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Clerical Leprosy and the Ecclesiastical Office: Dis/Ability and Canon Law¹

Ninon Dubourg

Leprosy (*lepra*²) is a chronic and infectious disease, which has long-lasting disabling consequences for the sufferer. It mainly affects the peripheral nervous system and the skin, provoking a disastrous loss of sensation in various body parts and ultimately even the loss of limbs. The Old Testament (Leviticus 21:13-14) nominates priests as chiefly responsible for dealing with lepers, a descriptor which often referred to those suffering not just leprosy, but incurable skin diseases, or those deemed to be 'unclean'. What happens when a cleric contracts leprosy himself? How is clerical leprosy treated, and by whom? In such cases, as we shall see, the clerical hierarchy acts to contain the leprous cleric's apparent impurity.

Some contemporaries and historians deemed leprosy as a test in the name of God's love for redemption. On the contrary, some regarded it as proof of the Lord's damnation, to punish someone or the person's parents.³ This ambiguity was stronger than for any other disease, because 'the cause and spread of the disease was little understood'.⁴ In the twelfth century, the *Book of Job* seemed to provide a favourable explanation for the disease,⁵ since being sick was viewed as a consequence of being touched by the grace of God. Lazarus, the patron saint of many leper colonies, embodied this explanation because he epitomized 'the virtuous poor' for Christians. Nevertheless, this positive view shifted many times during the Middle Ages. For example, in the *Decretum Gratiani*, composed in two parts sometimes around 11406, the father of Canon Law, Gratian, used *lepra* as a synonym for sin. This indiscriminate co-mingling of sin and leprosy is made clear in medieval times where leprosy is mostly defines as a physical illness resulting from loose morals.⁷ Because of the specificity of this disease, historians believed for a long time that lepers were excluded from medieval society, either quarantined in leper colonies or as beggars socially rejected with their ratchet⁸. In most recent historiography, scholars tend to avoid using the notion of exclusion when analysing leprosy in the Middle Ages. Instead, critics analyse this relative ostracism as a different kind of social integration.⁹

I follow, and extend, this theoretical approach to medieval leprosy in this article and analyse the social consequences – both positive and negative – of a diagnosis of leprosy for a cleric. My study is focused on the specific issue of the ecclesiastical office for a leprous cleric, as a means to

1 I thank Alicia Spencer-Hall for the amazing help she provides to write this paper and the editors, Stefanie Künzel and Erin Connelly for their kind remarks.

2 The Latin word *infirmity* was often used to describe leprosy in medieval documents, revealing that it was the epitome of a disease with a universal significance. However, we can assume that in the papal letters I used as sources, *lepra* refers to the actual leprosy (call Hansen's disease), which seemed to be well diagnosed during the Middle Ages according to Demaitre 2007.

3 Jeanne 2014, 69.

4 Marcombe, 2003, 140.

5 Bériou and Touati 1991, 34.

6 Winroth 2004.

7 For the Latin text see: Richter 1879, 2, c. 1, Q. 1, c. 14 '*Cum ordinaretur episcopus, quod dedit aurum fuit, quod perdidit anima fuit; cum alium ordinaret, quod accepit aurum fuit, quod dedit lepra fuit*' (Whom give the ordination to a bishop against money will lost his soul, whom give the order to someone else and accept money for it will be stroke by leprosy. The French translation (Löfstedt 1993, 9: '*qui ordine aucun par deniers, il ne li donne pas grace mes pechié.*') save only the sinful idea and not the leprosy: 'whom give the order against money don't give him grave but sin'.

8 The ratchet was the noise-making devices lepers had to carry in order to make people aware of their presence. Historically historians thought that this device was used to allowed people to escape from the lepers, but the most recent historiography now promotes the ratchet as a tool to attract passers-by in order to received aims from them.

9 Tabuteau 2012.

examine the wider issue of clerical leprosy. When a man entered the clergy, he holds an ecclesiastical office and performed a number of spiritual duties attached to it (sometimes a cure of souls). The clerics, secular or regular, could also have a benefice attached to their ecclesiastical office in order to provide them a livelihood, but I will be focusing more my analysis on the social role they ensured, between the representation on the members of the secular (in case of *cura animarum*) or regular community (because of their leadership role), and their physical capacity to perform the tasks attached to their ecclesiastical office. My study shows that, when a cleric was leprous, the papal chancery had many ways to manage his integration with regard to his subsequent (in)ability to hold an ecclesiastical office, specifically in case of specific offices (as bishop or abbot) or for those with a *cura animarum*. I draw from the *Decretals of Gregory IX* and other canon laws, supplication letters and papal dispensation letters to see how leprous clerics were treated by the popes and the papal chancery in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. I will show that the exclusion was not the path chose by the papal chancery for the leper-clerics and that she will prefer to offer them a relative social inclusion rather than an exclusion of the clergy. Firstly, I examine the ecclesiastical interdiction against being both a leper and a cleric. Then, I consider the real problems leprosy would cause for a cleric's ability to fulfil his social role. Finally, I analyse the professional, spatial and social consequences of the disease when the leper was also a member of the clergy.

