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Michael Pasquier, *Fathers on the Frontier: French Missionaries and the Roman Catholic Priesthood in the United States, 1789-1870*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. ix + 295 pp. Notes and index. \$74.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-537233-5.

Review by Sarah A. Curtis, San Francisco State University

Willa Cather's novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, opens with a scene between three cardinals (French, Spanish, and Italian) and a French missionary priest in a garden in Rome in 1848. The missionary priest, a bishop from a diocese by the Great Lakes, succeeds in convincing the cardinals to send one of his parish priests, a native of Auvergne, as bishop to a new diocese in New Mexico, a territory "vague to all of them." Once installed, the new bishop writes a letter in a "fine, finished French script" in which he claims that "all day I am an American in speech and thought," but when he returns to his adobe house, he becomes a Frenchman again. He then sits down to a Christmas dinner cooked by his assistant priest, also French, that featured a "dark onion soup with croutons" that "not another human being," "between the Mississippi and the Pacific Ocean," could make. "Not unless he is a Frenchman," corrects his assistant.[1]

In his new book, Michael Pasquier does not make it quite as far as New Mexico, but his study does much to illuminate the world of French missionary priests in America that Cather evokes in her novel. Like her fictional bishop, Pasquier's real priests can be located at the intersection of three worlds: revived Catholicism in France, growing centralization by Rome, and the expanding territory of the United States. Although French missionary priests never formed a majority of the American clergy, Pasquier makes a compelling argument for their significance between the French Revolution and the Third Republic. He also rescues their history from the mainly hagiographic work produced within the church since the late nineteenth century. Until the 1830s, American Catholic bishops were mostly French in origin, and a steady stream of French priests populated remote parishes in the West and South. He calls this "a frontier brand of Catholicism" that united the French priests and set them apart from immigrant priests of other nationalities (p. 15). No matter how long they lived in the United States (and most never returned home), French priests remained French in outlook, "looking to France for new recruits, monetary donations, personal encouragement, and spiritual fortification" (p. 91). Pasquier is most interested in the clash between their ideals, drawn from their French origins as well as ultramontane Catholicism, and the reality of their lives as parish priests in often harsh environments. To this end, he has made excellent use of private correspondence, which revealed much more self-doubt and failure to live up to the missionary ideal than the sometimes triumphalist narrative the Catholic church provided for public consumption.

Pasquier divides his study into five chapters, in rough chronological order: the French background of these priests in the period immediately following the Revolution, their experiences on the American frontier, their relationship with the *Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi* and other French Catholics, their role in the ultramontane movement, and finally an examination of the attitudes and actions of French Catholic priests in the South in the antebellum and Civil War years. In all five chapters, he has ample opportunity to evoke the lived experience of these priests as well as the pressures they encountered and the compromises they forged.

The original generation of French priests was largely refugees from the religious violence of the French Revolution who opposed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and refused the oath. When they arrived in the United States, they doubled the size of the Catholic clergy (p. 27). From the beginning, therefore, the political perspective of these priests was conservative and hierarchical. Most of them were trained at the Seminary of St-Sulpice in France or, later, at Sulpician seminaries in Maryland and Kentucky. The latter seminaries, although somewhat marginalized by Sulpicians in France, served as mediating institutions between French Sulpician ideals and the realities of Catholic life in the United States. Indeed, Pasquier is at his most eloquent and convincing when he depicts the hardships of French missionary priests who “traveled for weeks and sometimes months throughout their expansive diocese without the companionship of other priests” (or presumably a hearty bowl of onion soup) (p. 61). Susceptible to fatigue, illness, poverty, and indifference, these priests could not even take satisfaction in the holiness of suffering, instead blaming themselves for not measuring up to ideal missionary standards inculcated at the seminary or through their extensive reading in missionary sources. Steeped in the missionary literature of the past (from the Jesuit *Relations* to the eighteenth-century *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*), Pasquier describes these nineteenth-century priests as living “a double life of zealous missionary and cautious stranger in a strange land” (p. 72). Despite their efforts, frontier Catholicism was characterized by haphazard ecclesiastical authority, institutional disorganization, and inadequate monetary and personnel resources for the vast project of bringing Catholicism to the expansive spaces of the Midwest and Western United States.

French missionary priests also depended on two European institutions, the Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi in France and the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome, which deepened the gap between ideal clerical practice and American realities. Founded in 1822, the lay society of the Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi became an essential source of support for French missionaries around the world. The missionary letters they published in *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* served to raise funds and attract new recruits. But the heavily edited letters, Pasquier shows, were “well-crafted images” (p. 94) designed to cultivate popular support that differed in important respects from the more candid correspondence sent by missionary priests. In the American context, probably the most important function of the letters in *Annales* was to link the American missions with two aspects of the French missionary past: the conversion of Protestants and the evangelization of Indians. Although very few French missionary priests ever worked with them, the supposed close relationship between Native Americans and *robres noires* continued to loom large in the French missionary imagination, exciting the public and potential recruits alike. Yet the American Catholic hierarchy contributed little support and few resources to Indian conversion, focusing instead on the development of a national—white—church. The romantic depictions of priests working among Indians published in the *Annales* did not reflect the experience of the majority of French priests in the United States. Only in the 1840s did the *Annales* revise its coverage to include more urban and more established aspects of the American church, and by the 1850s, French priests were urging their parishioners to support the Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi and its work in more disadvantaged parts of the world through their own donations.

