To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Mary C. Montgomery entitled "Lay Perceptions of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century English Parish Clergy as Reflected in Contemporary Literature." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

Steven C. Fanning
Steven C. Fanning, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:

Noel Z. Brann

Thomas J. Heffernan

Accepted for the Council:

L. Evans Roth
Vice Chancellor
Graduate Studies and Research

Thesis
80
M6584
Cop. 2

LAY PERCEPTIONS OF THE THIRTEENTH AND FOURTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH PARISH CLERGY AS REFLECTED IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Mary C. Montgomery

August 1980

3044855

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to discover common perceptions of the English parish clergy held by men and women of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, and to detect any significant changes in attitude over the course of the two centuries. After these perceptions were determined, an attempt was made to explain these attitudes in light of the contemporary social situation and the conditions of parish life in late medieval England. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were chosen as the time period because of several important developments and events which occurred during this period. The thirteenth century witnessed the emergence of a popular religious movement, espoused by the Franciscans and Dominicans, which expressed a dissatisfcation with the state of the organized Church and a desire to return to a purer practice of Christianity. Also, in the first half of the fourteenth century, the Plague broke out in England, greatly affecting many aspects of English life. In the late medieval period, the parish priest was an important part of the everyday lives of most men and women; it was hoped that such a traumatic era would produce literature in which the parish priest and his role would be a topic of popular concern.

The sources for this study consisted mainly of primary literary works such as chronicles, poems, songs, and narratives. An examination of the ideas contained in these works constituted the major portion of the study. Secondary works concerned with the medieval English parish, religious history, and general histories of the period were employed to determine the social setting in which men and women of the late medieval period lived.

A close examination of the literary works of this period revealed several definite attitudes toward the parish clergy; however, there were three topics that appeared to be of primary interest to medieval writers. These were clerical celibacy, clerical illiteracy, and clerical greed; of these three, clerical greed was the topic which was of the most concern. The medieval parishioner preferred that the parish priest was at least fairly literate and that he abide by his vow of celibacy; the only instances of vehement criticism of illiteracy or incontinency were in conjunction with criticism that the priest was neglecting his responsibilities as the spiritual leader of the parish. Greed, on the other hand, was the most detested of vices in a priest and one which received the most vituperative attacks. The reason for this, it would seem, was that of the three vices, greed had the most negative impact upon the life of the average parishioner, for the parish priest held the threat of excommunication if a parishioner did not meet his financial obligations to the Church.

While illiteracy, incontinency, and greed were themes in the literature of both the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a comparison of the literature of both periods revealed that literature of the later period contained more numerous and bitter criticisms of the parish clergy as a whole. Condemnation was directed toward the priesthood as a class, not merely individual erring priests, as was characteristic of thirteenth century literature. This shift in attitude seems to be related to two very important phenomena of the fourteenth century—the Black Death and the Avignon Papacy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
INTRODUCTION		1
I.	PARISH LIFE IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND	6
II.	CELIBACY AND THE PARISH PRIEST	25
III.	ILLITERACY AND THE PARISH PRIEST	34
IV.	AVARICE AND THE PARISH PRIEST	41
V.	CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND THEIR EFFECT UPON THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARISH PRIEST	55
VI.	CONCLUSION	67
SOURCES CONSULTED		72
VITA		76

INTRODUCTION

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were important in the life of the English church. It was a period in which several significant phenomena occurred which quite possibly affected the lay perceptions of the parish priest. These were the centuries immediately following the the appearance of the popular religious movement of the Franciscans and Dominicans, a movement which stressed simplicity of life and the superiority of the spiritual over the material. Clerical chastity and poverty were other significant tenets of the Franciscans and Dominicans who traveled throughout England and the Continent, preaching their interpretation of the Gospel. Their ideals quickly gained acceptance and, it would seem, influenced the laity's expectations of the clergy. The Black Death made its appearance also during this period; it reached England in 1348, disrupting normal life and taking a vast toll among both the laity and the clergy. Such a horror as the Plague naturally had a great psychological impact, as well, upon those who witnessed the terrible suffering this seemingly unpredictable disease brought their friends and families. Another event of import in this period, although certainly not as traumatic as the Plague, was the Avignon Papacy. The popes' living in ostentatious splendor away from Rome, what many felt to be the only proper residence of the pope, offended many Englishmen and women. The concomitant increase in papal taxation did nothing to alleviate the growing resentment toward this situation;

this resentment found voice in the writings of Wyclif and other popular works of the period. An increase in lay literacy and in the number of works written in the vernacular meant that these writings expressing dissatisfaction with the clergy were being read by more people than ever before.

The parish priest, the focus of this study, was an important figure throughout these significant two centuries. He was the representative of the Church and spiritual leader to the laity during these troubled times. He lived, especially in the smaller parishes, in very close proximity to his parishioners and was an intimate part of their lives. The purpose of this study is to determine how he was perceived by lay men and women, and to determine if there were common attitudes concerning his behavior, his role and function in society. It would seem, in light of prevailing contemporary social and religious situations just discussed, that the laity would be more concerned with the role of the Church in their lives at this time than perhaps in less stressful times. Since the Church and its doctrines were, to most, embodied in the person of the parish priest, it would seem that the laity would look to this figure to provide some stability and meaning. This study will attempt to determine what these expectations were, and also to determine if, over the course of 200 years, any changes occurred in these expectations. If any changes are detected, an attempt will be made to explain why the changes might have occurred.

There has been much research done in the field of ecclesiastical history in the two centuries with which this study is concerned. Various

excellent books have been written dealing with the social and political aspects of the late medieval English church as well as its relation to the Crown and to the papacy. The hierarchical framework and the function of each level within the hierarchy, including the parish priest has been studied. The sources for scholarship such as this usually consist of parish registers, rolls, chronicles, other official church documents, and some contemporary literature.[1] Other works deal with the Church and its role as part of medieval society, focusing upon how the Church fit into the total picture of medieval life. Here, too, the parish priest is included and similar sources are employed.[2] Another type of work deals with a specific aspect of late medieval life, such as the Plague or the Avignon Papacy, and naturally, the role of the parish priest has some place here as well.[3] This study, however, will concentrate solely upon the contemporary literary works as a source for the perceptions of the role of the parish priest in late medieval English society. The first and last chapters will be exceptions to this; the first chapter will deal with what modern scholars know of the reality of a parish priest's life, i.e., what the duties of the parish priest were, how he lived,

---

[1]W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century*, Cambridge: University Press, 1955: J. R. Moorman, *Church Life in England in the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge: University Press, 1945.

[2]G. G. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938; Abbot Gasquet, *Parish Life in Medieval England*, London: Methuen and Company, 1907.

[3]Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death*, London: Collins, 1969; Anna M. Campbell, *The Black Death and Men of Learning*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1931; George Deaux, *The Black Death*, New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969; Yves Renouard, *The Avignon Papacy, 1305-1403*, translated by Denis Bethel, London: Faber & Faber, 1970.

his income, and what type of personal life he led. Only the parish priest will be studied; the roles of regular clergymen, nuns, and secular clergymen of higher rank will not be examined since in most cases, they were not as intimately involved in the everyday life of the medieval parishioner. The final chapter will examine contemporary social situations to determine how they affected the attitudes toward the clergy. The remaining chapters, however, have as their sources contemporary English poems, chronicles, and popular writings which either were written in Middle English, or have been translated into modern English. The limitation of works to those in English should not be a serious one, as the most popular works of this period have been translated into English.

The literature of the two centuries with which this study is concerned can be divided into the literature of the thirteenth century, penned largely by monks, and the literature of the fourteenth century which, for the most part, was written by laymen. Naturally, these two groups perceived the world somewhat differently and had different reasons for writing; for example, Matthew Paris' *English History* differs greatly from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. One is prose chronicle and the other is poetic narrative. However, a close examination of both genres shows that the clerical writers and lay writers shared at least several common concerns. The fact that both clergymen and laymen felt strongly enough about certain situations to mention them in their writings seems to attest to the fact that their concerns were prevalent in medieval society as a whole. And while the lay writers may have had more daily contact with parish priests, the monks of the thirteenth century who wrote the

chronicles obviously were aware of events and attitudes outside the cloister.

An examination of contemporary works indicates that three topics concerning the parish clergy appear fairly regularly in the works of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These are clerical celibacy, clerical illiteracy, and clerical avarice. The appearance of these topics in the literature of both centuries would seem to indicate that they were topics of concern to both the authors and their audience. It is an examination of these concerns that will be the subject for the main chapters of the study.

CHAPTER I

PARISH LIFE IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

In a study of perceptions, one easily can lose sight of the reality of the situations or persons being perceived due to the bias or ignorance of the writers who reflected the contemporary attitudes. In order to avoid this, and to understand and appreciate the perceptions concerning the parish priest more fully, this study will commence with a broad summary of a priest's life in a typical parish in England in the late Middle Ages. Due to the lack of a great many primary sources dealing directly with a parish priest's life and function, there will be some amount of speculation. However, scholarship conducted thus far in the area of parish registers and church records has presented the modern reader with what may be termed a fairly accurate picture of the parish priest's standard of living, his responsibilities, his educational level, and his marital status. These conditions of course were not completely the same in the two centuries with which we shall be concerned, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; naturally, a certain amount of change did occur, as shall be illustrated in the latter portion of the study. However, when one deals with a time span of 200 years, a certain amount of generalization is unavoidable. In any event, during the period with which this study is concerned, the parish clergy lends itself to such generalizations because it was a relatively stable class; therefore, certain statements can be made which would apply to both centuries.

Some early questions are what kind of person became a parish priest? From what class was he drawn? For what reason did he choose the parish clergy as his vocation? The English secular clergy of the thirteenth and fourteenth century was a heterogeneous group composed of men from various classes who entered the ministry for different reasons. Class representation ranged from the lowly peasant to men of the most powerful and wealthy families of England. To the poor man, the Church offered security, for no matter how poor a parish might be, the bishop was obligated to see that the priests under his supervision were clothed, fed, and housed.[1] It also provided him with a definite place in society since the priest was always needed as a mediator between God and man. To the more financially secure, the Church often was considered a stepping-stone to positions of authority, not only in ecclesiastical circles, but in the royal bureaucracy as well. Such a man probably would not be found in a rural parish, but rather would seek a more important position which would lead more rapidly to advancement. There were, of course, men who entered the ministry for totally altruistic purposes, who felt that their vocation of serving God and man was best accomplished in the Church. It is not the point of this study to determine how many parish priests fit into each of the above categories; it is enough to know that the English clergy of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries consisted of men of different social backgrounds and motives.

---

[1]G. G. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), p. 148.

Since the clergy was composed of men of various backgrounds, it would be logical to assume that these men exhibited various levels of educational preparedness for a priestly vocation. Contemporary sources indicate that this indeed was the case. Clerical literacy covered a broad spectrum ranging from the totally illiterate to the holder of a university degree, with the majority falling somewhere in the middle. A university degree did not necessarily indicate a training in theology or in the responsibilities of a parish; the Master's degree was awarded to one who had successfully completed the standard liberal arts courses which did not include theology.[2] During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries theology was not a common field of study. Canon law, however, was taught in every university in Europe. A knowledge of canon law was an absolute necessity for one aspiring to rise to an administrative office of any importance in the Church, whereas a knowledge of scholastic theology was of less practical consequence.[3]

Some knowledge of the usual training procedure for prospective priests obviously is important in a study of the literacy of the priesthood. There were no seminaries in the later Middle Ages. Further, university education was available to only a small minority. The usual procedure was for one interested in becoming a priest to serve as an apprentice to his own parish priest.[4] Such a notion of apprenticeship is not as startling as it seems if one considers this was the method

---

[2]John R. Moorman, *Church Life in England in the Thirteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945), p. 95.

