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Anne Bonzon, *La paix au village: Clergé paroissial et règlement des conflits dans la France d'Ancien Régime*. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2022. Collection "Epoques." 347 pp. Tables, notes, and index. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 9791026710707.

Review Essay by Joy Palacios, University of Calgary

In early modern France, if the local shepherd lost your sheep, or a neighbor's cow destroyed your property, or you believed your siblings had unjustly kept your inheritance, rather than taking your case to court you might choose to ask your parish priest to resolve the conflict amicably or to serve as arbitrator. In *La paix au village*, Anne Bonzon uncovers the local clergy's role in mediating disagreements, easing tensions, reconciling enemies, and helping parishioners settle their disputes out of court. Richly documented, Bonzon's book reveals a dimension of priestly activity that has received little scholarly attention and which shows how a priest's sacred functions had social implications beyond his administration of the sacraments. Although mediating disputes did not figure among a priest's canonical duties and was not reserved to priests--lawyers, nobles, friends, and other trusted parties could also serve as arbitrators--by the 1660s, ecclesiastical handbooks, seminary training, and episcopal instructions presented conflict resolution as an integral part of the responsibilities of the *bon curé*, or good parish priest. By bringing to light the way clergymen tried to keep peace in the village, Bonzon's book offers a valuable resource to scholars interested in early modern France's religious culture and history and demonstrates how excavating priestly action offers a deepened understanding of daily life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Bonzon outlines both the contours of priestly mediation and the mechanisms of its diffusion. Manuals such as *L'arbitre charitable* (1666), which present Saint Augustine as the exemplar of a good bishop who resolves disputes, articulate the norms for priestly peacekeeping. Based on such models, a priest aware of a dispute might intervene in a variety of ways, depending on the situation. If named as an arbitrator, the priest would gather information from and about all the involved parties and issue a judgement, to which the parties agreed in advance to adhere. As arbitrator, the priest might act alone or as part of an arbitration team that could include other priests, legal officials, or notables. The arbitration process resembled the legal process, and a notary typically registered its outcome, which the parish priest also often recorded and kept with the parish registers. When overseen by a clergyman, the mediation process typically involved summoning the disputing parties to the priest's home-the presbytery or episcopal palace--to hear each side of the story and negotiate a mutually agreeable solution. Alternatively, a priest might convince the disputing parties to sign an agreement binding them to enter into arbitration and then pass their case to the arbitrators selected by the parties, which may or may not include the priest.

As ancient as the early church and based at least in part on medieval customs, priestly mediation was not new in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but Bonzon shows how it spread. *La paix au village*'s chronological structure follows priestly mediation's dissemination. Promoted

by the first generation of Catholic reformers in the early seventeenth century, and especially those who organized ordination retreats and founded seminaries in the 1630s and 1640s, priestly mediation became a staple of ecclesiastical how-to manuals by the mid-1660s. The emphasis on the parish priest's role as peacekeeper spread as seminary-trained clergymen received appointments as curates and bishops across France and as missionary endeavors in the provinces, or what Bonzon calls the "vague missionnaire" (p. 301), brought conflict resolution to rural communities. The use of conflict resolution by Oratorians, Eudists, Capuchins, and especially Vincent de Paul's Congregation of the Mission, among others, inspired local clergymen to resolve disputes. Missionaries also collaborated closely with local clergymen to ensure the long-term success of peacekeeping efforts and provided training and retreats to parish priests in addition to meeting with local notables such as judges and lawyers likely to be involved in arbitration.

Methodologically, Bonzon's book stands out for the way it combines prescriptive and descriptive sources to reconstruct a full-fleshed picture of clerical mediation. To piece together the normative discourses that shaped a priest's decisions about how to respond to disputes in his parish, Bonzon consults manuals such as *L'arbitre charitable*, *Le parfait ecclésiastique* (1665), the *Traité des devoirs du bon curé* (1660), and collections of episcopal letters and decisions, such as the "Recueil de Noailles" compiled by the successors of Félix Vialart de Herse, bishop of Châlons. She pairs these prescriptive sources with archival documents that offer traces of actual cases of mediation or arbitration. Along the way, Bonzon's meticulous analysis turns a quantitative as well as a qualitative eye to her material, producing tables and charts to help numerically interpret the types of mediating roles filled by priests. Although Bonzon readily acknowledges the many lacune in the available data that make the representativeness of these numbers uncertain, her care in quantifying and classifying the available information provides the reader with a sense for the bigger picture that gives meaning to individual anecdotes.

