CHAUCER'S GOOD SHEPHERD: THE IDEAL AND THE ACTUALITY

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PREFACE

The history of the parson, or parish priest, and the references and allusions to him in English literature and history are interesting because they illuminate personalities and human drama, and they are important for their revelation of curious and meaningful facts. The historical record of the parson's duties and behavior and the definition of the ideal parson of the Middle Ages are not congruent. The corruption of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages is evident in all levels of parochial government, but it is particularly apparent in the ranks of the parish priests. In contrast to the actual medieval parish priests, Chaucer presented the ideal in his portrait of the Parson in the "General Prologue" of The Canterbury Tales. Chaucer uses the Good Shepherd image to characterize this parson's faithfulness in ministering to the needs of his flock.

Modern scholars have concerned themselves with several aspects of Chaucer's Parson including Chaucer's sources, the question of the Parson's Wycliffite tendencies, and Dryden's imitative version of Chaucer's Parson. The purpose of this paper is not to take issue with the scholars on these aspects of their studies of the Parson, but to bring together historical and literary material concerning the medieval parish priests and to define the contrasts between them and

Chaucer's Good Shepherd. This discussion is divided into three major areas: the origin of parishes, the right of presentation of benefices, and the religious climate of the times are given consideration in Chapter One; in the second Chapter the parish priest's social standing, education, official duties, and abuses are developed through literary and historical allusions; and in the final Chapter we see Chaucer's presentation of the idealized Parson in contrast to the other parsons of his time and to the other religious figures who have joined together for the Canterbury pilgrimage.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT ii

PREFACE iii

I. THE PARISH SYSTEM OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH 1

II. THE MEDIEVAL PARISH PRIEST 7

Rank in Society 7

Education 11

Ignorance 18

Teaching the People 26

Income 32

Misdemeanors and Abuses 45

III. THE EXAMPLE OF CHAUCER'S GOOD SHEPHERD 52

NOTES 71

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 77

CHAPTER I

THE PARISH SYSTEM OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

Parishes played an important role in the structure and government of the medieval Church. They were the local level of Church administration, and the local administration of Church work most affected the daily lives of the citizens. The exact origin of parishes in England is unclear. It was believed at one time that Theodore of Tarsus, an organizing genius, mapped England as a series of parishes as early as the seventh century. However, it has since been recognized that the establishment of parishes was far more casual than that. Most parish boundaries were the same as those of the lands held by the Anglo-Norman lords of the manors. The local lords in the thirteenth century built churches for their own use on their own estates.[1] Robert Mannyng points this out in the opening lines of a tale about a knight of Northfolk:

> Yn Northfolk, yn a tounne,
> wonede a kny3t besyede a personne;
> Fyl hyt so, þe kny3tes manere
> was nat fro þe cherche ful fere.[2]

The lord, whose ancestors probably built and endowed the local church, reserved to himself the right as chief parishioner to appoint the parish priest. This right was particularly advantageous if he had a son or relative he

wished to set up in life. The advowson, the right of presentation to a vacant benefice, was much sought after and frequently bought and sold. An anonymous poem, titled "The Simonie," treating the evil times of Edward II, illustrates this point. Immediately following the death of a parish priest, the patron would begin to receive gifts from clerks who were anxious to be set up with a benefice. He who gave the most to the patron received the church position.

> For sone so a parsoun is ded and in eorthe i-don,
> Thanne shal the patroun haue ȝifts anon;
> The clerkes of the cuntre´ wolen him faste wowe,
> And senden him faire ȝiftes and presents i-nowe,
> and the bishop;
> And there shal Symonye ben taken bi the cop.
>
> Coueytise upon his hors he wole be sone there,
> And bringe the bishop siluer, and rounen in his ere,
> That alle the pore that ther comen, on ydel sholen
> theih worche,
> For he that allermost may ȝive, he shall have
> the church, i-wis,
> Euerich man nu bi dawe may sen that thus hit is.[3]

There was a tendency in the minds of the patron and his appointee to think more of the material benefits of the benefice than the spiritual responsibility. In fact, episcopal registers are full of instances of candidates for office being appointed to parishes where they had no intention of living or carrying out any pastoral duties.[4]

The Church in fourteenth century England was generally corrupt at every level. The bishops were frequently engaged in political maneuverings and were active in their resistance to much control by Rome. The lesser ranks were decaying too.

In this era most of the parish priests seemed primarily interested in the financial benefits and the projected personal gains to be derived from their position.[5] These priests were able to maintain an authority over the people that was seldom challenged or threatened by any except the annoying mendicant orders.

The friars were a particular source of vexation for the parish priests. The parson, who preached and confessed in his parish, was not at all comfortable with the wandering friar, who preached and confessed anywhere and everywhere. The friars, generally more advanced in intellectual training than the secular clergy, prepared fascinating sermons, and the people were readily drawn to them instead of to their parish priest. Moorman states that "the quarrel between the friars and the parish priests turned on three things: the friar's right to preach, to hear confessions, and to bury the dead in their churches and cemeteries."[6] The bishops looked on the friars with favor, and gave them monetary support. They hoped that the friars could bring fresh vigor into the parishes, and this they did. The parish priests viewed this new life in their territory from a very different point of view:

> It was extremely galling for the incumbent of a parish to find himself in an empty church on a Sunday morning, knowing all the time that his flock were assembled on the village green, enjoying the racy stories and pulpit oratory of some wandering friar.[7]

The problem of hearing confession was even more difficult. Had the parish priest always been competent and capable of giving sound spiritual advice, he would obviously have been a better confessor than a man who was unknown before he entered the parish and who then left a few days later still unknown. However, many of the parish clergy were incompetent. The well-trained friars were only too willing to give the parishioners the flattering counsel that they responded to so readily. It was only natural that the friar close his sermon with an invitation for the people to confess their sins to him. This hearing of confessions became more profitable as time passed, and the mendicants jealously coveted the right to perform the office.

The desire for prestige was the crux of the struggle between the friars and the secular clergy over preaching. Competition for prestige, mingled with the desire for financial gain, was the reason for the struggle over the hearing of confessions. But the conflict over the burial of the dead was completely monetary. The people would pay heavily for the right to bury their dead in a holy place. Before the coming of the friars the parish priest could count on this source of income. After their arrival, the parson faced the prospect of losing his influence over the living and the possibility of severe financial setbacks through loss of the services for the dead.[8] The parish priest found it difficult

to schedule and conduct any of the paying services himself because of the fierce, competitive nature of the friars:

> Bot now þis londe so negh soght is,
> at unneþe may prestes seculers
> Gete any seruice for þes frers--
> þat is wondre þing.
> þis is a quaynt custome
> ordeyned ham among,
> þat frers shal annuel prestes bycome,
> & so-gates selle þer song.[9]

Wycliffe has a number of uncomplimentary things to say about the friars. He condemns them for preaching for gain, wasting money in adorning their churches, and slandering parish priests. In a catalogue of several causes for the lack of preaching he includes: the endowment of the Church, which makes prelates too fat to preach; the friar's robbing men of movable goods and preaching mainly for gain; and the slander that the friars aim at the priests:

> þe fourþe cause is bringing in of false freris bi many cuntreys; for, as it is seid bifore, þei letten trewe preching to renne & make curatis bi many weys to leeve þis moost worþy offiss. First þey robben hem many weyes & maken hem bisy for to lyue, for þey deprauen hem to þer parischens bi flori3shid wordis þat þat þey bringen yn; & no drede þey shapen þer sermouns bi dyuy siouns & opera iapis þat þey maken moost plese þe puple.[10]

These well-known quarrels between the friars and the parish priests prompted the Pope to issue a bull putting friars and the secular clergy in their distinct places, but the degeneracy on both sides made any longstanding agreement almost impossible.

The situation and environment of the parish priest's administration lent themselves readily to his deterioration. We have noted that even the installation of a new priest in a vacant parish was tainted or perverted by commercial interests. Furthermore, the presence of the friars often forced the local clergy to barter for the privilege of performing spiritual services. If the priest looked to his superiors for guidance, he often found moral disorder and injustices that further distorted his concepts. With this brief background view of the uncertain realm of the parish priest in mind, we can give closer attention to the processes and duties that governed his life.

CHAPTER II

THE MEDIEVAL PARISH PRIEST

Before it is possible to make valid comparisons and contrasts between Chaucer's idealized Parson of The Canterbury Tales and the actual priests of the Middle Ages one must become acquainted with the basic historical and literary records of the priesthood of that period. Several factors present themselves for consideration in such a study: the social class of the candidate for the priesthood, the variety and length of the steps in his education prior to ordination, the common label of ignorance given to parish priests, the daily and specialized duties of the priests, their income, and the major abuses that were charged against them. Through a study of commentaries by scholars of history and literature this chapter will attempt to draw some conclusions about the factual characteristics of the priesthood during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Such a study clearly shows that there was a great chasm between the ideal and the actuality.

Rank in Society

A man's social standing at his birth did not of itself guarantee or deny him the opportunity of choosing the vocation of a parish priest. The records show that the clergy

were drawn from all ranks of society. Abram observes that the social ranks in the various clerical classes covered a wide spectrum. He places the parish priest about midpoint on the social scale:

> Great churchmen were on a level with the nobility, and kept up quite as much state as lay peers. Private chaplains were hired servants and received wages from their masters like other household servants. Parish priests held a position midway between these two extremes.[1]

Edward L. Cutts tells us that in pre-conquest times the rank of priest was considered to be equal to that of a thane. A thane stood in rank above the station of an ordinary freeman or churl, but his rank fell below that of an earl or nobleman.[2]

Though the rank of parish priest was only a single level of the Church's well-defined organizational hierarchy, the social class of people within this level represented a broad continuum of ranks from a diversified society. It was rather easy for the son of a noble family to enter training to become a parish priest. It was often the younger son of the lord of the land who was brought up to be the spiritual rector of the family estate. Thus it was only natural that many of the parish priests would have been men of "good" family.[3]

The rank of the parish clergy, however, was not limited to priests of noble birth. In the "Canons of Edgar" (A.D. 959-975), made under the influence of Archbishop Dunstan, standards of life and the duty of the clergy were set forth.

Among these standards we find instructions that tell the priests of high birth not to despise a low-born priest because of his origin, but to consider that all men are of one birth. Those who were blessed with natural ability and circumstantial advantages were also told that the learned priest should not "throw scorn on the half-learned, but correct him."[4]

Those who belonged to the peasant class could not be prevented from holding office because of their birth, unless their birth had been illegitimate. The Church opened opportunities for careers to all classes and ranks of people. People frequently rose in the ranks of the Church. The peasant class, including men like the poor Parson of the Canterbury Tales, whose brother was a ploughman and carter of dung, provided a number of rectors for country parishes. Many of them made excellent parish priests because of their identity with the common people--they understood their parishioners and could speak to them in their own language.[5]

During the thirteenth century the local priest had a dual loyalty. Moorman defines this double allegiance:

> He was responsible to his bishop, without whose sanction he could not function, but he was also responsible to his lord, without whose support he could not live at all. At his institution he would have to pay homage to his bishop, to whom he would be bound by an oath of canonical obedience; but at the same time he would be his lord's "man," and therefore subject to his authority and jurisdiction. We must not, however, think of the parish priest as

> a serf; he was a free man, exempt from the performance of servile labor and endowed with a freehold from which he could not be dislodged.[6]

In the fourteenth century English landlords were only too glad to bestow benifices, of which they had the right of presentation, upon young sons or relatives who had been trained for this purpose. But in the same century the ranks of the clergy were partially filled with middle class people and even the sons of serfs. These serfs had to obtain permission from their overlord and pay him a fine for sending their children to school. Abbot Gasquet states that episcopal dispensations were frequently noted in the diocesan registers. These dispensations "show that a not inconsiderable number of the English clergy sprang from the class of natives of the soil, or serfs, upon whom the lord of the manor had a claim."[7]

From these comments we can see that the ranks of the clergy in the medieval church were filled with representatives from all stations of life. There was usually a way or a means whereby a man could, regardless of his family or circumstances, enter training and take up a responsible position in the Church. This democratic policy of the Church made it possible for a man to grow through the exercise and development of his abilities and talents. This recognition by the Church of individual human worth motivated men of low standing toward Church-related work.

