In her new book, *Clerical Households in Late Medieval Italy*, Roisin Cossar makes a valuable contribution to a growing literature on the medieval clergy, particularly the parish priests and urban canons about whom we know rather little in comparison to those higher in the ranks. She does this primarily through the careful analysis of notarial documents deriving from northern Italy, especially but not exclusively Venice and Bergamo. The result is an image of most clerics as situated between two worlds. On the one hand, they lived among and often with laypeople whose domestic lives their own frequently resembled, despite crucial differences that set them apart. On the other hand, they were the object of top-down efforts to reform their mode of life, with the ultimate goal of producing a distinct clerical ordo. This is a goal familiar to any historian interested in the history of the church in the high and late Middle Ages. With one foot in an idealized church and the other in the world of daily life, clerics were faced with the need to “manage and mitigate the demands of church officials” in order to allow for their own human needs and complex social realities (p. 6). This was not a clerical rejection of the reforming ideal but rather a reformulation of that ideal from the perspective of those required to live it.

Built on notarial sources, this book is an effort to understand a world by means of documents that had their own specific priorities and goals. Rather than erasing the difficulty of the task she has taken up, Cossar consistently emphasizes the challenges of working with notarial evidence and allows that evidence to shape the book in key ways. The first chapter provides a primer for those unfamiliar with notaries, their documents, and the various ways in which they archived information and were themselves archived. Of particular interest here are the many clerical notaries of Venice. Cossar observes that although Venetian notaries are usually considered quite different from those on the mainland, this was less true than it may seem. All notaries shared the obligation to maintain high moral character and to perform one primary task above all: the interpretation of the law in a way that served their clients’ needs while upholding local standards.

The second chapter shifts from notaries to their documents, with a special focus on testaments, inventories, and visitation records, all of which play a key role in the book. Embracing the archival turn, Cossar emphasizes that these sources are not transparent windows on the past but rather the carefully considered, strategically tailored outcomes of negotiation between notary and client or, as with visitation records, between the interests of the visiting authority and those questioned. Notarial documents are also con-
sidered here as material culture. In chapter 1, for example, the marginalia, cover drawings, and even doodles are mined for evidence of clerical and notarial culture. In chapter 2, careful attention is given to questions of use, as well as to ways the editing or structuring of a document can reflect tensions, negotiations, and the like. These first two chapters provide a valuable guide to any historian turning to such sources for the first time. For those already familiar with notarial evidence from other parts of Italy, the consideration of the similarities and differences between Venetian practice and that of the mainland is equally valuable. Italianists will sense in both of these chapters, and those that follow, the influence of Robert Brentano, whose insights, Cossar points out, anticipated by several decades those of the archival turn she embraces in this book.

In the three subsequent chapters, Cossar shifts her focus away from consideration of notaries and the evidence they produced onto the book’s titular topic, clerical households. The allusive often ambiguous evidence of testaments, inventories, visitation records, and other sources is marshalled for chapters on the domestic life of the clergy, on the women who were often crucial parts of priests’ lives, and on the labor and material culture characteristic of the clerical home.

Cossar’s treatment of the clergy and their households frequently circles back to one of the book’s main themes: that these domestic situations were at once quite similar to everyone else’s and, at the same time, uniquely clerical. Cossar’s focus in chapter 3 is on the clerical life cycle, from youth to old age and death. Much about this was common to clergy and laity alike. She notes that the domestic lives of the clergy were marked by relationships with women, children, and other clergy, just as most lay professionals lived and operated in a web of social ties that privileged others who shared their profession. The sons of clergy tended themselves to become clergy, as was the case with other trades, and we see brothers enter the life together and support one another throughout their professional careers. Clergy were, of course, forbidden to act as a paterfamilias, or head of household, but in practice they found ways to do this, often with the assistance of a notary. Various aspects of the clerical life cycle were more unique, however, among them the tendency of young clergy to live with older men of the cloth, who would then act as a disciplining presence in their lives and sometimes even after death. Much of this is common to both Venetian and mainland priests, though in some matters, most notably concubinage, Venetians tended to be more frank because their society was more tolerant of what they were doing.