[3]Ibid., p. 97.

[4]Coulton, p. 143.

of most medieval guilds. The interested young man would assist at the altar, learn about the Mass and the Church's functions, and then would supplement this knowledge with whatever education he received from the local school, if one existed. Often the next step would be for the young man to become the parish clerk in which capacity he performed such important functions as serving the priest at Mass and rendering the congregational responses. The most significant aspect of the parish clerk's position was his responsibility to read the Matins and Evensong in the absence of the priest. In a period of widespread absenteeism, this function was a very important one, for it came to be regarded as an apprenticeship leading to ordination through a proclamation of Archbishop Boniface in 1260.[5] This type of training resulted in a clergy that was oftentimes illiterate because many of these apprentices learned to say the Mass purely out of imitation, understanding little, if any, of what they were saying. There was an examination administered by the bishops for determining the qualifications for prospective priests; contemporary accounts clearly illustrate the abysmal level of literacy encountered by the examining clergy.[6] Unfortunately, for various reasons, many men who were unprepared for the priesthood managed to avoid the examinations or pass them under false pretenses.

One reason many unqualified men managed to slip by the bishops' tests was the large number of candidates; for reasons mentioned earlier, the priesthood was a popular vocation. Another reason many uneducated

---

[5]Ibid., p. 145.

[6]Moorman, pp. 90-3.

and untrained men were able to enter the ranks of the clergy was the fact that they possessed a "title"—a fact which in some cases was more important to the bishop than the educational or moral state of the candidate. The bishop was ultimately responsible for the upkeep of his parish priests; if one, for some reason, was unable to provide for himself adequately, the bishop was obligated to supply him with an adequate living. Therefore, it was of utmost importance to the bishop that the priests of his parishes possess adequate independent means to support themselves. A "title" was a statement assuring the bishop that the candidate possessed a sufficient patrimony to prevent him from becoming a burden to the Church. Frequently, false titles were presented to the bishop, allowing not only illiterate men to become priests, but financially burdensome ones, as well.[7]

The Church recognized the need for an educated clergy and was painfully aware of the inadequacy of many of its servants. In an attempt to remedy this situation, Pope Boniface VIII unwittingly contributed to another problem of the Church—absenteeism. In the papal bull *Cum ex eo*, Boniface decreed that rectors could receive a seven year dispensation from their parishes for the purpose of study, providing a vicar was supplied to care for the parish during his absence. Besides allowing the rectors out of the parish for periods of study, [8] Boniface's plan indirectly contributed to absenteeism in another way.

---

[7]Ibid., pp. 148-9.

[8]Vera F. Garlick, "The Provision of Vicars in the Early Fourteenth Century," *History*, vol. 32, (1949), pp. 22-3.

As the English kings of the fourteenth century were expanding their bureaucracies, they had an increasing need for educated people to fill positions in their governments, and clergymen on leave from their parishes completing their university study were prime candidates for the king's civil service. In the event the rector entered the king's service, the vicar, a fully ordained priest, was left in charge to serve the parish indefinitely. Frequently lacking revenues, the kings would often reward their servants with benefices rather than currency, again causing an increase in absenteeism. This point is vividly illustrated in the *Articuli Cleri* of 1315 which states that the king's servants holding a benefice were not required to reside in the parish.[9]

Hence, clerical literacy in the thirteenth and fourteenth century was at a low ebb. Education was local and spasmodic, with educational opportunities limited to a few, and in many cases the government, not the parish, received the benefits of the rector's educational achievements.[10] Despite the Church's attempts to improve the educational quality of its priests, a great many of them were quite definitely ill-prepared, a topic of concern to the Council of Oxford in 1222. A common fear was that the ignorance of the clergy would result in the deviation of laymen from orthodox ideas and practices.[11] One should not be unduly pessimistic about the clergy of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; an uneducated priest was not necessarily a bad

---

[9]Ibid., p. 25.

[10]Moorman,,p. 109.

[11]Coulton, p. 157.

priest. Many priests took their responsibilities seriously and used what education they had to instruct their parishioners in the teachings of the Church.

Literate or illiterate, the parish priest was expected to provide his own living. His source of income and standard of living, as would be expected, varied with the relative wealth of the parish. Thirteenth century parish records indicate that the financial worth of parishes ranged from £230 15s at Lindisfarne, to 3s 4d at Devon. The average gross income was most likely around £10 per year, making the parish priest in most cases a very poor man.[12] Financial conditions did not change significantly in the fourteenth century, except that the effects of the Plague brought about a decline in agricultural production in some areas.

The parish priest received his income from two sources—the land and his parishioners. Since the parish priest was a landowner by virtue of his benefice, he was entitled to all the privileges of a landowner, such as the right to let his cattle graze in common pastures and the right to collect fallen timber on his land.[13] However, the parish priest received the majority of his income from the tithes his parishioners were obligated to pay him. These tithes came in two forms: the "garb," or greater tithes, which consisted of tithes on all types of grain, and lesser tithes, which included the fruits of the manual labor of men and animals, the offspring of animals, and any other crop other than wheat, such as fruit, flax and hay.[14] According to Church law, each

---

[12]Moorman, p. 136.

[13]Ibid., p. 14.

[14]Ibid., pp. 117-8.

parishioner was obligated to give the Church 10 percent of his gross revenue, in whatever form. Tithing was not an obligation to be taken lightly; one of the serious obligations of a parish priest was regularly to excommunicate those who had failed to give the Church its due.[15] The other source of income, the offerings of the parishioners, came at several specified times of the year such as Christmas, Easter, and certain saint's days. Parishioners were urged to make an offering each time they attended Mass, although this suggestion was not always heeded. The Church had another source of offerings in death bequests, the making and witnessing of wills, and the sale of seats in Church. The payment of marriage and burial fees was also required by the Church.[16]

Thus, the parish priest received a substantial source of income in the tithes and offerings of the parishioners. However, the priest was not allowed to keep all of the income his parish provided. The Church required that the income be divided three ways with one-third going to the upkeep of the parish church, one-third going to the care of the poor, and one-third to be kept by the priest.[17] Therefore, unless the parish was an especially wealthy one, the priest's share was not particularly large. Fortunately, the priest did not have to provide his own home, for in almost every instance the parish supplied him with a house, whose quality, again, varied according to the wealth of the parish. Most were rather humble dwellings, very similar to the peasants'

---

[15]Coulton, p. 162.

[16]Moorman, pp. 126-131.

[17]Coulton, p. 167.

cottages. Even the better parsonages were extremely simple, small and sparsely furnished by modern standards. A nice parsonage most likely would consist of two small rooms, a kitchen, and perhaps a bakery and brewery.[18] The parsonage generally did not consist merely of a house, but usually had barns and other farm buildings as well. Such housing was needed to manage the priest's land and his animals. A priest, then, was often a shepherd both literally and figuratively.

Rarely did the priest have to carry out all of his ecclesiastical and domestic affairs singlehandedly. He usually shared his house and its tasks with a parochial staff whose size depended upon the amount of money available, and the number of chores needed to be done. A young boy of the parish, or the priest's concubine, if the situation was such, helped with the farming, while a parish clerk, as previously described, assisted in the religious duties and carried on in the priest's absence.[19]

This financial system would seem to indicate that the parish priest could be fairly certain of an adequate income and a comfortable standard of living. Likewise, one-third of the parish's income seems sufficient for caring for the poor, as does the remaining one-third allocated to the upkeep of the Church. Yet, it has already been seen that the average parish income of the late thirteenth century was £10, and numerous accounts are found of churches in various stages of disrepair as well as instances in which the poor are neglected. While this was

---

[18]Moorman, p. 59.

[19]Ibid., pp. 61-2.

not the case in all parishes, this type of situation occurred with alarming frequency. The blame seems to lie in the prevalence of absenteeism and pluralism.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the system of benefices and preferment lent itself to abuse and corruption. A benefice was usually granted by a noble, a bishop, or in some cases, the pope, to an individual who then had all the rights and responsibilities both of a landowner and a clergyman. Unfortunately, the recipient of a benefice was not necessarily a particularly pious man, nor the one best suited for the position. The real problem came when a child or layman was named to a benefice; these individuals naturally could not fulfill the obligations of their positions, nor could foreigners appointed benefices by the pope. When one adds these situations, which were rather common, to the previously discussed occasions of rectors entering the king's service and priests leaving their parishes for educational purposes, we find a situation which led to widespread absenteeism.

As a result, during the high Middle Ages in England, many parishes were left lamentably unattended by their rectors. Instead, the parish was served by a vicar, a substitute priest. This is the basis for the poor financial situation of so many parishes and their priests. Since a vicar was not the holder of the benefice, he was not entitled to its income from the tithes and offerings. These went, as usual, to the actual holder of the benefice, the absentee rector. The rector, in turn, provided the vicar with a salary for his service and in many cases, this salary was pitifully meager and did not reflect

the true worth of the parish. Theoretically, the vicar was to receive the one-third designated for the parish priest's living, with the other two-thirds going to the rector who was supposed to see that it was spent in the correct fashion.[20] This did not always occur, especially in situations where the holder of a benefice was a layman, an unpious clergyman, or a beleaguered clerical bureaucrat in the king's service who cared little for the spiritual or physical condition of the parish. Since such an individual perceived his benefice in terms of economic rights to be exploited, the resident vicar was often paid a minimal amount, and the remaining income, intended for the rector to use in the parish, was kept for his personal use or for some other purpose of the Church.[21] Hence the poor condition of many parish churches was not always due to the neglect of the resident priest, but often could be attributed to the fact that funds intended for the parish were being used in other ways.

Closely akin to the problem of absenteeism was that of pluralism, the holding of more than one benefice at a time. This practice was condemned in 1179 by Alexander III at the Lateran Council III on the grounds that it involved the "certain peril of souls." Innocent III reconfirmed this position at the Lateran Council IV in 1215.[22] However, it still occurred quite frequently not only in England but on the Continent as

---

[20]Coulton, pp. 136-8.

[21]W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 35.

[22]Coulton, p. 155.

well. Pluralism naturally brought with it absenteeism; one could obviously not reside in more than one place at a time. The financial implications of holding more than one benefice are obvious, and many strove to amass as many benefices as possible. Several cases of extreme pluralism are recorded; for example in the late thirteenth century, Bogo de Clare, younger son of the Earl of Gloucester, possessed two canonries and prebends, three dignitaries in cathedral churches, and twenty-four parish churches. He was not even a priest.[23] Pluralism often resulted in great wealth for the holder. Records indicate that in 1366, the diocese of Salisbury contained 56 pluralists holding 132 benefices; in Lichfield there were 38 pluralists holding 95 benefices; and in Norwich the 41 benefices were held by 20 pluralists. This would amount to two to three benefices for each pluralist. The average aggregate income the pluralists received from their benefices ranged from approximately £26 in Salisbury to £30 in Norwich.[24] Pluralism could be the source of a great deal of wealth or it could mean simply surviving on the combined incomes of several benefices.

Thus far we have examined several important aspects of the life of a parish priest of late medieval England—how well he was educated and trained for the priesthood, and how he received his income. While these certainly are significant, they tell us little about the personal life of the priest. One area left as yet unexplored is the personal life of the priest with special attention to the ancient vow of clerical

---

[23]Ibid.

[24]Pantin, pp. 37-8.

celibacy. Since the eleventh century the Church had taken a militant stand supporting clerical celibacy, but did this mean that clerical marriage did not occur in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries? A celibate clergy was the ideal of the Church; did this ideal correspond with reality?

