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*Disabled Clerics in the Late Middle Ages: Un/suitable for Divine Service?* is a history of ecclesiastical institutions that mediated between the papacy and impaired (physically, mentally, or otherwise) clerics serving in dioceses and parishes, mainly in Italian and French lands between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Author Ninon Dubourg undertakes to determine how impairments were experienced and understood by the clergy, and at what point impairments became disabilities.

This project is critically important to premodern history of disability, still a relatively new domain of inquiry. Although histories of disability in European and North American contexts after 1800 have flourished for the past two decades, narratives about earlier centuries are still informed by unexamined assumptions. There is an expectation that impaired individuals in the Middle Ages faced extreme prejudice and harsh, disabling treatment at every turn. This expectation is based not only on old-fashioned views of the medieval world as primitive and violent but also on some evidence from the period. For Dubourg, the problem arises in canon law, which articulated what appear to be rather stringent requirements for the physical integrity of clerics. Deviations from these requirements could, at least in theory, disqualify individuals from clerical service. Recent scholarship has recognized these laws as potentially norm-setting but has not yet systematically considered their real-world application—that is, whether and how the laws were actually followed.

Dubourg’s main purpose is to consider this question of application and to see how people navigated the potentially disabling structures of the late medieval church. She posits that impaired clerics became disabled at the moment the late medieval church recognized them as such in the formal granting of pontifical grace, a special dispensation that allowed for modified ecclesiastical duties tailored to the individual circumstances of impaired clerics. Beginning in the twelfth century, the practice of petitioning the Papal Chancery for such dispensations became more widespread and, over the course of the next two centuries, gener-
ated a considerable documentary record. Both the letters of those clerics who initiated such requests and the responses of the chancery have survived, and Dubourg makes instructive use of a sample of 885 such documents, blending quantitative and qualitative analytical methods.

Quantitative analysis is intended to show macro-level patterns—enduring both structures or ways of thinking about impairment and significant changes over time. Qualitative analysis complements the reader’s understanding of these big-picture issues by zooming in to highlight details of individual cases. Close readings of the petitions and the papal letters written in response show how impaired individuals navigated and responded to prevailing norms about bodily integrity and ability. It’s in these moments that we get as close as we possibly can to any “authentic reality” of impairment for these clerics. Supplementing the main source base are dogmatic Christian texts, biblical passages, legal compilations, and the occasional medical treatise.

The argument unfolds in five body chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the establishment of religious, legal, and medical norms that had bearing on the particular language used to describe impairments in the petitions and papal letters. Chapter 2 may be of special interest to some readers of H-Sci-Med-Tech, as it deals most explicitly with medical discourse on impairment. The medical model of impairment described by Dubourg was grounded mainly in the Galenic-Hippocratic tradition: adventitious impairments might be attributed to humoral imbalances within the body, while congenital impairments might be the result of humoral qualities passed from parent to child. These and other contemporaneous medical concepts appear with some regularity in Dubourg’s sample. She parses the language carefully, though, taking pains not to overstate the normative influence of medical thought. She shows, for example, that while the prevailing school of thought guaranteed that all forms of debilitating illness were, at least in theory, curable, many of the petitioners presented their conditions as permanent. Additionally, Dubourg notes that medical concepts were commonly entangled with contemporaneous religious ideas. Although the qualitative analysis in this chapter is enlightening in many respects, a more finely textured quantitative analysis of the uses of more specific concepts from the Galenic-Hippocratic tradition could have improved the chapter.

Chapters 3 through 5 sketch out, in turn, how individual petitioners frequently sought papal grace to join the clergy, to remain within the clergy, or to be released from clerical duties if they judged their own impairments too debilitating. Each chapter demonstrates that petitioners were frequently successful in securing special exemptions from restrictions and exclusions laid down in canon law. Taken together, these chapters make a convincing case for the notion that institutional power and authority, not impairments themselves, are what produce disability. This is a commonplace in disability studies, but rarely do we get such vivid examples from premodern contexts. We see clearly how adjudication of who was disabled (and therefore worthy of pontifical grace) became a natural outgrowth of the doctrine of papal supremacy, regnant in these centuries. Granting pontifical graces legitimated papal authority over and above canon law or other ecclesiastical institutions. At the same time, Dubourg is careful to show that even papal authority took into account the local, individualized circumstances of petitioners from across Europe.

*Disabled Clerics in the Late Middle Ages* makes an important contribution to the study of premodern disability by carefully mining a rich source base. To be sure, there are some weaknesses built into the methodology, and Dubourg acknowledges many of them. The primary source evidence, as is typical for studies of the Middle Ages, represents a narrow cross-section of society: the experiences to which we have access are over-
whelmingly those of figures we typically think of as "elites"—abbots, bishops, and the occasional abbess. The vast majority of rank-and-file, parish-level clergy are left out of the picture. Additionally, this sample of evidence is apparently reflective of mostly masculine experiences, but Dubourg has largely set aside questions of gender and its intersection with disability. That said, one expects that these types of questions would merit their own separate book-length studies. We might anticipate that scholars interested in probing these questions will benefit tremendously from the solid foundations laid by Dubourg.

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