That topic brings us to the women in clergymen’s lives, who are the subject of chapter 4. The literature that most commonly discusses such relationships is that on clerical concubinage, with which Cossar engages extensively. Ultimately, she opts to refer to these women as companions rather than concubines, capturing a wider array of relationships and acknowledging that the precise nature of priests’ ties to women is not always clear in our sources. Simply put, not every woman living in a cleric’s house was a concubine, and not all concubines actually lived in the cleric’s house. Again, much about priests’ lives turns out to be fairly typical, even in ways that Cossar does not explicitly note. She observes, for example, that clergy are often found exhorting their companions to be morally upright in their testaments, which it should be noted is something lay husbands are commonly seen doing as well. She also notes the care taken by clergy to delineate between their possessions and those of their companions, in order to ensure that said companions would not be deprived of what was rightfully theirs. This practice closely resembles the handling of married women’s non-dotal property and is likely an example of the kind of client-notary collaboration based on established models that Cossar is keen to emphasize. One gets a sense that reactions to clerical companions, or concubines as the case may have been,
was decidedly mixed. Some laypeople were unconcerned while others were scandalized. Most interestingly, the late medieval tendency toward professional dynasties means that when the sons of clerical companions became priests themselves, the women in their lives could undergo a dramatic change in status. The clerical companion may have been a marginal figure of questionable moral character but the mother of a priest was far more consistently honored. Cossar explores in detail the forms this particular relationship between women and priests could take.

The material culture of clerical domestic life, which is the focus of chapter 5, is sometimes hard to track down. The terms used by notaries to describe clerical housing (and really, most housing in general) are frustratingly vague. Cossar compares the urban parish priest with his rural counterpart, drawing on the work of Daniel Bornstein. She finds that rural life was generally harder but also signals a number of shared challenges, among them the need to navigate relationships with a local laity who were sometimes keen to control the living situation of their priests. The homes of the clergy emerge as fascinatedly hybrid spaces. Sometimes they were so reflective of the distinct clerical order as to take on an air of holiness, being used to store vestments and liturgical implements like chalices. Other times they were replete with objects priests were not supposed to possess, including swords. Cossar reflects on a wide range of quotidian objects as well, from containers and tools to books. She points out that, as anyone who has tried to investigate such matters knows, our records are often exasperatingly vague about precisely which books priests had in their homes. Fascinatingly, Cossar observes that the line between a clergyman’s management of his private affairs and his public role could be blurry. In particular, a priest’s economic savvy, his management of his domestic assets and obligations, could sometimes be read as a reflection of his overall virtue.

This is a book, ultimately, that has the domestic life of the clergy at its core but that approaches that topic from a truly wide variety of perspectives, all of them afforded to the historian by the rich if subtle evidence of notarial documentation. The book frequently moves back and forth between Venice and the northern Italian mainland, and the casual reader might find following the various claims challenging at times. At its heart, however, this is a book about the differences between the ideal of a clerical order and the actual practices of the clergy. It is all too easy to see clergy living with concubines, proudly displaying swords in their homes, or engaging in profit-driven money lending and decide that one is seeing the messy evidence of a corrupt late medieval church. This, Cossar tells us, would be an error. The idealized vision of what clerical life should be, imposed from the top down by church reformers, was not the only such vision. The everyday clergy in both city and countryside had their own sense of what it was to be a priest, one that they may have shared at least to some extent with the laity among whom they lived. This alternative vision of the clerical ordo was not formally recorded in treatises or normative texts, as reform ideals were. Instead, their homes, private relationships, and acts of domestic economy provide the challenging but crucial evidence of how the late medieval clergy understood themselves and their place in the world.
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