

Gender and Priests

by Anthony Favier

Once a closet for homosexuals, now embroiled in pedophilia scandals, the Catholic Church is trying to restore a veneer of masculinity to its religious figures, thus sacrificing itself to gender politics.

Reviewed: Josselin Tricou, *Des Soutanes et des hommes, enquête sur la masculinité des prêtres catholiques*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2021, 480 pp.

Why on earth – and how – should one conduct a study of the sociology of priestly masculinity in France today? The number of Catholic priests is dwindling, and they form an ageing group (see text box). However, far from being anecdotal or outlandish, Josselin Tricou's dense work, based on a doctoral thesis in sociology he defended in June 2020 at the University of Paris 8, shows us how a gender studies approach to religious phenomena can contribute. He does so by innovatively combining original and unpublished field data, a detailed knowledge of the religious sphere and a proposal for a class-sensitive interpretation, which is rare in contemporary Catholic studies.

Catholic priests in France (data drawn from Tricou's book)

Number of priests (secular clergy) in France:

in 1965 : 40,994.

in 2012 : 13,331.

Average age of priests (2012): 75 years old.

Place of origin: One priest in 10 practicing in France is a foreigner, most often from Africa (1048 of 1689 foreign priests). The majority of foreign priests minister in rural parishes with the lowest income levels.

Rules for the ordination of Catholic ministers

Only celibate men (i.e., banned from having sexual relations) can be ordained as priests.

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), married men can be ordained as "permanent deacons" and have the right to celebrate baptisms. However, this may not lead to full orders of priesthood, nor to the episcopate.

Women are excluded from the permanent diaconate, the presbyterate and the episcopate. Catholics who participate in or engage in ordinations of women are immediately "excommunicated".

Since a 2005 Roman "instruction", candidates for the priesthood who are homosexual or "support gay culture" have been barred from being ordained.

The 'symbolic emasculation' of Catholic priests

Although recent works have sought to explore the field in a novel way (see 'Further reading', below), sociology has not neglected the figure of the priest in its 'canonical' studies. Priests have been described as endowed with a "*charisma of office*" (Max Weber) or as "*representatives of the priestly monopoly over the goods of salvation*" (Pierre Bourdieu). But these approaches to the discipline only touch on gender relations to a very limited extent. According to Josselin Tricou, in the Catholic context, the priest is often perceived through a "*Catholic gaze*" (p. 53) – just as feminists speak

of a "male gaze" – which acts as a filter that desexualizes the body and its desires. And this halo has also seeped into secular sociological studies. The seminary and the priest's particular vestments are seen more as a means of acquiring a *habitus* than as a component of gender identity.

However, it is important for sociologists to establish a socio-history that is continually tackling questions of masculinity and sexuality. In the long history of Christianity, a "*priestly ideal*" – which can even be seen as a "*true gender project*" – (p. 82) took hold very gradually, from the eleventh-century Gregorian Reform, the landmark Council of Trent (1545-1563), to the nineteenth century, when the figure of the Curé of Ars was dominant. This 'Sulpician' model is still alive today: the priest is celibate; he may wear a different vestment in the street or at Mass; and is a man of piety whose core activity is the celebration of the sacraments. Nevertheless, the two world wars, when priests were placed in the very midst of their fellow men's daily reality, as well as the breakthrough that occurred in the Church's focus on social commitment around the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), led to a change in this priestly norm, which is now increasingly in crisis.

In Josselin Tricou's view, for several decades the Catholic priesthood has become "*a movement of gender*" (p. 34), meaning 'movement' in the photographic sense of 'motion blur': a disturbance that pushes priests themselves to occupy and perform their gender identity. The Catholic priest's distinction from other types of masculinity, as originally intended by the Church, is thus exposed to a form of social downgrading. In the first part of his book, the author describes this "*symbolic emasculation*" (p. 96), which can occur through cinematic representations (chap. 1) or through suspicions linked to the scale of revelations of sexual violence (which are specifically addressed in the epilogue).

Contemporary changes in the 'priestly closet'

If the status of priests is less privileged than in the past – as the "*vocational crisis*" in Western countries clearly shows – does this mean that only those who remain have a particular interest in being there, especially homosexual Catholics? The author reminds us that the clergy, by strongly valuing celibacy as a special path to fulfillment, has in fact built up over time what he himself refers to as a "*closet*". This situation has intensified since the 1970s, with large numbers leaving the clergy and vocations

narrowing to more privileged social circles, where marriage remains highly valued and offers little escape for homosexual boys.

Somewhat paradoxically, the Catholic Church claims to defend the complementarity of the sexes and the universal inclination toward heterosexuality, yet it has institutionalized two highly contradictory models of masculinity: that of the married layman supported by a 'natural' order, and that of the priest called to celibacy by a 'supernatural' force. Managing this tension requires internal control policies to prevent the system from cracking at a time of greater social tolerance of homosexuality:

The fight against "gender theory", beyond the moral enterprise and the remobilization of one of Catholicism's demographic bases in a context of minorization [sic], would therefore also be a matter of ecclesiology: it would be a true 'closet policy', with the internal aim of silencing homosexual priests about their sexual preferences by making the issue extremely sensitive among the faithful. Better still, it would have the purpose of silencing them; perhaps above all because publicizing them would mean revealing, beyond the sexual preferences of each individual, the secret about this secret, i.e. the Church's overall silence with regard to homosexuality in particular, and sexuality more generally, within the clergy (pp. 267-268).