The ecclesiastical idea of perfection

Canon law codified the core teachings of the Church, including rules for the clergy. However, canon law also established mechanisms by which the Church could issue letters of dispensation for some clerics, thereby allowing them to disobey the edicts of canon law without being found at fault. This study takes both canon law and dispensation letters into account as primary sources for examining how the Church went against its own rules about leper-clerics with dispensation letters. Such letters were issued by the Roman Catholic Church as a response to supplication letters written by the leprous cleric himself, his hierarchy or a lay or clerical informer. They formulated the cleric's requests for a special dispensation in order to contravene canon law – with regard to income or religious practices – necessitated by the circumstances of their disability (here, leprosy). Both supplication and dispensation letters offer us only partial insight into each case, literally as one side of a dialogue between at least two people or groups, the leper-cleric and his supporters or detractors and the Church. Often, it is impossible to know how the story ended, in part at least because of the quantity of letters sent and received and the poor organisational structures to deal with them. Nevertheless, the popes, since the Gregorian Reform centralized the reception of all *causae majores* of the Church¹⁰ and so the papal chancery kept a great number of these letters in the chancery registers. In the centuries studied in this essay, and since the twelfth century, the popes' decisions were absolute and above all, by means of their high power of grace and the *plenitudo potestatis*.

Why was clerical leprosy such a problem? In a nutshell, clerics had to be perfect physically, like Christ. Firstly, physical perfection was linked with moral perfection. These two impairments to enter the cleric condition put the applicant in situation of irregularity, for being outside the canonical norms. These canonical norms evolved in time. At the beginning of Christianity, moral perfection was a more important criteria than physical perfection because that last was just supposed to illustrate the moral wrongs.¹¹ But this matter of facts changed with the first canonical

10 Gregory VII's *Dictatus Papae* is a commentary on the Gregorian Reform – Propositions XXI et VII.

11 This idea was first expressed in several oft-quoted verses from Leviticus 21:16-24, translated into English in the Wycliffe Bible in the late fourteenth century: 'Nor shall he come to do his service; nor, as well, if he is blind, or lame; or too small, or too big; if he hath a crippled, or deformed, hand or foot; if he hath a botch, or a bulge, on his back; either if he is bleary-eyed; if he hath white colour, or a pearl, in his eye, that hindereth his sight; if he hath a continual scab; if he hath a dry scab on his body; either if he be bruised in the privy members.' Noble et al. 2010, 172. In latin see Weber et al. 2007, 231.

legislation (IV^e and V^e centuries) because canonists distinguish *defectus infamiae*, which forbid ordination, and *defectus corporis*, which can prevent a man to enter in the clergy.¹² To finish, in the canonical collections of the XII^e and XIII^e centuries, physical perfection became a category of defects of the same gravity than moral ones. So, canon law, which fixed the rules and the means to go against itself, seized the question of the disabled clerics. The first important canonical collection to address this issue directly, the *Decretum Gratiani*, stated in several *dictinctio* that a physically-altered man could not be a member of the clergy.¹³ Church councils could also legislate on infirmity. For example, less than a century after the composition of Gratian's legal textbook, canon 10 of the Fourth Council of the Lateran allowed a physically-disabled bishop to send another cleric to do his normal clerical duties in his diocese.¹⁴ Twenty years later, the *Decretals of Gregory IX* outlined in several chapters the rationale behind the disqualification of individuals from the clergy if they exhibited physical abnormalities.¹⁵ Gregory claimed that the diseased simply could not enter major orders on a moral basis: the sinful nature of the disabled or diseased body prevented a cleric from performing routine duties, such as blessing the sacrament and leading the mass.¹⁶

The construction of the legal notion of *defectus corporis* by canon law implies that an infirmity could prevent the cleric to be ordinate or to hold an ecclesiastical office. But it is clear in the canonical texts above mentioned that an infirmity became a *defectus corporis* solely when the representation (*claritas*) of the minister and his physical capacities were questioned.¹⁷ However, only a superior authority, like episcopal courts and more specifically papal court could judge if an infirmity lead to these social consequences on representation and physical capacities. Thus, this perfection had to be checked before the priest's ordination, to prove his ability to hold an ecclesiastical office. This verification may not have been done systematically for all clerical appointments (especially to enter minor orders), but was frequently requested in suspected cases of leprosy. As in lay trials on leprosy, conducted when there was a suspicious case of leprosy within the society, an inquiry was launched after an individual was denounced. This element of denunciation is also connected to the role of *fama publica* (public reputation) and scandal, (which I analyse in depth below) which launched the inquiry process.¹⁸ For example, Theobaldus, treasurer of Rouen's superiors specifically requested an examination after he was denounced as leprous¹⁹:

*We order an examination of Theobaldi the treasurer of Rouen's election because some people insinuate that Theobaldi is infected by lepra. This is why we ask you [[Gervasio] bishop of Séz, the major archdeacon of Reims and the deacon of Amiens] to lead, under the invocation of the divine judgment firmly enjoining, an investigation made by the most faithful and honest medical experts.*²⁰

Honorius III ordered this examination to silence people with a medical test administered by both lawyers and doctors, comparable to what would have happened in a lay trial. However, he asked for judges who were the most learned scholars in the field of medical investigation and who worked the most meticulously. In another letter, dated 18 May 1222, Honorius III, using his papal authority,

12 Guaydier 1933.

13 Richter 1879, *distinctio* 55, c. 1–13; 34, c. 10; 36, c. 1; 49, c. 1.

14 Mansi 1961, 998.

15 Richter 1881, I – IX, Cap. 1, 9, 10, 15; I – XX, Cap. 1-7; III – VI, Cap. 1-5.

16 To see all canonical legislation on leprosy, see Merzbacher 1967.

17 Thomas Aquinas et al., 2005. Commentary on the Sentences by St. Thomas Aquinas, IV, D. 25, Q. 2, art. 2.

18 Picot 2012, 297.

19 It is Important to note that this is because Theobaldus was being elected as archbishop of Rouen at the time that this denunciation was probably made.

20 Honorius III – Reg. Vat. 11, fol. 237: '[...] idem Thesaurarius infectus esse dicitur morbo lepre, discretioni vestre sub obtestatione divini iudicii firmiter iniungendo, mandamus quatenus inter alia inquirenda circa hunc articulum advocatis medicis fidelibus et in hoc peritis inquisitionem diligentissimam faciatis.'

allowed Theobaldus' ecclesiastic community to elect another 'appropriate' (*idoneus*) – i.e. definitely healthy – cleric, to celebrate mass whilst the investigation went on.²¹

Within the pontificate of John XXII, during the years 1332-1333, another case of leprosy had to be checked. To do so, the Bishop of Lincoln appointed three commissioners, one papal legate, one canon and one professor in civil law, to judge whether Richard of Wallingford, Abbot of Saint Alban²², had leprosy or not. Unlike Honorius III, John XXII did not request a physician. The medical issue was diagnosed and dealt with by non-medical specialists, which perhaps strengthened the moral dimension of the disease. During the commissioners' visit and examination of the abbot, they noted that Richard had been afflicted with leprosy for five years, according to the *Chroniques* of St Alban's monastery.²³ The investigators also had to enquire about the damage caused by Richard's infirmity to the monastery more generally, as a result of the abbot's incapacity to govern properly. Another dispensation letter on this case, written by John XXII two months later on 15 July 1333, stresses the negative spiritual and earthly consequences of the abbot's disease for those around him:

*Furthermore, stained by leprous disease caused by divine judgment, [Richard] can not live among healthy people without scandal, so that the whole administration, both for spiritual and temporal matters, is known to be being carried out by means of others.*²⁴

Similarly, John XXII wrote to the bishop of Autun in a letter dated 22 September 1329 to enquire if he could, personally, inform him as to the (suspected) leprosy of Guidonus, Abbot of Flavigny.²⁵ From studying dispensation letters, it is clear that popes frequently required investigations in order to confirm – or deny – suspicions of leprosy before making any irreversible decisions as to the cleric's unsuitability. Moreover, in the papal dispensation letters, the popes routinely added a forfeiting clause for the attention of the addressees. Using the words *si est ita* (if that is), the popes signalled that their decisions would be valid only if *lepra* was definitively diagnosed by the direct superiors of the 'leprous' clerics.²⁶ The fact that the direct superior of a suspected leper-cleric had to check if the cleric really had leprosy reveals the papal willingness to control all clergy levels.

The disabled cleric: between physical incapacity and suitable representation

In a discussion of the Eucharist, the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas maintains that a cleric with a physical deficiency cannot celebrate mass. The disabled cleric cannot save souls and provide the laity with the sacraments because of his infirmity: 'sometimes by making it impossible to exercise them, as, for example, if he lost his sight, or his fingers, or the use of speech; and sometimes on account of danger, as in the case of one suffering from epilepsy, or indeed any disease

21 Honorius III – Reg. Vat. 11, fol. 239.

22 For two years Abbot Richard had suffered from a progressing case of blindness in his left eye. Thus, it is doubtful that he actually suffered from leprosy. Further, identifying Richard as a leper was the means for his enemy to depose him. Nevertheless, the dispensation letters and St Alban's chronicle use the term leprosy – reflecting the fact that his contemporaries most likely classified him as such. In this context, I consider Richard as 'leprous'. On this, see: North 1967, 7.

