation dans le bas clergé, 1713-1791* (Paris: Gamber, 1928).

[5] I mean especially Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Bernard Plongeron,

Conscience religieuse en révolution. Regards sur l'historiographie religieuse de la Révolution française (Paris: Picard, 1969); Jean Quéniart, *Les hommes, l'église et Dieu dans la France du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1978).

[6] See the seminal article by Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1750-1850," *The American Historical Review* 77 (1972): 625-652; and his subsequent *The Making of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

[7] Gérard Cholvy and Yves-Marie Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine*, 3 vols. (Toulouse: Privat, 1985-1988).

[8] Important monographs here are Timothy Tackett, *Eighteenth-Century France: A Social and Political Study of the Curés in a Diocese of Dauphiné, 1750-1791* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), Bernard Plongeron, *Vie Quotidienne du clergé français au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1974), and Joseph Brugerette, *Le prêtre français et la société contemporaine*, 3 vols. (Paris: Lethellieux, 1933-1938).

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