Education

The steps in the education of a parish priest varied in some instances, according to his social backgrounds, but most of the steps were very much the same. The normal procedure included teaching by the local parish priest, attending grammar school and the university, completing requirements for the minor and major orders, and, finally, ordination.

The child's parentage and social status dictated to a certain extent the type of education he would receive. One of the duties of a parish priest was to teach the children of his parishioners before they went to any formal school. Often it was the parson's influence that determined whether or not the sons of artisans and laborers got an education.[8] Many of the clergy, drawn from the peasant or laboring classes, were men who had little education other than what they learned in childhood from some sympathetic, but probably ill-educated, parish priest.[9] If the youth was privileged enough to go to school he would then receive the normal grammar school education of his time and area. During the time of his early education a youth could help the priest at the altar. In doing this he would learn in very much the same way as a "gild apprentice obtained his mastership, by practice and rule of thumb."[10] By working for the parish priest the boy could learn enough to receive in a lump the four minor orders: doorkeeper, reader, exorcist, and acolyte.

Then the youth could function as parish clerk, whose ordinary responsibility was to give the response; but in the priest's absence he must read the Matins and Evensong. This apprenticeship provided good, practical preparatory exercises for the candidate aspiring to the priesthood.

The apprentice had many duties. He would cense the congregation, sprinkle holy water from house to house on solemn occasions, sing for departed friends and relatives, and even teach. Sprinkling holy water from house to house, singing, and teaching could bring in a small fee for the novice. After obtaining the minor orders and serving as the priest's apprentice, the clerk had to decide whether to continue in pursuit of ordination as a priest, or to go the way of the world and seek other employment. With some additional training at the university, a spiritually oriented student could proceed to the three major orders: subdeacon, deacon, and priest.[11]

The education and apprenticeship processes usually occurred at a very early age. The age when the candidate for the priesthood could be promoted to higher steps along the way leading to ordination was settled by law and custom. If, at the age of seven, a boy showed promise of entering the sacred ministry, he might receive the tonsure that would make him a cleric. In the following seven years he could serve his apprenticeship with the priest and receive the four minor

orders. He would be at least fourteen then and could begin his course of study at the university. Four years later, at eighteen, he could be ordained subdeacon, the first of the major orders. The other two followed at two and five year intervals--at the age of twenty he could become a deacon, and at twenty-five he could be ordained priest. These ages corresponded to the academic degrees of the university. The candidate began at the university at fourteen, and by then he had more than likely already attained the four minor orders. At eighteen, after four years of the liberal arts, he could take his Bachelor of Arts degree and receive the first of the major orders the same year. Seven years later, when he was twenty-five and had completed a thorough theological study, he could receive the degree of Bachelor of Divinity.[12]

The courses at the university were rather strenuous and lengthy for those who could attend. For the Bachelor's degree, the young aspirant to the priesthood studied grammar, which included the Latin language and literature with rhetoric and logic. This course could be completed in four years. Seven more years of theological study had to be completed for his Bachelor's in Theology. To obtain the degree of Doctor of Theology, the student was required to study the Bible three more years and lecture on one book of the Scriptures.[13] The regular course consisted of these steps. Many

candidates for the office of parish priest did not get through all the schools. Some dropped out of the study for the ministry altogether and sought worldly employment. There were some, however, who after entering the sacred orders, "became attached to cathedrals, colleges of priests, and even parochial churches, where . . . they prepared themselves for further ecclesiastical advancement."[14]

There were problems enough among those who successfully completed ordination requirements for the priesthood, but those who almost made the final grade developed problems of their own and contributed a poor image to society. These young men formed a large class of careless scholars and useless clerics:

> In the Norwich Corporation records of 1521, is a copy of the examination of Sir William Green, in whose sketch of his own life we have a curiously detailed relation of the way in which many a poor man's son became a scholar and a priest. He was the son of a laboring man, Stephen-at-Grene, at Wantlet, in Lincolnshire, and learned grammar for two years at the village school, and then went to day labour with his father. Afterwards he removed to Boston, where he lived with his aunt, labouring for his living and going to school as he had opportunity. Being evidently a clerkly lad, he was admitted to minor orders, up to that of acolyte, by "Friar Graunt," who was a suffragan bishop in the diocese of Lincoln. After that, he went to Cambridge, where he maintained himself partly by his labour, partly on alms, and availed himself of the opportunities of learning which the university afforded. At length he found an opportunity of going to Rome with two monks of Whalley Abbey, probably as one of their attendants; and there he endeavoured to obtain the order of priesthood, which seems to have been bestowed rather indiscriminately at Rome, and without a title; but in this

> he was unsuccessful. On his return to England, he was for a short time thrown again on his labour for his living; but, going to Cambridge, he obtained from the vice-chancellor, Mr. Coney, a license under seal to collect subscriptions for one year towards an exhibition, to enable him to complete his education and take his degree. Had he obtained money enough, completed his education, and obtained ordination in due course, it would have finished the story of a poor scholar in the regular way; but he fell into bad hands, forged a new poor scholar's letter, using the seal of the old letter, then letters of orders with a forged seal, and then went about begging alms as a destitute priest; and we find him in the hands of the magistrates of Norwich under the charge of being a spy.[15]

After completing his university training or otherwise meeting the prerequisites for entering the priesthood the candidate was ordained. The ordaining bishop was responsible for seeing that the candidate's fitness in education and morals was proven. A few bishops took the cases seriously, and they rejected some candidates because they could not answer elementary points of Latin grammar or because they could not sing by note. Often the examiners were pressed for time and were not careful to ascertain that the applicant had a "title" (a definite place to exercise his ministry) and sufficient funds to keep him from becoming a disgrace to the church as a pauper clergyman. The bishop was also supposed to inquire whether or not he was of illegitimate birth and to make sure that the candidate was not lying about his age and that he had indeed received the necessary inferior orders. In one case, three of three hundred applicants were capable

of passing the examination, but the bishop had to let the others pass too because no other persons could be found to fill the vacant offices.[16]

The Church in the Middle Ages never felt itself to have sufficient funds for all of its operations. To insure that they would have no pauper priests on their hands, the administrators shifted to the bishops the responsibility of making sure that the parish priest had a living. If an applicant for ordination was ordained by a bishop without his making sure that the applicant had a title or benefice, then the bishop would have to maintain him from his own pocket.[17] In the following selection from Piers Plowman we notice that the person who gave the parish priest his title was also supposed to give him his wages or else the bishop who ordained him was to do so. Langland enriches his point with an illustration showing that kings make knights only if they have proper monetary provisions:

> For spera-in-deo speketh of prestes that han no spendyng-seluer,
> That yf thay trauaile treweliche and tristen in god almyghty,
> Hem sholde neuere lackye lyflode nother lynnen ne wollene.
> The title that ȝe taketh ȝoure ordres by telleth ȝe beth auaunced,
> And needeth nat to nyme seluer for masses that ȝe syngen;
> For he that tok ȝow title sholde take ȝow wages,
> Other the bisshop that blessed ȝow and enbaumede ȝoure fyngeres.
> For made neuere kyng knyght bote he hadde catel to spene,

> As by-fel for a knyght other fond hym for hus strengthe;
> For hit is a carful knyght and of a caitif kynges makynge,
> That hath no londe ne lynage riche ne good loos of hus hondes.
> The same ich seye for sothe by suche that ben preestes,
> That han nother konnynge ne kyn bot bote a corone one,
> And a title, a tale of nouht to hus liflode, as hit were.[18]

We find here a mention of the "corone," or tonsure--the shaving of a circle on the cleric's head as a sign of his renunciation of the world. The tonsure was important as a public symbol of the youth's entry into the clerical state. In modern usage the corona has become synonymous with the "tonsure." At one time, in its original English meaning, the corona signified "that clerics sought only the kingdom of God." No doubt there were quite a few young men from noble families who sought ordination, but not the kingdom of God.[19] These men desired ecclesiastical benefices as rewards for their services to great lords or to their king. As Moorman suggests, the rectors of parishes fall into two quite different types. The humbler men, those with a higher sense of responsibility, lived in their parishes and ministered daily to their flocks. The second group consists of those who regarded their parishes merely as source of income.[20]

Ordination was the culmination of the cleric's climb through the minor and major orders, his scholarly degrees,

if indeed he had any, and his attainment of a benefice. With his ordination, the priest embarked upon a lifetime of service. Unfortunately, though it may be agreeable to think that this service was service to God and his flock, usually this was not the case. The priest often served himself through dealings for personal financial gain, or served no man because he was ignorant.

Ignorance

We have seen the many phases a young man could go through in his education to receive ordination and to become a priest. Certainly the ideal was for the candidate to complete all these levels of learning successfully, but in actuality many ignorant young men were ordained as priests because the bishop was careless in making sure his candidate met all the requirements for ordination. There are many references to ignorant, imperfect parish priests in the literature of the Middle Ages.

In Piers Plowman Langland indicates that the majority of the parish priests were ignorant. In discussing the Seven Deadly Sins, Langland personifies Sloth in the character of a parish priest. Sloth describes his own intellectual disabilities and illiteracy. Even though he has been a parson for thirty years he cannot sol-fa (sing by note) nor read the saints' lives. He can find a hare in a field or

furrow better than he can construe one clause of Latin to teach to his parishioners. He can arbitrate disputes, but he cannot read the canon of the mass or decrees from the Pope determining points of ecclesiastical laws:

> Ich haue be prest and person passynge thretti wintere,
> 3ete can I neither solfe ne synge ne seyntes lyues rede.
> But I can fynde in a felde or in a forlonge an hare,
> Better than in beatus vir or in beati omnes
> Construe oon clause wel and kenne it to my parochienes.
> I can holde louedayes and here a reues rekenynge,
> Ac in canoun ne in the decretales I can nou3te rede a lyne. (PP, B, V, 422-428)

In the eighth Passus, the C-Text says almost the same thing, and it makes the point of his illiteracy even clearer by saying that he cannot read in the clerkly, or scholarly manner: "Ac ich can nouht constrye Catoun ne clergialliche reden" (PP, C, VII, 34). There are numerous other references in Piers Plowman to the imperfection of the clergy. The large number of ignorant, or "lewed prestes," within the ranks of the clergy gave the Church, and especially the priesthood, a poor reputation. The unlearned condition of a great many of the parsons contributed to their misdemeanors. Twice in the same passage Langland laments the laxness of the entire priesthood, in fact, that of the entire Church system beginning with the Pope: "For were preest-hod more parfyt that is, the pope formest," (PP, C, XVII, 233) and, "If preest-hod were parfit and preyede thus the peuple sholde

amende" (PP, C, XVII, 250). If the priest were doing right, surely the people would make spiritual progress, too. How could unlearned and imperfect shepherds lead their spiritual sheep in the ways of righteousness?

