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## Priests and their Bodies after Trent: (Dis)abilities, Masculinities, Sexualities

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This article discusses the impact of a “corporeal turn” in early modern religious history on recent publications in Counter-Reformation Catholic History. Scholars increasingly look towards the Church’s legal archives in Rome as a source of information about ecclesiastical and theological attitudes to the body and sexuality. The figure of the priest has emerged as one of the most interesting subjects in that inquiry because of the richness of material about clerics which those archives hold. Scholars are now engaged in study of how past generations of theologians, ecclesiastical magistrates, and medics assessed priestly abilities and disabilities, priests’ engagement in sexual acts, and their wider performances of masculine identities. Rome’s role as a major centre in shaping Catholic masculinities is reinforced in this scholarship but a new study underscores the blurred boundaries between the lay and ecclesiastical in masculinities there. Overall, this research provides much new material both for rethinking historical questions about Trent’s impact on reform discourses and also for commenting on contemporary debates in theology and Church politics about the nature of Christian priesthood.

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The “corporeal turn” in Counter-Reformation Catholic History is proving to be an exciting phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Begun by scholars who applied gender theory to the lives of female religious, it now emphasises the essential physicality of religious experience and also the body’s role in early modern spiritual regimes.<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther’s assault on the medieval Latin Church, though often seen primarily in theological or ecclesiological terms, was simultaneously an iconoclastic attack on its most ardent suppositions about the physical’s relation to the meta-physical. Sex became a flashpoint, naturally – and so too did corporeal perfection. Female bodies were hotly contested during the religious fervour which early modernity unleashed.

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B. Röder, *Der Körper des Priesters: Gebrechen im Katholizismus der Frühen Neuzeit* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Campus Verlag, 2021), pp. 348.

U. Lehner, *Inszenierte Keuschheit: Sexualdelikte in der Gesellschaft Jesu im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023) pp. viii+306.

J.-P. Gay, S. Mostaccio, and J. Tricou, *Masculinités sacerdotales* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), pp. 398.

L. Nussdorfer, *City of Men: Service and Servants in Baroque Rome* (Rome: Viella, 2023), pp. 219.

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1. For an introduction to the “corporeal turn”, see Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2009).

2. See, for example, Michael D. Barbezat, “The Corporeal Orientation: A Medieval and Early Modern Framework for Understanding Deviance through the Object(s) of Love,” in Susan Broomhall and Andrew Lynch (eds.), *The Routledge History Handbook to Emotions in Europe, 1100–1700* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 119–32. Michael D. Barbezat and Anne M. Scott (eds.), *Fluid Bodies: Rethinking Expressions of Bodies and Their Fluids in Pre-Modern Literature, Theology, and Art* (York: Arc Humanities Press, 2019).

But so were male bodies: indeed, the body – of whatever sex – became a major site in the acquisition and contestation of what Ulrich Lehner, in one of the books reviewed here, calls “symbolic capital” (p. 9). The Catholic reaction to Luther, even if in general also framed by its apologists in theological terms, nevertheless – by those apologists’ own admission – still involved a supreme exercise in legalistic classification and labelling. The urge to categorise and regiment, already visible in medieval canonistic discourse, became Tridentine hallmarks – and the body thus a major canvas on which such schemes were etched.<sup>3</sup>

The books presently under review owe much to the rich intellectual heritage which the subject of corporeality has already generated across time and place. Caroline Walker Bynum,<sup>4</sup> Peter Brown,<sup>5</sup> John Boswell (via his work on medieval sexualities),<sup>6</sup> and Lyndal Roper<sup>7</sup> are among the many important scholars whose writings on earlier Christian history, or on early modern Christianity’s reformed confessions, constitute the palimpsest here. Yet the authors discussed in the present essay transcend that general inheritance from histories of the Christian body via their immersive focus on the figure of the Roman priest himself: his physical characteristics, performative behaviours, and misdemeanours. Priests’ bodies, it turns out, were some of the Catholic Reformation’s most interesting bodies. That old problem which the medievalist Jo Ann McNamara identified as the *Herrenfrage* (“manliness question”) – how priests were to demonstrate their masculinity, when its normative vehicles such as sport, sex, and violence were denied them – did not go away with Trent.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Protestant rejection of celibate ideals, if anything, made the original antinomy within the Catholic position more acute. Theologians, but also canonists, medics, and ecclesiastical magistrates had to ponder such weighty questions as what physical requirements there might be for entry into Catholicism’s superior state? How was faithful adherence to that state to be pursued – and policed? And what made priests *men* (indeed, what was the relationship between what made them men and what made other men *men*)?

The Counter-Reformation – whose priests have often been subjected to what we might term “professionalisation” discourse<sup>9</sup> – emerges from these volumes as a critical moment in both the questioning and consolidation of sex/gender norms and expectations among Europeans. Debates about those norms and expectations in turn have major implications for how we understand models of priestly formation in the present<sup>10</sup> but also for historical

3. On the medieval background to this, see James Brundage, “‘Let me count the ways’: canonists and theologians contemplate coital positions,” *Journal of Medieval History* 10 (1984): 81–93; and James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

4. For example, Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011).

5. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

6. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

7. For example, Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Lyndal Roper, *The Witch in the Western Imagination* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

8. Jo Ann McNamara, “The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050–1150,” in Clare A. Lees (ed.), *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3–29. See also, Ruth Mazo Karras, “Thomas Aquinas’ Chastity Belt: Clerical Masculinity in Medieval Europe,” in Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (eds.), *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 52–67.

9. On “professionalisation” debates, see, for instance, Kathleen Comerford, “The Care of Souls is a Very Grave Burden for [the Pastor]: Professionalisation of the clergy in early modern Florence, Lucca and Arezzo,” *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* 85 (2005): 349–68. Wietse de Boer, “Professionalisation and Clerical Identity: Notes on the Early Modern Catholic Priest,” *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* 85 (2005): 369–77.