Even though clerical celibacy was preferred for centuries by the Roman church, this doctrine was largely ignored in spite of papal protestations and married priests were not uncommon.[25] As would be expected, the papal decrees denouncing clerical marriages and extolling celibacy did not mean that married priests left their wives or that incontinent clergymen suddenly became continent. Actually, things continued much as they had for centuries. The Church officials did try to curb its practice by imposing punishments, usually fines, upon clergymen found guilty of violating celibacy either through marriage or concubinage. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in England the punishments were not especially severe, leading one to surmise that the local authorities were not really seriously trying to correct the situation, as rarely did a bishop deprive a priest of his parish on grounds of incontinency. For example, in Ripon, five priests were to be deprived of their benefices on grounds of incontinency. Of the five, only one had his parish taken away, three of the remaining four managed to escape with a fine, and the other with a fine and private penance.[26]

---

[25]Coulton, p. 170.

[26]Ibid., pp. 172-3.

Records of bishops' visitations clearly show how widespread were clerical marriage and concubinage. The visitation of the bishop throughout Hereford in the fourteenth century reveals that 72 clerics out of 281 parishes were found guilty of violating the vow of celibacy. The reports indicate an almost tolerant attitude of the visiting bishops toward the situation, for those guilty were not punished or even chastised severely, but merely told to remedy the situation. The records of the first part of the fourteenth century give the same picture of incontinency. The visitation at Dawlish in 1301 found a chaplain having lived with a concubine for ten years although he had been reprimanded on several occasions. In 1333 ten parish priests were presented to the bishops of Norwich for violation of celibacy. One of the priests had "kept" a woman, Beatrice of Brok, for three years; Beatrice apparently was a friendly sort as she was named in the cases of four of the ten priests brought before the bishops.

> Robert, nephew to the vicar of Costessey . . . keeps incontinently, and has kept for 3 years, Beatrice of Brok. He denies this from all time; let him be admitted to purge himself with 4 compurgators. Roger, rector of Drayton, is ill-famed with the same woman; he confesses the sin and abjured it . . . under penalty of 5s. Master Robert of Knapton, chaplain of St. Magdalen, is ill-famed with the same woman, and with Margaret of Hampton; this he denies from all time; . . . Ralph Pecke, vice-dean of Rockland, is ill-famed with the same Beatrice and with Juliana Methelound of Shopham; he confesses the sin and abjures it it . . . under penalty of 5s.[27]

---

[27]Ibid., pp. 174-77.

While the attitude of the local church authorities toward clerical marriage and incontinency was one of almost resigned acceptance, there appeared zealous reformers from higher ecclesiastical levels such as archbishops or cardinals seeking to rid the Church of this corruption. In 1237, at the Council of London, the papal legate Cardinal Otto ordered that all married clergymen have their benefices taken away with the property going not to the wives and children, but the churches. He further decreed that sons of married priests were not eligible to take holy orders unless they had received a special dispensation. Priests with concubines were another target for his reforming zeal; after chastising them severely for their licentiousness, he ordered them to get rid of their women in thirty days or else lose their benefices. The bishops and archbishops were charged with seeing that these orders were carried out, and the previous casual attitude toward this abuse was not to be tolerated. They apparently took Otto's exhortations seriously, as evidenced in the 1240 constitution of the bishop of Worcester which ordered his officials to seek out any erring clergymen in his diocese. The trend set by Otto was generally followed: in 1251, Robert Grosseteste, one of the most prominent leaders of clerical reform, led an untiring crusade against clerical incontinency, and in 1268, Cardinal Ottoboni offically reaffirmed the declarations of Otto. However, in his declaration, Ottoboni omitted any reference to clerical marriage, concentrating solely on concubinage indicating that clerical marriage was declining while concubinage still persisted. Hence from the last half of the thirteenth century through the fourteenth century

both clerical marriage and concubinage existed, but the more prevalent practice was concubinage.[28]

Absent in the portrayal of the parish priest up to this point is his spiritual role in the parish. He was in most cases a landowner and possibly a husband and father, but these roles were secondary in importance to his position as the spiritual representative of the Church. Catholic doctrine taught that salvation was offered to man through the proper reception of the sacraments and since the priest was authorized to say the Mass and give Communion, he was an extremely important part of parish life. The priest brought the Church's influence to bear upon each stage of life as he baptized, confirmed, heard confession, married, comforted the sick and dying, and administered Extreme Unction at death. Perhaps the priest became most intimately involved with his parishioners in the confessional where men revealed their failures and shortcomings to the priest, trusting in his ability to bring God's absolution to them and restore them to a proper relationship with God and the Church. The priest may not always have been a particularly pious or educated man, but he was their only access to salvation.

Added to these awesome responsibilities, the priest was a preacher and teacher—he was the sole source of spiritual knowledge. He was obligated to teach young children the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, provide advice on practical living as well as spiritual fulfillment, and prevent men from straying from orthodoxy into heresy. These

---

[28]Henry C. Lea, *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church*, (Philadelphia: University Books, Inc. 1966), pp. 240-4.

three obligations were often fulfilled on a personal basis between priest and parishioner; another medium was the sermon, although it was not always a part of the service. There are several reasons for the absence of sermons in the service. One is that the sermons were usually too abstract for the average parishioner; most sermons were more like the exposition of a thesis than a medium for practical spiritual instruction. Also, few parish priests possessed the knowledge of the Scriptures necessary for composing a sermon. All in all, there was little corporate participation in the Mass.[29]

With the arrival in England of the Franciscan friars in 1224 and the Dominican friars in 1221, preaching as a regular part of the service became more common. The friars specialized in preaching and their often entertaining sermons drew large crowds as the friars traveled about England. Their popularity would seem to indicate a willingness on the part of a great many men and women to listen to spiritual instruction.[30] Eventually, priests began to take their responsibilities as preachers more seriously as they witnessed many of their flock preferring the sermons of the friars over the usual services. Most of the reform bishops of the thirteenth century, realizing the importance of sermons in the worship experience, urged their priests to preach often, and in the vernacular. By the end of the thirteenth century, largely due to

---

[29]Moorman, p. 77.

[30]Bernard Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif*, (Wiltshire, England: The Harvester Press, 1975), p. 19.

the influence of the friars, preaching was more common during the service and played a more significant role as a tool for instruction.[31]

The typical late medieval sermon usually could be divided into three categories—a series of anecdotes, a scholastic discussion, and a practical exposition on Scripture or doctrine. The first was the most popular, with the friars being especially adept in composing sermons containing numerous wonderful *exempla*. This type of sermon was not, of course, always intended to be entertaining as it was often used to prove the saintliness of a character through the recounting of miraculous deeds and successful confrontations with temptation. The second category, the scholarly discussion, was hardly suited to the typical parish church as its congregation was unable to understand or appreciate fine points of doctrine or theories of Scriptural interpretation. The last type, the expository sermon, was more directed toward simple explanation of the Scripture and basic Church doctrine, and providing guidelines for practical Christian living.[32]

Another important spiritual duty the parish priest performed was the collecting of tithes. While the tithe, along with the offering, was the priest's source of income, it theoretically was money and goods given to God for the furthering of his kingdom. As we have already seen, tithing was an extremely serious obligation, and those who neglected their duty were in imminent danger of excommunication. The parish priest, then, was responsible for seeing that the obligatory 10 percent

---

[31]Moorman, p. 81.

[32]Manning, pp. 19-24.

of each parishioner's revenue was turned over to him, and making sure that it was used in the proper fashion. All men and women were required to pay the tithe much in the same way as modern Americans are required to pay income taxes; the parishioner had no voice as to whether he would financially support the Church. The medieval Church was a powerful institution which demanded that tithes be collected promptly and in full.[33] Demanding payment of tithes must not have always been a pleasant task, for many parishioners naturally loathed to part with even a small part of their revenue. But with the priest holding the power of determining their destiny, they had little other alternative.[34]

A reasonably accurate picture of certain aspects of the parish priest in late medieval England has been presented. Most likely he was poor, ill-educated, and possibly married, or living in sin. The parish supplied his living, and he provided the means for his parishioner's salvation. Being the official representative of the Church, he was set apart from the parishioners, yet was an intimate part of their lives from birth to death. Indeed, he may very well have been born in the village he was later to serve. Undoubtedly, he was a crucial part of late medieval society.

---

[33]Moorman, pp. 111-2.

[34]Ibid., pp. 124-5.

CHAPTER II

CELIBACY AND THE PARISH PRIEST

We have already seen that clerical marriage and concubinage were not infrequent among English parish priests of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This disregard of priestly celibacy did not escape the attention of the parishioners; in the daily relationship between priest and parishioner in many communities, there could be few secrets. Nor were the bishops unaware of the situation as they made their visitations throughout their diocese, for priests were brought regularly before them for this disobedience of their vow. The focus will now shift from the reality of the situation as presented above to contemporary perceptions of that reality. Namely, what were the attitudes of contemporaries toward married or incontinent parish priests? Did they feel that violation of celibacy was a grievous offense? Did they accept the situation as inevitable? Or did they even have definite feelings on the subject?

In contemporary literature, one finds there is little available to the historian on the celibacy of the parish priest. In a period in which clerical incontinency was prevalent and condemned by the Church, one would expect to find many references to this flagrant abuse. While a scarcity of relevant comment is characteristic of both the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century literature, the works of the former period are much less fruitful than the latter in providing modern readers with an insight into contemporary attitudes toward clerical celibacy. In the

instances in which it is mentioned in thirteenth-century literature, there is a relative lack of the strident disapproval found in the writings of the following century. A thirteenth-century anonymous Latin poem entitled "A Cleric Courts His Lady" deals with a priest begging a lady to give him her love. Verse after verse she refuses, telling him that if they were discovered he would be disgraced. Finally, she succumbs to the priest's insistence, and gives him her love.[1] This poem does not specifically concern a parish priest, but it does illustrate a rather nonchalant attitude toward a cleric's seeking a lady's love, for he is treated no differently from any other aspiring lover. "Love Holy Church and its Priests," also a thirteenth-century composition, is a religious poem in which priests are portrayed as a holy and chaste class, one to be honored and revered.[2] While these poems are of totally different genres, one being a rather frivolous love poem and the other a serious exhortation to honor the Church, both display an uncritical attitude toward clerical celibacy. None of the bitterness or comic satire common to works of the fourteenth century is found in these passages. Yet, violations of celibacy did exist, as evidenced in the *Chronicle of Roger of Wendover*, who tells of an archbishop's proclamation penalizing the concubines of priests;[3] likewise, Matthew

---

[1]"A Cleric Courts His Lady," *Medieval English Lyrics*, R. T. Davies. ed., (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 59-62.

[2]"Love Holy Church and Its Priests," *Vernon Manuscript*, Frederick Furnivall, ed., (London: Paul Trench and Trubner, 1892), pp. 721-3.

[3]J. A. Giles, ed. *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, vol.II, (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), pp. 459-60.

Paris in his *English History*, relates the actions of Cardinal Otto and the Council of London concerning this problem.[4] It would seem that the thesis of the poem regarding the cleric and the lady was as least as close to reality as the other work extolling a chaste priesthood.

Fourteenth-century literature gives a few more clues to the problem of discovering a common perception. There are quite a few references to violation of celibacy on the part of the friars, but seldom does one find the parish priest specifically mentioned in this respect. The lechery of the friars was a favorite target for the biting sarcasm of contemporary writers as seen in the poem "Friars' Enormities;" here the friars are depicted as deceitful and engaging in whoredom, as well as other vices.[5] Chaucer treats the subject more lightly in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* in which the friar is described as a jolly, wanton fellow who definitely liked pretty women.[6] Two anonymous songs written in the fourteenth century, "Song Against the Friars" and "On the Minorite Friars" are invectives against the hypocrisy of the friars, i.e., their lust, deceitfulness, and seduction.[7] In none of these works is the parish priest mentioned specifically. Occasionally

---

[4] _____. *Matthew Paris' English History*, vol. I, (London: Oxford University Press, 1889), p. 79.