23 Walsingham 1867, 286. See also John XXII – *Regesta*, Vol. 117, f. 116: '[...] *magister Johannes de Offorde, de quo supra scripsimus, decanus de Arcubus, et magister Robertus de Bromlee, officialis magistri Icherii de Contoreto, nuncii Domini Papae, cum commissione eis facta per Episcopum Lincolnensem, ad inquirendum de statu Abbatis et Monasterii; qui suggestum fuit, ut duximus, Domino Papae, quos Abbas fuit jam per quinque annos tam gravi leprae morbo respersus.*'

24 John XXII – Reg. Vat. 105, ep. 1503: '*Adeo est divino iudicio lepre morbo respersus, quod nequit inter sanos absque scandalo conversari propter quod tota administratio ipsius monasterii tam in spiritualibus quod in temporalibus per alios dumtaxat dinoscitur exerceri.*'

25 John XXII – Reg. Vat. 93, ep. 22: '*[...]de huius ipsius abbatis infirmitate per te ipsam diligentius te informes et quecumque super hiis inveneris nobis fideliter per tuas litteras studeas intimare.*'

26 For example, Gregory IX – Reg. Vat. 17, f. 23 r°, or Alexander IV – Reg. Vat. 24, fol. 205.

of the mind'. Thomas adds that, on occasion, the leper-cleric could provoke such horror in those around him that it would prevent the cleric's exercise of typical duties. This is the case, for example, for a leprous cleric 'who ought not to celebrate in public: he can, however, say mass privately, unless the leprosy has gone so far that it has rendered him incapable owing to the wasting away of his limbs'.²⁷ This interdiction against public celebration is designed to prevent an incapacity *de facto* caused by the inability to perform a task required of the clergy. Moreover, the prohibition is also founded upon public contempt for the disease and the desire of the Church to avoid potential scandal. Here, Aquinas utilises leprosy as the most vivid example of a disease that would provoke horror in a clerical sufferer's parishioners; leprosy is the worst disease for a cleric to contract.

Leprosy's power to generate horror is not just due to the concept of the disease as a sign of moral corruption. Indeed, the illness causes genuine disabilities, such as loss of limbs due to its progression or the need for amputations to forestall its spreading ever further. Much more than the cleric's perfect bodies, the idea questioned in the texts discussed above is the fundamental ability of the priest to perform his task. The first canonical texts, such as the *Apostolic Constitutions* dated from 375 to 380 AD and its most famous chapter 47 (*Canons of the Apostles*), allowed a cleric to become a bishop if he was worthy of the episcopal dignity, even if he was 'maimed in an eye (blind), or lame of his leg'. But this chapter also stresses that a blind or mute man cannot be a bishop. This is to avoid the disruption of ecclesiastical affairs, both spiritual and temporal, for mass or sacraments and management of property law. The canon states that a man could not be a bishop in this case, 'not as being a defiled person, but that the ecclesiastical affairs may not be hindered'.²⁸ According to that canonical statement, blemishes and injuries of the body were not obstacles to holy orders if the soul was clear from any impurity.

Guidonus, Abbot of the monastery of Flavigny founded by the kings of France, under the influence of Philip VI of France and Joan the Lamé, was suspected by the latter to be a leper. Indeed, Guidonus was totally incapable of managing and governing his monastery because he lost his tongue (he had some difficulties of speech due to leprosy) and he was 'tarnished' (*respersus*) by *lepra*. This is why the king and queen of France ask the pope to take care of this case before the spiritual and temporal damage to the monastery become permanent.

*Our dear son Guidonus, abbot of the monastery [of Flavigny], is totally unsuitable (inhabilis) to govern the said monastery, because he lost the benefice of his tongue and he is splashed by leprosy. So, he can not serve or govern his monastery in spiritually or temporally matters. The king and queen of France implore us to take care with diligence of the spiritual and temporal damage of this monastery.*²⁹

The loss of speech put Guidonus in a position of ecclesiastical irregularity, specifically as a cleric suffering from the canonical notion of incapacity (*impedimenta*). From the perspective of canon law, total incapacity of the sort experienced by Guidonus precludes an individual from being a member of the clergy, whilst partial incapacity just reduced his sphere of action.³⁰ Leprosy could make the clerics *inhabiles* (incompetent: fully incapacitated) or *inutiles* (useless: partially