10. For a sense of the ongoing importance of this in Catholic theology and practice, see Declan Marmion, Michael Mullaney, and Salvador Ryan (eds.), *Models of Priestly Formation: Assessing the Past, Reflecting on the Present, and Imagining the Future* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996).

engagement with Trent's objectives and effectiveness – in the Council's immediate aftermath and during later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “reform” waves.<sup>11</sup>

### Priestly Ability and Disability

Brendan Röder's book, the first under consideration here, discusses the priest's body with explicit reference to histories of ability and disability.<sup>12</sup> This is not necessarily a subject broached in older summaries of the priest and his responsibilities.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Simone Majoli (1520–97), a sixteenth-century canonist, wrote that each priest must be “irreproachable of entire body [and] perfect from head to toe.”<sup>14</sup> Such attitudes drew on – although, in Röder's view, were not directly derived from – Old Testament injunctions about priestly purity such as in Leviticus 21:<sup>15</sup>

<sup>18</sup>No man who has any flaws can come near. No man who is blind or disabled can come. No man whose body is scarred or twisted can come. <sup>19</sup>No man whose foot or hand is disabled can come. <sup>20</sup>No man whose back is bent can come. No man who is too short can come. No man who has anything wrong with his eyes can come. No man who has boils or running sores can come. No man whose sex glands are crushed can come. <sup>21</sup>No man with any flaws who is in the family line of Aaron the priest may come near me... <sup>23</sup>He must not go near the curtain or approach the altar. If he does, he will make my sacred tent “unclean.”

Bodily perfection was a medical concern for early modern authorities, to be sure, but it was also a moral and sacramental problem. A priest who could not perform the sacraments – perhaps because, say, he was missing an arm – imperilled the sacred mysteries as they unfolded. Equally, a priest whose physical deformity induced disgust in his congregation brought with him both scandal and a potential imperilling of Christian souls. For Majoli, and the others who subscribed to his views, greater things were at stake here than the individual rights we now place at the heart of dignified treatment of personhood. The Church needed, and developed, a sophisticated apparatus for assessing how successfully priests could physically fulfil their mandated role. The Congregation of the Council (the body charged with interpreting and enforcing Trent's decrees) ruled in marginal cases, issuing dispensations when merited.<sup>16</sup>

Röder's book offers a series of engaging investigations into how the Church – its magistrates as much as its theologians – not only judged but also *understood* such cases. Above all, it addresses transformations which have taken place in collective understanding of them, offering some compelling insights. What counted as “disability” is, perhaps, Röder's prime concern. However, an important distinction between *debilitas* (weakness) and *mutilatio* (mutilation) – disability by category and by degree – also looms large in his

11. See Miriam Turrini, “La riforma del clero secolare durante il pontificato di Innocenzo XII,” in Bruno Pellegrino (ed.), *Riforme, religione e politica durante il pontificato di Innocenzo XII (1691–1700)* (Lecce: Congedo, 1994), 249–79. Mario Rosa, “Riforme della Curia e riforme dello Stato: il pontificato di Innocenzo XII,” in Mario Rosa, *La Curia romana nell'età moderna: Istituzioni, cultura, carriere* (Rome: Viella, 2013), 101–18. Maria Teresa Fattori, *Benedetto XIV e Trento: tradurre il concilio nel Settecento* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 2015).

12. See Michael Remblis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

13. For example, Joseph Bergin, “Between estate and profession: the Catholic parish clergy of early modern western Europe,” in M.L. Bush (ed.), *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification* (London: Longman, 1992), 66–85. Dominique Julia, “The Priest,” in Michel Vovelle (ed.), *Enlightenment Portraits*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 356–92.

14. Simone Majoli, *Tractatus de Irregularitate et aliis canonicis Impedimenti* (Rome: Andrea Phaei, 1619), 377.

15. For the commentary tradition on this passage, see Jennifer Anne Cox, “Disability as an Enacted Parable,” *Journal of Religion, Disability, & Health* 15 (2011): 241–53.

16. On the workings of this congregation, see D.L. d'Avray, *The Power of Protocol: Diplomats and the Dynamics of Papal Government, c.400–c.1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 177–81.

analysis. That distinction in ecclesiastical thinking was often difficult to pin down in practice – certainly, for instance, when the Congregation of the Council considered the case of Antonio Maniardo, a tonsured doorkeeper (*ostiarius*) with a bad stammer (p. 63). Maniardo argued, unsuccessfully, that his office was performed through bodily actions (*opera corporis*) rather than through speech, which meant that his disability was no object to it. The Congregation ruled against him, although its members may yet have granted him a dispensation. Other cases of interest include, for instance, those of priests who petitioned to be allowed to wear wigs to hide their unsightly pates from their flocks. Again, clerical officialdom's answers may surprise. Giacinto Casaro, a canon of Gaeta cathedral, was told that his supplication for a dispensation was denied – perhaps in part because he had admitted to having already worn the false hair for some 20 years without having sought permission (pp. 220–22). Casaro was allowed to celebrate mass only in private, on which occasions he could wear his wig so long as he removed it when consecrating the host (thus complying with an injunction in 1 Corinthians 11).<sup>17</sup> The complaints of the other cathedral canons, who sent a letter attesting that his “false hair” was a scandal, would seem to have had some influence on this apparently uncharitable verdict.

