PASTORALIA IN PRACTICE: CLERGY AND MINISTRY
IN PRE-REFORMATION ENGLAND*

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1. Introduction

In *The Voices of Morebath* the ordinary Tudor clergy at last find their hero. Christopher Trychay, that Devonshire parish's long-serving vicar, provides an eyewitness response to the changes in English religion between 1527 and 1574, and a unique insight into the experiences of a parish priest. Yet an unbridgeable gap precludes full assessment of his effectiveness as a priest. We have his voice, but what his parishioners thought of him, how they judged his pastoral care, how far he really was a 'good pastor', we cannot say.

Trychay's voice has no earlier parallel. The closest equivalent may be the series of jottings made by Richard Gosmer at Basingstoke in the early 1500s. These, however, are almost exclusively financial in their concerns. They certainly show Gosmer interacting with his flock, and as an active incumbent, but convey nothing of a sense of pastoral responsibility, or of the local response to his ministry. For pre-Reformation England in general, the sources available to test the quality of the clergy, whether they were 'good' or 'bad' pastors, are generally impersonal, mainly administrative and formulaic. The records do sometimes suggest personalities, but they are almost invariably priests who were perceived as failing. The 'good pastor' is rarely reported; he must be constructed rather than identified.

This process of construction is hindered by imprecision in the actual definition of a 'good pastor'. There was certainly no denying the importance of the clergy and their tasks. For Gregory the Great, the cure of souls was the supreme craft, *ars artium cura animarum*, an

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* In several respects this paper complements another recently completed, 'Before the Protestant clergy', to appear in *The Protestant Clergy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. C. Scott Dixon and Luise Schorn-Schütte (Basingstoke, 2003).
2 Cambridge University Library, MS I.2.2, fols. 1r-4v, 257r-58r.

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idea often repeated during the Middle Ages. Recognition of the importance of the clergy and their role also contributed to the long-term elevation of the dignity of priesthood, its sacramental status (particularly when consecrating the mass) and exercise of the power of the keys combining to create an impossibly demanding and burdensome appreciation which placed priests higher than angels. In particular, priesthood imposed the task of assuring salvation for others, of guiding the lewd laity to eternal bliss. The laity lacked vision, they needed direction; but, as an oft-cited Biblical tag had it, when the blind lead the blind, both fall into the ditch. The clergy, above all, needed clear vision, not least because their success as pastors would affect the eternal fate of their own souls.

The laity were to be led both by moral guidance and personal example. As personifications of Christ, especially during the mass, the clergy were constrained by ideals. The idealism of personal qualifications, and of performance, resonates from much of the instructional material prepared for clerical use in late medieval England. Searching for the pastor bonus of that period by drawing on indicative material ranging from the pastoral revolution of the thirteenth century through to the reign of Henry VIII in the sixteenth, this paper examines how far the clergy lived up to expectations, personally, and in relation to their parishioners. The period effectively begins with the affirmation of priesthood (especially in a pastoral and parochial context) at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, setting guidelines subsequently adopted across Europe. It ends with the onset of Reformation, less firmly a terminus because of the long-drawn-out nature of the changes to priesthood during the English Reformation.

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4 R.N. Swanson, 'Angels incarnate: clergy and masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation', in Masculinity in Medieval Europe, ed. D.M. Hadley (Harlow, 1999), pp. 163-64.


7 Swanson, 'Before the Protestant clergy' (see above, n.*).