[5] "Friars Enormities," *Political Poems and Songs*, vol. I, Thomas Wright, ed., (London: Longmans, Green, Roberts, and Green, 1861), p. 141.

[6] "Canterbury Tales," *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, F. N. Robinson, ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. 18.

[7] "Song Against the Friars," and "On the Minorite Friars," *Political Poems and Songs*, vol. I, p. 263.

when a writer deals with the morals of the clergy, he speaks only in general terms, not singling out any particular order for his criticism. For example, John Gower, in the prologue to the *Confessio Amantis*, laments the fact that clergymen were no longer celibate as they had been in the past:

> To thenke upon the daies old/ the life of clerkes to beholde/men sein how that thei weren tho/ enxample and rule of all tho/ which of wisdom the vertu soughten.[8]

There is no specific criticism; he generalizes the state of the clergy as he sees it, which is not in a very favorable light. However later, he specifically criticizes the preoccupation of many priests with physical comfort, seeing it as a threat to the moral state of the priests.

> I not how thilke body fat,/ which they with deynte metes kepe/ And leyn it fofte forto slepe,/ whan it hath illes at his wille,/ with chastite shal stonde atille.[9]

"On the Times," a poem written in 1388 states that simony and other vices were present among the clergy, but makes no specific accusations.[10] The monks are also attacked as violators of celibacy. In the "Shipman's Tale" in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer tells of a monk who deceived a man and seduced his wife. After the story is told, the Host advises,

> A ah! felawes! beth ware of swich a jape!/ The monk putte in the mannes hood an ape/ and in his wyves eek, by Seint Austyn!/ Draweth no monkes more into your in.[11]

---

[8]"Confessio Amantis," *The Complete Works of John Gower*, vol. I, G. D. Macaulay, ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), p. 10.

[9]Ibid., p. 17.

[10]"On the Times," *Political Poems and Songs*, vol. I, p. 270.

[11]"Canterbury Tales," p. 160.

A possible explanation for the specific attacks upon the friars and monks is perhaps found in the nature of the clerical disciplines to which they were committed. The friars were a product of a popular religious movement which appears to have its roots in the third and fourth Lateran Councils and the foundations of the episcopal reform movements initiated and carried on by Pope Innocent III. This movement had as one of its goals the reforming of a clergy which many felt had become corrupt and too much a part of the world. The popular religious movement stressed such ideals as chastity, poverty, and asceticism. Of course this is not novel, but what was novel was the movement's adherence to these ideals. These ideas theoretically were to be realized in the life and work of the friar. Since the friars then were set apart as the "ideal" clergymen, it is not inconceivable that criticism of them would be more numerous and harsh when they failed to live up to these standards than when an ordinary parish priest, not a representative of the reforming movement, succumbed to temptations. Likewise, the monk, by his choosing the monastic life, was presumably setting himself apart from the world to live in contemplation and prayer; this separation of course entailed separation from all worldly pleasures. Since violation of celibacy was such a glaring repudiation of the monastic ideal, it is understandable that it would be viewed by many with disfavor.

Although the friars quite often bore the brunt of criticism concerning clerical celibacy, contemporary authors realized that parish priests were not without blame. Langland's *Piers Ploughman* quite clearly speaks out against the incontinency of parish priests. In one passage, the character Conscience, speaking of Lady Lucre, says,

> For she is priue with ȝe pope/ privusoures it knoweth,
> for sire symonye and hir-selue/seleth hire bulles.
> She blissith bisshopes/ eiȝe ȝey be lewed,
> Prouendreth persones/ and prestes meyteneth.[12]

And in a later passage, Langland is even more vituperative in his attack upon the parish priest; in a discussion of the seven deadly sins, the sin of Sloth is personified and also identified as a parish priest. Sloth the priest says,

> I am occupied eche day/haliday and other, with ydel tales atte ale/ and otherwhile in cherches/ Goddes peyne and his passover/ful selde þynke I epe-on. I visited neuere fieble men/ ne fettered folke in puttes, I have leure here an harlotire/ or a somer-game of soutlres, Or lesynges to laught at/ and belye my neighbore, an al ȝat eurer Marke made/ Matthew, Johan, and Lucas. And vigilies and fastyn-dayes/ alle ȝise late I pass, Tyl matynes and masse be do.[13]

A passage in *Mum and the Sothsegger* also deals with this lack of responsibility. Here the priests are portrayed as spending the parish's money on their mistresses, leaving the maintenance of the church and the poor to suffer while they engage in "lustes and sportes."[14]

It should be noted that these speculations concerning priestly incontinence are based upon only a few passages gleaned from many contemporary literary works. The scarcity of information makes determining a common perception difficult unless one considers the possibility

---

[12]J. F. Davis, ed., *Langland, Piers Ploughman*, text B, (London: University Tutorial Press, Ltd., n.d.), p. 28.

[13]Ibid., pp. 55-6.

[14]Mabel Day and Robert Steele, eds., *Mum and the Sothsegger*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 60.

that perhaps the lack of contemporary comment upon clerical celibacy is actually a comment in itself. One would assume that a writer would write about topics he considered to be important and of interest to his audience. The Church certainly figures in late medieval English literature. Apparently, however, the celibacy of the parish priests was not a prime area of interest to medieval writers who wrote of topics which reflected common attitudes and interests. This lack of concern is not too surprising in light of the fact, as seen in the previous chapter, that the bishops were not terribly alarmed at the presence of incontinency in their dioceses, as they handed out light punishments, if any, to those found guilty. Whenever any real action was taken to correct the situation, it was instigated by ecclesiastics far above the local level, such as a cardinal or archbishop. One would expect the bishops, as official representatives of Church policy, to be more concerned than the layman with the incontinency of the parish priest. If this is true, then the average layman was less concerned with the subject of clerical celibacy. How then can one explain this indifferent attitude when incontinency was definitely against Church teaching?

The explanation for this possibly lies in the circumstances of the parish priest's training and the environment of many parishes. As we have seen, the most common training for the priesthood was through assisting one's own parish priest. The young priest very likely grew up in the parish and was a part of the community, as well as being its priest. Although he was now the spiritual leader of the parish, the other people of the parish possibly continued to view him as the son

of common villagers, or as a fellow farmer or landholder. Taking a wife was certainly a natural thing for other men of the parish; if the priest, who lived and worked as other men, took a wife or mistress, would this be so shocking? Unlike a higher official of the Church, the parish priest spent every day in close contact with men and women who saw him not only as a priest, but as a man. Apparently, however, the priest who had a wife or concubine was expected to put his responsibility to the parish before his personal life.

In view of the passages in *Piers Ploughman* discussed earlier in this chapter, one might conclude that a priest's having a wife or mistress was accepted by the parishioners as long as he continued to fulfill his responsibilities as their priest. In these passages, violation of celibacy is criticized in conjunction with neglect of duties; in the first instance, Lady Lucre provides the priests with money so their lives will be spent with their wives, concubines, and children.[15] The implication is that the priest would have little time or inclination to fulfill his priestly duties. In a later passage, Sloth confesses that, instead of properly observing Lent, he lies in bed with his mistress, and fails to attend Mass and Matins.[16] And in *Mum and the Sothsegger*, the priest is criticized for frolicking with his mistress or concubine, abandoning the duties of his position.[17] The relative absence of comments concerning the celibacy of the parish priest in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century literature, except in the

---

[15] *Piers Ploughman*, p. 28. [16] Ibid., pp. 55-6.

[17] *Mum and the Sothsegger*, p. 60.

cases of *Piers Ploughman* and *Mum and the Sothsegger* in which the priest is depicted as neglecting his duties, and the lax attitude of local ecclesiastical authorities toward this situation leads one to the tenuous conclusion that at least some parishioners were not concerned if their priest had a wife or concubine as long as it did not interfere with his functions and responsibilities.

CHAPTER III

ILLITERACY AND THE PARISH PRIEST

In the first chapter the fact was established that the level of literacy of parish priests in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was low, and that a great many priests received no formal training, learning church doctrine and practice only through an apprenticeship under their own parish priests, who quite possibly were not adequately trained themselves. It has also been seen how the examinations administered by the bishops which were designed to determine a potential priest's qualifications often failed to eliminate unworthy candidates, resulting in the placing of inept priests in charge of the spiritual life of a parish. How did contemporary laymen view this situation? Did the low level of educational training disturb them? Did they feel that it detracted from a priest's effectiveness? Most laymen in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were illiterate, so those writing about the situation were in a minority. Since we then have little direct evidence from the illiterate majority, we must recognize that these limitations render any conclusion tenuous.

An examination of late medieval literature reveals several interesting similarities between the perceptions of clerical celibacy and clerical literacy; i.e., references to the literacy of the clergy are scarce in the thirteenth century, increasing both in number and severity of criticism in the fourteenth century. The only substantial comment concerning clerical literacy, or rather illiteracy in any

of the thirteenth-century literature examined was that by Matthew Paris in his chronicle, and even then it seems he was not actually attacking illiterate priests, but rather the greed and presumption of some of these unlearned clergymen. Speaking of the "wretched condition of England," Paris says that

> the small fire of faith began to die away, so that it was almost reduced to ashes, and seemed scarcely to emit a single spark . . . Illiterate persons, of the lowest class, armed with the bulls of the Roman Church, bursting forth into threats, daily presumed despite of the sacred privileges we enjoy from our ancestors, to plunder the revenues left by pious men . . .[1]

Matthew Paris does not specify what kind of clergyman he is speaking of, so it is not clear if he is including the subject of this study, the parish priest, in his criticisms. The thirteenth-century literature, then, offers little insight into the perceptions of clerical literacy. Clerical illiteracy certainly existed, but apparently in the thirteenth century was not a major area of concern. The remainder of this section will be focused upon literature of the fourteenth century.

A second similarity between the perceptions of celibacy and perceptions of literacy is the sources of contemporary comments on these subjects. The authors most concerned with, and critical of, clerical violation of celibacy were William Langland, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Gower. These authors apparently felt that not only should the parish clergy be chaste, they also should be well educated in theology and church practice. William Langland is especially bitter, while the

---

[1]J. A. Giles, ed., *Matthew Paris' English History*, vol. I, (London: Oxford University Press, 1889), p. 50.

other two are more moderate on this subject; two anonymous poems of the late fourteenth century *Mum and the Sothsegger* and "On the Evil Times of Edward II," also echo the sentiments expressed by the three authors.

A third similarity, and perhaps the most important one, between the perceptions of clerical literacy and celibacy is the reason for the criticism in the works examined. The authors just mentioned seemed to be most critical of clerical incontinence when it interfered with a priest's responsibility to his parishioners. Likewise, clerical illiteracy was criticized in that an ignorant priest could not properly understand, much less teach, the doctrines of the Church, nor could he correctly say the Mass and explain its significance to his congregation. A passage in *Mum and the Sothsegger*, an avowedly polemical tract, illustrates this point; the Sothsegger tells of parish priests given over to ignorance and immorality neglecting their duties.[2]

William Langland in *Piers Ploughman* very graphically portrays the uneducated priest; Sloth, portrayed in chapter two as incontinent, was also quite illiterate. Sloth confesses:

> I haue be prest and persoun/passynge thretti wynter,
> ȝete can I neiþer solfe ne synge/ne seyntes lyues rede;
> But I can fynde in a felde/or in a fourlonge an hare,
> Better þan in beatus vir/or in beati omnes
> construe con clause wel/and kenne it to my parochienes.
> I can holde louedayes/and here a reues rekenynge,
> Ac in canoun ne in þe decretales/I can noughte rede a lyne.[3]

---

[2]Mabel Day and Robert Steele, eds., *Mum and The Sothsegger*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 66.