Röder is just as interested in the verdict of colleagues and parishioners as he is in that of the Church's authorities. But he also engages the growing body of medical opinion which supplemented and, indeed, resourced and restructured ecclesiastical thinking. Medics could be brought in to show that a priest needed a prohibited prophylactic (such as a wig) as well as to certify his healthiness or his lack of physical impairments. Marcello Orlando, a priest from Lecce, obtained two such certificates in 1694 which declared him free from leprosy, a rather striking example (pp. 233–4). The case of Lelio Repetti (pp. 237–45) is no less memorable – and in fact, illustrates much of the complexity surrounding this topic in the prevailing discourse. Repetti's bishop banned him from saying mass in 1686 on account of an epileptic seizure. Yet it was the bishop rather than the priest turned to Rome to confirm his decision, in large part because the priest did not obey him. The priest, in turn, argued that the bishop had failed to seek reliable medical opinion about his condition before suspending him – a procedural oversight which rendered his decision on the basis of only inexpert eyewitness testimony unsafe. Rome's doctors considered the matter, though at an intellectual level rather than via practical examination. Judges ultimately weighed up the evidence of illness against the risk of scandal (it was said that Repetti had dropped the consecrated host during his seizure and one of its fragments could not be found; also, that some 400 people had been present in the church when it happened and several had run out in terror). At root, money was also almost certainly at stake. Repetti, like many men in clerical orders, needed to say mass in order to work and his suspension amounted to an imposition of penury.

Skin colour and gender form the subjects of other chapters in Röder's text. However, this essay does not dwell on them because his findings on both subjects have already been translated into English and published (in the former case within this Journal's own pages).<sup>18</sup> Röder's material on these topics makes for uncomfortable reading, surely, and even compared with the cases described above. Modern sensibilities are grated when we see race described in terms of “blemish” and “perfection.” Nevertheless, as Röder notes,

17. 1 Corinthians 11, v. 4: “Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head”; v. 7, “A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.” See also, Fulvio de Giorgi, “La parrucca dei preti: limiti interior all'esteriorità barocca e sacralità sacerdotale nell' 'Ancien Régime',” in *Le carte e gli uomini. Studi in onore di Nicola Raponi* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 2004), 3–42; Louis Trichet, *La tonsure: vie et mort d'une pratique ecclésiastique* (Paris: Les éditions du CERF, 1990), esp. 124–28.

18. Brendan Röder, “Skin Colour and Priesthood. Debating Bodily Differences in Early Modern Catholicism,” *The Journal of Religious History* 48 (2024), early view, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.13041>.

the invocation, in relation to acts of racism and of scandal – a concept also central to Lehner’s book below – is instructive: Counter-Reformation canonists struggled to find legitimate scriptural reasons to discriminate on this basis, yet they felt able to argue that dark skin could “evoke horror” among the faithful (p. 156). Attitudes towards hermaphrodite, intersex, and unsexed clergy were similarly astringent – and just as unsettling in retrospect.<sup>19</sup> While, in general, missing members do not seem necessarily to have been seen as a reason to preclude priestly ordination they most certainly cast suspicion on those who wished to live their lives as nuns. There is a curious modernity as well as anti-modernity embedded in such assumptions and modes of knowing, which confirm the generally misogynistic picture also presented in Francois Soyer’s recent account of the inquisition case against the “Catalan Hermaphrodite” Maria Duran (and in other cases described in Röder’s book).<sup>20</sup> The discourses which Röder documents, in fact, not only “medicalise the moral,” as Maria Pia Donato has put it, but also moralise the theological.<sup>21</sup> Overall, the constructed nature of ability/disability (per Foucault’s *Madness and Civilisation*) is well sustained in his pages. So too is an implicit argument that the whole subject was almost infinitely problematic for those who sought to create order in the post-Tridentine world.

### Jesuits Behaving Badly

Ulrich Lehner’s new book engages an entirely different side to the priest’s body: its instrumental status in pursuing the (forbidden) sexual desires which Noel Malcolm has also recently explored in a new interpretation of early modern sexuality.<sup>22</sup> However, Catholic clerical sexuality has become a hot topic in general, for some time and across all historical periods. Dyan Elliott’s contentious and controversial treatment of the medieval evidence for priestly sexual scandal, *The Corrupter of Boys*, made a forceful case in 2020 that the Church has been an institutional facilitator of sexual abuse of both adults and children for centuries.<sup>23</sup> Mark Jordan’s older *Silence of Sodom* (2002) and Frédéric Martel’s *In the Closet of the Vatican* (2019) both tried to document and explain the apparent “homosexualisation” of the Catholic priesthood since the mid-twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> Franco Benigno and Vincenzo Lavenia have recently offered their own overview of the long-term versus short-term trends in forbidden priestly sexualities in Italian, which engages similar materials.<sup>25</sup> Critical assessment of these books – the arguments within which range from gossip to problematic conflation of homosexuality and paedophilia, to thoughtful consideration of the seminary’s sadomasochistic potential – are outside scope here. However, all these texts remain pertinent to Lehner’s work which, like Benigno and Lavenia’s (and a

19. See also Brendan Röder, “Ambiguous Gender in Early Modern Catholicism? The Case of Clerical Eunuchs,” in *Masculinités sacerdotales*, 71–86. Brendan Röder, “Essentialising Sex: Hermaphrodites and the Thresholds of Masculinity and Femininity in the Early Modern Catholic Church, c. 1700,” *Gender & History* (2023), early view, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12715>.

20. Francois Soyer, *The “Catalan Hermaphrodite” and the Inquisition: Early Modern Sex and Gender on Trial* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

21. Maria Pia Donato, *Sudden Death: Medicine and Religion in Eighteenth-Century Rome* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 126–27.