A frequent complaint was that the parish priest skipped part of the masses, only saying the portions with which he was familiar. His inability to read hindered his conscientious performance of duty. Also, his imperfections and unconsecrated attitude allowed him to hurry through the masses, skipping the unfamiliar, or difficult portions. Perhaps, if he could not read at all, he had memorized only small parts of the masses as a youth while he was working as an apprentice to the parish priest. When he repeated the masses in his own church, he would more than likely resort to mumbling the portions that he cculd not remember. An anonymous couplet, written about the beginning of the fifteenth century preserves the epithets bestowed on those, who either mumbled, skipped, or leaped over the Psalms, in chanting:

> Ecclesiae tres sunt, qui servitium male fallunt;
> Momylers, forscyppers, overelepers, non bene psallunt.[21]

The author of Piers Plowman gives us further insight into the priest's overskipping or overhopping of lines in the masses. In a sincere wish, or prayer, he asks God to grant that these priests say masses loyally, and that they

do not skip portions so they can get through in a hurry. The people's knowledge and spiritual state would reflect the way their parson performed his duties:

> Lord leyue that these preestes leelly seyn here
> masses,
> That thei ouerhuppe nat for hast! as ich hope thei
> do nat,
> Thogh hit suffise for oure sauacion sothfast
> by-leyue;
> As clerkus in Corpus-Christi feste syngen and reden,
> That sola fides sufficit to saue lewede peuple.
> Ac yf preestes do her deuer wel we shullen do
> the bettere. (PP, C, XVIII, 117-122)

Langland attacks bishops who carelessly ordain such ignorant men for service as parish priests. Ignorant parsons, and especially unknowing bishops could not be excused. Only a "goky" or fool would make mistakes or overskip in masses:

> So is he a goky, by god that in the godspel failleth,
> In masse other in matynes maketh eny defaute;
> Qui offendit in uno, in omnibus est reus.
> And ouer-skippers al-so in the sauter seith David,
> Psallite deo nostro, psallite, quia rex terre
> deus; psallite sapienter.
> The bishop shal be blamed by-fore god, as ich leyue,
> That coroneth suche clerkes as for godes knyghtes,
> That conneth nat sapienter nother synge ne rede
> Ac neyther is al blameles the bissop ne the chapeleyn;
> For ignorantia non excusat as ich haue herd in bookes.
> (PP, C, XIV, 120-128)

In his note on this passage Walter W. Skeat explains: "The advice of David is contained in the word sapienter; or, in our English version, 'sing ye praises with understanding;' Ps. xlvii 7."[22]

The parish priests were to be especially careful of the manner in which they said mass. They were not to overhop

portions of the mass, and they were to enunciate their words carefully. John Myrc, in his Instructions for Parish Priests, exhorts priests not to cut the tails or the ending of their words. They are to say the service with devotion, thinking only of the sacrament:

> Sey þe wordes of þat seruyse
> Deuowtely with gode a-ryse;
> Cotte þow not þe wordes tayle,
> But sey hem oute wyþowte fayle;
> Sey hem so wyþ mowþe & thoght
> Þat oþer þynge þow þenke noght,
> But al þyn herte & þyn entent
> Be fully on that sacrament.[23]

The whole parish might be ruined for lack of proper instruction, states one of the political songs on the times of Edward II. A portion of the poem called "The Simonie" compares an ignorant priest to a jaybird who can speak good English, but does not understand what he is saying. The ignorant priest knows no more than does this bird about what he reads in books. Perhaps, though, comparison would be clearer if the anonymous poet had chosen a parrot or a mynah bird that is noted for its ability to reproduce human speech:

> For riht me thinketh hit fareth bi a prest that is lewed,
> As bi a jay in a kage, that himself hath beshrewed;
> God Engelish he speketh, ac he wot nevere what;
> No more wot a lewed prest in boke what he rat bi day.
> Thanne is a lewed prest no betir than a jay.[24]

From these examples from the literature of the time we can see that at least some, if not a majority, of the parish priests did not or could not make use of the educational

opportunities that were offered in the Middle Ages. The mere fact that they had been ordained certainly did not mean that they were literate and qualified for the priesthood. Moorman gives some interesting and enlightening examples of clerical ignorance which he has collected from several sources. He quotes Roger Bacon, who in speaking of ignorant men who have risen to high positions in the church, says they "only recite the words of others without knowing in the least what they mean, like parrots and magpies which utter human sounds without understanding what they are saying."[25] Bacon is further cited for his comment that priests and country clergy repeat their masses in the same manner as choir-boys sing Psalms that they have learned by heart.[26] Moorman provides illustrations collected by Giraldus Cambrensis which show the unlearned state of some of the parish priests. "He [Cambrensis] told with scorn of the parish priest who was unable to distinguish between Barnabas and Barabbas," and another parson who instructed his parishioners to celebrate "the feast of S. Simon and S. Jude for the sake of the former only, since S. Jude was the man who betrayed Christ."[27] Since such ignorance was deplorable in any man, and especially horrible in teachers of the people, many church leaders tried to raise the standard of education. Attempts were made to put teeth into the requirements of ordination. An example is given of a parish priest whose knowledge of English was

so poor that another man was hired to take care of his parish, and the former priest received only a minute part of the material profit of his benefice. The parson was to know the Ten Commandments, the Seven Sacraments, the Seven Deadly Sins, and the elements of the Christian Faith, and be able to explain them in the language of the common man. Other instances are cited of archdeacons ordered to question their clergy and to suspend those who were ignorant. In one such examination Simon de Manston was being questioned by William de Wanda, Dean of Salisbury. Simon told the examiner where and by whom he had been ordained for each of the major orders. Then the questioning began. Simon proved unable to understand what he had read from the Gospel for the First Sunday in Advent. Next, he was asked to explain the first sentence from the Latin Canon of the Mass. Poor, ignorant Simon could not get past the first word. He could give no meaning to the word clementissime. He could not say any antiphones or responsive readings or songs, neither could he repeat any part of a psalm, or of the Divine Office, or the canonical hours. After a series of negative answers, Simon protested that Dean William had no right to question a man that was already ordained! Dean William then inquired what questions were part of his examination for ordination. Simon could only answer that he could not remember. After he was dismissed, the dean wrote Sufficienter illiteratus est ("He is

ignorant enough") by his name. The next men to be examined were not only ignorant, but many were silent when asked to clarify points of their faith. Later, the dean discovered that they had decided not to answer when questioned. Nonetheless, he suspended some of them from office.[28]

These examples of intense ignorance lead one to fear for the parishioners' religious instruction and spiritual guidance. The local clergy were clearly unlearned. Mr. Moorman points out that in considering the clergy's level of education one must know from whose point of view one is observing him. These illustrations of their ignorance were given by renowned scholars who were shocked that the parsons could not clarify and explain the simplest Latin. But, in contrast, the parishioners, the common country men who had almost no chance for educational advancement, saw their "ignorant" parish priest in quite a different light. The town people "gave almost universal testimony to the sufficiency of their clergy as preachers and teachers."[29]

We have read passages from medieval literature, written by scholars, no doubt, condemning the clergy for its ignorance and imperfections. We have read accounts of attempts to raise the educational standard by suspension for ignorance. The laymen were even more ignorant and illiterate, however, and even the smallest amount of learning could impress them. Yet scholastic learning was not finally the

most important way of influencing his people. The people could not read books of doctrine or religious instructions, but they could read the example of the daily life of their parish priest.

Teaching the People

The parish priest, uneducated and ignorant in the eyes of the medieval scholars, was charged with the spiritual instruction of his congregation. The people were to be taught specific passages of Scripture and points of their faith on a regular schedule. The bishops were supposed to visit the parishes at scheduled intervals to test the knowledge of the congregation and determine whether or not the parson was doing his job well. Parish priests were given some help in knowing how and what to teach their people. Manuals of teaching were not uncommon in the Middle Ages. Two of these manuals of teaching were written by Archbishop Peckham and John Myrc.

In 1281, Archbishop Peckham's manual of teaching covered the Articles of Faith, the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Seven Principal Virtues, and the Seven Sacraments. His work was so thorough that it was used continuously in the Middle Ages.[30] E. L. Cutts quotes the original preamble to the Canon X of the Provincial Synod of Lambeth, 1281:

> The ignorance of priests precipitates the people into the pit of error, and the foolishness or rudeness of clerks, who ought to instruct the minds of

the faithful in the Catholic faith, sometimes tends rather to error than to doctrine. Also some blind preachers do not always visit the places which most need the light of truth, as the prophet witnesses, who says, "The children seek for bread, and there is no one to break it to them;" and another prophet cries, "The poor and needy ask for water, and their tongue is parched." For the remedy of such mischiefs we ordain that every priest who presides over a people do four times a year, that is, once in each quarter of the year, on one or more festival days, either by himself or by another, expound to the people in popular language without any fanciful subtlety, the Articles of Faith, the 10 Commandments of the Lord, the 2 Evangelical Precepts of Charity, the 7 Works of Mercy, the 7 Deadly Sins with their progeny, the 7 Principal Virtues, and the 7 Sacraments of Grace. And in order that no one may excuse himself from this on account of ignorance, though all ministers of the church ought to know them, we have here with great brevity summed them up.[31]

Another of these handbooks for ill-educated parish priests is John Myrc's, Instructions for Parish Priests. Edward Peacock, in his edition of Myrc's poem, suggests that the first manuscript from which his imprint is made was written not later than 1450.[32] Myrc's directions are written in rhyming poetry to aid the priests in remembering them. His opening statement, much like Archbishop Peckham's, warns the parish priest against leading the people into the ditch because of their own ignorance. Myrc exhorts the priests to read his book and take heed of his guides for teaching the parishioners.

> God seyth hym self, as wryten we fynde,
> That whenne þe blynde ledeth þe blynde,
> In to þe dyche þey fallen boo,
> For þey ne sen whare by to go.

So faren prestes now by dawe;
They beth blynde in goddes lawe,
That whenne þey scholde þe pepul rede
In to synne þey do hem lede.
Thus þey haue do now fulle ȝore,
And alle ys for defawte of lore,
Wharefore þou preste curatoure,
ȝef þou plese thy sauyoure,
ȝef thow be not grete clerk,
Loke thow moste on thys werk;
For here thow myȝte fynde & rede.
That þe be-houeth to conne nede,
How thow schalt thy paresche preche.
And what þe nedeth hem to teche,
And whyche þou moste þy self be.
(Instructions, 1-19)

After giving a few directives for the personal lives of the priests, Myrc then begins a long list of things a priest must teach to his congregation:

Thus thow moste also preche,
And thy paresche ȝerne teche;
(Instructions, 69-70)

According to Myrc, the parish priest must teach the people many things other than the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, and all the points of their faith. The conscientious parish priest must instruct his people when to go to confessions. He must also give very detailed and interesting instructions to midwives. The very most important thing for them to remember is to promptly baptize the child whose life is in danger even if it is only half-born. The life of the mother is only secondary because if the midwife loses a child without having baptised it, she must weep for it evermore. The parish priest had to teach the midwife the words to say

in baptising the child, and it did not matter if she said them in English or Latin:

> I folowe the or elles I crystene þe, in the nome of
> the fader & þe sone and the holy gost.
> Or elles thus, Ego baptiʒo te. N. In nomine patris
> & filij & spiritus sancti. Amen.
> Englysch or latyn, whether me seyþ,
> Hyt suffyseth to the feyth
> So that þe wordes he seyde on rowe,
> Ryʒt as be-fore I dyde ʒow schowe.
> (Instructions, 127-134)

Many other directions for proper baptism, christening, and confirmation of children are given. Specific instructions as to who may be joined together in marriage and how the service of marriage should be performed are included, too. The remaining multitude of items in the priest's manuals of instructions to the people are broad and varied. They include proper conduct in church, what should be done in the churchyard, how to pay tithe, how to avoid witchcraft and usury, and how wives and husbands should consult one another before making vows.