[3]J. F. Davis, ed., *Langland, Piers Ploughman*, text B, (London: University Tutorial Press, Ltd., n.d.), p. 56.

In "Complaint of the Ploughman" Langland again attacks the illiteracy of the clergy, saying, "Unnethe mote they matins say/For counting and court-holding;/ and yet he jangleth as a jaie; and understont him selfe no thing."[4] This is a rather gloomy picture that Langland has presented. However, his belief that the clergy should understand and teach church doctrine is shared by other contemporary writers. Chaucer clearly feels that an educated priest is vital to the spiritual life of the parish. The ideal priest would be like the Poor Parson of the *Canterbury Tales* who "was also a lerned man, a clerk That Christ's gospel trewely wolde preche;/His parisshens devoutly wolde he preche."[5]

Contemporary authors seemed to view clerical illiteracy not only as preventing a priest from properly carrying out his responsibilities, but also as a possible threat to their own salvation. For if the priest did not adequately understand the Mass, how could the parishioners be sure that he was even saying it correctly? Catholic doctrine taught that participation in the Mass and the Sacrament of Communion were important vehicles for receiving God's grace. It would seem that some medieval men and women felt that an incorrect "performance" by the priest might detract from the efficacy of their spiritual experience, endangering the spiritual state of the entire parish. The following passage by Langland, while not specifically concerned with the parish priest, expresses this concern:

---

[4]Complaint of the Ploughman," *Political Poems and Songs*, vol. I, Thomas Wright, ed., (London: Longmans, Green, Roberts, and Green, 1868), p. 316.

[5]"Canterbury Tales," *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, F. N. Robinson, ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. 21.

> Such that cannot say her crede,/with praier shall be
> made prelates;/Nother can the gospel rede./
> such shall now weld high estates/ . . .
> such bere the keys of hel yates . . .[6]

An anonymous poem of the early fourteenth century, "On the Evil Times of Edward II" also deals with this idea:

> And if the persoun have a prest of clene lyf,
> that be a god consailler to maiden and to wyf
> shall comen a daffe and putte him out for
> a litel lasse.
> That can noht a farthingworth of God,
> unnethe singe a Masse But ille. And
> Thus shal al the parish for lac of lore spille.[7]

John Gower, in the prologue to the *Confessio Amantis*, takes a different viewpoint of clerical literacy. While the other authors discussed seem to feel that an ill-educated priest was a bad priest, Gower does not seem to feel that this is necessarily true: "It were betre dike and delve/ and stonde upon the ryhte feith,/Than knowe al that the Bible seith/and erre as somme clerkes do."[8] To Gower, then, an education and understanding of the Scripture do not insure that a clergyman will always preach or live in harmony with the teachings of Christ.

Several possible conclusions can be drawn from an examination of these passages. However, one must be aware of one limitation. One must take into account the fact that the literature of the thirteenth century was largely composed of chronicles and only in the fourteenth century

---

[6]"Complaint of the Ploughman," p. 327.

[7]"On the Evil Times of Edward II," *Middle English Literature*, A. Brandl and O. Zippel, eds., (New York: Chelsea Publishers, 1947) p. 188.

[8]"Confessio Amantis," *The Complete Works of John Gower*, vol. I, G. D. Macaulay, ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), p. 14.

does one find the beginnings of popular literature. Also, the writers of the chronicles were very often clergymen, while the popular authors of the later period often were laymen; this fact naturally would affect the portrayal of the priest. Still, both types of literature can provide clues as to what topics were of contemporary concern, and with these limitations in mind, one can perceive certain ideas running through the literature of both centuries and therefore, tenuously, arrive at several possible theories.

First, in light of the lack of comments in the thirteenth-century literature, one possibly can conclude that in the thirteenth century, clerical illiteracy was not a prime area of concern. The presence of negative comment in fourteenth-century literature would seem to indicate that men and women of the fourteenth century had higher expectations in regard to the educational level of their clergymen than people of the previous century. Secondly, it would appear that correct understanding and teaching of church doctrines and accurate performance of the Mass were perceived as an integral part of the parish priest's function. Illiteracy, then, was unacceptable, for a lack of knowledge in this area might have rendered the priest ineffective, and thus possibly endanger the salvation of the parishioners. Finally, although the educational quality of the parish priest was a matter of concern to all in the late Middle Ages, the relative scarcity of contemporary comment dealing with this subject would indicate that clerical illiteracy, just as clerical celibacy, was not the main issue concerning the parish clergy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Rather, as the next chapter will

show, the primary area of concern was what was seen as the incredible avarice of the parish priest.

CHAPTER IV

AVARICE AND THE PARISH PRIEST

References to what was perceived to be the insatiable greed of the parish priest, as well as the clergy in general, are found to be much more numerous and more vituperative in nature than the two previously discussed subjects, celibacy and literacy. The thirteenth-century authors who were largely silent on these two topics speak out quite frankly on the greed of the parish priests, and the prominent writers of the fourteenth century who were critical of the clergy on other accounts add priestly avarice to their list of grievances. As a matter of fact, it seems that avarice headed this list. Many of the comments regarding clerical greed are general in nature, such as William Langland's statement in *Piers Ploughman* that ". . . many chapeleynes arne chaste/ac charite is awey; aren no men auarousere þan hij/whan pei be anaunced;/ Vnkynde to her kyn/and to alle christene,/Cheuen here charite/and chiden after more;/Such chastitie wip-outen charite/worth cheyned in helle!"[1] However, quite a few references can be found which indicate that there were specific grievances which prompted the criticisms of greed; these grievances seem to fall into two areas: that greed led to an abandonment of religious vows, and that it caused a priest to neglect his responsibilities to his parishioners. While the two categories are closely

---

[1] J. F. Davis, ed., *Langland, Piers Ploughman*, text B, (London: University Tutorial Press, n.d.), p. 14.

related and sometimes overlap, critical examination of the various passages reveal the presence of several distinctive complaints.

The first grievance insisted that the greed of the parish priest caused him to lose sight of his clerical vows. When one entered the priesthood, one separated oneself from the world's pleasures, dedicating oneself to a life of service and self-denial. However, a priest who sought money to provide himself with a comfortable home, fine clothes, and elegant food apparently was not adhering to his vow. Likewise, a priest who used money to obtain a more profitable benefice was not obeying Christ's command that his servants be humble and self-sacrificing. Literature of the late medieval period seems to indicate that this sort of self-serving, pleasure-oriented priest was an offensive and disliked individual.

Matthew Paris, in his *English History*, provides us with several quite disapproving references to this type of avaricious priest. He tells of one bishop who traveled about to all his parishes and unfairly collected great sums of money for his personal gain from people who were in no position to oppose him. Obviously, the bishop is not the object of this study; however, often situations portraying bishops or other types of clergymen still serve to illustrate the general attitude toward the clergy, of which the parish priest was an important part. At the conclusion of this entry into his chronicle, Matthew Paris adds, with what seems to be some satisfaction, ". . . and as fraud is seldom without fear, he went about in alarm, surrounded by armed attendants."[2]

---

[2]J. A. Giles, ed., *Matthew Paris' English History*, vol. III, (London: Oxford University Press, 1889), p. 199.

Apparently, collecting tithes under false pretenses was a problem in the thirteenth century, for Matthew Paris tells of a church council in 1237, called by Archbishop Otto, addressing this problem. Matthew Paris attributes these words to Otto:

> We have heard with horror that some wretches of priests perhaps from the benefit of their vicarage, or to farm, or from some other cause of gain, receive incomes arising from the altar or from the penance of those who come to them to confess, and do not admit those who confess to penitence, unless some present is first placed in their avaricious bosom, and they thus do the same with regard to the other sacraments; and whereas, those who act thus are unworthy of the kingdom of God.[3]

The *Flowers of History* by Roger of Wendover contains a miracle story which would indicate that Roger felt that such priests who forsake the dictates of their vows will have to face the consequences of their sin. In this miracle story, a parish priest who had been guilty of extreme avarice lay dying; when several priests came to visit, he did not confess his sin, but instead told the priests he was bequeathing them a large amount of wheat. When the priests went outside to see their gift, the Devil met them in the wheatfield and told them that it all belonged to him. When the priests returned to the sick man and told him what they had just experienced, he confessed that years earlier in his desire for wealth and power, he had done homage to the Devil who had promised to give him these things. The story ends on a happy note, for the guilty priest repented and soon recovered from his illness.[4]

---

[3]Ibid., vol. I, p. 78.

[4]Giles, *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, vol. III, (London: Oxford University Press, 1891), p. 599.

The literature of the fourteenth century also deals with the subject of the priest who allows greed to lure him away from a "priestly" life, although here the comments are more numerous and more bitter. An outspoken critic of the clergy attacks the vain and worldly priest in the "Complaint of the Ploughman:"

> That high on a horse willith ride/In glitterande gold of great array./ Ipainted and portred all in pride./ No common knight may go so gay;/ chaunge of clothing every day./ With goldin girdles great and small . . . with change of many manner meates./ With song and solas sitting long./ And filleth her wombe, and fastes tretes,/ And from the meat to the song;/ And after meat with harpe and song;/ And each man mote hem lords call;/ And hote spices ever among . . .[5]

This is a much more specific complaint than those of Matthew Paris or Roger of Wendover; the two thirteenth-century authors criticized, in a general fashion, priests who took money for their own gain. The tone of the fourteenth-century poem is much more bitter and the author specifically lists the ways which offended him most that these priests spent their money—to buy luxurious clothes, fine meats, and exotic spices. This certainly did not agree with the ideal of the humble, self-sacrificing priest who placed the welfare of his church and parishioners above his own interests. Nor do the priests portrayed in "On the Evil Times of Edward II" who squeeze all the revenues they can from a parish, then depart "wid hawkes and haundes," leaving a totally impoverished parish.[6]

---

[5]"Complaint of the Ploughman," *Political Poems and Songs*, vol. II, Thomas Wright, ed., (London: Longmans, Green, Roberts, and Green, 1861), p. 307.

[6]A. Brandl and O. Zippel, eds., "On the Evil Times of Edward II," *Middle English Literature*, (New York: Chelsea Publishers, 1947), p. 187.

John Gower expresses the opinion that these priests who indulge themselves in luxurious food and clothes probably indulge in other worldly pleasures as well.

> I not how thilke body fat,/ which they with deynte metes kepe/ And leyn it softe forto slepe,/ whan it hath illes at his wille,/ with chastite shal stonde stille.[7]

Gower perceives the avaricious priests as being hypocrites for while they preach that worldly gain is only temporary, they themselves seek and indulge in every pleasure. The anonymous author of *Mum and the Sothsegger* contrasts the priests of the fourteenth century with the saints of the past; "For clercz were not knowe by þaire cloping pat tyme, me by royal raye ne riding aboute . . . Byt by þe deeds pat pay dide . . ."[8] He likewise condemns the extravagant and worldly lives of some contemporary priests who led lives of "lustes and sportes," spending on their mistresses money which should be used for the parish's poor.[9]

This statement leads us to the second area of criticism: a preoccupation with the accumulation of material goods most likely would lead a priest to neglect his duties as the parish priest. This concern for clerical neglect is shared by both thirteenth- and fourteenth-century authors. The previously quoted passages found in the chronicles of Matthew Paris and Roger of Wendover indicate that these writers saw greed

---

[7]"Confessio Amantis," *The Complete Works of John Gower*, G. D. Macaulay, ed., (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1901), p. 17.

[8]Mabel Day and Robert Steele, eds., *Mum and the Sothsegger*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 60.

