

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

Review Essay by Karen E. Carter, Brigham Young University

When I first began working with early modern visitation records in search of information about catechisms and schools, I noticed that bishops sometimes asked curés about any lawsuits, quarrels, or *inimitiés* in their parishes. This surprised me a bit, so I made notes on what the curés said and the measures they had taken to try to put an end to these sometimes fleeting, sometimes persistent affairs between their parishioners. Preoccupied by other topics, those notes remained buried in scattered computer files. As other projects came my way, requiring the use of additional sources, I found similar examples of curés who used Christian charity, as required by their position as curés, to try to resolve conflicts in their parishes.[1] As it turns out, many of the documents that provide information about the duties and day-to-day lives of French curés in the early modern period reveal hints—but often only hints—that they were called upon to engage in reconciliation and peacemaking on a regular basis. I came to realize, like Anne Bonzon, that this was a fact regularly assumed by historians like myself, but one that had never been studied systematically (p. 9). Thankfully, her excellent book, *La paix au village: Clergé paroissial et règlement des conflits dans la France d'Ancien Régime*, has taken important steps toward filling this gap.

As Bonzon explains, the primary reason the topic of reconciliation was neglected for so long is a familiar one. When it comes to the activities of early modern curés, especially those in rural areas, the sources are limited and inconsistent across time and region. Because the work that curés did to settle disputes was never bureaucratized, very few documents specifically addressing reconciliation were ever generated. Sometimes there were notaries involved when reconciliations were made, but often there were not. Curés' activities in this realm were always on the margins of the early modern court system, since the whole point of their interference in their parishioners' arguments was to try to prevent the parties from going to the courts at all. When they failed and a lawsuit resulted, the curés' initial attempts at reconciliation were not always noted in the resulting records. One of the major strengths of Bonzon's work is the fact that she has collected as many sources as possible, ephemeral as they may be, to reach a critical mass of information and make a significant contribution to the study of both the early modern justice system (and ideas about justice) and the roles played by early modern curés during the Catholic Reformation.

The range of sources Bonzon has consulted is thus quite significant. These sources include visitation records and responses to bishops' questionnaires filled out by curés (especially for the dioceses of Auxerre, Châlons-sur-Marne, and Montpellier). Journals of curés, including the remarkable seven-thousand-page record produced by Hugues Aulanier in seventeenth-century Le Brignon (Haute Loire), provide intimate details of how curés went about the reconciliation process and how they felt about it. Another curé, Nicolas Prévost, left a specific record of the

reconciliations he conducted between 1655 and 1673 in his parish, Songeons (Oise). Added to these are records of bishops, of clergy involved in missions, and prescriptive sources like *L'arbitre charitable* (1668) and *Le parfait ecclésiastique*, first published in 1665 and used in seminaries thereafter, which provide information about what clergy and elites outside of the parish thought about arbitration and reconciliation.

Together, these sources and many others, whether archival, prescriptive, or hagiographic, contribute a great deal of new insight and have allowed Bonzon to sketch a remarkably well-drawn picture of reconciliation in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Although others in this forum address the contributions the book makes to our understanding of the early modern justice system, I have chosen to concentrate on the arguments related to the lives and work of parish curés, especially those in rural areas, as these arguments most overlap with my own research. Bonzon does not overturn any major arguments about rural curés in the Catholic Reformation period, but she does provide additional depth and nuance to our understanding of them. By the second half of the seventeenth century (the period Bonzon concentrates on most), these men were most often educated, dedicated, and had a clear identity of themselves as intermediaries between God and their parishioners. They understood the importance of administering the sacraments as a way to perfect not only the individual, but the community as well. What Bonzon adds is that part of their dedication to the church and to the idea of the Christian community was their view of themselves as peacemakers.

Bonzon also demonstrates that curés were intermediaries between two worlds--the parish and the exterior, which included the formidable and often perplexing court system. Even if a curé himself was involved in his own lawsuits and *inimitiés*, he could still perform a peacemaking role for others, partially because of his education and his experience with the courts and the world beyond the parish. He had many connections with the outside world and the time and resources to travel to collect documents or question witnesses. It was recognized that disagreements were bound to happen within families and communities, and sometimes curés had their own quarrels. Part of what it meant to be a member of these Christian communities was to be willing to engage in reconciliation to settle those disagreements as fairly as possible, and the most likely person to help the process along was the curé.

Because of the difficulties with the sources dealing with parish curés, it is easy to lump curés together into one category: the ubiquitous *bon curé*. I am certainly guilty of this in my own work. One of the strengths of Bonzon's research is that her careful examination of this one aspect of priests' duties has allowed her to illuminate the variety of curés who served ably, but with different approaches, in their parishes. In the conclusion to the book, Bonzon points out four different types of curés involved in reconciliations. First, the zealous administrator. This curé performed his duties consistently and was responsive to the orders of the bishop. He reported the quarrels in his parish and did what he could to resolve them, even using the confessional if necessary. Second, the devout curé, who was influenced by missions and the religious orders. He was more interested in peacemaking as a way to demonstrate charity rather than obedience. Third, curés who were attracted by the legal aspects of reconciliation. Already engaged in the court system themselves, these curés performed their duties but did not necessarily fit the model of the edifying curé found in hagiographical literature. They were perhaps more oriented to activities outside of their parish than within it. Finally, the fourth type which Bonzon proposes is curés who took a community approach, with the primary goal being to maintain peace in the

parish. As the least likely of the four to produce documentation, there were probably more in this last group than the sources can ever reveal.