The book's first three chapters, structured as case studies, exemplify Bonzon's method of combining diverse sources. In chapter one, Bonzon examines the arbitration sentences for four successive curates from the parish of Songeons from 1650-1762 (conserved under call number Bp 3446 at the Archives départemental de l'Oise). In chapter two, she analyzes what she calls *journaux de curé*, or heterogeneous examples of "self-writing" composed by parish priests,[1] focusing on the nearly 7,000 pages written by Hugues Aulanier (p. 58), parish priest of Brignon in the Velay from 1638-1691. As Bonzon notes, the hybrid content of these texts "hésite constamment entre chronique locale, mémoires, journal personnel et livre de paroisse" (p. 55). In chapter three, Bonzon turns to the records from pastoral visits conducted by the bishops of Auxerre, Montpellier, and Châlons. Notary records on the one hand and hagiographic accounts on the other allow Bonzon in each chapter to add further details, either by teasing out additional information in notarial registers about specific individuals and their disputes or analyzing how stories in saintly *vies* show how priests thought mediation should unfold.

This method allows vivid characters to emerge from history's folds. I especially enjoyed discovering Nicolas Prévost, the first curate of Songeons, whose peacekeeping efforts Bonzon studies in chapter one. The son of a notary in Doullens, Prévost attended the Collège de Cholets in Paris and earned a bachelor's degree in theology before receiving the cure in Songeons in 1650, where his level of education far exceeded that of his approximately 450 parishioners, who were mostly peasants or merchants. Prévost held his post for twenty-six years--until his death in

1673--and left a record of thirty-five cases he helped resolve. We learn that in sixteen cases, Prévost served as arbitrator, in eight he acted as mediator, and in eleven cases he filled a role akin to that of notary by recording arbitration decisions (p. 37). Bonzon uses Prévost's story to demonstrate how arbitration worked. In 1666, for example, Prévost helped resolve an inheritance dispute among the six children of a deceased parishioner named Louis Lenglet, listening to each one, issuing a decision about how to divide the father's belongings and debt, and then ratifying the decision via the royal courts (p. 39). Arguments reinforced by later chapters thus emerge first in concrete form. We see firsthand how priestly arbitration interfaced with the kingdom's judicial system, how arbitration was often faster and less expensive than a trial, and how priests emphasized reconciliation's spiritual dimensions even as parishioners might seek arbitration for practical and financial reasons.

As the book progresses, in addition to unearthing individual characters, Bonzon's careful contextualization uncovers the larger networks in which they moved. She identifies three key overlapping social circles through which devout ideas and practices, such as conflict resolution, circulated. The first developed around Jean-Jacques Olier and the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice,[2] where Olier established, during his tenure as parish priest, an *assemblée charitable* that consisted of seventy parishioners who met twice monthly to help poor residents of the parish with their legal affairs and to encourage them to pursue non-juridical options such as arbitration and amicable settlements (pp. 122-23). Including nine clergymen, twenty-one legal professionals, and many of the kingdom's most powerful devout nobles--among them the duke of Liancourt, the duke of Luynes, René II de Voyer d'Argenson, and the Prince de Conti--Bonzon shows how Saint-Sulpice's collective effort to help parishioners pursue mediation served as a model for other parishes across France. The other two networks, for which Bonzon provides diagrams in the appendix (pp. 314-15), radiate outward from Nicolas Pavillon, bishop of Alet, and the chancellor Séguier. For scholars wanting to trace the transmission of devout ideas and practices in early modern France, these networks offer an excellent starting point.

An additional fruit of Bonzon's approach concerns the way she foregrounds pastoral practices that cut across theological divisions. Even as she acknowledges the Jansenist leaning of many of the bishops and nobles who promoted the priestly mediation of parish conflicts, Bonzon shows how Jansenism does not fully explain the spread of priestly peacekeeping. In her words, "certains sont plutôt jansénistes, mais l'option théologique ne paraît pas prépondérante ici : c'est l'action qui compte" (p. 124). In the diocèses of Châlons and Montpellier, for example, the first bishops to actively promote the priestly resolution of disputes had Jansenist ties but their successors, who in some cases had opposing views, continued to use the same "méthodes et outils" to encourage peacekeeping (p. 94). Similarly, in the diocese of Auxerre, the fifty-two parish priests during the period 1672-1717 who reported that they attempted to resolve conflicts did so before the tenure of Jansenist-leaning bishop Charles de Caylus (p. 102). Bonzon's work in this regard advances the field by pushing beyond a Jansenist binary.

Although the book's chronological organization supports the careful contextualization of sources and addresses in a satisfying way questions about change over time, it leaves less room for thematic exploration. Two themes on which Bonzon briefly touches left me particularly hungry for more analysis. At multiple points, she mentions the ritual nature of arbitration and mediation (pp. 244, 280-81), often in contrast to ritualized modes of violence, such as the duel (pp. 199). Mediation, for example, takes place in the presbytery rather than the cabaret and concludes with

visible signs of reconciliation, such as hugs, kisses, and meals. Nonetheless, the sources do not reveal the specific gestures of the mediator nor seem to differentiate between the ceremonial forms used by a priestly versus a lay mediator (pp. 280-81). Beyond the setting, which foregrounds the priest's sacerdotal authority, the ritual elements of priestly peacekeeping therefore seem to draw on repertoires that may have resonance with liturgical ceremonies such as communion and the kiss of peace but belong to a broader set of gestures. Bonzon's observations thus invite an analysis informed by ritual and performance theories.