[9]Ibid., p. 46.

as this type of threat; the statement attributed to Archbishop Otto illustrates this point, for the greedy priests were refusing to perform certain spiritual functions such as hearing confession or administering Communion until a payment was made.[10] The bishop who traveled from parish to parish exacting large sums of money from his parishioners[11] probably had little time to tend to the spiritual needs of the parishioners, as seems to be the case with the priest in Roger of Wendover's miracle story who conspired with Satan in order to satisfy his greed.[12]

The fourteenth-century writers seem to feel that the duty most neglected by avaricious priests was the care of the poor. Again and again this theme appears throughout accounts of clerical abuse and ineffectiveness. In the first chapter the financial system of the parish was examined; there we saw that one-third of the parish's income was to go toward the care of the poor, with the other two-thirds allocated to the upkeep of the church and the salary of the parish priest. The numerous references to the neglect of the poor leads one to conclude that not all priests were following this system; apparently they were using the money which was to go to the poor for their own purposes. John Gower states that avarice has hardened the hearts of many priests, who no longer feel pity for the plight of the poverty-striken.

> The strong coffre hath al devoured Under the keye of avarice/ The tresor of the benefice, Whereof the povere

---

[10] *Matthew Paris*, vol. I, p. 178.

[11] Ibid., vol. III, p. 199.

[12] *Wendover's Flowers of History*, vol. II, p. 599.

schulden clothe/ And ete and drinke and house both;/ The charite goth al unknowe,/ For thei no grain of pite sown.[13]

William Langland tells of ignorant people giving their money to pardoners for indulgences. These "dirty-minded scoundrels" were in league with the parish priests, with whom they divided the money which should have gone to the poor.[14] A later passage in the book portrays Reason refusing to forgive greedy bishops until they "sell their houses to buy shelter for the beggars . . ."[15] The author of *Mum and the Sothsegger* has no doubt as to how the parish's money should be spent; he depicts the Sothsegger attending a church service in which the priest urges the parishioners to make a liberal offering in addition to their obligatory tithe. The Sothsegger waits for the priest to tell the parishioners how the money will be spent, but the priest does not offer this information. Although he is uneducated, the Sothsegger claims that he knows the way in which the parish's income should be utilized—it should be used for the care of the poor, after the parish church and priest have received their due. Sothsegger realizes that this will not happen, because the clergymen take it all for themselves, doing nothing but conniving to obtain more money.[16]

In marked contrast to this type of parish priest is Chaucer's Poor Parson who hated to threaten his parishioners to make them pay their tithes; "But rather wolde he yven, wiþout doute,/ Unto his poure

---

[13]"Confessio Amantis," *John Gower*, vol. I, p. 13.

[14]*Piers Ploughman*, p. 2.

[15]Ibid., p. 97.

[16]*Mum and the Sothsegger*, pp. 44-6.

parisshens aboute/ of his offerying and eek of his substance . . ."[17] How unlike the priest in "On the Evil Times of Edward II" who took all the parish's money and then abandoned his parishioners, or the priest in *Piers Ploughman* in partnership with the pardoner, who duped the ignorant parishioners of their money. It would seem most definitely that many men and women felt that the care of the poor was a direct responsibility of the parish priest, and that neglect of this duty was a grievous offense. Some priests possibly were blaming the Plague for the poor condition of their parishes, for the parish priest in *Piers Ploughman* complains to the bishop that since the Plague the parishes were too poor to live in. He, and other priests, used this situation to justify leaving their parishes to go to London in hopes of making more money.[18] Langland makes no comment on this, but one receives the impression, from the satirical tone of the entire passage, that he does not accept this excuse.

This brings one to what perhaps was the most unacceptable offense of the avaricious priest—that of seeking a benefice not for the purpose of service, but as a means of making money. This must have been quite a problem in the fourteenth century, for the writers of this period devote a great deal of time criticizing this abuse. A parish without a priest was bereft of spiritual leadership, and more importantly was

---

[17]"The Canterbury Tales," *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, F. N. Robinson, ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961) p. 22.

[18]*Piers Ploughman*, p. 2.

without the sacraments on a regular basis. John Gower clearly perceives the gravity of the situation, for he states in the Prologue of the *Confessio Amantis*:

> Lo, thus tobroke is Christes folde/ Whereof the flock without guide/ Devoured on every side,/ In lacke of hem that ben unaware . . .[19]

This passage, preceded by a comment on the unconcern of priests with spiritual duties and their preoccupation with temporal gain, explains the consequences of a parish without a priest—they are "devoured on every side."[20] The Sothsegger in *Mum and the Sothsegger* also tells how priests leave their flock to find more profitable parishes and to seek a lord who would pay them well for their service.[21] However, *Piers Ploughman* provides the most effective satire of this abuse. Langland depicts priests trafficking in benefices—by buying them, more than likely with money they unfairly took from their parishioners. Simony, the practice of buying or selling church offices, must have been a common practice in the search for better benefices; in one passage Holy Church speaks to the Ploughman in a dream, telling him that Lady Lucre has done her much harm along with her friend, Father Simony.[22]

> Mourne nought, Mede/ ne make þow no sorwe./ For we wol wisse þe kynge/ and þi wey shape./ To be wedded at þi wille / and where þe leue liketh,/ For al Vondvirnvr vsdyr/ or craft, as I trowe!/ Mildeliche Mede þanne / mercyed hem alle/ of þeire gret good nesse/ and gaf hem vchone/ Coupes of clene golde/ Thanne lau te þei leue/ þis lordes, at Mede./ With that comen clerkis/ to comforte hir þe same,/ and beden hire be

---

[19]"Confessio Amantis," p. 15. [20]Ibid.

[21]*Mum and the Sothsegger*, p. 66.

[22]*Piers Ploughman*, pp. 16-18.

> blithe/ "for we beith þine owne,/ For to worche þi wille/
> þe while þow myȝte laste."[23]

Langland bitterly states what he felt to be an intolerable situation. Rather than attack the problem squarely, Chaucer uses the device of contrast—he portrays the good priest. Chaucer's Poor Parson has no inclination to abandon his responsibilities for personal gain.

> He sette not his benefice to hyre/ And let his sheep encombred in the myre/ And ran to London unto Sainte Paules/ To seeke him a chauntrie for soules, or with a bretherhed to been withhoulde; But dwelt at hom,/ and kept well his folde,/ as that the wolf ne made it noy myscarie.[24]

In light of this evidence, one can conclude that the function of the parish priest was perceived to be extremely vital. In his absence the parishioners, with no spiritual direction, were vulnerable to evil, and thus their souls were possibly in grave danger. There seems to be several reasons why this particular abuse was so offensive to medieval men and women. Not only were the priests misusing the parish's money for their own purposes, they were also using what was believed to be a holy office as a vehicle for material gain, disregarding the important spiritual responsibilities inherent in that office.

There are several references to clerical greed that do not refer specifically to parish clergy, but should at least be mentioned briefly. In the thirteenth-century chronicles of Matthew Paris and Roger of Wendover, there are a substantial number of statements regarding the greed of the Pope, and his legates who, the chroniclers felt, required unfair amounts of money from England for the Pope's campaign against

---

[23] Ibid., pp. 24-25.

[24] "Canterbury Tales," p. 22.

Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. They lament that the insatiable greed of the Romans was impoverishing their parishes and endangering the life of the entire English Church.[25] The Avignon Papacy in the fourteenth century was resented by some writers who believed the taxes exacted from the English parishes supported their luxurious lifestyles and growing bureaucracy. John Gower refers several times to the Babylonian Captivity and doubtless feels that it is a liability not only to the English church but the universal Church as well.[26] In these two situations, criticisms were not leveled at the parish priest because he was powerless in the matter and actually received no gain from the papal exaction.

In conclusion, it has been seen that the avarice of the parish priest was much more offensive to men and women of the thirteenth and fourteenth century than illiteracy or sexual immorality. It has also been discovered that abandoning one's parish in search of a more profitable benefice seemed to be the most unacceptable act of greed a parish priest could commit. Why was this the case? Why was clerical greed more intolerable than violation of celibacy or clerical illiteracy for that matter? The primary reason seems to be that, of the three topics examined, clerical greed seems to have affected the lives of ordinary men and women more directly and dramatically than the problem of celibacy or illiteracy.

---

[25] *Flowers of History*, vol. II, pp. 529, 544; *Matthew Paris*, vol. I, pp. 298, 361.

[26] "The Complaint of the Ploughman," *Political Poems and Songs*, vol. II, p. 305-320, passim; "Confessio Amantis," p. 14.

For instance, every parishioner was required to tithe, therefore the parishioners had a vital interest in how the money was utilized. Also, if the money was misused, it was readily discernable even to the most casual observer; the condition of the parish church and the welfare of the poor would attest to whether the money was being used properly. On the other hand, if a priest violated his vow of celibacy, it actually did not affect the daily life of the parishioners unless having a wife and/or children caused the economic needs of the priest to increase in such a way that it burdened the parish or if it took away from time that should be given to his parish. Likewise, the educational level of the parish priest was most likely not something the average parishioner concerned himself with daily. The literacy rate was so low, especially in the thirteenth century, that a good many men and women were probably unaware if their parish priest was illiterate. However, money and crops were a continual area of concern to the parishioners. The majority of the rural population worked quite hard to produce an adequate food supply and maintain healthy livestock. When the parish priest collected his tithes and offerings from his parishioners, it is understandable that these hard-working people expected their contributions to be utilized in the manner for which they were intended, not to provide the parish priest with luxurious clothes and fine food and especially not to buy him a more profitable benefice.

There seems to be another possible reason for the vehement criticism of clerical avarice, that is that it appeared to be in such opposition to the teachings of Christ. Christ taught that his followers

should not concern themselves unduly with material gain, but instead seek a meaningful spiritual relationship with God by living in harmony and service with his fellowman. The Franciscan and Dominican movements, founded in the early thirteenth century, actively espoused this ideal through a life of simplicity and a concentration upon the spiritual aspects of life. By the fourteenth century, many of the brothers of both orders had strayed from these early precepts.[27] However, it seems that the ideal was still quite strong and influenced the way men and women perceived how a clergyman should live. The unanimous opinion expressed in the literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth century is that a clergyman should not be overly concerned with material gain or honor, but should live a life centered upon religious understanding and service to the Church, thereby setting an example for the laity to follow.

Herein lies the priest's ultimate responsibility—providing spiritual leadership for the parishioners. This, also, is a theme one can perceive in the criticisms of each of the three abuses we have examined. In all cases—incontinency, illiteracy, and avarice—the main complaint was that they in some way or another prevented the parish priest from adequately fulfilling his spiritual duties. In the case of violation of celibacy, a wife, mistress or children quite possibly could take away from the priest's time as well as his financial resources, preventing him from giving his full attention to the spiritual needs of his parish. Likewise, an illiterate priest who could not fully understand

---

[27]John Moorman, *Church Life in England in the Thirteenth Century*, (Cambridge University Press), pp. 386-401, passim.

the Gospels or church doctrine was certainly not in a position to instruct effectively the parishioners in correct dogma or the teachings of Christ. And finally, a parish priest who was concerned only with his own material situation was not going to be concerned with the physical or spiritual needs of the parish; a priest who would eagerly abandon his church in favor of a more financially lucrative one was certainly no spiritual leader. Therefore, it appears that English men and women of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries felt that the parish priest's first priority should be providing spiritual guidance and leadership for the parish, and anything that interfered with this responsibility should be eliminated.

