

The state of the clergy

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The visitation records of the 1560s and 1570s describe a clergy that the Tridentine reformers regarded as deficient in almost every respect. Many parishes were served by priests who held the benefice but lived elsewhere and paid a substitute. Others were held by clerics who had bought or inherited the right to the income. Priests lived with women and children, carried arms, frequented taverns, traded in cattle and timber and took part in the feuds of their communities. Many could barely read the Latin of the missal. The parishioners often preferred it that way: a local priest who was part of village society, who could be dismissed by the community and who did not interfere too much in marriage, inheritance or the customs of the feast days was a familiar figure in the Alpine parishes.¹ These descriptions must be read with care, because the visitors had an interest in documenting abuses that justified reform. They are nevertheless consistent across many valleys and decades. The same records show a strong lay religiosity: chapels built and endowed by families and emigrants, processions, pilgrimages, confraternities of the Holy Sacrament and of the dead, and a dense network of pious bequests. The remittances of the emigrant builders and artisans described in Chapter A.III flowed in large part into churches, altars and foundations of masses in their home villages. The problem of the reformers was therefore not a lack of religious practice. It was the absence of clerical discipline, of education and of central control over the property and income that lay piety had accumulated.

1 Communities as patrons

One feature of the Ticinese parishes deserves particular attention because it shaped the finance of the Church until modern times. In many valleys the community itself, the *vicinanza* or the *comune*, had acquired the right to elect its parish priest and to administer the property of the parish church. This right of election had grown from the foundation and endowment of churches by the communities, when villages detached themselves from

their mother churches (*pievi*) and paid for their own priests. In Ticino parish rights passed to the new village churches from the twelfth century onwards, north of the Alps mainly between the fourteenth and the early sixteenth century.² The community that had built and endowed a church claimed to choose its priest, to approve his contract and to control the accounts. The bishops accepted this as a right of patronage, which gave the community the right to present its candidate, while the bishop could refuse a presented priest only if he proved unsuitable. The Council of Trent substantially confirmed these principles and laid greater weight on the patron's duty to maintain the church buildings.³

The consequence was a parish organization in which the laity held the purse. The *massari* or *fabbricieri* elected by the community administered the *fabbrica*, the fund for the building and maintenance of the church, collected its rents and kept its accounts. The priest lived from the *beneficio*, a separate fund of land and rents attached to his office, supplemented by tithes, stole fees and the income from foundations of masses. Borromeo's reforms did not abolish this lay administration. He tried to subject it to episcopal control through inventories, visitations and the duty to render accounts, which is the institutional root of the parish finance examined below.⁴ Communal election of the parish priest survives in parts of Ticino today, regulated by cantonal law on the Catholic Church, and is among the most persistent institutional continuities of the territory.⁵

2 Notes

1. D'Alessandri (as above); C. di Filippo Bareggi, "San Carlo e la Riforma cattolica", in *Storia religiosa della Svizzera* (1996), 193–246. ↩
2. Immacolata Saulle Hippenmeyer, "Parrocchia", transl. Valerio Ferloni, in DSS, version of 4 September 2023, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/011744/2023-09-04/> ("In Ticino già dal XII secolo, a nord delle Alpi soprattutto dal XIV all'inizio del XVI secolo – sempre più spesso i diritti parrocchiali passarono ai nuovi edifici di culto nei villaggi"); Immacolata Saulle Hippenmeyer, "Prebende", transl. Carlo Negretti, in DSS, version of 28 September 2010, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/031950/> (parishioners in Ticino acquired rights of patronage from the central Middle Ages, which allowed them to administer the property of the local church). See also Ceschi (as above). ↩
3. Andreas Thier, "Patronato", in DSS, version of 24 November 2009, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/009623/2009-11-24/> (the bishop "poteva rifiutare il parroco proposto solo se quest'ultimo risultava

inidoneo"; the communal patronage as "una delle premesse fondamentali per il diritto delle comunità di eleggere il parroco"; "Il Concilio di Trento (1545-63) sostanzialmente confermò questi principi, dando però maggiore peso all'obbligo per i titolari del patronato di provvedere agli edifici sacri"). The conciliar provisions are Session XXIV (11 November 1563), Decretum de reformatione, c. 18, and Session XXV, Decretum de reformatione, c. 9. ↩

4. Saulle Hippenmeyer, "Prebende" (as above): the benefice as a "dotazione correlata a una carica ecclesiastica"; parishioners' rights to administer the property of the local church. Saulle Hippenmeyer, "Parrocchia" (as above), on the redefinition of the parish priest's duties by Trent, including residence and the keeping of parish registers. For the Milanese decrees see the Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis (Milan 1582). ↩
5. Canton of Ticino, Regolamento della legge sulla Chiesa cattolica of 7 December 2004, implementing the Legge sulla Chiesa cattolica of 16 December 2002, Art. 8 para. 2 (in the chapter on the parish assembly deciding by popular vote: "per la nomina del parroco possono essere usate schede stampate"), <https://m3.ti.ch/CAN/RLeggi/public/index.php/raccolta-leggi/pdfatto/atto/6516>. ↩

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