22. Noel Malcolm, *Forbidden Desire in Early Modern Europe: Male–Male Sexual Relations, 1400–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

23. Dyan Elliott, *The Corrupter of Boys: Sodomy, Scandal, and the Medieval Clergy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

24. Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Frédéric Martel, *In the Closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). See also Jean-Pascal Gay’s remarks on this topic in *Masculinités sacerdotales*, 41, and Josselin Tricou’s recent essay, “Refaire des ‘taupes’: gouverner le silence des prêtres homosexuels à l’heure du mariage gay,” *Sociologie* 9 (2018): 131–50.

25. Franco Benigno and Vincenzo Lavenia, *Peccato o crimine: La Chiesa di fronte alla pedofilia* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2021).

further forthcoming study by Mita Choudhury), attractively fills the “middle” period of Catholic History somewhat neglected by Elliott’s medieval focus.<sup>26</sup> Lehner in this book, which is as arresting as an earlier one on monastic prisons, makes a strong case that Trent was a key watershed in the Church’s “institutionalisation” of the “cover up.” Lehner’s nominal focus is the Society of Jesus – but his book is far more expansive than that, and the more valuable for it. Chapters on the economy of priestly reputation, definitions of sexual violence in the early modern period, and the processes of dismissal from the Society (at different stages of entry) supplement the main presentation of case studies. Overall, the impression one gets from Lehner’s material is that Jesuit high-mindedness over the order’s superior probity – an attitude found in earlier, internal Jesuit historiography, such as that of Bernhard Duhr – was (mostly) so much cant.<sup>27</sup>

Lehner’s chapter on priestly reputation (pp. 9–30) is worth focusing on in the first instance, for it is likely to be his tome’s most widely utilisable section (not least, because it advances on the somewhat technical presentation Silvia Mostaccio has offered in a recent Italian-dominated journal special issue on this subject).<sup>28</sup> Lehner advances an argument which, thanks to such diverse scholars as Craig Muldrew and Daniel Lord Smail, is by now familiar in wider context: trustworthiness or credibility (*fama*) was particularly important in an age that had “organisationally underdeveloped forms of credit monitoring” (p. 9).<sup>29</sup> Assumptions about the extent of priestly *fama* are hard to verify either before or after Trent, for one thing because we can easily read critical statements about priests in two ways. On the one hand, such statements all too often reveal (or imply) dissatisfaction with an individual cleric (or the class of clerics); on the other, their critical nature suggests rising expectations in the standards demanded of clergy (which means they are not necessarily a good measure of how *present* performance related to *past* performance).<sup>30</sup> Lehner’s chapter is particularly strong in its reflection on how the general economy of credit and credibility translated to the figure of the priest. In many parish settings the priest was a social lynchpin but also a “man in the middle.” A curate, even rector, needed to retain the confidence of both local bigwigs it (who donated to the church) and also the poor (on whom it relied for labour and to whom it provided alms). The padre’s role as a broker within society and community gave him unique opportunities to acquire credit and trust yet also placed an exceptional burden on him to safeguard reputation won. His mediating role could easily be degraded if he lost the respect of others. Priests who suffered such reputational loss – perhaps from being too merry, too lazy, gamblers, womanisers, or too fond of the bottle – are well documented across European societies and in many studies (Celeste McNamara’s recent account of Gregorio Barbarigo’s ‘heroic’ efforts to discipline his diocesan clergy in Padua provides many good examples).<sup>31</sup> Lehner does not so

26. See also Celeste McNamara’s recent essay which theorises the Church’s understanding of scandal and the role of the Tridentine period in shaping contemporary cultures of secrecy within the Catholic hierarchy, “Priests Behaving Badly: The Problem of Scandal in the Early Modern Catholic Church,” *The Journal of Modern History* 96 (2024): 47–77.

27. Bernhard Duhr, *Geschichte der Jesuiten in den Ländern deutscher Zunge*, 4 vols. (Freiburg-im-Breisgau: Herder, 1907–28).

28. Silvia Mostaccio, “Sacramental Potency and Ecclesiastical Power: Putting Power and Sexual Abuses in the Catholic Church in Context,” *Rivista di storia del Cristianesimo* 19, (2022): 243–58.

29. Daniel Lord Smail, *The Consumption of Justice: Emotions, Publicity, and Legal Culture in Marseille, 1264–1423* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). Daniel Lord Smail and Thelma Fenster (eds.), *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

30. Celeste McNamara, “Conceptualising the Priest: Lay and Episcopal Expectations of Clerical Reform in Late 17th-Century Padua,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 104 (2013): 297–320.

31. Celeste McNamara, *The Bishop’s Burden: Reforming the Catholic Church in Early Modern Italy* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020).

much add to such case studies as use them to frame his more focused subsequent discussion of the role of sex in such cases. Sex was a problematic thing for priests to engage in, to be sure, but not all sex acts caused similar loss of reputation. Moreover, not everyone in society understood the severity of all priestly sexual transgressions equally – and the gap between legal theory and social practice remains, in this telling, one of the most interesting aspects of the subject.