These guides are of great importance for parish priests to know and to impart carefully to their parishioners. It is more important, however, that the priest teach them the Pater Noster and the Creed. The parson should be sure to teach the Pater Noster and the Creed to his people two or three times each year, and to instruct the people to say them every day:

The pater noster and þe crede,
Preche þy paresche þow moste nede;
Twyes or þryes in þe ȝere
To þy paresch hole and fere,
Teche hem þus, and byd hem say
Wyþ gode entent euery day.
(Instructions, 404-409)

John Myrc's rhyming version of the Pater Noster, the Lord's Prayer, in Middle English, has a primitive kind of beauty:

"FAder owre þat art in heuene,
Halowed be þy name with meke steuene,
þy kyngdom be for to come
In vs synfulle alle and some;
þy wylle be do in erþe here
As hyt ys in heuene clere;
Owre vche dayes bred, we þe pray,
þat þow ȝeue vs þys same day;
And forgyue vs owre trespas
As we done hem þat gult vs has;
And lede vs in to no fondynge,
But schelde vs alle from euel þynge. Amen."
(Instructions, 410-421)

The Ave, "Hail Mary"; the Creed, "I believe"; the Articles of Faith, and the Seven Sacraments follow in the same poetical style, thus aiding the priest in his instruction of his people in the ways of righteousness.

Further on in the book the priest is given instructions for enforcing the learning of the Pater, the Ave, and the Creed. When a parishioner comes to confession and the priest discovers that he does not know these fundamental things, then the priest is instructed to give him such penance that he will learn them:

Const þow þy pater and þyn aue
And þy crede now teile þow me,

> 3ef he seyth he con hyt not,
> Take hys panawnce þenne he mot.
> To suche penaunce þenne þou hum turne,
> Þat wole make hym hyt to lerne.
> (Instructions, 917-922)

We have seen from two manuals of teaching in the Middle Ages the type of religious instruction that the bishops and archbishops expected the parish priest to give to his congregation. It was part of the bishop's responsibility to see how well the parson was carrying out his sacred trust. The following episode reprinted in G. G. Coulton's, Social Life in Britain from the Conquest to the Reformation, is quite enlightening. In Coulton's introduction to the passage, he says:

> The following passage from the autobiography of a most orthodox and hard-working visitor in North Germany which is perhaps unique of its kind, throws a vivid light on the patriarchal relations between clergy and people in a good parish. It is translated from Johann Busch, Liver Reformationis Monasteriorum.[33]

The writer, Father Busch, questioned a peasant-farmer in a north German village about his knowledge of the principles of his faith, and the faithfulness of his whole village. The farmer answered well--repeating the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and Ave Maria in good German. Then he was questioned rather thoroughly on various other points of faith, including the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Principal Virtues. Again the farmer demonstrated his grasp of the facts and their applications. The town fathers, who witnessed the questioning,

exclaimed that they couldn't have answered so well. At lunch, when all the priests were gathered together, Father Busch asked, "How did that farmer know how to answer so exactly?" Another priest answered that the parson of that parish "forbade their suffering any man to dine or make merry with them at the tavern until he had first said his Pater, Ave, and Creed." Because of this, they said, "they speak to each other of these things, and have got so perfect a memory and understanding thereof."[34]

One of the parish priest's most important duties was to make sure his people knew the Pater, Ave, and Creed. By requiring that the local parson teach these fundamentals on a regular schedule, the ecclesiastical authorities felt that they were partially compensating for the ignorance of many parish priests. To aid the parson in his work, manuals of teaching were commonly circulated. Through even a brief visit, the bishop could determine how successful the parish priest had been.

Income

One of the principal problems for parish priests in the Middle Ages was their income. As we have seen earlier, bishops were carefully instructed not to ordain parish priests unless they had a benefice, that is, a church office endowed with funds or property. This simple provision was apparently

not enough, because much literature of the time is concerned with payment and collection of tithes. Some unscrupulous parish priests amassed large fortunes by collecting many benefices. However, in spite of all this concern over the selfish dealings of a few, many parsons lived in poverty.

Moorman tells us that if it had not been for the corruption, the "scandals of pluralism and appropriations," within the ranks of the clergy, the income of the parish priests would have been no problem. At ordination the Church bestowed upon the priest a benefice and "a cure of souls." These two factors comprised the parish priest's income. The glebe, or designated area of land, and the right to collect taxes from his parish comprised his benefice; "while as holder of a cure of souls he was entitled to the voluntary offerings of the people."[35]

There is no way to determine a fixed amount of money or benefits that the parson received, because the amounts varied in different parishes. The people paid tithe on their produce, and their produce could be greatly affected by adverse changes in the weather. Tithe was also demanded on items the prople produced by hand. Fluctuation in trade affected the tithe they could pay on merchandise.[36] Therefore the parson could not count on a regular, monthly salary from the tithe. Like his congregation, the parson farmed. He could raise crops of his own on his glebe land to supplement

the edible produce he received as tithe. As collector of the tithe he kept a careful eye on his parishioners' fields, too. With his "cure of souls," his spiritual jurisdiction over his flock, the parson could exact fees for "churchings, weddings, and burials." He was authorized to claim "his Easter dues from every home, and his price for obits and masses."[37]

The tithes were carefully regulated. Ideally they were to be divided into four parts: "one for the rector, one for the dependent clergy, one for the maintenance of the church buildings, and one for the poor."[38] However, we have very little indication that this is the way they were really spent. Misappropriation was a common practice and one of the clergys' flagrant misdemeanors.

It was not left to the parishioners to decide if they would pay tithe, or how much tithe they should pay. Careful instructions and requirements were set forth to insure the Church and the parson their dues. Myrc tells parish priests that they should teach the people to pay tithes speedily of all things, both small and great. Then he says he really does not know why he has spent his time telling the priests to make sure the people knew how to pay tithe, because even the most ignorant priest knows that:

> Teche hem also welle and greythe
> How þey schule paye here teythe:
> Of alle þynge that doth hem newe,
> They schule teythe welle & trewe,

> After þe costome of þat cuntraye
> Euery mon hys teythynge schale paye
> Bothe of smale and of grete,
> Of schep and swyn & oþer rete.
> Teyþe of huyre and of honde,
> Goth by costome of þe londe.
> I holde hyt but an ydul þynge
> To speke myche of teythynge,
> For þa$_3$ a preste be but a fonne,
> Aske hys teyþynge welle he conne.
> (Instructions, 346-359)

Wycliffe felt that good priests were due the tithe, even though the tithe really belonged to God. He seems to stress that the priests that gave true service were indeed the ones that needed the tithe. He states that law and reason impel men to give true priests their tithe:

> & þus lawe & skile chacchiþ men to $_3$yue to trewe prestis þes dymes, for þis were moost li$_3$t & resonable $_3$if þat prestis lyuen wel.[39]

Tithing was so important that strange formulas were worked out to let the people know exactly what they should tithe, and what to do in case they did not have ten of something. Coulton gives us special insight in this tedious matter. He quotes from a decree governing the tithe to be paid in cases where there are less than ten animals:

> We therefore decree that one farthing should be given as tithe for each lamb, kid or pigling below the number of seven. If there are seven, let one be given for tithe; and the next year whatsoever is lacking from the number ten shall be allowed for in tithing.[40]

The decree continues, giving the rates for milk from cows when the quantity of it is not enough for cheese to be made

from it. Also, it warns malicious givers not to come and pour their milk out on the altar if no one is there to receive it.[41] All the decrees governing the procedure for proper payment of tithes are too numerous to discuss here. The medieval man was burdened by the pressures of tithing.

Even though it was so important that people pay tithe, some folks were not to pay tithe. Langland says that the Lord expects tithes from those who have made their gain honestly, but those who have increase from dishonest and sinful means should not presume to pay tithe:

> Tythen here goodes trewliche a tol, as hit semeth,
> That oure lord loketh after of eche a lyf that wynneth
> With-oute wyles other wrong other wommen atte stuwes.
> (PP, C, XIV, 73-75)

Not only were wicked people forbidden to pay tithes; priests were to refuse to take tithe from them. In another passage the author of Piers Plowman says the priest who receives ill-gotten gain as tithe would help the thief pay his debt in purgatory:

> The preest that thy tythe taketh trowe ich non other,
> Shal parte with the in purgatorie and help paye
> thy dette,
> Yf he wist thow were suche when he reseyuyde thyn
> offrynge.
> What lede leyueth that ich lye loke in the sauter glosed
> On ecce enim ueritatem dilexist;
> Ther he shal wite witerliche what vsure is to mene,
> And what penaunce the prest shal have that prout is
> of thi tythes.
> For an hore of hure ers-wynnynge may hardi loker tythe
> Than an erraunt vsurer haue god my treuthe!
> (PP, C, VIII, 300-307)

As we have seen, there were some people who were not to pay tithes from ill-gotten gain. There were, however, quite a few people who withheld their tithes purposely. Myrc instructed the parish priests to question the people on the ten commandments, and other points of faith, when they came to confession. He then gives, in very detailed form, the questions the priest is to ask. One of the questions testing the seventh commandment concerns withholding tithes:

> Hast þou wyth-holden any teyþynge,
> Or mys-I-teyþed by þy wytynge.
> (Instructions, 1061-1062)

The priests were not to simply ask the penitent man in confessional if he were withholding tithes; they were to curse, or excommunicate him if he remained unwilling to pay. Failing to pay tithe was not the only sin for which the medieval church member could be excommunicated. It was, however, close to the top of the list of rank transgressions. John Myrc includes the entire service of excommunication for the instruction of the parsons.[42] The curse or sentence in itself is rather severe and the grim ritual accompanying it would shake the medieval man's very foundation. The service was to have been performed "twies or thries in the yere." The priest was to make sure the parish was all gathered together to hear him pronounce this hideous thing and to witness the spectacle, "with crosse & candell and bell knylling." The curse did not allow the doomed man any hope.

He was not allowed to attend any of the services of the Church. The curse would follow him not only in spiritual things, but in his physical acts of sleeping, waking, going, sitting, standing, riding, lying above and under the earth, speaking, crying, and drinking; in wood, in water, in field, and town. The priest was to claim the authority of the Trinity in meting out his retribution:

> By the aucthorite of the ffather and of the son and of the holy goost and of our lady Seynt Mary godes moder, of heuene, and all oþer virgines and Seynt mighele and all oþer apostles and Seynt Steven and all oþer martires, and Seynt Nicholas and all oþer confessoures & of all the holy hallowen of heuen; We accursen and warren and departen from all gode dedes and preres of holy chirch, and of all þes halowen, and dampne into þe peyn of hell all þose þat haue don þes articles þat we haue seid bifore, till þey come to amendment; We accursen hem by the aucthorite of the courte of Rome, within and withoute, sleping or waking, going & sytting, stonding and riding, lying aboue erthe and vnder erthe, spekyng and crying and drynkyng; in wode, in water, in felde, in towne: acorsen hem fader and son and holy goost: accursen hem angeles and archangeles and all þe ix orders of heven; accursen hem patriarkes prophetes and apostles and all godes disapules and all holy Innocentes, martieres, confessoures & virgines, monkes, canons, heremytes, prestes and clerkes þat þey haue no part of masse ne matenes ne of none oþer gode praiers, that ben do in holy chirch ne in none oþer places, but that þe peynes of hell be her mede with Iudas þat betrayed oure lorde Ihesu Crist; and þe life of hem be put oute of the boke of lyfe tyll they come to amendment & satisfaction made. fiat fiat. Amen.
>
> (Instructions, 750-776)

Then the priest was to dash the candle to the ground and spit on the ground while the bells were knelling. He was to make sure the people's hearts were fearful:

> Then þou thi candell shalt cast to grounde
> And spet there to þe same stound
> Ane lete also þe belles knylle
> To make her hortes the mor grylle.
> (Instructions, 777-780)

The Church was interested in acquiring all the monetary gain possible and enforced payments that it felt were due. Moorman tells us that the Church wanted its parsons to go to every extreme to get the tithe. He says:

> The parson who hesitated to take the full measure, or who was willing to forgo any of his rights, was liable to be severely reprimanded by those who believed that the Church had a duty to exact all that it was due.[43]

Therefore we see that the Church provided the people with the knowledge of how much tithe they were expected to pay and the threat of what would happen to them if they did not. The Church gave the priests their instructions to collect the tithes faithfully, and gave them the power to curse those who failed to return an honest tithe. Tithe paying to the medieval man, then, was not a returning of a portion of their wealth or earthly possessions to God, but a burdensome tax accompanied by a heavy threat.