CHAPTER V

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND THEIR EFFECT UPON THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARISH PRIEST

In the preceding three chapters the perceptions have been examined of men and women of the thirteenth and fourteenth century as reflected in contemporary writings on the subjects of clerical celibacy, clerical illiteracy, and clerical greed as these topics are reflected in the literature of these two centuries. As one reads these works one is soon struck by the fact that there appears to be a difference between the writings of the thirteenth century and those of the fourteenth in terms of the three topics examined. First, there is simply a difference in the quantity of literature expressing a particular attitude or opinion on the subjects treated in this study. In the thirteenth century writings, these three topics for the most part do not appear as major themes; when they are mentioned, it is usually only in passing or in a manner which does not actually reflect a general opinion. A possible exception to this could be the subject of greed. Several of the thirteenth-century writers studied included the subject of clerical greed in their works; however, this does not appear nearly as often as it does in fourteenth-century works. Secondly, there is a sharp contrast in the attitudes of the authors toward the three topics. As was just mentioned, the thirteenth-century writers seldom mention the celibacy or the illiteracy of the parish priest, and when they do, it is most often in a neutral manner. On the other hand, these two subjects were

very common areas of criticism in fourteenth-century literature, with the topic of clerical greed carrying over from the thirteenth century as a literary theme. However, the attitudes of the fourteenth-century writers toward the avarice of the parish priest is much more bitter and sarcastic than those of thirteenth-century authors. Finally, there is a distinct difference in the general tone in the works of these two centuries as it relates to the parish priest. For the most part, the thirteenth-century works show an acceptance of the parish priest and his function in society. True, the parish priest was criticized, but only in individual instances; the entire group was not condemned. However, in the fourteenth-century literature, the tone changes quite drastically. There is no longer this sense of an almost unquestioned acceptance of the parish priest which one perceives in some thirteenth-century works. The attitudes toward the parish priest in fourteenth-century literature, to the contrary, are much more negative and skeptical, many expressing a general distrust of not only parish priests, but of the clergy as a whole.

We are then presented with a very interesting situation in which popular opinion toward a certain group, the parish clergy, changed significantly in the course of two centuries. In the thirteenth century, one finds a literature which expresses confidence and support in the role and function of the parish priest in society. This picture changes in the fourteenth century, most markedly in the latter part of the century. Here, the parish priest is portrayed more often as a menace to society than as a positive influence. One immediately concludes that

there must be some reasons or reasons for such a phenomenon; popular attitudes do not alter significantly without cause. Also, it would seem that the cause or causes must have been something of great import with far-reaching effects to have brought about such a widespread change in attitude. Therefore, the focus will now shift from the perceptions to the external events which may have influenced these perceptions.

In searching thirteenth- and fourteenth-century history for possible causes, two events immediately appear which could have exerted a significant influence, bringing about a perceptible change in attitudes. These are the Black Death, appearing in England in the mid-fourteenth century, and the Avignon Papacy, which began in the early fourteenth century. In light of the nature of these two events and the changes which occur in the literature as one moves throughout the two centuries, it would seem that the Avignon Papacy and the Black Death helped to bring about a growing anti-clericalism on the part of many men and women.

The Black Death without doubt was an incredibly horrible experience which left no group untouched or area of life unaffected. The Plague first appeared in southwest England in 1348 and quickly spread throughout the land, in some cases wiping out entire villages and drastically reducing the population of England. The clergy suffered as much as any group, and the number of parish priests dropped significantly during the period of the Plague; according to one source, the mortality rate of the clergy was 36 percent.[1] Another source puts the percentage of

---

[1]Anna M. Campbell, *The Black Death and Men of Learning*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 1931, p. 138.

clergy lost as 48.6 percent. While there is some argument over the exact number lost, there is no doubt that the ranks of the clergy were considerably lessened.[2]

Without question, then, the Black Death was traumatic. But how did this cause a change in attitude toward the parish priest? He certainly could not be held accountable for its appearance or disastrous results. The problem seems to lie in the behavior and role of the parish priest during the period of the Black Death. Apparently some parish priests were guilty of leaving their Plague-infested parishes to find a safer location, if there was such a place. Immediately, one can see that this action would be totally unacceptable in view of the common medieval perception of a parish priest's function. He was to be the spiritual leader, especially in times of distress such as this. Comforting the sick and dying and administering Extreme Unction were very vital tasks whose importance must have increased in such a period of widespread fear and death. The prospect of death by the Plague must have been unbearable, and such a death without spiritual comfort must have seemed even more intolerable. It would seem, though, everyone who could escape a diseased area would do so; certainly priests were not the only ones who did so. There are records of other people such as physicians and bureaucrats leaving their responsibilities to seek safety. In many instances, clergymen were more loyal than any other group of people. However, the fact that some parish priests left their parishes caused a great deal of criticism.[3]

---

[2]Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death,* (London: Collins, 1969), p. 202.

[3]Ibid., p. 273.

A very likely explanation for the hostile reaction to priests leaving their parishes during the Plague is that the Black Death showed laymen very graphically that the parish priest was not necessarily evil, but was not superior to any other group of people. "The priests, who as a class, had been almost deified, showed themselves to be very human, and a disillusioned populace concluded, echoing the words of St. Bernard, that 'the priests are worse than the people.'"[4] It is possible that this anti-clerical feeling growing out of this disillusionment became deeply ingrained in the minds of men and women and definitely affected the remainder of medieval history.[5] The Wycliffite movement appears to be an example of this negative feeling which pervaded society during and after the Black Death. "Wyclif was a child of the Black Death in that he belonged to a generation which had suffered terribly and learned through its sufferings to doubt the premises on which its society was based."[6] However, this suspicion of the organized Church did not necessarily mean a departure from religiosity; on the contrary, while confidence in the Church declined, there was a growth in religious fervor. This can be seen in the large number of churches built in the period following the appearance of the Plague.[7]

Not only did many priests leave their parishes, but apparently some of those that stayed were persuaded to do so only by the promise

---

[4]George Deaux, *The Black Death*, (New York: Weybright & Talley, 1969), p. 189.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ziegler, p. 270.

[7]Ibid., p. 267.

of financial reward. This factor could have contributed to a spirit of anti-clericalism among a great many men and women. Comments made by two archbishops of Canterbury, Simon Islip and Simon of Sudbury seem to substantiate such a claim. They wrote that the priests displayed "insatiable avarice," charged outrageous fees for performing spiritual functions, and neglected the care of souls and the upkeep of the church.[8] These criticisms agree with those made by the popular writers of the period such as Chaucer and Langland, who, it will be remembered, charged the parish clergy with gross neglect and carelessness in fulfilling their spiritual responsibilities. In a time when the parishioners desperately needed guidance and spiritual comfort, it seems that many parish priests were concerned only with their own comfort and safety. The people probably felt betrayed, and understandably so, for it appeared to them that their main source of hope had abandoned them. A certain amount of resentment on the part of the parishioners, then, would not be surprising and it appears that it was *this* resentment that colored so much of the popular literature of the late fourteenth century. Thirteenth-century literature contains examples of priests who neglect their responsibilities and disobey their vows, but again, these criticisms were aimed at specific individuals, not the class as a whole. In fourteenth-century literature, it seems that the writers begin with the assumption that the priests are greedy and irresponsible.

---

[8]Campbell, p. 138.

Another aspect of the Black Death's effect upon the clergy seems to have intensified this growing disrespect. As mentioned above,[9] poorly educated clergymen were a problem in both the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but the attacks grew more severe in the fourteenth century. The reason for the decline in the literacy of the parish priest appears to be directly related to the advent of the Plague. We have already stated that a great many of the parish clergy were lost in the epidemic, leaving a great many vacancies. Necessity forced bishops to appoint young, unprepared and often uneducated men to these vacant parishes. Candidates who before the Black Death would have been totally unacceptable were placed in positions of responsibility and leadership over people who perhaps more than ever before were looking to their parish priests for guidance.[10] While many priests in the thirteenth century certainly were ignorant, these great vacancies allowed even greater numbers who were illiterate into the ranks of the parish clergy. When these unqualified, illiterate priests failed to provide adequate leadership, it is possible that people felt as betrayed as those whose priest had abandoned them for his own safety.

The Black Death, then, appears to have had a significant impact upon the lives of most medieval men and women and it affected their perceptions of the parish clergy. This change in attitude was reflected, in turn, in the popular literature. The Avignon Papacy, while certainly

---

[9]Chapter 1, pp. 2-6; Chapter 3, pp. 34-40, passim.

[10]Francis A. Gasquet, *The Black Death of 1348 and 1349*, (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1908), p. 239.

not as traumatic as the Black Death, seems to have contributed to the increasing anti-clericalism so evident in the late medieval English literature.

At first examination, the Avignon Papacy seemingly so far removed from English parish life, would appear to have little effect upon the common perception of the parish priest. However, the Avignon Papacy touched the lives of parishioners in a very real way—through their purses. The papal exactions grew throughout the duration of the papacy's stay at Avignon, and naturally this intensified the cries of clerical greed.

The way in which the money collected from the parishes was used was as unacceptable, if not more so, as the large amounts of money collected. The popes at Avignon spent vast sums of money on the papal residence, making it more glorious than the one left behind in Rome. The popes gathered around them their cardinals who dressed in a manner befitting the ostentatious papal abode. It is understandable that the poor populace resented increased taxation when it seemed as if their money only served to provide the pope with more luxuries instead of furthering Christ's kingdom. This displeasure most probably was heightened by the fact that the pope was not residing in the Holy City as most felt he should. Actually, a great deal of the money collected during the Avignon Papacy was used for the strengthening of the papal bureaucracy and the building up of a papal army to reestablish papal supremacy in the Holy City, and making it a safe place for the pope to reside.[11] However, the common man and woman were not aware of this; they

---

[11]Yves Renouard, *The Avignon Papacy, 1305-1403*, trans. Denix Bethell, (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 117.

only knew that the Church was taking a significant portion of their crops and money, yet their parish church was not always maintained adequately, nor were the poor cared for as they should. They also heard stories of the pope and the Curia living in incredible splendor away from the proper papal residence.[12]

Since the papacy was concerned with political affairs not only in Italy, but with those of England and France (the pope often served as a mediator between the two countries), the Avignon papacy was not a period of strong spiritual leadership. This does not imply that the Avignon popes were not religious men or were solely occupied with matters of state. However, it is true that there were no reform impulses originating with the papacy during this period. The Avignon papacy could be viewed as causing a religious laxness. "After 1311 the popes called no council and therefore made themselves responsible for the relaxation of the moral and spiritual life of the Church."[13] The people were confused and angered by the popes' raising armies, levying high taxes, and seeking to reconquer land just like a temporal ruler. The problem was basically one of misunderstanding on the part of both the populace and the papacy. Most laymen did not understand that the popes were concerned with strengthening their bureaucracy and raising an army because this was necessary before they could safely return to a strife-ridden Rome. It is true, however, that several of the Avignon popes, enjoying the security and comfort of Avignon, had no intention

---

[12]Ibid., p. 120.

[13]Ibid., p. 117.

whatsoever of returning to Rome. But the majority of the Avignon popes actively worked toward returning to Rome; if they themselves could not, they strove to make it possible for their successors to do so. Regardless of what actually was the true situation, the average layman only understood that he was sacrificing an increasing part of his income to an incredibly wealthy, worldly-minded papacy.

Not only was the pope and his intentions misunderstood by the laity, the papacy likewise was out of touch and did not understand the thinking of the laity. While a significant portion of the laity was turning to mysticism, the Avignon popes were concerned almost solely with the very practical affairs of politics and papal bureaucracy. This failure to perceive the growing tendency toward mysticism, in addition to the failure to relate meaningfully to an increasingly educated laity, resulted in a papacy and laity that largely were alienated from each other and quite possibly mutually suspicious.[14] This alienation and suspicion of the papacy quite possibly could have been a contribution to the hostility toward the parish priests, for they were a part of the church hierarchy which was so financially demanding. And, as stated earlier,[15] when the parish priests collected large sums of money while the parish church was in disrepair and the poor were unattended, hostility and a sense of betrayal was an understandable result. The additional papal exactions most certainly did nothing to improve this situation.