Josselin Tricou thus invites us to look beyond the ideological conservative/progressive divide in recent mobilizations in France such as the anti-same-sex marriage movement *Manif pour tous*, and observe the genuine internal social dynamics linked to the internal contradictions of a religious group awkwardly situated within secular modernity.

Gender policies to "masculinize" priests

Based on a typology common in Catholic social sciences (see the work of Philippe Portier and Yann Raison du Cleuziou), Josselin Tricou sets out to highlight two major "gender regimes" within "identity Catholicism":

- "Charismatic" communities (inspired by North American evangelicalism), such as the Emmanuel Community and Chemin Neuf, have developed a gender regime known as "sponsal", which refers to a nuptial symbolism strongly rooted in the teachings of John Paul II. In this regime, the priest, in the image of Christ, is a "spouse of the Church", which must implicitly submit to him: *"these communities place at the center of their cosmogony the image of a couple that is both traditional (i.e. faithful and*

procreative) yet modernized by the integration of expressive culture and a negotiated balance between intra- and extra-familial investment, and by the promotion of a certain equality between men and women, while respecting their complementarity" (p. 284).

- "Restitutionist" communities, on the other hand (which aspire to restore an ancient order) such as St. John's or St. Martin's, tend to develop a "*neo-sacerdotal gender regime*". They "*have largely reinvested the idealized image of the nineteenth-century 'good priest', which places the priest not on an equal footing with laypeople, but above them*" and "*in practice is carried out within these communities by means of a resacerdotalization of the cleric, i.e., by the return of his priestly attributes: the cassock, the setting apart, etc.*" (p. 286).

Within these two regimes, the author identifies three "methods of reasserting the value of clerical masculinity" that form a "masculinist front" converging with contemporary movements that challenge female emancipation: 1) the establishment of virile seminars that challenge overly intellectual masculinities, drawing on the codes of the European scouts or spaces of military socialization (chap. 4); 2) the emergence of priests as "experts in masculinity" who accompany men on men-only courses such as Camp Optimum (chap. 5); and 3) the use of digital tools by priests to develop managerial skills and reassert their authority, particularly in the political sphere (chap. 6).

Position and reception of a complex book

We can only applaud the author's efforts to use his theoretical knowledge to tackle a subject that is far from straightforward, particularly considering that he carried out his doctoral research within a Catholic framework strongly polarized by the same-sex marriage debates in France. He does so by explicitly adopting the ethics of the "*situated point of view*" of feminist and queer studies; which is rare in the French social sciences, particularly when dealing with the subject of Catholicism. Josselin Tricou does not hide the fact that he is a former clergyman (non-ordained priest) and acknowledges that this gave him an advantage when it came to "*perceiving the alternative masculinities to the naturalized vision of gender put forward by the Vatican*" (p. 53). The sociologist also recognizes that he benefited from "*passing*" as "*both heterosexual and homosexual*" (id.): the book describes how he was propositioned by clerics in the course of his investigation.

This ethnographer has produced an impressive work of observation: how does one write such a book without settling scores? Or without "denouncing" in pursuit of sensationalism or scandal, like certain recent documentary productions such as Frédéric Martel's *In the Closet of the Vatican* (Laffont, 2019) or Dener Giovanini's documentary *Sacred Love* (2016), which are sometimes based on filmed "outings" and "traps"? In *Des Soutanes et des hommes*, the subjects' initial responses to the research – for example, their reactions to the researcher's first presentations at conferences, the messages he received, etc. – serve as the basis for further exploration of methods and concepts. On this last point, the author perhaps seeks to protect himself too much, even if it means piling on the theoretical concepts and jargon of queer studies ("*queerisation*") or making bold, unapologetic use of the informal lexicon of priests ("*sacristy queen*", "*pseudo*", "*mole*"). While the book's reception in the Catholic context may have been adversely affected by this, it perhaps also reveals the embarrassment that gender questioning continues to cause, given that the priesthood is the "*traditional pivot of the Catholic gender system*" (p. 18). Nevertheless, one can only hope that Josselin Tricou's work will enrich the religious sciences themselves, since, in the aftermath of the Sauvé report, France's Catholic priests seem to be in a state of deep disarray. The researcher, however, now assistant professor at the University of Lausanne, seems to have his doubts about this, at least as far as France is concerned: "*In Switzerland, bishops talk to me about my research, and I'm even invited to present it as part of seminarian training. In France [...] there is silence*"¹. Does the Gospel proverb also apply to this sociologist of the priesthood: "No man is a prophet in his own land" (Luke, 4: 24)?

Further reading

- Céline Béraud, *Prêtres, diacres, laïcs : révolution silencieuse dans le catholicisme français*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2007, 351 pp.
- Hélène Buisson-Fenet, *Un sexe problématique : l'Église et l'homosexualité masculine en France, 1971-2000*, Saint-Denis, Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2004, 245 pp.

First published by laviedesidees.fr, 6 December 2021. Translated by Susannah Dale, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in bookansideas.net, 8 June 2023.

¹ "Des Soutanes et des hommes", interview with Pascal Janin and Christian Terras, *Golias Hebdo*, n°701, 23-29 December 2021, pp. 5-7.