Many priests in the Middle Ages were only too glad to squeeze their parishioners for every pence of tithe. One can readily see that any priest who would execute this terrible ceremony of excommunication and curse his parishioners for non-payment of tithes was certainly more interested in the money than the souls of his people. Wycliffe gives us

some evidence of priests' wrongdoings, and his reproof to evil priests is strong. The wicked priests bring lawsuits against their parishioners for tithe. They summon men and put them in prison, and curse them for non-payment of tithe. This is all contrary to the example Christ set. The parish priest gave evidence that he did not love his flock when he eternally damned their souls for four pence:

> Þe fyneþe defaute; þa þei haunten strif & plee & gendren enuye & hate among lewed men for tyþes, whanne þei don not here office aȝenward; for now þei leuen prechynge of þe gospel & crien faste aftir tyþes, & somonen men to chapitre & bi fors taken here goodis, & ellis cursen hem seuene fote aboue þe erþe & seuene foot wiþ-inne þe herþe & seuene fote on eche side; & afterward drawen men to prison, as þei weren kyngis & emperours of mennus bodies & cate, & forȝeten clenly þe mekenesse & þe pacience of crist & his apostlis, hou þei curseden not for tyþes whanne men wolden neiþer ȝeue hem mete ne drynk ne gerbwre. . . . Lord, hou louen þes curatis here sugetis soulis þat wolen for foure pens bitake hem bodi & soule to þe fend, ȝe, whanne þei may not paie for verray pouert, & shanne þei don not here gostly office; & þanne þe curatis ben more cursed of god for wiþdrawynge of techynge in word, in dede, in good ensaumple þanne þe sugetis wiþdrawynge tiþes & offryngis whanne þei don wel here gostly office.[44]

In another portion of his writings, De Officio Pastorali, Wycliffe again reinforces his statement that priests should not go to the law or curse for tithes. Christ's example of love for his people is far above the mercenary attitude that the medieval parish priest frequently displays:

> of þis it semyþ to many men þat neþer persoun ne prelat shulde wringe out þe godis of his sugetis bi cursis ne worldly ple. . . . Also crist & his apostlis neþer cursiden ne pletiden for þer dette,

> & pey shulden be ensample to vs; why shulden we curse or plete for hem?[45]

In the same work Wycliffe again denounces those priests, those supposed shepherds, who care more for money than the souls of their flock. Wycliffe says that in reality such a shepherd, cursing unskillfully or unjustly, curses himself and not his sheep:

> & cursing is a fendis fynding to curse men þus for worldly godis; for þanne hauyng of þes godis is more desirid þan blessing of þer sheep; but who may holde charite & þus chese þis worldly hauyng? for a man shulde loue more his sheep þan alle his godis as crist dide. & þis moueþ many men to sette litil bi siche cursing; for whanne man curseþ vnskilefuly, he cursiþ hym silf & not his sheep.[46]

Certainly there were some true priests in the Middle Ages who, heeding Wycliffe's counsels, did not curse for their tithes, but apparently they were in the minority. In An Alphabet of Tales, a fifteenth century English translation from Latin-French, we find the story of the way one parson made sure a delinquent parishioner paid his tithe. The anecdotes in this collection were intended to be used as illustrations by medieval preachers in their sermons and exhortations. The lesson of honest tithe payment is strong and clear in the following story:

> Iacobus de Vetriaco tellis how som tyme þer was a husbandman þat was ane yll payer of his tenndis, and he wold seldom offer bod if it were on solempne dayis, and þan he wold offr a fals peny or ane yll. So on a passch-day hym happend emang oþer to com unto þe howselburde, and þe preste, þat knew þat he vsid evur to offer a fals peny, when he had gyffen

oþer men þer howsell, he gaf þis husband, in-stead of his howsell, þe same yll peny þat he offerd. And he chewid & feld at it was hard, & grapid in his mouthe what it was, & he fand it was þe same fals peny þat he had offerd; & when he saw it he had grete mervell þerof, and made mekull sorrow. So when mes was done, he come vnto þe preste wepand & sayd; "A! sur, my syn is so grete þat it happend me þis day at þe sacrament att ye gaff me is turnyd in-to a fals peny." And þe preste anssWerd hym agayn & said; "This thyng happynd not vnto þe with-oute som cawce, and þerfor þou haste done som horrible syn. Tell me what it is!" And with grete shame he tolde hym in confession, & said; "I shryfe me þat I was so attemptid with covatice, þat evur when oþer folk offerd gude syluer I offerd alway ane ill penye." And þan þe preste said vnto hym; "This was þe iugement at þou tolde me off; and herefor in-stede of þe sacrament þou fand in þi mouthe ane ill peny. And þerfor þou moste make restitucion." And so he did, & promysid þat evur after fro thens furth he sulde trewlie pay his tend & offer gude syluer. And so þe preste asoylid hym & gaff hym his howsell, and evur after he was a gude man.[47]

We have seen that the Church provided for the parish priest by giving him, upon his ordination, a benefice and a cure of souls. By collecting tithes, farming his glebe land, and extracting fees from his congregation, the parson should have been able to have a comfortable income. Certain demands were made of the parson, though. He was expected to help in the care of the poor, to be hospitable to strangers or churchmen, and to keep a portion of the church in good repair. Even if the parson managed his money well, if he were faithfully performing his duties, he would not be rich in earthly possessions. The picture of the parish priest as an humble and able administrator was the ideal. In

actuality, however, quite a few parish priests were rich, using the powers that the Church had bestowed upon them to create fortunes.

The sons of manor lords appointed to the benefice by their fathers were often poor examples to their sheep. They could amass a small fortune by holding several parishes, collecting all the money, and hiring someone for a pittance to "care for their flock," thus taking little or no spiritual interest in the parishes. Moorman shows us one of these bad examples. Bogo de Clare was a son of the Earl of Gloucester and Hertford. At the time of his death he held two canonries, three dignities in cathedrals and collegiate churches, and twenty-four parishes. He lived sumptuously. His household included two knights, many squires, thirteen servants, two pages, a staff of clerks for legal and financial matters, a champion, a harper, and occasionally a troup of professional actors. He spent money wildly. In a year he paid as much for preserved ginger as he paid a chaplain to watch over one of his parishes for the same period. His financial records show that he gave very little for alms.[48]

The rich parson was less likely to be a good example to his sheep than the poor one. It is unfair to say that poverty was the sole qualification of an ideal priest and that all rich priests were evil. The very fact that he was poor might lead a parish priest to seek to improve his financial state

by some of the unchristian methods that we have discussed. However, the priest who lived in poverty, following Christ's example, generally came closest to achieving the ideal. Wycliffe believed that the poor priest was more capable of following the example of Christ and His apostles than one who was burdened with caring for large financial interests:

> Also crist & his apostlis techen vs to lywe beter þanne þes patrouns of þes newe ordris; & þei lyueden pore liif, & fledde lordschipe as venym. lord, whi schulde not we do so aftir þese holy patrouns?[49]

Piers Plowman counsels prelates, priests, and princes of holy Church to follow Christ's example without fear of death or poverty:

> The catel that Crist hadde thre clothes hit were,
> Ther-of he ryfled and robbed er hc deyede;
> After that he les huslyf for lawe sholde loue wexe.
> Prelates and preestes and princes of holy churche.
> Sholde doute no deth nother dere ȝeres,
> To wenden as wyde as the worlde were,
> To tulien the erthe with tonge and teche men to louye;
> For ho so loueth, leyue hit wel god wol nat lete hym sterue
> In myschef for lacke of mete ne for myssynge of clothes; (PP, C, XI, 185-201)

The Church provided the parish priests with a means for a basic income at his ordination. From this income the priest was required to meet certain obligations. If the parish priest did his job well, not seeking fortunes, but giving liberally to the poor and giving himself and his means to the work of the Church, he would be successfully striving toward the ideal; but he would not be wealthy. The parson who

followed Christ's example did not need to concern himself unduly over his clothing or daily bread for "god wol nat lete hym sterue."

Misdemeanors and Abuses

Many complaints were brought against the parish priests for their actions and their lack of actions in the Middle Ages. We have seen that in ignorance they skipped parts of the masses and gave the people a very scanty knowledge of their faith. Also, the parish priests' greed for riches led them to treat their parishioners with contempt and indifference if they failed to pay the correct tithe. Pluralism and absenteeism were abuses that by their very nature encouraged other misdemeanors. The Church's standard required celibacy, but in reality very few priests were chaste. The typical parish priest wanted to look like his parishioners in dress and be included in their sporting events, yet he still wished to have the benefits of the office. Their corruption did not stop with these things. They were also convicted of crimes of forgery, theft, assault, and many other social deviations. With the churchmen behaving in such a dreadful manner, society was almost certain to be further corrupted. Coulton observes that Gower, in Vox Clamantis and Mirour de l'Omme, does not spare any words in telling of the corruption of the Church, especially that of the parish priests, and of the resultant moral decline of society:

> The times are out of joint, he says, the light of faith grows dim; the clergy are mostly ignorant, quarrelsome, idle, and unchaste, and the prelates do not correct them because they themselves are no better. The average priests do the exact opposite of what Chaucer praises in his Poor Parson; they curse for tithes, and leave their sheep in the lurch to go mass hunting into the great towns. If, again, they stay unwillingly in the villages, then instead of preaching and visiting they waste their own time and the patrimony of the poor in riot or debauchery; nay, the higher clergy even encourage vice among the people in order to gain money and influence for themselves. Their evil example among the multitude, and the contempt into which they bring their office among the better laity, are mainly responsible for the decay of society.[50]

One of the reasons for a parish priest's absence from his flock was the previously mentioned arrangement called pluralism. The priest would gain control of more than one parish, and at every opportunity multiply his holdings. He would collect the money for the benefice and pay a lesser churchman to say mass and to be in charge of the people's spiritual welfare. This practice of pluralism caused the medieval man to see his rector rarely, if ever. When the rector did visit his parishes, it was usually with tithe collection in mind. The person left in charge seldom cared for the spiritual needs of the people. Therefore the people really had no shepherd.