Much of the rest of Lehner's book explores that issue either directly or tangentially. The chapter on sexual violence, for instance, sets out some slightly counter-intuitive canonistic theory on the subject, which defined vulnerability as much in terms of the spiritual relationship between aggressor and victim as in terms of age or age differential. Chapter 6 on Jesuit sexuality (pp. 102–203) sets out and categorises various normative attitudes. Lehner's examples also show the sheer variety of examples of what was designated illicit, transgressive, or reprehensible behaviour – in short, these categories could cover almost any physical or mental violation of the vow of chastity.<sup>32</sup> Many acts which Lehner describes we would still find just as problematic if they occurred now: the cases of Johann Werner von Ehingen, Frutuoso Álvares, Jakob Marell, Theoderich Beck, Adam Herler, Franz Schlegl, and – most notoriously – Maximilian Gill, all pederasts, for instance. The apparent love affair between Ignatius Wilhelm (1674–1741) and Johan Baptist Vischl (b. 1677), which caused both men to be dismissed from the order is, on the other hand, an example which might in fact elicit one to express some sympathy for the perpetrators (pp. 60–3). Lehner shows how the fixation on chastity does indeed seem “to have driven some Jesuits mad” (p. 106). But he is also interested in the patent methodological difficulties of recovering historic sexual behaviour from surviving sources. Can these sources always be taken purely at face value? At what point should suspicion on the part of authorities be taken as evidence by the historian? Should we always believe the victim (as some feminist historians have argued),<sup>33</sup> even when we know well how almost all statements in front of magistrates were constructed (“fiction in the archives,” as the late Natalie Zemon Davis called it).<sup>34</sup> A thoughtful discussion of the ambiguous case against Juan Bautista de Ribera, once confessor to the august eminence of Carlo Borromeo, outlines many of the problems (pp. 73–6).<sup>35</sup>

One further intriguing argument advanced by Lehner (pp. 258–9) concerns the impact of secular reform on clerical cultures of secrecy towards abuse. Josephinism, the enforced subordination of the Church to secular norms and jurisdiction, was pursued in the Habsburg lands by Maria Theresa (r. 1740–80) and then Joseph II (r. 1765–90), and ended ecclesiastical liberties (it has therefore rarely been popular with Church historians). But, as a power grab by the state, Josephinism also had the unintended consequence of encouraging cover-ups: where, previously, ecclesiastical authorities would have prosecuted an offender in their own courts, now they preferred to do whatever they could to avoid

32. See also Fernanda Alfieri's interesting essay reflecting on how far Trent's identification of marriage as the only framework for permissible, sacramentally sanctioned sexuality contributed to making, all other expressions of sexuality unthinkable, “Rules of Use and Impunity of Abuse. Marriage, Sacerdotal Celibacy, and the Sexually Illicit between the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Rivista di storia di Cristianesimo* 19 (2022): 259–77.

33. For example, Mita Choudhury, “Tears and Empathy: Possible Methodologies for Studying Sexual Violence,” in Irene Kacandes (ed.), *On Being Adjacent to Historical Violence* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 465–84. Amy Stanley, “Writing the history of sexual assault in the age of #MeToo,” *Perspectives on History*, 24 September 2018, accessed 5 March 2024, <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/november-2018/writing-the-history-of-sexual-assault-in-the-age-of-metoo>.

34. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

35. Lehner notes that Borromeo dismissed the initial accusations but then dismissed the Jesuits from Milanese seminary in 1578, shortly after Ribeira's return to Rome in 1575; Borromeo also had little or no contact with him from 1575 to 1584, which we can read variously (p. 75).

drawing the secular authorities' attention to the issue. This dereliction of justice – which, as Lehner notes, has familiar undertones to the Church's late twentieth-century abuse crisis – was ultimately very damaging because it gave critics still more material to beat their anticlerical drums. Lehner has already drawn our attention to an internal Franciscan manual on criminal procedure from 1769 which, rather shockingly, instructs the midwife who examines a girl suspected of being deflowered by a friar to lie to protect the order's honour: she should proclaim the friar's innocence whether that was true or not.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, one can overstate the case for continuities between the Tridentine and the contemporary – and it would also have been useful to see more direct engagement with the case Benigno and Lavenia make for the situation south of the Alps.<sup>37</sup> Elliott is surely right, too, that fear of scandal was a motivating factor in Church cover-ups long before Trent (an observation which surely must have some further impact on how we incorporate this subject within debates about that broader notion of a “Tridentine paradigm”).<sup>38</sup> Moreover, whether the Jesuits were better or worse than other orders is another, ultimately unanswerable, question. Lehner is sensitive to the fact that anti-Jesuit polemic and propaganda – which reach epidemic proportions during the eighteenth century's middle decades – necessarily obscures much. He is also only too aware of the implications that his arguments must have for contemporary debate about how to deal with consecrated sex offenders. However, his brief final remarks are admirably historical in orientation. Their author, unlike some of the other scholars mentioned here, is no doubt too discreet to say everything he must really think.

### Of Priests and Men

*Masculinités sacerdotales*, a collection which offers a range of general, and also focused, essays by 20 impressive scholars, constitutes a different kind of contribution to our subject yet again. The book imbibes the philosophy of Judith Butler, and thus seeks to understand gender as a performance. The old *Herrenfrage* therefore returns (and, indeed, appears in Michelle Armstrong-Partida's chapter, p. 251). However, the editors' introductions – there are three, one by each editor – marry the general Butlerian framework to a more specific set of questions shaped by Raewyn Connell's “hegemonic” theory: that certain traits and behaviours are coded masculine to legitimise dominant men's social positions (the so-called “patriarchal dividend”).<sup>39</sup> As Jean-Pascal Gay points out (p. 39), this theory leaves the status of priestly masculinities (or perhaps just how we understand them) in a particular quandary, especially in the Latin West. Latin priestly masculinity has clearly never been hegemonic in any straightforward sense – indeed, priests have not been able to have legitimate offspring since the medieval Lateran Councils (perhaps earlier); they are at best elite *adjuncts* or associate members. Roman clergy are certainly not normatively a self-perpetuating group or caste in the conventional father-son sense.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, such men – and they remain exclusively men – have also clearly never been subalterns within European societies. Far from it: they were all too complicit with many hegemonic masculine paradigms – as various examples from this collection adumbrate – and were all too

36. Ulrich Lehner, *Monastic Prisons and Torture Chambers: Crime and Punishment in Central European Monasteries, 1600–1800* (Eugene: Cascade Books), 47.