Bonzon's attention to the collaboration between clergymen and laity leads to the second theme that whetted my appetite for deeper study, which I will call the boundaries of priestly authority. This theme, for me, has two parts. First, many of the priestly characters Bonzon unearths had layered professional trajectories that endowed them with knowledge and skills from more than one cultural domain, enhancing their capacity to serve as arbitrators. Bonzon argues, for example, that part of Prévost's propensity to keep records derived from his origins in a family of notaries. Similarly, the first president of Saint-Sulpice's *assemblée charitable* was a priest named Antoine Jacmé de Gaches who had been a judge before entering the clergy. Figures like Prévost and Gaches raise questions about how the type of family histories and social networks excavated by Bonzon introduce new possibilities for priestly action through what we might today think of as interdisciplinary cross-pollination. Second, arbitration as presented in Bonzon's sources consistently required that priests work together with laity--lawyers, judges, notaries, nobles, experts--as well as with other types of priests, such as missionaries, bishops, and regulars. Peacekeeping's collaborative structure invites questions about how priests constructed and shared their authority when dealing with disputes in their parishes. Bonzon's work opens the door for further research on priestly authority.

In terms of the book's readability, in some places the details overwhelm the main argument, especially in chapters seven and eight, where the content returns to themes addressed in earlier chapters but with less focus. Although the concise introductions and conclusions for each chapter, as well as the subsection titles, provide a sense for the book's structure, the chapter titles, which consist of evocative quotes taken from Bonzon's primary sources, do little to clarify the goals of each chapter or how they relate to each other. I wished that all the chapters had subtitles, as do chapters four, five, and six, and found myself trying to create my own titles to help me remember what each chapter was about. For newer scholars, the book poses a challenge in that it assumes a working knowledge of the early modern French legal system as well as post-Tridentine Catholicism. Those who may want to use *La paix au village* in graduate courses in North America would do well to first assign selections from a work like Bernard Barbiche's *Les institutions de la monarchie française à l'époque moderne, XVI^{e}-XVIII^{e} siècle*, René Tavenaux's *Le catholicisme dans la France Classique, 1610-1715*, or Joseph Bergin's *Church, Society, and Religious Change in France, 1580-1730*. Lastly, I was surprised to note that, given Bonzon's extensive documentation, the book does not consider diocesan Rituals, the liturgical handbooks issued by bishops that contained instructions for all the sacraments except the Eucharist. As Jean Dubu and Annik Aussedat-Minvielle show, over the course of the seventeenth century diocesan Rituals contained an expanding amount of detail about what priests should do in ceremonial and pastoral situations, many of which were settings for arbitration and peacekeeping, such as pastoral visits, penance, and the reception of a final testament before death.[3] Diocesan Rituals would likely reinforce Bonzon's findings, but I am nonetheless curious as to why they are excluded.

Bonzon's book is essential reading for anyone interested in early modern priestly practice and offers a finely grained look at the way parish priests interacted with their flock in periods of conflict and discord.

NOTES

[1] "Self-writing" is the capacious term Nicolae Alexandru Virastau uses for early modern texts that "do not fall within the modern, normative definitions of either autobiography or memoirs." See Virastau, *Early Modern French Autobiography* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 12.

[2] In the spirit of careful contextualization that Bonzon exemplifies, I would like to note a small correction to chapter four (p. 122), where Bonzon identifies Simon de Doncourt, author of *Remarques historiques sur l'église de Saint-Sulpice* (Paris: Nicolas Crapart, 1773), as the parish priest of Saint-Sulpice. A Doctor of Theology associated with the Communauté des Prêtres de la Paroisse Saint-Sulpice, Doncourt was not the parish priest. Rather, he was part of the community of priests founded by Olier in 1642 to help the parish priest carry out his duties in a vast parish. Olier divided the parish into eight sections, placed a priest in charge of each section, and gave each section leader a support team of ten to twelve other priests. As part of this community of priests, Doncourt indeed shared in the parish's pastoral duties but did not hold the role of parish priest. See Henri François Simon de Doncourt, *Remarques historiques*, vol. 1 (Paris : Nicolas Crapart, 1773), 171, 210-16; Louis Bertrand, *Bibliothèque suplicienne ou histoire littéraire de la Compagnie de Saint-Sulpice*, vol. 1 (Paris: Alphonse Picard et fils, 1900), xiv-xv, 8 n.1.

[3] See Annik Aussedat-Minvielle, "Histoire et contenu des rituels diocésains et romains imprimés en France de 1476 à 1800: inventaire descriptif des rituels des provinces de Paris, Reims et Rouen" (Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1987); Jean Dubu, *Les églises chrétiennes et le théâtre (1550-1850)* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1997).

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