---

[14]Renouard, pp. 120-21.

[15]Chapter 4, pp. 5, 9, 10.

The enthusiasm exhibited by the laity for the Franciscans in the early thirteenth century (a movement with *lay* origins) would seem to indicate that the organized clergy was not adequately providing spiritual guidance. It is true that the hierarchy realized the value and importance of this movement, for it was officially recognized by the Church. However, the important fact is that this was a reform movement originating outside the clergy which often must have seemed to be completely materialistically oriented. The Wycliffite movement, appearing in the next century, appears to be a reaction to this same perception of clerical greed and worldliness. The Wycliffite movement was born in the bleak period following the Black Death when social and religious conditions were at their nadir. Wyclif surveyed the situation and saw parishes without priests, or if there were priests, they were avaricious and would perform their functions only after they had been sufficiently paid for their services. He also saw an impoverished and deprived populace in many cases barely eeking out a living while the pope and his court lived sumptiously in a luxurious palace which was paid for by harsh papal taxation. Not only was the pope materialistic, he was a failure as a spiritual leader, neglecting his duties as the shepherd to Christ's flock in favor of political and military activities which Wyclif and others saw as contrary to the proper function of the vicar of Christ.[16]

The popularity of Wyclif and his ideas seems to attest that feelings of disillusionment were not limited to just a few disgruntled critics.

---

[16]S. Parkes Cadmon, *The Three Religious Leaders of Oxford and Their Movements*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916), p. 24.

To the contrary, in light of the contemporary literature examined thus far, it appears that dissatisfaction with the condition of the clergy as a whole in the fourteenth century was a widespread phenomenon. The Wycliffite movement was the extreme expression of a general sense of discontent with the existing state of affairs. The Black Death and Avignon Papacy seem to have contributed to a very significant change in general and the parish priest in particular. Criticisms that in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century were leveled only at individual priests, were now aimed at the clergy as a whole; what before was the exception was now the rule. In earlier literature, one reads of greedy and immoral priests; in literature of the later fourteenth century, one reads of a greedy and immoral priesthood. Before, the parish priest was seen as the spiritual leader of the parish, and his function in the parish as the representative of the Church was almost unquestioningly accepted. Later he was viewed often as a shameless opportunist who used the Church merely as a vehicle for furthering himself materially with no regard for the religious responsibilities of his position. In light of the commonly accepted opinion concerning the parish priest's function and role, it is understandable that hostility would result when the priests stepped out of this mold and behaved in a contradictory manner.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

A close examination of major English literary works of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries has illustrated that medieval men and women in England held several common perceptions of the parish priest. The medieval writers who wrote about parish priests held very definite ideas of how a parish priest should behave and what his role in the secular and spiritual world should be. Apparently the writers, and presumably most other men and women, believed that the parish priest should provide guidance and comfort in times of trouble, and act as an example of the Christian life after which the laity could pattern their own lives. Not only did the parish priest have these spiritual duties, he had certain practical responsibilities as well. He was to see that the parish church was properly maintained and that the impoverished of the parish were cared for. The majority of the income collected from the parish was to go toward these ends.

These expectations would indicate that the life of a parish priest was to be devoted wholly to the service of God and men; it was to be a selfless existence, one in which worldly pleasures and material gain were to have no place. They were, in essence, a class set apart; they were men but as representatives of the Church, they were expected to live differently than the laity. This attitude is clearly portrayed again and again in contemporary literature. A desire for financial security and material comfort certainly would be an acceptable attitude

in a layman, but would be seen as avarice in a clergyman. In the same manner, illiteracy or incontinency may have been tolerated in a layman, but in the late medieval period, these traits were definitely condemned in a clergyman. The priest's only concern was to be the spiritual welfare of his parishioners; all else was of lesser consequence. In most cases of criticism dealing with greed, incontinence or illiteracy, the complaint is concerned with clerical neglect of responsibility which in some way is caused by these vices.

The English literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries not only reveals these attitudes, it also indicates that criticism of the clergy for the abuses listed above—greed, illiteracy, and incontinence—are more prevalent and more bitter in fourteenth-century literature than in the thirteenth-century literature. While the works of the former period portray the parish priest in most cases as a productive force in society with scattered examples of individual immoral priests, in fourteenth-century literature, the greedy, lustful priest appears to be more common then the good priest who takes his vows and his responsibilities seriously. By the late fourteenth century, a definite hostility toward the clergy in general as well as the parish priest can be detected. It seems possible that two important events of the fourteenth century, the Black Death and the Avignon Papacy, may have influenced the attitudes of the laity toward the clergy.

The Black Death quite possibly negatively affected the perceptions of the parish clergy in that it graphically showed lay men and women that in reality, the parish priest was very human; his unique position

as representative of God and the Church did not protect him from the ravages of the Plague. The fact that some priests left their parishes to escape the Plague very likely intensified the frustration and fear caused by the Plague, for it was during times of uncertainty such as this that men and women sought the guidance and support that the parish priest should have provided. The idea that their spiritual leader would abandon them for personal safety was absolutely unacceptable.

The Avignon Papacy seems to have affected lay men and women in a less traumatic, but equally real way. The financial implications of the Avignon Papacy for many English parishioners served to create hostile feelings toward the Church which the parish priest represented. The popes, living away from the usual papal abode, needed vast sums of money to raise armies necessary for a return to Rome, and to make the papal residence at Avignon acceptable until such a return was feasible. The Avignon popes increased the exactions on the English church, causing accusations of greed and misuse of funds; the appearance of a figure such as Wyclif attests to the extreme dissatisfaction of many with the existing state of affairs. Most men and women did not understand why their money was being taken, few being fully aware of the great cost a return to Rome, which most agreed was proper, would entail. All they knew was that greater amounts of money were required of them, yet their parish churches remained in need of repair and the poor of the parish were left unattended. The papal residence at Avignon was very sumptious, and the tales spread throughout England of the fabulous splendor did nothing to improve the attitude of the laity toward the

papal taxes. The trauma of the Black Death appears to have brought about a certain amount of disillusionment with the parish clergy; the financial demands of the Avignon Papacy seems to have strengthened the resentment of English lay men and women toward a priesthood which they felt had abandoned its clerical vows and responsibilities.

The three themes pertaining to the clergy which appear regularly in the English literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—clerical greed, illiteracy, and incontinence—all seem to point to the fact that the laity of the period expected the parish priest to live a life apart from ordinary laymen in which his spiritual responsibilities were his only concern. In thirteenth-century literature the parish priest is generally accepted as adhering to his ideal; only individual erring priests are condemned. However, in the fourteenth century, a growing antagonism can be detected in which the priesthood, not merely individual priests, is criticized as selfish and worldly. This hostility appears to be directly related to the effects of the Black Death and the Avignon Papacy on English parish life. These were not the only factors contributing to such a significant shift in attitude. An increasingly literate laity in the fourteenth century is one factor not examined in this study which possibly could have affected lay opinion of the clergy. However, the Plague and the Avignon Papacy seem to have had a definite impact upon a large number of people to the extent that a common change in attitude could be attributed to them. In this period of fear and uncertainty, it appeared to many that the parish priest, supposedly the revered representative of the spiritual security of the Church, had

failed to provide the guidance so desperately needed; disillusionment and a sense of betrayal were understandable reactions.

SOURCES CONSULTED

SOURCES CONSULTED

Primary Sources

Appleby, John T. *The Chronicle of Richard of Devizes.* London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1963.

Blake, N. F. *Middle English Religious Prose.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972.

Burrow, John, ed. *English Verse 1300-1500.* London: Longmans, Green, Roberts and Green, 1865.

Butler, H. E., ed. *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond.* London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1963.

Brandl, A. and O. Zippel, eds. *Middle English Literature.* New York: Chelsea Publishers, 1947.

Davies, R. T., ed. *Medieval English Lyrics.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Davis, J. F., ed. *Langland, Piers Ploughman,* text B. London: University Tutorial Press, Ltd., n.d.

Day, Mabel and Robert Steele, eds. *Mum and the Sothsegger.* London: Oxford University Press, 1936.

Emerson, Oliver Farrar, ed. *Middle English Reader.* New York: Macmillan and Company, 1905.

Erbe, Theodore, ed. *Mirk's Festial.* London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company, 1886.

Forester, Thomas, ed. *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon.* London: Henry C. Bohn, 1853.

Fowler, David and Thomas Knott, eds. *Piers the Plowman.* Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1952.

Furnivall, Frederick, ed. *The Chronicle of England by Robert of Manning,* vols. I and II. London: Fyre and Spottisworde, 1887.

_____. *Vernon Manuscript.* London: Paul Trench & Trubner, 1892.

Gee, Henry and William Hardy, eds. *Documents Illustrative of English Church History.* London: Macmillan Company, 1910.

Giles, J. A., ed. *Matthew Paris' English History*, vols. I, II, and III. London: George Bell and Sons, 1889.

_____. *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History*, vols. I and II. London: Oxford University Press, 1925.

Hall, Joseph, ed. *King Horn*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901.

Hingeston, Francis, ed. *The Chronicle of England by John Capgrave*. London: Longmans, Green, Roberts, and Green, 1858.

Lodge, Eleanor and Mildred K. Pope, eds. *Life of the Black Prince*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910.

Lumby, Joseph, ed. *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis*, vols. VII and VIII. London: Longmans, Green, Roberts and Green, 1865.

Macaulay, G. C., ed. *The Complete Works of John Gower*, vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon, 1901.

Robbins, Russell Hope, ed. *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955.

Robinson, F. N., ed. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961.

Ross, Woodburn O., ed. *Middle English Sermons*. London: Oxford University Press, 1940.

Sisam, Celia and Kenneth, eds. *Oxford Book of Medieval Verse*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.

Weston, Jessie L., ed. *The Chief Middle English Poets*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914.

Wright, Thomas, ed. *The Chronicle of Pierre de Langtoft*, vols. I and II. London: Longmans, Green, Roberts, and Green, 1868.

_____. *Political Poems and Songs*, vols. I and II. London: Longmans, Green, Roberts, and Green, 1861.

Secondary Sources

Cadmon, S. Parkes. *The Three Religious Leaders of Oxford*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916.

Campbell, Anna M. *The Black Death and Men of Learning*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1931.

Coulton, G. G. *Medieval Panorama*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938.

Deaux, George. *The Black Death*. New York: Weybright Talley, 1969.

Garlick, Vera F. "The Provision of Vicars in the Early Fourteenth Century," *History*, vol. 32. 1949.

Gasquet, Francis A. *The Black Death of 1348 and 1349*. London: G. Bell and Sons, 1908.

Hart, A. Tindell. *The Country Priest in English History*. London: Phoenix House, 1959.

Kane, George. *Middle English Literature*. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1951.

Lea, Henry C. *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church*. Philadelphia: University Books, Incorporated, 1960.

Manning, Bernard. *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif*. Wiltshire; England: The Harvester Press, 1975.

Moorman, John R. *Church Life in England in the Thirteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945.

Pantin, W. A. *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955.

Renouard, Yves. *The Avignon Papacy, 1305-1405*. Translated by Denix Bethell. London: Faber & Faber, 1970.

Ziegler, Philip. *The Black Death*. London: Collins, 1969.

VITA

Mary Carolyn Montgomery was born on March 11, 1955 in Etowah, Tennessee. She attended elementary school there and graduated from McMinn Central High School in 1973. That fall she entered Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee, where she majored in History. A member of Phi Alpha Theta History Honor Society and Alpha Chi Honor Society, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History in 1977, graduating as the Outstanding Student in History for that year.

She began her graduate studies in Medieval History at The University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee, and received a Master of Arts in History in Summer, 1980.