37. Benigno and Lavenia, *Peccato o crimine*, esp. 203–13.

38. On this point, see also Ruth Mazo Karras, “Clergé, mariage et masculinité au Moyen Âge,” in Anne-Marie Sohn (ed.), *Une histoire sans les hommes est-elle possible?* (Lyon: ENS Editions, 2013), 109–20.

39. Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

40. In the Counter-Reformation context, see the important essays by Ulrike Strasser, “Copies With Souls: The Late Seventeenth-century Marianas Martyrs, Francis Xavier, and the Question of Clerical Reproduction,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 2 (2015): 558–85.

willing to imitate them even in defiance of canonical norms. *Masculinités sacerdotales*'s major contribution to the broad field will surely then be to have shown how clerical masculinity's status, neither hegemonic nor fully subordinate, is a tricky phenomenon to describe, let alone explain. As Gay notes, it can only ever really exist in dialogue with those other forms.

To cite one example of how this works: Michelle Armstrong-Partida's chapter (pp. 251–78), which updates material developed in her outstanding 2017 monograph, explores a dialectic between priestly and lay masculinities: it argues that medieval Catalan parish priests took concubines because being sexually active clearly functioned better for their needs to assert social status than did the celibacy prescribed by canonical norms.<sup>41</sup> Armstrong-Partida's observations here build on a broad field which, since Foucault, has emphasised the contested nature of the "celibate ideal" – and of efforts to enforce it during and after the Gregorian Reform. Armstrong-Partida therefore makes interesting reading in conjunction with, say, Jean-Marie Le Gall, whose chapter (pp. 155–76) discusses clerical hair and beards both before and after Trent (the moment when, arguably, institutional logics demanded much stricter enforcement of the celibate ideal). Le Gall, like Armstrong-Partida, notes the associations of his subject (hair growth) with virility, and also with the difficulty ecclesiastical authorities had in enforcing rules such as clean-shaving. Fashions in clerical facial hair oscillated, often – and perhaps also tellingly – in response to secular trends: it is no coincidence that Julius II (1503–13), and then Clement VII (1523–34), began to regrow the papal beard at the time that beards were emerging as vehicles for the expression of individual identity.<sup>42</sup> Of course, such beards also ran contrary to canon law, which may be why Pope Julius grew his – it was *precisely* an aggressive assertion of hegemonic masculinity in the context of the papal court. Maya Maskarinec, in an important essay (not cited here), has already noted the two contradictory traditions which emerged in Rome around this time surrounding the presentation of Gregory the Great (590–604): was it his patrician senatorial background that should be emphasised (implying that he should be shown clean-shaven) or his patriarchal Church Father role (which implied that he should be heavily bearded)?<sup>43</sup>

Other chapters of *Masculinités sacerdotales* also engage this contradictory, even hypocritical, approach to priestly aesthetics – apropos of which it is worth reiterating the irony of the material Brendan Röder describes in his book as well as his essay on ecclesiastical eunuchs here (pp. 71–86): discourses on canonical ability and disability surrounding the priesthood elevate the aesthetic even at the same time as they criticise priests who strive to obtain masculine perfection (by the wearing of wigs or as such). Sarah Barthélemy's chapter on Jesuit masculinities in nineteenth-century France (pp. 87–106) is also noteworthy, in part because it presents an interesting contrast not only to Lehner's book (described above) but also Ulrike Strasser's well-known work on the Society's gender norms in an earlier period.<sup>44</sup> Strasser stressed the early Jesuits' promotion of "feminine" behaviours (moderation, simplicity, decorum) and the Society's emotional appeal to young men (including via

41. Michelle Armstrong-Partida, *Defiant Priests: Domestic Unions, Violence, and Clerical Masculinity in Fourteenth-Century Catalunya* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

42. Mark Zucker, "Raphael and the Beard of Julius II," *The Art Bulletin* 59 (1977): 524–33. Opher Mansour, "Prince and Pontiff: Secular and Spiritual Authority in Papal State Portraiture between Raphael's Julius II and the Portraits of Pius V and Clement VIII", in Jill Burke and Michael Bury (eds.), *Art and Identity in Early Modern Rome* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), 209–29.

43. Maya Maskarinec, "A Question of Tradition: Catholic Reformers on Gregory the Great's Beard", *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 51 (2021): 651–86.

44. For example, Ulrike Strasser, "'The First Form of Grace': Ignatius of Loyola and the Reformation of Masculinity," in *Masculinity in the Reformation Era*, ed. Scott H. Hendrix and Susan C. Karant-Nunn (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2008), 45–70.

Ignatius' embrace of feminine emotions and tears as well as a millenarian militarism). Barthélemy, on the other hand, locates her subjects' masculinity elsewhere – above all in hierarchical relationships. There is some overlap between the two groups of early modern and late modern Jesuits, perhaps – for example, in the glorification of shared suffering (martyrdom in the sixteenth century, suppression in the early nineteenth). Nevertheless, the question remains: was this processed similarly? Silvia Mostaccio's chapter on Jesuit masculinities during the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648) (pp. 291–302), like Strasser's work, emphasises the military bent to the Society's gender constructs – and, related to that, the key role of a concept of brotherhood. Perhaps just as interestingly, Mostaccio draws attention to the stereotype of the Jesuit as a sort of mental “hard man” against the world (she also draws attention to the propensity towards loneliness which that has implied).