27 Thomas Aquinas, 1888-1889, III, Q. 82, art. 10, Reply 3.

28 Coxe 1886, VIII, 47.77-47.78.

29 John XXII – Reg. Vat. 93, ep. 22: '*Dilectus filius Guidonis, abbas dicti monasterii, totaliter est factus inhabilis ad regimen et gubernationem ipsius, ex eo quod divino iudicio beneficium linguae perdidit et est etiam lepre morbo respersus, propter quod nequit in spiritualibus et temporalibus ipsius monasterii ministrare sive administratores alii sunt positi in eodem. Quare praefati Rex et Regina nobis humiliter supplicarunt ut ne propter hoc praedictum monasterium in eisdem spiritualibus et temporalibus subeat detrimentum eidem monasterio, in hac parte prospicere paterna diligentia curaremus.*'

30 Naz 1935, VI, 43.

incapacitated) to govern their ecclesiastical office.³¹

Leprosy causes incapacity due to its inherent disabling effects. Thus, as a consequence of his disease, the leper-cleric enters into irregularity, which is etymologically derived from the term '*regula*', or rule, which is imposed on all clergy. All irregular clerics were sources of scandal because they publically deviated from the ecclesiastical norm.³² According to Arnaud Fossier, the Church's fear of scandal reflects an institutional fear of evil as *contagio*. It also shows that a key part of the cleric's role was to be a public *exemplum*. In cases of irregularity, the cleric's capacity and legitimacy as a model could come into question. The Church tried to maintain the clerics' 'orderliness', because clerical indiscipline, if made public, could cause the laity to question their faith and the legitimacy of Church control. The *Decretals of Gregory IX* refer to a letter composed by Clement III which details the necessity of removing a leprous priest from the administration of his office in order to suppress potential scandal and the inevitable contempt of the general public:

*The priest who is tarnish by the disease of leprosy because of divine judgment has to be remove from the administration of his office of a parish church because of the scandal and abomination among the people he could provoke.*³³

Sometimes, mere suspicion of leprosy in a clergyman was enough to provoke scandal. Thus, the pope wanted to anticipate or avoid scandal and might hide the cleric's *defectus* through the mechanism of papal grace.³⁴ Returning to the case of Abbot Richard of Wallingford, after a thorough examination, the investigators declared that Richard could not live with the healthy without provoking *scandalus*. Furthermore, they proclaimed that the abbot could not be a member of the chapter or the chancel with the other brothers, re-iterating the pope's earlier statement in his letter. According to the commissioners' diagnosis, the *Chronicle* relates that:

*This abbot, who was gravely tarnish by leprosy, can not speaks with other people without scandal or enter in the monastic chapter or the choir of the church with his monks brothers.*³⁵

The investigators even predicted the ruin of the monastery if the abbot did not abdicate. Although Richard refused, he could not manage the monastery without assistance. To resolve this problem, he later appointed himself a coadjutor according to the *Chroniques*. In a letter sent a few months later (not recorded in the *Chroniques*), the pope claimed that the bishop threatened witnesses and thus stopped them from giving true testimony about Richard's leprosy.³⁶

This is an example of a scandal that motivated papal intervention and the use of dispensation letters in order to control the flow of information to the public and to settle the cleric's discipline. The Church used the category of 'irregularity' to contravene canonical precepts, and ultimately to render the 'irregularity' nullified by authorizing it with dispensation letters. In addition, the only way for the Pope to interfere in order to prevent scandal was to provoke the ostracism of the cleric. This ostracism could be professional or spatial – or both – leading to social exclusion. We can assume

31 Another example in Clement VI – Reg. Vat. 151, fol. 31R: '*cum infirmantibus infirmemur et cum illis maxime qui divino percussi iudicio sibi inutiles et ad aliis contemptibiles reputantur.*'

32 Fossier 2009, 328.

33 Richter 1881, III – VI, IV: '*De sacerdote vero, qui divino iudicio leprae morbo re percussus in parochiali ecclesia praelationis officio fungitur, dicimus, quod pro scandalo et abominatione populi ab administrationis debet officio removeri.*'

34 Fossier 2009, 345.

35 Walsingham 1867, 286; John XXII – *Regesta*, Vol. 117, f. 116: '*Quos Abbas fuit jam per quinque annos tam gravi leprae morbo respersus, quod non posset sine scandalo cum hominibus conversari, neque capitulum aut chorum ingredi inter fratres.*'

36 John XXII – Reg. Vat. 104, fol. 477 R: '*Testes autem qui fuerunt nominati si se gracia, odio vel timore subtraxerint censuram simili appellatione cessante compellas veritati testimonium prohibere.*'

that the popes did so because of the fear of *contagio* (which could be literal or moral, i.e. disease or evil), but also to promote physical perfection and so to avoid the horror that the leper provoked in others.