If the Propagation de la Foi was an essential link between France and the United States, its namesake, Propaganda Fide, provided the same function between Rome and the United States. Pasquier argues that “French missionary priests were largely responsible for laying an institutional foundation for ... the ‘Romanization’ of Catholicism in mid-nineteenth-century America” (p. 135). As the centralized arm of the church responsible for Catholic missions all over the world, Propaganda Fide reflected the rise of ultramontanism in the Catholic Church. In the numerous conflicts of priestly and episcopal authority that arose in the American church, Propaganda Fide took on a larger role as arbiter, and French bishops in particular saw themselves as embodying that authority in the United States. To run-of-the-mill French priests, however, living up to “Propaganda Fide’s prescriptions for the priesthood” produced another set of standards almost impossible to fulfill in the American context (p. 152). Faced with ignorance, indifference, or outright hostility, they struggled to impose Tridentine ideals on an ethnically

and religiously mixed population. French priests found themselves tolerating mixed marriages between Catholics and Protestants and mass baptisms of Protestant children whose families had not converted. Despite these lapses, however, Pasquier argues that over time French clergy in America shed Gallican traditions for papal authority, acting as mediators between Roman rigor and American pluralism.

Nowhere does the essentially conservative nature of the French clergy reveal itself more starkly than in Pasquier's concluding chapter on the accommodation of French priests to slavery in the southern United States. From its very beginnings in the United States, the French clergy was deeply involved in the slave economy, owning and trading slaves, especially in Maryland, Kentucky, and Louisiana. Pope Gregory XVI's condemnation of the slave trade in 1839 as well as rising abolitionist sentiment in the United States resulted in the defense of slavery by French priests who worked in the South, "pastoral protectors," as Pasquier puts it, "of a southern way of life" (p. 170). Many adopted a passive approach, conceiving of slavery as analogous to the relationship between parent and child. Some took a more active approach of trying—in the spirit of the *Code Noir*—to evangelize among slave populations without, however, challenging the institution of slavery itself, arguing instead for its reform. And a few, like Antoine Blanc, the archbishop of Louisiana, proactively defended slavery, issuing a pastoral letter supporting inner religious freedom and denouncing legal freedom for slaves in 1852. During the Civil War, French priests in the South acted as chaplains to the Confederate Army and supported the Confederate cause in ways big and small. As a result, few were well positioned to minister to former slaves at the end of the war. By 1870, at any rate, French priests were rapidly being replaced by Irish clergy and during the Third Republic most French missionaries found themselves called to other parts of the world as the French embarked on a new colonial empire.

To historians of France, this book is valuable in understanding the impact of French and Catholic culture in the greater world. Although historians discount French immigration to the United States as negligible and the numbers of French priests who became American missionaries pales in comparison to the Irish, Italian, and Polish clerics, among others, who came after them, this book adds to a growing literature on the small but pivotal role of French emigrés and Catholics in the early United States.[2] Pasquier provides a nuanced and sensitive portrait of men trapped between two cultures and a set of expectations based on French norms on the one hand and the very real conditions of the American frontier on the other. He makes excellent use of source material in both the United States and Europe. (Or I assume he does, since the notes omit the location of the archival materials from *Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi* and *Propaganda Fide*, and the book does not include a bibliography.) French historians often forget about the United States as an area for French cultural imperialism, but Catholicism provided one of the key sites for the expansion of the French world view, and French clerics, priests as well as religious orders of women in America, were its main agents. Although the subject of Pasquier's book is priests, some comparisons with the French religious orders of women who established missions in the United States during the same period and who served many of the same functions with the same set of tensions—and whose exploits go unsung in the *Annales*—would have provided a broader view of this phenomenon.[3]

Pasquier, though well versed in the French historiography on nineteenth-century Catholicism, neglects an international dimension to this story. How did the experiences of these priests compare to their French brethren in other parts of the world? Just how different was the United States as mission territory? In the chapter on slavery, for example, comparisons to the abolitionist debate in France in the 1830s and 1840s as well as the situation in the Caribbean and West African colonies might have revealed that the French clergy in the American South were not in fact as different as Pasquier makes them out—he compares them to "the outspoken cadre of liberal Catholic leaders in France" (p. 188). But the Catholic hierarchy in France overwhelmingly supported slavery as an institution and the main abolitionist societies were dominated by secular (or Protestant) viewpoints.[4] On the ground in the Caribbean colonies, most priests accommodated slavery for similar reasons as did the priests in the American South, but the direct experience of slavery also inspired some to become abolitionists, which

diverged from the American experience.[5] It is perhaps too much to ask of a book that already jumps the wide divide of the Atlantic and whose target audience is mainly Americanists to widen its viewpoint even further, but French historians will find themselves wanting to put the United States in a larger context relating to the expansion of French influence, religious and otherwise, throughout the world.

In the brief conclusion to his book, Pasquier lists some of the areas that remain to be researched, including “why almost twenty young Frenchmen chose to become missionaries in New Mexico” (p. 204). Although he makes frequent allusions to missions in the American West in his narrative, specific examples are largely confined to what we now call the Midwest. It is unfortunate that he could not have included an additional chapter on the French missions in the Far West and Southwest, which he acknowledges were areas of significant interest to French priests. For that story we must still turn to Willa Cather.

#### NOTES

[1] Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1900; orig. ed. 1927), pp. 4, 35, 38.

[2] See, for example, Harry Liebersohn, *Aristocratic Encounters: European Travelers and North America Indians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Rebecca Rogers, *From the Salon to the Schoolroom: Educating Bourgeois Girls in Nineteenth-Century France* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), chapter 8; and Sarah A. Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapters 1-3.

[3] On female religious orders of French origin in the United States, see Rogers; Curtis; and Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[4] Lawrence C. Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

[5] Troy Feay, "Mission to Moralize: Slaves, Africans, and Missionaries in the French Colonies, 1815-1852" (Ph. D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2003); Philippe Delisle, "Clergé et esclavage aux Antilles et en Guyane françaises: De l'Ancien Régime à 1848," *Mémoire Spiritaine* 9 (1999): 161-72.

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