We have read about the riotous living of Bogo de Clare, who collected many benefices. Cutts tells us of John Mansel, Chancellor of Henry III, who is alleged to have "held the revenues of seven hundred benefices."[51] The priest certainly

could not function effectively in working for his people's welfare and eternal salvation if he rarely saw his flock. Wycliffe was decidedly against priests who were continually absent from their flock:

> also þre offisis of goostly herde moten haue his presence wiþ his sheep; for who can preche to his sheep, or defend hem fro wolues, or heele hem as curatis shulden, but if he be present wiþ his sheep?[52]

In the opening Passus of Piers Plowman we find that parish priests and parsons complained of poverty to the bishops and went to London to sing there for simony:

> Persones and parsheprestes pleynede to the bishop,
> That hure parshens ben poore sithe the pestelence tyme,
> To haue licence and leve in Londone to dwelle,
> And synge there for symonye for seluer ys swete.
> (PP, C, I, 81-84)

It was not uncommon for parish priests to hire a substitute to stay with their flock, then go to London to seek chantries. Relatives of the dead would hire a priest to sing mass daily for the departed ones. The demand was so great for this service that many priests flocked to London to get their share of the income. Westlake states that in seeking chantry jobs the parish priests were interested in the money rather than the souls of their congregations. These unscrupulous priests would even take more masses than they could sing; then for lack of something to do they would spend their time "in taverns or in places less reputable."[53]

The problem of parish priests' relationships with women has drawn much attention and many conflicting opinions. The Church had at various times tried to insure a celibate clergy, but without much success. Many legal entanglements stemmed from the relationships of wives and children to the clergy, so pressures were directed that would encourage the clergy to remain single, or to put away their concubines. Certainly a single priest could keep his mind on the spiritual state of his parishioners with greater facility than one with a wife. John Myrc lets parish priests know right away that they should beware of the fellowship of women:

> Wymmones serues thow moste forsake,
> Of euele fame leste they the make,
> For wymmenes speche that ben schrewes,
> Turne ofte a-way gode thewes.
> (Instructions, 57-59)

Robert Mannyng warns priests not to kiss or touch women. He also instructs women not to kiss a priest's mouth, because it is hallowed in God's service:

> 3yt ys þer a spyce to mene
> For hem þat shuld be chaste and clene,
> As þo men þat are of hygh degree,
> Of holy cherches owne meyne;
> Ÿesë men shuld for no þyng
> Come yn wymmens handëlyng;
> Ne womman, þat gode couþe,
> Shuld kyssë any prestys mouþe;
> For þere may nat but synne aryse;
> hys mouþ ys halewed to Goddys seruyse.
> Ne prest oghte no woman touche,
> For, of foule touchyng, synne men souche.
> (HS, 7685-7696)

He spends several pages warning women and priests to stay away from each other. One lesson on the subject is entitled, "The Tale of the Priest's Concubine, and how Fiends carried off her Dead Body." He says that clerics need to be wise and avoid staring at women:

> And ȝe clerkes nedeþ to be wyse,
> ȝow nedeþ cune ȝow self chastyse;
> ȝe mowë se yn holy wryt
> How ȝe shul kepe ȝoure ownë wyt.
> whan ȝe at Goddës seruyse are,
> ȝe shul nat þan aboute ȝow stare,
> Specyaly wymmen to be-holde,
> Ne for to langle wurdës bolde.
> (HS, 8893-8900)

These are only a sampling of the many warnings against the evils of women given to medieval parish priests. The necessity of these warnings gives some evidence of the moral decline of the priests.

Not only were the parish priests misbehaving with women, they were found guilty of rather serious offenses in other areas as well. Abram tells us in the Early Chancery Proceedings that charges brought against priests included forgery, theft, assault, and many cases wherein the priests refused to restore land that had been temporarily entrusted to them.[54]

Parish priests were not expected to look and act like their parishioners. We find specific instruction in Myrc's book about their actions and their dress:

> Hawkynge, huntynge, and dawnsynge,
> Thow moste forgo for any thynge;

> Cuttede clothes and pyked schone,
> Thy gode fame þey wole for-done.
> Marketes and feyres I the for-bede,
> But hyt be for the more nede,
> In honeste clothes thow moste gon,
> Baselard ny bawdryke were þow non.
> Berde & crowne thow maste be schaue,
> ȝef thow wole thy ordere saue.
> (Instructions, 41-50)

The ideal priest would willingly give up hawking and hunting, fancy clothing and decorated shoes; he must also forego the wearing of armor and wear "honest" clothes. In actuality we find that priests did not follow Myrc's insturctions. We find an instance in Piers Plowman of proud priests accompanying Sloth who wore jackets and ornate shoes, and carried long knives:

> Sleuthe with hus slynge an hard saut he made.
> Proude preostes cam with hym passend an hundred;
> In paltokes and pikede shoes and pissares longe knyues.
> (PP, C, XXII, 217-219)

An anonymous political poem of the time of Edward II gives another instance of a priest traveling with armor. This priest was a sorry fellow; not only did he carry armor, but he spent the money from his benefice to go hunting. On this hunting trip he had an affair with a dairymaid:

> And whan he hath i-gadered marks and poundes,
> He priketh out of toune wid haukes and wid houndes
> Into a straunge contré, and halt a wenche in a cracche;
> . . . . . .
> Ther beth so manye prestes, hii ne muwe noht alle be gode
> And natheles thise gode men fallen oft in fame,
> For thise wantoune prestes that pleien here nice game, bi nihte,
> Hii gon wid swerd and bokeler as men that wolde fiht.[55]

Wycliffe wrote against priests' wasting money on hawking and hunting:

> but prestis wasting in oþere þingis, as ben horsis, haukis & houndis, & costly making of feestis, ben ful dampnable bifore god.[56]

It is easy to see that the priests who went hunting with their parishioners would be uncomfortable dressed in their honest clothes. Moorman sums the matter up concisely. "In a word, the priest was expected to look like one, and was not to go about disguised as a layman."[57]

The priests certainly were not good examples to their sheep if, in their hunger for money, they would wantonly leave their flock unattended, and seek more lucrative pastimes in London. Neither could the priest who was distracted by a wife or a concubine spend the proper time and energy required to fill the spiritual needs of his congregation. The shepherd's ideal role was to be a model for his flock to follow, but with such flagrant abuses readily apparent in the conduct and appearance of the parish priests, they could hardly project the proper image.

CHAPTER III

THE EXAMPLE OF CHAUCER'S GOOD SHEPHERD

In the midst of a corrupt Church administration Chaucer presents the Parson as a truly good man, an ideal,[1] and a Good Shepherd. The parish priest is Chaucer's most sympathetic picture of a contemporary churchman. His strict observance of duty and his kindly tolerance and understanding show him to be very different from his fellow religious pilgrims. The Parson is poor by worldly standards, yet he is rich in holy thoughts and works. He is a devout teacher. The Parson visits his parishioners regularly. He resists the temptation to "live luxuriously in London." Many admirable virtues can be found in his life: generosity, patience, tolerance, and humility.[2] Manly suggests that even though the character of the Parson conforms to more than one "traditional character" of a good parish priest, Chaucer had known and respected the man, who is portrayed in the prologue, "as a powerful and living reality."[4]

Why Chaucer chose to idealize the parson can only be conjectured. Perhaps the reason was that the medieval Church was so corrupt that Chaucer felt that only one in a lowly position in the Church could be truly spiritual. The Parson was of lowly birth; his brother was a plowman, and he held a lowly position in the Church. The Plowman is also shown

as a good man with a humble spirit. Perhaps the Parson, with his humble origin was best suited to work among his own people. Moorman tells us that in medieval England, the parish priest was more closely associated with his people than any modern preacher could aspire to be. The parish priest would find himself working by the side of his people daily in the fields and meeting them at the mill or at the well.[5] With this type of relationship the parish priest could be the most influential churchman in the everyday lives of the common people.

Chaucer provides a clear contrast to the other religious pilgrims in the "General Prologue." We will try to gain a clearer picture of the idealized Parson by observing this contrast. But deeper, perhaps, than the striking contrast between the Parson and the other religious travelers is the contrast between the example the Parson gave and the example of other parish priests of the Middle Ages. Surely there is nowhere a better priest.

Chaucer shows his interest in the religious pilgrims by devoting almost half of the total number of lines to them in the "General Prologue" to the Canterbury Tales. Thomas Kirby notes: "A total of 320 lines is devoted to the seven religious figures (Friar, Parson, Pardoner, Summoner, Monk, Prioress, Clerk), but only slightly more, 349 lines, to the other nineteen."[6] The portrait of the Friar is the longest,

containing sixty-two lines, and the Parson's follows with fifty-one lines. If the length of the portraits is any indication of their importance, or at least of Chaucer's concern for the particular personages, we can be sure that the Parson's ideal character interested Chaucer. Kirby notes that Chaucer gave special emphasis to the Parson and his brother, the Plowman, by placing their portraits at the end of Part I of the descriptions. Chaucer's placement of these two portraits in this strategic location shows his desire to give heightened interest and appeal to "these two characters, so good, so perfect in every respect that they contrast sharply with all the rest of the pilgrims, whether worldly or ecclesiastical."[7] The whole force of Chaucer's satire in the portraits of the other religious pilgrims is based upon a background knowledge of the religious ideal.

The character of the Parson does "contrast sharply" with the other pilgrims--particularly those who are considered to be religious pilgrims. The portraits of the worldly Prioress, the hunting-obsessed Monk, the "wantowne" Friar and the silver-tongued Pardoner show the actuality of the times. These travelers did not conform to principles of the Church, and their examples were not godly. In contrast, the ideal figure of the Parson depicts a most beautiful character and "noble ensample."

Madame Eglentyne, the well-dressed Prioress, is characterized by many physical details. She did not have her broad, fair forehead covered in the company of the other pilgrims in compliance with the dictates of the Church. F. N. Robinson notes that her pet dogs "were clearly against the rules" too.[8] Chaucer's gentle satire grows a little stronger as he begins to speak of her "conscience," or tender feelings:

> But, for to speken of hire conscience,
> She was so charitable and so pitous
> She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
> Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
> (CT, I (A), 142-145)

Her "charity" was not the same sincere charity that characterized the life of the poor Parson. We are told nothing about the Prioress that would indicate her willingness to sacrifice personal comforts to help others. The Parson was not rich in earthly possessions, and he was "Ful looth" to curse for his tithes as a means for increasing his personal income. Nevertheless, from his meager sustenance and the voluntary offerings that made up his salary he would give freely to any of his parishioners who were in need. He could get by without a great store of the world's goods and still accomplish his goal of drawing folk to heaven. His poor parishioners would certainly be impressed by the fact that he would give to them from his limited and almost inadequate income. They would certainly notice the contrast between

their Parson and the parish priests of nearby towns who were so concerned with money that they unfeelingly collected every pence of tithe that could be figured to be due.

Chaucer's Parson showed a genuine love for his congregation:

> But rather wolde he yeven, out of doute,
> Unto his povre parisshens aboute
> Of his offryng and eek of his substaunce.
> He Koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce.
> (CT, I (A), 487-490)

Love to his fellow parishioners guided the Parson's dealings with them. Only a man with a sincere love could be kind to a sinner. The Parson's speech demonstrated real courtesy. He was not contemptuous, haughty, or arrogant:

> And though he hooly were and vertuous,
> He was to synful men nat despitous,
> Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne,
> But in his techyng discreet and benygne.
> (CT, I (A), 515-518)

In the portrait of the Parson then, we see true charity. The "charity" of the Prioress fades into shallow pretentions of insignificance in comparison.

The second religious pilgrim that we are introduced to in the "General Prologue" is the hunter-Monk. Both hunting and the love of fine horses and dogs were condemned by the Church. The Monk loved both and he let his love for hunting lead him to extravagant spending:

> Ful many a deyntee hors hadde he in stable,
> And whan he rood, men myght his brydel heere
> Gynglen in a whistlynge wynd als cleene
> And eek as loude as dooth the Chapel belle.
> . . . . . .