Professional and spatial ostracism leading to relative social inclusion

The *Decretals of Gregory IX* state that if the rector of a church is leprous, he must be removed from his administrative role. However, the Church had to support such an individual, including feeding him as much as his church could,³⁷ paying out on a kind of ecclesiastical health insurance. No leprous ex-priest was neglected by the Papacy, which took seriously its obligation to take care of all members. Obviously, the sick cleric could not stay in the same position as before. For example, Gregory IX pointed out that, afflicted with *lepra*, a priest of Saint Solen and vicar of Pludishie (in the diocese of Dol), in 1233 could not serve his church anymore without putting his soul in danger, deceiving his parishioners, and spiritually damaging his parish and his vicariate. Although he could not be a priest any longer, he could nevertheless keep his payment owed to the curate of priest, but he had to appoint a vicar to his vicariate who could collate the earning and ensure the administrative or practical functions in the Church, such as the celebration of mass:

*R. of Saint Solen, priest in [the recipient (bishop of Dol)]'s diocese, suffers from leprosy and can not serve his church nor his perpetual vicar of Pludishie, in the Dol diocese because of the danger for his soul and for his church. We allow him a grant of thirty livres Turon, recover from the dime of his church and other ecclesiastical incomes in order to live conveniently. We also ask that a suitable people is entrusted to serve in his vicariate.*³⁸

Nevertheless, the practical work of tending to the spiritual needs of the laity had to be done, so the leprous cleric or his superiors had to appoint a suitable (*idoneus*) assistant to help him. The coadjutor had to ensure the public representation of a *cura animarum* instead of the leper and to share the income with him. The *Decretals of Gregory IX* enacted that a rector of a church who is leper or infected in other way cannot ensure the service of the altar because of the major scandal he could provoke for the healthy people who come to the church. To prevent that, the Pope want the infected rector to have a coadjutor who can manage the *cura animarum* and who have to receive a portion of the resources of the Church to sustain him.³⁹ Or, in a French translation of this decretal in an anonymous manuscript dated from mid-twelfth century we can read that ‘priest with a benefice who become leper can sing without scandal. We ask that he have a coadjutor to take care of the souls’.⁴⁰ The translation of this anonymous French author implies that the coadjutor ensured the proper care of souls whilst the priest could no longer sing (perform) mass, a situation stated in the *Decretals of Gregory IX* because the coadjutor had received an earning sufficient to sustain him. Similarly, in the regular clergy, the pope asked the superiors to send to the diseased an administrator

37 Richter 1881, III – VI, Chapter IV.

38 Gregory IX – Reg. Vat. 17, f. 23 r^o: ‘*R. de Sancto Sollemni, presbyterum sue diocese lepre morbo labore et propter hoc alicui ecclesie nequeant deservire, nichilominus tamen perpetuam vicariam in ecclesia de Pludishie., Dolensis dioecesis detinere presumit in anime sue periculum et eiusdem ecclesie detrimentum. [...] in decimus eiusdem ecclesie et aliis proventibus ecclesiasticis in sua diocese ultra valentiam triginta librarum Turonensis monete unde potest comode sustentari, super hoc providere paterna sollicitudine dignemur. [...] Vicariam ipsam per illos ad quos eius collatio pertinet idonee facias conferri persone qui in eadem ecclesia velit et valeat deservire.*’

39

Richter 1881, III – VI, Chapter III (Lucius III): ‘*De rectoribus ecclesiarum leprae macula usque adeo infectis, quod altari servire non possunt, nec sine magno scandalo eorum, qui sani sunt, ecclesias ingredi, hoc volumus te tenere, quod eis dandus est coadiutor, qui curam habeat animarum, et de facultatibus ecclesiae ad sustentationem suam congruam recipiat portionem.*’

40

Godefroy 1881-1902: ‘*pretre qui avoit benefice devint mesel (leprous), ensi quil ne peut chanter sans scandal. On demande quendist droit on dist quil doit avoir coadjuteur qui ait le cure des ames.*’

to manage the monastery for him.⁴¹ This coadjutor was often chosen from the diseased abbot's circle thanks to his knowledge of the specific monastery.⁴²

The scenarios outlined above situate leper-clerics as burdens, completely useless to their churches. They kept their honorific title, but their responsibilities were insignificant and they were, in fact, jobless. Furthermore, their career plans were annihilated by such a relegation from active clerical duties. For example, a friar minor in 1392 was, because of his leprosy, segregated (*segregatus*) from the common fellowship (*consortio*) of his order. He was left as a beggar without any means of subsistence and he was turned out of his monastery. The pope allowed him to hold an ecclesiastical office without cure (*simplex*), or a poor hospital, or a hermitage, again with no cure of souls, but at least with an earning.⁴³