One further theme of interest in this collection is change over time. Josselin Tricou's chapter on priestly masculinities in French cinema (1944–2014) (pp. 371–92) can illustrate the careful work in this regard that scholars here also demonstrate. Tricou presents an apparent bifurcation in priestly gender discourse during the twentieth century between a “hot,” virile, hypermasculine priest, such as that in Natlia Saracco's 2014 drama *La mante religieuse* [The Maneater] (but which Anglophone audiences might more readily associate with something like the BBC comedy-drama *Fleabag*), and an effete, eunuch-esque character. The rise of these two tropes, both of which can also surely be found in the nineteenth century – but how much earlier? – itself presents an interesting paradox for historical contextualisation (which authors explore variously throughout this volume). Because priests have become less central to the lives of their parishioners, they might be thought to have facilitated this divergence into propagandist idealisation and vulgar caricature. Except that the de-sexualisation of both priestly personae would appear to have been a curious, underrated twentieth-century development. Earlier Protestant critiques of Roman clergy often presented them as *both* effete and sexually incontinent – as, for instance, underlined in Mita Choudhury's essay here on priests and sexual violence in eighteenth-century France (pp. 303–20) or in nineteenth-century English anti-Catholic, no-popery texts.<sup>45</sup> What it has meant to become a priest, and who are perceived to be the types who become priests, have clearly both been transformed in contemporary societies (and this may be at the root of what Tricou observes). Jordan and Martel both engaged this, of course, but Tricou sees wider social and cultural pressures as particularly significant on *presentation* of priests – which, of course, invites further questions about the nature of the feedback loop between actual priests and cultural stereotypes. Whether or not the precise detail in Tricou's somewhat sociological approach to answering these questions is sustained, his framework for them will remain interesting and relevant for “priest historians” in all periods.

### **Roma: Città degli uomini**

In his introduction to *Masculinités sacerdotales*, Jean-Pascal Gay notes how the dynamics of Roman Catholicism are unusual: unlike other Christianities, it appears to create strict boundaries between clerical and non-clerical (i.e., lay) masculinities (p. 41). The last book under consideration here, Laurie Nussdorfer's *City of Men* presents an exception that proves this rule – and thus complicates Gay's general picture. Nussdorfer, well-known for her pathbreaking social histories of early modern Rome, has produced a feature-length

45. Diana Peschier “Religious Sexual Perversion in Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Literature”, in Julie Peakman (ed.), *Sexual Perversions, 1670–1890* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 202–20.

book which binds together themes and materials already out there in various essays.<sup>46</sup> “What was manhood in a city of men?” is her guiding question here. *City of Men* aims to explain causes, but also consequences, of Rome’s unique, idiosyncratic imbalance between the sexes. Lest we forget, this was a place where males outnumbered females, at times by a ratio of almost 2:1 (p. 13). Early Modern Rome was, in a metaphorical sense, like a body which encased the legitimising apparatus of Latin priesthood during the Tridentine era; its individual households were, likewise, vessels which supported august *padroni* (lay or ecclesiastical). Such households were generally all-male in part because – as Nussdorfer notes (pp. 19–20) – domestic service was trending male throughout Italy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (a phenomenon which itself requires explanation). However, the phenomenon was surely also shaped by a coalescent view that it was not seemly or proper for women to be employed in such proximity, or potential intimacy, to the virtuous clerical numen (at least in the case of the ecclesiastic’s household). Women within the clerical household had either to be first-degree relatives (i.e., mothers or sisters), or females over 40 of impeccable reputation (which did rather limit the potential supply). Paramount priests needed faithful servants who were above reproach, and to be seen to be above reproach – and the all-male household was a product of this, even if complex patronage systems and networks also demanded young men migrate to where they could place themselves in the *padrone*’s physical presence.

How to manage these households was a constant preoccupation for the fussy major-domos who ran the Cardinal’s *casa* (and the *letterati* who counselled those officious fellows). Nussdorfer draws heavily on the writing of Francesco Priscianese (1494–c.1575), author of the best-known *Maestro di casa*’s manual, which she locates between the traditions of Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) and Paolo Cortesi’s *De Cardinalatu* (1510); she also expands our knowledge of and familiarity with Cesare Evitascandolo’s more substantial *Dialogo del maestro di casa*, which dates from 1598. Priscianese and Evitascandolo are full of advice on how to keep a Roman household shipshape. Pay attention to status markers was one of their more consequential admonitions – but understand how such status markers intersect with necessary divisions of labour was another. So many disputes within Roman all-male households in this period would seem to have come down to slights, perceived slights, assertions or denials of privilege. The household had to be – to borrow a military term – highly regimented. In fact, some of the most interesting parts of Nussdorfer’s text concern the gap between theory and practice in that regimentation – including the constant difficulties of getting men in service to observe necessary proprieties. Drinking, gambling, and sexual congress (including between household members) were all activities that were, unsurprisingly, only too commonplace. Less intuitive, however, are important distinctions both in performance of duties and philosophical approach to duties which Nussdorfer also detects between the household’s “working” and “gentleman” servants. The latter, constituted of those who aspired to social position, were generally easier to restrain than the former, who worked for wages until they dropped. However, in 1624, the “gentlemen” formed their own company across households: the *Congregazione urbana*, which functioned as a sort of guild or confraternity. Why they did so – to unionise bargaining, or just for sociability (including by supporting each other to maintain standards) – is an operative question. Nussdorfer detects something of both motives.

46. Laurie Nussdorfer, “Masculine Hierarchies in Roman Ecclesiastical Households,” *European Review of History/Revue européenne d’histoire* 22 (2015): 620–42; and Laurie Nussdorfer, “Managing Cardinals’ Households for Dummies,” in Ann Blair and Anja-Silvia Goeing (eds.), *For the Sake of Learning: Essays in Honour of Anthony Grafton* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 173–94.