> Grehoundes he hadde as swift as fowel in flight;
> Of prikyng and of huntyng for the hare
> Was all his lust, for no cost wolde he spare.
> (CT, I (A), 168-171, 190-192)

Evidently the Monk knew he was not obeying the voice of the Church on this matter:

> He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
> That seith hunters ben nat hooly men.
> (CT, I (A), 177-178)

It requires no brilliant deductions for us to determine that this fat Monk was lazy. We are told that he loved hunting and loathed scholarly endeavors. Why should he study enough to make himself mad or work with his hands, he asks:

> What sholde he studie and make hymselven
> wood,
> Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
> Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,
> As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?
> Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!
> (CT, I (A), 184-188)

The Parson certainly was not lazy, neither did he spend his time in frivolous activities. The industriousness of the Parson is clearly evident in Chaucer's portrait of him. "Benygne he was, and wonder diligent." His parish was large, with more than ample space between each residence. He went on foot, not horseback, to visit each house in his parish regularly. The foul English weather did not keep him from visiting the most distant house "In siknesse nor in meschief." Nor did the social class of his parishioner influence him in his decision to go to the aid of a member of his congregation:

> Wyd was his parisshe, and houses fer asonder,
> But he ne lefte nat, for reyn ne thonder,
> In siknesse nor in meschief to visite
> The ferreste in his parisshe, muche and lite,
> Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf.
> (CT, I (A), 491-495)

It would have been an easier life for the Parson had he hired a substitute and gone to London to say masses for dead men's souls or become a chaplain for a guild. There he would not have had to exert himself physically or mentally, and more than likely he would frequently have time for rest and relaxation. But because he was industrious and not looking for ways to get out of work he stayed at home and watched over his flock well:

> He sette nat his benefice to hyre
> And leet his sheep encombred in the myre
> And ran to Londoun unto Seinte Poules
> To seken hym a chaunterie for soules,
> Or with a bretherhed to been withholde,
> But dwelte at hoom, and kept wel his folde.
> (CT, I (A), 507-512)

In these words Chaucer expresses his admiration for the Parson who abstained from the evil that his contemporaries revelled in. Perhaps his sketch of the ideal parson implies the existence of far too few worthy priests. The Archbishop of Canterbury wrote to the Bishop of London in 1362, expressing his regrets over the deplorable situation:

> We are certainly informed by common fame and experience that modern priests through covetousness and love of ease, not content with reasonable salaries, demand excessive pay for their labour and receive it; and do so despise labour and study pleasure that they wholly refuse to serve as parish priests in churches and chapels or to attend the cure of souls,

> though fitting salaries are offered them, that they may live in a leisurely manner by celebrating annals for the quick and the dead.[9]

Talock explains that a guild or "bretherhed" priest was not required to expend much physical or mental effort in the performance of his duties. The guild hired a priest to spend most of his time seeing to the well-being of the members of the guild or "bretherhed." His duties would be comparatively easy, and included saying masses for the living and the dead at the guild meetings held four times each year, and the pronouncement of dirges, placebos, and masses for guild members and their deceased families at other times as well. Tatlock further observes that since a private mass only occupied about twenty minutes, even twenty-four or thirty masses bestowed on each soul would have left ample leisure time for the priest to pursue other occupations.[10]

The Parson of The Canterbury Tales would have had adequate opportunity for frivolous activities if he had wished. However, unlike the Monk, he chose to follow the counsels of the Church, and he spent his time at home in his parish with his congregation. The Monk did not long to look after the estates of the monastery; he preferred rather to hunt, enjoy his expensive hobby of collecting fine horses and dogs, and to avoid "madness" by refusing all studies and toil. Another weakness of this pleasure-loving Monk was his clothing. Chaucer gives us enough detail to show us that his

love for fine garments far exceeded his love for the Church or its duties. This Monk's sleeves were edged with the finest fur in the land. He also sported an elaborate gold pin to fasten his hood under his chin. His boots were not cheap; they were soft, supple, and very costly. Even the fine horse that he rode was adorned with gold bells and costly trappings. The Monk would have had no money to give to the poor, because he spared no expense on the things that he loved.

The Parson loved his parishioners. We have seen that he exemplified great charity toward them by his generosity with his limited funds, and by his most forbearing and gentle treatment of rank sinners. It is significant to note that Chaucer does not say anything about the Parson's clothing or his physical appearance. The only tangible property that Chaucer associates with his description of the Parson is the staff in his hand that we see him using as he visits the most distant house in his parish on foot. The staff is perhaps symbolic of the Parson's position as shepherd of his flock. It can be clearly seen that in Chaucer's mind, elaborate clothing did not belong in the portrait of the ideal churchman.

The illustration of the Parson in the text of the Ellesmere Manuscript is not consistent with the idealized figure Chaucer describes. Piper notes that the artist

clothed him in rich colors. The Parson's hood, hose, and gown are red, and his shoes are black. "The black girdle is studded with white as are the red straps of his trappings."[11] Loomis points out that the red garb was customary in his profession.[12] The Parson of The Canterbury Tales, as we have seen him, did not do the things that his contemporaries did. He conscientiously followed the instructions of the Church, but more than that, he followed the dictates of the love in his heart for his congregation. This love did not allow him to spend money foolishly on luxurious clothing when someone of his flock was in need. Moorman elaborates on the Church's position regarding the clergy's clothing. The priests were frequently reprimanded for wearing cloaks with sleeves, rich trappings, or other displays of extravagance. The clergy were furthermore counseled to wear garments of one color, and particularly to avoid red or green cloaks or stockings.[13] Therefore, it is highly improbable that the Parson, who was so bound up with the welfare of his flock, would wear red garments.

In further contrast with the Monk, the Parson was very poor. Any priest who stayed in his parish and performed his job well would almost necessarily be poor. Most of the country parishes were quite impoverished after the pestilence. Chaucer's Parson, ideally, had chosen not to seek more lucrative occupations in London. His parishioners were, no doubt,

poorer than those of the city. Moreover, he refused to demand payment of tithes, and he was "ful looth" to curse or excommunicate his faltering parishioners because they were so poor they were unable to pay.[14] In this respect the Parson let his human concern for his parishioners and his wise judgement counteract the Church's desire that the parish priest curse the members for their tithes when necessary.

The Friar is another religious pilgrim that helps us to have a clearer picture of the Parson by contrasts of character. Huberd, the begging Friar, clearly represents the corruption of the mendicant orders in Chaucer's time. One of the major quarrels between the friars and the parish priests was over the friar's right to enter the parishes to hear confessions and offer absolution:

> For he hadde power of confession,
> As seyde hymself, moore than a curat,
> For of his ordre he was licenciat
> Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
> And pleasunt was his absolucion:
> He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
> Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
> (CT, I (A), 218-224)

Huberd, as was typical of the friars of his time, gave easy absolutions. He was more interested in the money of the penitent parishioners than their souls:

> For unto a povre ordre for to yive
> Is signe that a man is wel yshryve;
> For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt,
> He wiste that a man was repentaunt;

> For many a man so hard is of his herte,
> He may nat wepe, althogh hym soore smerte.
> Therfore in stede of wepynge and preyeres
> Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres.
> (CT, I (A), 225-233)

No mention was made of anyone giving anything to the Parson. In contrast, the Parson is shown giving to his parishioners. He gave much more than monetary support as he showed them a Christlike, loving spirit. His absolution was not always easy or pleasant. The Parson was not afraid to rebuke the unrepentant sinner even if he were rich and commanded some threatening powers:

> And though he hooly were and vertuous,
> He was to synful men not despitous,
> Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne,
> But in his techyng discreet and benygne.
> To drawen folk to hevene by fairnesse,
> By good ensample, this was his bisynesse.
> But if it were any persone obstinat,
> What so he were, of heigh or lough estat,
> Hym wolde he snybben sharply for the nonys.
> (CT, I (A), 515-523)

Muriel Bowden notes that the medieval clergy did not treat all men as equal in God's sight. The reformers complained that the priest would overlook the mistakes of the higher classes and would give severe penalties to the peasant classes.[15] Here again Chaucer's Parson represents the ideal.

Chaucer's Friar was not an ideal example. He was overly familiar with the young wives of the town and, "He hadde maad ful many a mariage, / Of younge wommen at his owene cost." There is no mention of the Parson's interest in women. Indeed we would be surprised if there were, because he gave his money

to his needy parishioners and, "He koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce." It would be extremely hard for him to divide his time and meager income between support of a wife and the needs of his parishioners. The Friar, suave, greedy, and wanton, typified the actual corruption of the times; the Parson, generous, chaste, and considerate, typified the ideal.

The flashy, quick-thinking Pardoner was out for the money, too. He had indulgences all hot from Rome and a bag of false relics with which to trick the innocent into giving him an income:

> But with thise relikes, whan that he fond
> A povre person dwellynge upon the lond,
> Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye
> Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;
> And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,
> He made the person and the peple his apes.
> (CT, I (A), 701-706)

The Pardoner could read the lesson or tell a story well, but best of all he could sing the offertory. After his song, he knew that he could preach to win silver:

> For wel he wiste, whan that song was songe,
> He moste preche and wel affile his tonge
> To wynne silver, as he ful wel koude.
> (CT, I (A), 711-713)

Originally the pardoners were sent out to sell indulgences as a means for raising funds for the restoration of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. They had, however, like all the branches of the Church's working force, grown corrupt. Robinson notes that many people posed as pardoners and sold

fake indulgences. The ecclesiastical authority condemned these fraudulent practices. Robinson suggests that the Pardoner had probably only received the minor orders and was very likely one of these imitation pardoners.[16] At any rate, we can see that the Pardoner's true motivation was filthy lucre, and though he preached moral sermons well, the people would learn nothing from his example but the way to hell.

The Parson expressed no interest in financial gain, not because he was simply ignorant, but because he was innocently and entirely concerned with the higher moral duties that were his responsibility--he carefully taught his flock by example and by preaching Christ's gospel:

> He was also a lerned man, a clerk,
> That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche,
> His parisshens devoutly wolde he teche.
> Benygne he was, and wonder diligent,
> . . . . . .
> But in his techyng discreet and benygne.
> . . . . . .
> He waited after no pompe and reverence,
> Ne maked him a spiced conscience,
> But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve
> He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselve.
> (CT, I (A), 480-484, 518, 525-528)

In his portrait of the Parson, Chaucer stresses that the Parson's most effective method of teaching was through his personal example. His characteristics were worthy of emulation by his flock because his goal and constant endeavor were to draw folk to heaven through his good example. We see here

quite a different motivation from those that were apparent in the actions of his money-hungry contemporaries:

> To drawen folk to heven by fairnesse,
> By good ensample, this was his bisynesse.
> (CT, I (A), 519-520)

The medieval people were mostly illiterate and were highly impressionable. Their spiritual shepherd had a great opportunity to mold their thinking and actions. They were taught that the commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother," included their religious leaders. Myrc suggests that the parish priest ask his parishioners as they come to confessional if they have properly honored their curate. This inquiry is to be made during their examination over the commandment that instructs them to honor father and mother:

> Hast þow done also honowre
> To hym þat ys þy curatowre?
> Leue welle sone in gode lewte,
> I say not þys for lowe of me,
> But for þow owest to do honour
> To hym þat ys þy curatour.
> (Instructions, 1023-1028)

Since the people were charged with honoring their parson as well as their parents, the priest was placed in a position of grave responsibility. He was to be the kind of man that his flock could safely follow toward the ideal and toward a place in heaven. Chaucer's Parson was wise in not looking to the examples of his immediate religious superiors. The bishops were by no means free from corruption. They often blinked their eyes or turned their heads on the abuses of the priests because they were guilty of the same misdemeanors.

The Parson of The Canterbury Tales did not teach the knowledge and instruction of the bishops, the archbishops, or even the Pope. He chose rather to teach Christ's doctrines in his sermons, but first he exemplified Christ's teaching in his day-to-day living habits.