The spatial isolation experienced by leprous clerics was directly linked to their physical condition. Roger, a priest and rector who was struck by *lepra* in 1256, was allowed by the pope to have a pension. But Alexander IV, in a letter written 23 October 1256 to the Archbishop of Rouen, also forced Roger to live in complete isolation, staying in his house without any other resident a stone's throw away.⁴⁴ This precaution, according to the pope, prevented Roger from causing scandal. In this case, the leper was authorized to stay in his own isolated home because it met the criteria for sequestration far enough away from the healthy.

The rules surrounding the isolation of lepers within monastic communities make the necessity of spatial ostracism even more clear. In the Dominican rule, the leprous monk could not live with other monks, but had to be within the precincts of his monastery, in an isolated place.⁴⁵ Yet, if the monastery could not provide this accommodation for a legitimate reason (for example, if there was no space for the leprous isolation), the leprous brother could be transferred to another monastery.⁴⁶ There are no records of any papal letters that concern this part of Dominican rule. However, one petition written in 1349 about William Volandi – sub-prior of the Cistercian Order, appointed at the monastery of Sainte Marie des roches, in the diocese of Auxerre – sheds light on this issue. William lost his benefice of sub-prior because of his bodily default (*defectum corporis*) of leprosy and its consequences. He was then made the beneficiary of revenues from an outbuilding of his monastery, worth 20 livres of Paris, in line with the wishes of his prior.⁴⁷ The abbot and his assembly sent a

41 John XXII – Reg. Vat. 93, ep. 22, refers to the previous quotation.

42 For example, Richard, the abbot of St Alban's appointed as coadjutor Nicolas of Flamstede who had been a monk in this institution for some thirty years.

43 Boniface IX – Reg. Lat. 28, fol. 118: '*Tu propter lepram qua in asseris domino permittit percusses a communi ordinis fratres minorum professorum consortio segregatus existat tuque non habeas unde vitam tuam valeas sustentare nec dicti tui ordinis cui victimi et alia necessaria prestat voluntaria et merita mendicitas conditio succedat secundum persone tue decentiam iuxta huiusmodi morbi qui opinione homine incurabilis est expressas facere oportunas. [...] inclinati tecum ut beneficium ecclesiasticum etiam si simplex officium aut hospitale pauperum seu hermitagium quandoque per clericos quandumque vero per laicos solitum gubernari existat.*'

44 Alexander IV – Reg. Vat. 24, fol. 205: '*Ex parte Rogerii, [...] fuit propositum coram nobis quod ipso occulto dei iudicio morbo leprae percusso [...] Reliques ecclesie predicta redditibus per sustentatione sua eidem R. reservatis et concessa eidem Rogero morandi quo adiuverit in quadam domo et ecclesie prefate quam ipsem construxit distante ab ea ut dicitur per iactum lapidis dummodo sine habitantium inibi scandalo possit fieri facultatem.*'

45 The Dominican rule and the book of Dominican constitutions were written at the foundation of the Order. This idea is both in the rule from 1256 and the constitutions from 1375. See also Montford 2002, 98.

46 Galbraith 1925, 211.

47 Clement VI – Reg. Suppl. 17, fol. 201 R: '*Guillermus Volandi de Brionone [...] qui casualiter sicut Deo placuit de infirmitate lepre incurreret et ut asseritur paciatur de punti qui propter huiusmodi defectum per abbatem dicti monasterii et conventu de Ruppibus de dicto monasterio et officio subprioratus eiectus quatenus more pii prioris gratiam facientes eidem specialem de Grangia Rubea dicto monasterio de Ruppibus dependent cujus fructus redditus et proventus XX librum parisiensis valorem annum non excedunt [...]. Compellatur abbas et conventus facere sibi aliquam domum prope monasterio separatam tamen a conversatione aliarum ubi provideatur sibi de necessariis.*'

request to the pope. The words of the final sentence, which contain the decision made by the chancery, allowed William's superiors to put him in a private house separated from the monastery, even if this contravened the order's and the monastery's constitutions. The pope perhaps over-ruled the Cistercians with the ultimate aim of standardizing the monastic *regulae* under pragmatic principles which already existed in the Dominican rule.