Nussdorfer's social historical (as opposed to church-historical) inclinations perhaps explain one of the other notable features of this tightly-argued little monograph: the comparative absence of priests from its pages. One might think the clerical throng would be everywhere in a book about men in Rome.<sup>47</sup> And big-boss cardinals do appear here as *padroni* (Cesare Evitascandolo, for instance, was a serial client of several). Yet bog-standard clergy are thin on the ground both in Nussdorfer and her sources. Evitascandolo, somewhat eccentrically, did not even insist that a cardinal's *maestro di casa* had to be one: he only had to dress as one (p. 37)! This tidbit is itself fascinating for what it reveals about expectations of propriety and self-fashioning (to dress as a cleric without being in holy orders was not allowed, and potentially undermined clerical garb's special status as signifier). But the absence of an inducement for young men in service to Rome's ecclesiastical households even to take minor orders raises questions – not least about expected career pathways and patterns of mobility. Nussdorfer engages some of these questions – her work is especially strong on the evidence Roman households provide for geographical mobility – but it does not take up Paolo Prodi's observations from *Il sovrano pontefice* about this as an era of “clericalisation” (i.e., de-laicisation) of the Roman curia (in contrast to the nineteenth century, which saw a revival of laymen's governmental and ceremonial roles).<sup>48</sup> The ongoing embrace of – indeed, perhaps even expansion of roles for – laymen in clerical households after Trent seems worth remarking upon in light of Prodi's views. Perhaps seventeenth-century Rome simply had too many priests already (there were a lot of them). And those who achieved ecclesiastical status may simply have had better ways to make their living than doing menial service work (i.e., they could say the mass for money). But the concerns that officialdom had about Rome's priests at this time do sometimes seem remarkably similar to those expressed by Priscianese and Evitascandolo about Rome's male servants.<sup>49</sup> The city's male, masculine culture bled the boundary between the two groups and perhaps contributed to the odd physiognomy present in both.

## Conclusion

The collective impact of these four books on the corporeal turn in scholarship will likely prove substantial – and not only for our understanding of the Counter-Reformation and/or of Early Modern Catholicism. Above all, they form a literature which makes *the priest* central to discussion of Catholic Masculinities. In so doing, they also support and broaden an already existing historiography which increasingly emphasises the problems reformers faced when they tried to tame or reshape such notions in the service of a “socially-disciplined” Church. Yet, simultaneously, the authors of these books refocus that discussion of Catholic masculinity away from one or two specific archetypes (such as the ascetic saint or the Jesuit on mission) towards a more general, and thus also more nuanced, image (which also records imperfections and flaws). The masculinity of Catholic priests has always been hard to pin down – in any era – and the materials presented here advance our sense of why that might be. Not only was priestly “gender performance” defined in relation to the performances of lay peers and the values inherent in abstract ideals, but it was also lived out in reaction to the often all-too-imperfect performances of other priests.

47. On the numbers of priests in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Rome, see Hanns Gross, *Rome in the Age of the Enlightenment: The Post-Tridentine Syndrome and the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 67–69; or Luigi Fiorani, “Identità e crisi del prete romano tra Sei e Settecento,” *Ricerche per la storia religiosa di Roma* 7 (1988): 135–212, at 138–42.

48. Paolo Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice. Un corpo e due anime: la monarchia papale nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1982).

49. For example, Fiorani, “Identità e crisi del prete romano,” 178–79.

The body was, unsurprisingly, a major site in which this masculinity was contested. But what becomes clear from these studies is that a wide range of contextual factors, religious and non-religious, ecclesiastical and profane, informed and shaped bodily contests. Rome, the central focus of its activity, both informed them and was informed by them: the city and Curia's odd forms of masculine culture (and male same-sex sociability) meant that it typically played out differently there even from other places within the Catholic world. The logical point for further comparison is then non-Catholic bodies: those of Protestant pastors, Eastern Christian (Orthodox) priests, and even non-Christians. The relationship of the sacerdotal function to the physical, material, corporeal form remains the primary point at stake – and showing where modern Catholicism sits within a broader spectrum still of human experience will be a worthwhile goal for any future endeavours.

The aim of seeing how Catholic clerical bodies are situated within global cultural (and spiritual) experience matters explicitly in contemporary debates about the Catholic Church, and for the arguments being litigated right now. The ordination of women, clerical celibacy (or marriage), the penalties for priests who abuse or otherwise err in the flesh, the safeguards needed to protect congregations from priests, etc. – these are all among the liveliest and most contentious topics in contemporary theology and Church politics.<sup>50</sup> The scholars whose work has been discussed here all contribute something of fundamental importance to those debates: they show how theological “truth” claims advanced in the present can be critiqued historically – and, indeed, can and need to be historicised. Such scholarship in itself provides rich and valuable material for those seeking to resolve the various impasses in Church teaching and/or the Church's understanding of minoritised or marginalised groups (within or without the clerical habit). But for historians too, there is something to be gained here in the content of these works and in their methods of argumentation: a richer, fuller appreciation of the complexity and variety in Latin Christian, or Catholic, internalisations of the body as part of the apparatus of true religion and spirituality. Those who obtained holy orders after Trent, and those did not (but not for want of trying), speak still through these studies. Their lives are an important witness to Catholicism's ever-evolving corporeal discourse.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

50. For a recent collection of perspectives on relevant debates, see, for example, Declan Marmion and Salvador Ryan (eds.), *Reforming the Church: Global Perspectives* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2024); Laura Wilson, “The need for an historical theology of women deacons in the early church,” *Religion Compass* 18 (2024): <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12488>; Mark Jordan, *Queer Callings: Untimely Notes on Names and Desires* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023); Werner Jeanrond, “Abuse, Cover-Up, and the Need for a Reform of Church and Theology,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 3 (2023): 247–64; Massimo Faggioli, “The Need for the Historiographical Approach to Understand and Address the Sex Abuse Crisis in the Catholic Church,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 3 (2023): 265–80.