> But Christes loore and his apostles twelve
> He taughte, but first he followed it hymselve.
> (CT, I (A), 527-528)

Chaucer's Good Shepherd was indeed a rare exception because as we have read, parish priests in the Middle Ages were almost collectively corrupt. Their lives were doubly wicked because they were the shepherds of ignorant people. These priests might have been skilled in pulpit oratory, but that availed very little. Myrc clearly stresses that their preaching was almost worthless if their lives were not unstained illustrations of the right way to live:

> Here also thow myȝte hyt se;
> For luytel ys worthy þy prechynge,
> ȝef thow be of euyle lyuynge.
> (Instructions, 20-22)

Langland believed the reason the people were evil was that their examples--the parsons, the priests, and the preachers of holy Church--were evil. He points out that in the summertime when one sees a tree with some branches full of green leaves and some branches barren, it is plainly evident that something is wrong with the branches that have no foliage. He then applies this "ye are known by your fruit" principle to the inconsistent examples of the priesthood:

Ryght so out of holychurche al vuel spredeth,
Ther imparfit preest-hod is prechours and techours.
And seo hit by ensample of trees in somer-tyme,
Ther somme bowes bereth leues and somme bereth none;
The bowes that bereth nat and beeth nat grene-leuede,
Ther is a myschif in the more of suche manere stockes.
Ryght so perones and preestes and prechers of holy
  churche
Ys the rote of the ryght feithe to reuwele the peuple;
Ac ther the rote is roten reson wot the sothe,
Shal neuere floure ne frut wexe ne fair leef be grene.
For wolde ȝe letteride leue the lecherie of clothinge,
And be courteis and kynde of holykirke goodes,
Parte with the poure and ȝoure pruyde leue,
And therto trewe of ȝoure tonge and of ȝoure tail also,
And haten harlotrie and to vnderfonge the tythes
Of vserers and of hores and of al vuel wynnynges,
Loth were lewede men bote thei ȝoure lore folweden,
And a-menden hem of here mysdedes more for ȝoure
  ensamples
Than for to preche and preuen hit nat; ypocrisie hit
  semeth!
Ypocrisie is a braunche of pruyde and most among
  clerkes,
And is ylikned in Latyn to a lothliche dounghep,
That were by-snywe al with snow and snakes with-ynne,
Or to a wal whit-lymed and were blak with-inne.
Ryȝt so meny preestes prechours and prelates,
That beth enblaunched with bele paroles and with
  bele clothes;
And as lambes thei loken and lyuen as wolues.
(PP, C, XVII, 245-270)

Langland declares that by their examples clerics have led men and women to do exactly the opposite of what they have been taught to do by preaching. He is repulsed by hypocrites who cry, "Be pure!" and are not pure themselves. The hypocritical class of priests is shown to be most dangerous because they take on the appearance of lambs, yet live like wolves.

Hypocrisy could not be charged against Chaucer's Parson. His actions never varied from his teachings because they preceded his teachings:

> This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,
> That first he wroghte, and afterward he
> taughte. (CT, I (A), 496-497)

This Good Shepherd that Chaucer has shown us was able to give his "noble ensample" to his sheep for one reason--he stayed in the parish with them constantly and consistently. He did not leave his parish with a hired keeper so he could run to London for more money. Therefore he was able to be a continuous influence for good upon his congregation. Wycliffe notes that Christ instructed His shepherds to live among their sheep and teach them:

> crist ordeynede þat his herdis shulden dwelle wisely vpon his sheep, & teche hem boþe bi lif & word hou þey shulden lyue to come to heuene; but anticrist castiþ an-oþer gile, þat is herdis dwelle afer in castels & be doump of lore of lif & lore of word to helpe þer sheep, & so it is nedeful þat þe puple be disseyued in body & sould. Þey ben disseyued in þer body, for þei ben robbid of bodili good & it is clepid almes bi ipocrisie.
> & þus þey ben goostly disseyued, boþe for hem wantiþ techning to wende to heuene bi cristis weye, & for þey ben led to helle bi errour of þe fendis weye.[17]

The hypocritical parish priests with their pretended righteousness were unable to persuade their people to follow their pulpit exhortations because the congregation naturally followed the example of their priest and were led along the very hellish paths that they heard denounced in sermons. Wycliffe points to the folly that has resulted from the priests' failure to teach their people by example the way to fight against their fleshly natures: "of þis wasting of

goddis godis springen synnes þat harmen þe chirche, for siche curatis 3yuen not ensaumple hou men shulen fi3te a3enus þer fleys."[18]

The sheep who followed Chaucer's Good Shepherd would have had no trouble knowing the way to heaven because they could see that way in the life of their Parson and hear from his lips a "figure" to illustrate his point:

> This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,
> That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte.
> Out of the gospel he tho wordes caughte,
> And this figure he added eek therto,
> That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?
> For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,
> No wonder is a lewed man to ruste;
> And shame it is, if a prest take keep,
> A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep.
> Wel oghte a preest ensample for to yive,
> By his clennesse, how that his sheep sholde lyve. (CT, I (A), 495-506)

NOTES

Chapter I

1. See E. F. Lincoln, The Medieval Legacy (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1961), p. 61; and J. R. H. Moorman, Church Life in England in the Thirteenth Century (Cambridge: The University Press, 1945), p. 2. (Hereinafter referred to as Church Life.)

2. Robert Mannyng of Brunne, Handlyng Synne, ed. by Frederick J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, No. 119 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Limited, 1901), p. 273. Hereafter all direct quotations from Handlyng Synne are cited parenthetically in the text with the line numbers (eg. HS, 8893-8900).

3. "The Simonie," in The Political Songs of England, ed. and trans. by Thomas Wright, Camden Society, No. 6 (London: John Bowyer Nichols and Son, 1839), p. 324.

4. Moorman, Church Life, pp. 5, 7.

5. R. M. Lumiansky, Of Sondry Folk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955), p. 240.

6. Moorman, Church Life, p. 390.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., pp. 390-392.

9. "The Orders of Cain," in Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries, ed. by Rossell Hope Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 162.

10. John Wycliffe, De Officio Pastorali, in The English Works of Wyclif, ed. by F. D. Matthew, Early English Text Society, No. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1880), p. 445.

Chapter II

1. A. Abram, English Life and Manners in the Later Middle Ages (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1913), p. 52. (Hereinafter referred to as English Life.)

2. Edward L. Cutts, Parish Priests and Their People in the Later Middle Ages in England, Publications of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (London: William Clowes and Sons, Limited, 1898), p. 77. (Hereinafter referred to as Parish Priests.)

3. Ibid., p. 127.

4. Ibid., p. 68.

5. Moorman, Church Life, p. 25.

6. Ibid., p. 3.

7. Abbot Gasquet, Parish Life in Medieval England (London: Methuen & Co., 1906), p. 72.

8. J. J. Bagley, Life in Medieval England (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1960), pp. 90-91.

9. Moorman, Church Life, p. 93.

10. G. G. Coulton, Medieval Panorama (Cambridge: The University Press, 1947), p. 143.

11. Ibid., pp. 144, 147.

12. Gasquet, Parish Life in Medieval England, p. 77.

13. Ibid., p. 76.

14. Ibid., p. 78.

15. Cutts, Parish Priests, p. 144.

16. Coulton, Medieval Panorama, pp. 148-149.

17. Cutts, Parish Priests, p. 144.

18. William Langland, The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts Together with Richard the Redeless, ed. by Walter W. Skeat, I (London: Oxford University Press, 1886), p. 357. This work is hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by text, passus,and lines (eg. PP, C, XIV, 101-114).

19. Gasquet, Parish Life in Medieval England, p. 80.

20. Moorman, Church Life, p. 37.

21. Thomas Wright and James Orchard Halliwell, eds., Reliquiae Antiquae, I (London: William Pickering, 1841), p. 90.

22. Walter W. Skeat, ed., The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts Together with Richard the Redeless, II (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 176.

23. John Myrc, Instructions for Parish Priests, ed. by Edward Peacock, Early English Text Society, No. 31 (London: Trübner & Co., 1848), p. 58. Hereafter this work is cited parenthetically in the text with the proper line numbers for specific quotations (eg. Instructions, 7-12).

24. "The Simonie," p. 328.

25. Moorman, Church Life, p. 90.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., pp. 90-91.

29. Ibid., p. 91.

30. Cutts, Parish Priests, p. 216.

31. Ibid., pp. 216-217.

32. Edward Peacock, ed., Instructions for Parish Priests, Early English Text Society, No. 31 (London: Trübner & Co., 1868), p. v.

33. G. G. Coulton, Social Life in Britain From the Conquest to the Reformation (Cambridge: University Press, 1918), p. 263. (Hereinafter referred to as Social Life.)

34. Ibid.

35. Moorman, Church Life, pp. 111-112.

36. Abram, English Life, p. 53.

37. James Edwin Thorold Rogers, Six Centuries of Work and Wages (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1949), p. 64.

38. John Matthews Manly, ed., Canterbury Tales (New York: Holt, 1928), p. 529.

39. Wycliffe, De Officio Pastorali, Eng. Works, p. 431.

40. Coulton, Social Life, pp. 215-217.

41. Ibid.

42. Myrc, Instructions, pp. 21-24.

43. Moorman, Church Life, p. 111.

44. John Wycliffe, The Office of Curates, in The English Works of Wyclif, ed. by F. D. Matthew, Early English Text Society, No. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1880), p. 445.

45. Wycliffe, Die Officio Pastorali, Eng. Works, p. 415.

46. Ibid., pp. 453-454.

47. "The False Offering," in An Alphabet of Tales, Part II, ed. by Mary Macleod Banks, Early English Text Society, No. 127 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1905), pp. 385-386.

48. Moorman, Church Life, pp. 26-27.

49. John Wycliffe, Of Dominion, in The English Works of Wyclif, ed. by F. D. Matthew, Early English Text Society, No. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1880), p. 285.

50. G. G. Coulton, Chaucer and His England (London: Methuen & Co., 1930), p. 296.

51. Cutts, Parish Priests, p. 323.

52. Wycliffe, De Officio Pastorali, Eng. Works, p. 454.

53. Herbert Francis Westlake, Parish Gilds (New York: Macmillan, 1919), pp. 45-46.

54. Abram, English Life, p. 56.

55. "The Simonie," pp. 327-328.

56. Wycliffe, De Officio Pastorali, Eng. Works, p. 434.

57. Moorman, Church Life, p. 148.

Chapter III

1. John Matthews Manly observes that the Parson represents Chaucer's concept of the ideal priest. One of the pilgrims accuses the Parson of being a Lollard. This is a question that the scholars have enjoyed discussing. Manly states that Chaucer was definitely closely associated with some of the leaders of the Lollard movement and that the life of the Parson can be closely paralleled in the writings of Wycliffe. There were orthodox priests in England who might have furnished the ideal traits who were "distinctly pious and even puritanical. Moreover, orthodox churchmen had long described the ideal priest in terms very similar to those used by Chaucer." J. M. Manly, Canterbury Tales, p. 528.

2. For discussions of the Parson's character see, eg. Lumiansky, Of Sondry Folk, pp. 239-245; and Muriel Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), pp. 230-238.

3. John Matthews Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer (New York: Holt, 1952), p. 260.

4. Moorman, Church Life, p. 83.

5. Thomas A. Kirby, "The General Prologue," in Companion to Chaucer Studies, ed. by Beryl Rowland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 215.

6. Ibid.

7. F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (2nd ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. 653.

8. Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. by F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. 18. Hereafter quotations from The Canterbury Tales are cited parenthetically in the text by fragment and line numbers (eg. CT, I (A), 142-145).

9. Westlake, Parish Guilds, p. 46.

10. John Strong Perry Tatlock, "Bretherhed in Chaucer's Prologue," Modern Language Notes, XXXI (1916), p. 140.

11. Edwin Ford Piper, "The Miniatures of the Ellesmere Chaucer," Philological Quarterly, III (1924), p. 254.

12. Roger Sherman Loomis, A Mirror of Chaucer's World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 95.

13. Moorman, Church Life, p. 149.

14. Ezra Maxfield, "Chaucer and Religious Reform," Publications of the Modern Language Association, XXXIX (1924), p. 72.

15. Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, p. 237.

16. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 667.

17. Wycliffe, De Officio Pastorali, Eng. Works, p. 420.

18. Ibid., p. 435.

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