With these four types, we see the varied results of the interaction of curés and the many possible influences in their lives: local nobles and other elites, bishops, the members of the religious orders who ran the seminaries and conducted missions, their own families, and their own interests. Ever since Timothy Tackett's work on the ideologies of curés in the late eighteenth century and at the time of the French Revolution, historians have tried to understand exactly how parish priests developed their ideas and how they viewed themselves; Bonzon adds nuance to this issue and argues that there was a great deal of real cooperation between curés and the clerical hierarchy on the subject of peacemaking.[2] There were times when curés and their bishops disagreed, though: this is probably an area to which Bonzon could have devoted more attention. When it came to the administration of the parishes curés and bishops often had to compromise on many issues. Was the subject of reconciliation itself one of these? She does provide convincing evidence that the importance of reconciliations and maintaining peace in the parish was apparently one that nearly everyone could agree on, even if they may have gone about it in different ways. At the same time, another strength of the book is that Bonzon looks at the issue through the eyes of devout lay elites as well, showing how they may have influenced clerical sensibilities by positing that the author of the popular text *L'arbitre charitable*, which appeared under the name Prieur de Saint-Pierre, was actually written by a Breton nobleman known for promoting a particular brand of charity popularized by the elites of the Parisian parish of Saint-Sulpice.

Bonzon thus does an admirable job of demonstrating that the subject of peaceful society permeated both elite and clerical discourse in the second half of the seventeenth century to a much greater degree than previous scholars have recognized. Curés that engaged in reconciliation were not just substituting for a justice system that was not robust enough to provide services in rural areas, as they may have done in the medieval period. Instead, their role as arbiters was a key part of the Catholic Reformation, just as the concept of Christian charity—and therefore peacemaking—was. It was also particular to the seventeenth century because of the need to emphasize peace and unity after the disruptions of the Wars of Religion and the Frondes. At all levels of society, peacemaking was emphasized in terms of its importance to both church and state.

This argument overlaps with recent work on Jansenism as well. Bonzon notes that the four curés who produced the journals (or journal-like records) that she used most extensively all had rigorist tendencies but that they were not necessarily Jansenists. More scholars are deemphasizing the strict separation of Jansenist clergy from mainstream clergy, and Bonzon is among this group.[3] Rigorism was not limited to Jansenists alone; it was a widespread approach taken by many clergy regardless of their theological leanings. Furthermore, efforts to promote reconciliation often continued when a Jansenist bishop was replaced with a non-Jansenist. Many of the theological questions that Jansenists concerned themselves with had little bearing on the practicalities of the day-to-day clerical functions in rural parishes, but rigorism, and holding parishioners to the standards expected by Catholic reformers, was more widespread and more relevant. Whether Jansenist or not, bishops and curés were expecting better behavior from even rural Catholics, and part of that behavior involved making peace with their neighbors.

Bonzon's primary focus in this work is on the parish clergy, as is appropriate given her sources. But these sources also shed some light on how the laity felt about peacemaking and reconciliation, and on rural life in general. Villagers saw their curé as a religious authority, and they acknowledged that part of his responsibility was to act as a neutral arbiter in their disputes. They went to curés for all kinds of small affairs, from boundary disputes to lost animals; the most common cases were those involving family and property issues or taxes. But in general, Bonzon has successfully argued that approaching the curé as an arbiter was one of several possibilities that villagers recognized when it came to settling disputes, along with violence, private transactions, and other types of arbitration.

It is also evident that the laity recognized peacemaking as part of Christian charity, just as the elites did. The curés' writings reveal the most information about this, as they show that reconciliation was part of the process of preparation for Easter communion; both Christophe Sauvageon (curé of Sennely-en-Sologne, Loiret) and Jean-Baptiste Raveneau (curé of Saint-Jean-les-deux-Jumeaux, Seine-et-Marne), had their parishioners confess twice at Easter, so that they could resolve their sins and conflicts in between confessions. Aulanier provides fascinating details about deathbed reconciliations. Confronting and reconciling disputes was thus a regular practice for early modern villagers, and it was probably even more frequent than the traces found in the sources might indicate. Of course, there are still many questions when it comes to lay participation in reconciliation and peacemaking. Anything we learn about the rural villagers involved in disputes is filtered through either clerical or judicial sources, and how much of the discourse produced by lay and clerical elites that Bonzon describes so well penetrated the world of rural peasants is hard to gauge. But Bonzon has done an excellent job of teasing out many useful details nevertheless.

On the whole, Bonzon's work is an excellent example of how to pursue a historical topic when it did not produce a specific paper trail in the historical record. I came away from the book with many of my vague suspicions about the curés' role in local justice confirmed, as well as with many new and important realizations about not only curés but also bishops, devout elites, and interactions between various members of the church hierarchy. The topics of peacemaking and reconciliation now have their well-deserved place in the list of essential topics of the French Catholic Reformation.

## NOTES

[1] See my article, "The Affair of the Pigeon Droppings: Rural Schoolmasters in Eighteenth-Century France," *Rural History* 27 (2016): 21-36, for one example.

[2] See both of Timothy Tackett's foundational works, *Priest and Parish in Eighteenth-Century France: A Social and Political Study of the Curés in a Diocese of Dauphiné 1750-1791* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), and *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[3] For another recent example of this, see Christopher J. Lane, *Callings and Consequences: The Making of Catholic Vocational Culture in Early Modern France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).

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