Isolation could be brutal for a cleric; leaving his monastery could be very traumatic and could lead to ostracism. But petitions also show that some leper-clerics chose to leave their monastic communities. The leper Johanes of Pedo asked the pope for permission to reside in the Saint Lazar *leprosarium* in Beziers, a place where he could suffer the creator's flagellation with patience.⁴⁸ We can assume that he chose to join a leper colony to avoid public scandal. We can also assume that some clerics preferred exclusion from society in the form of joining a community of other lepers, rather than the experience of exclusion from the Church which would leave them alone, fully isolated. In certain cases, the *leprosarium* offered a social link with which a partial integration in the orders could not compete. For example, in Dover's leper house, sufferers were even tonsured like monks.⁴⁹ In another letter written by Clement VI, the leprous cleric Robert of Bours was authorized to enter a leper colony because of his inability. Moreover, he was allowed to choose which location he entered, to be sure that he could stay with his wife,⁵⁰ who would dedicate herself to the hospital to take care of the sick.⁵¹

Conclusion

Supplication and dispensation letters show the complex interconnection of denunciation, judgement, and scandalized public opinion in diagnoses and management of clerical leprosy. But there was not only secular judgement to consider; God is often present in these documents. In the papal letters, leper-clerics seem to be seen in a negative light in every instance. In a letter issued by Clement IV, dated between the 15 February 1265 and 23 April 1266, an equivalence is made between leprosy and a bad action inflicting *mala fama* on a man, who was at the same time accused of being a leper and of committing the vices of fornication and adultery. By these prosecutions, Clement drawn a direct parallel between leprosy and the consequence of God's anger because the leper misbehaved before.⁵²

The majority of papal letters analysed in the course of my research quote God's judgement as a justification that leprosy afflicts some people and not others; this explanation also was typically expressed in contemporary literature.⁵³ By restating the divine roots of leprosy, the popes did not give any personal opinion on the malady. God let it happen; the deity permitted a disease which was, *opinione homini*, incurable.⁵⁴ It is noteworthy that neither of the two petitions discussed in this

48 Clement VI – Reg. Suppl. 6, 341 R: '*John mansionem in domino sancti lazarii sibi civites Bitericensis misericorditer impendendo ut ibidem verbera suum creator pati valeat patienter*'.

49 Rawcliffe 2006, 303.

50 He was probably married because he was in the minor order.

51 Clement VI – Reg. Vat. 151, fol. 30R: '*Cum dilectus filius Robertus de Bours, dictus peuboin clericus coniugatus Morinensis diocese sit morbo lepre percussus et ob hoc dilecta in christo filia Margareta Vailly eius uxor ad eius consorcio separari et in hospitali pauperum Beate Marie Remensis in quo fratres et sorores existunt cupiat in infirmis et pauperibus domino famulari [...] Margaretam in eodem hospitali ad servitium infirmorum et pauperum recipi faciat in sociam et sororem sibi iuxta ipsius hospitalis consuetudinem habitum exhiberi*'.

52 Clement IV – Reg. Vat. 29 A, n° 191: '*propter quod venit in filios diffidentie ira Dei, adiciens quod ejusdem vitii occasione perpetuo a choro predictae Parisiensis ecclesie dicebatur ejectus, quodque de morbo lepre suspectus erat, et de fornicatione vel adulterio procreatus necnon inhonestate conversationis ac perjurii crimine irretitus existens, Parisius errores pluries predicavit*'.

On the association of a disease to different sins see for example Stearns 2011, 52 or 169.

53 On the 13 letters I use for this study, 11 quoted God's judgment.

54 Boniface IX – Reg. Lat. 28, fol. 118. See quotation above.

article resort to such framing. The first does not mention God at all; the second supplicant writes about chance rather than judgement, probably to clear himself of any charge of moral corruption due to the malady.⁵⁵ This notion of fortuity (or occasionalism) is entirely absent from the papal letters, which were probably influenced by hagiographical literature and preferred to spread the idea of God's judgement. Regarding such differences between the letters and the petitions, we can assume that the judgement of others (fear of contagion for example) was important, even shaping the opinion that lepers had about their own disease. They were afraid of what others might think about their disease, which could be perceived as a malediction or a blessing. This demonstrates the incredible power of the belief that lepers were the subject of God's judgement, positively or negatively, a belief which marked leprosy out as different to all other diseases, even in the papal dispensation process. Moreover, these letters offered us an insight in the construction of what we may call today 'disability'. Indeed, coupled together, unsuitable representation and physical inability caused social consequences for the ecclesiastical office's holder. This last, by means of dispensation papal letters, acquired a new social status, not really as a cleric, neither as a layman. Thus, because of the *defectus corporis* he suffered, the cleric entered in a new category of the canon law where he was socially included in a complete different way.

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55 Clement VI – Reg. Suppl. 6, 341 R, by the words: 'morbo lepre percussit'; or in Clement VI – Reg. Suppl. 17, fol. 201 R: 'casualiter sicut Deo placuit de infirmitate lepre incurreret'

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