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Episcopal Biographies and Religious Historiography of the French Contemporary Period

Christian Sorrel

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Spiritual and Ecclesiastical Biographies

Research, Results, and Reading

Editor:

Anders Jarlert

Konferenser 94



KUNGL. VITTERHETS HISTORIE OCH
ANTIKVITETS AKADEMIEN

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Episcopal Biographies and Religious Historiography of the French Contemporary Period

Christian Sorrel

Pierre Bourdieu's phrase "The biographical illusion" shows that contemporary history is marked by the questioning of a genre that is much appreciated by readers.¹ Having undergone a transformation from the 1960s, religious history has not evaded the questioning that first affected episcopal biography, even though the discipline was being renewed.² In the context of conciliar reforms, historians of Catholicism gave priority to the study of the Christian people and highlighted laymen or simple priests. Still, the episcopate as a body returned to the forefront with the success of the prosopography of élites,³ and in its wake new biographical projects were born to extend beyond the thanklessness of statistical investigation and to analyse decisive moments. Episcopal biography has thus become fully legitimate again in its search for the individual behind the group and by articulating two times: a life and a society.⁴

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- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, 'L'illusion biographique', in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 62–63, 1986, pp. 69–72; François Dosse, *Le Pari biographique. Ecrire une vie*, Paris 2005.
 - 2 Claude Langlois & Jean-Marie Mayeur, 'Sur l'histoire religieuse contemporaine', *Revue Historique* 512, 1974, pp. 433–444; Claude Langlois, 'Trente ans d'histoire religieuse. Suggestions pour une future enquête', *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 63, 1987, pp. 85–114; René Rémond, 'L'histoire religieuse de la France au XXe siècle', *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 17, 1988, pp. 93–107.
 - 3 *Prosopographie des élites françaises (XVIe–XXe siècles). Guide de recherche*, Paris 1980.
 - 4 Michel Lagrée, 'Biographies d'évêques et histoire religieuse en France', in *La Création biographique*, ed. Marta Dvorak, Rennes 1997, pp. 253–260; Jacques-Olivier Boudon, 'De la biographie à la prosopographie dans l'historiographie religieuse contemporaine', in *L'Histoire religieuse en France et en Espagne* (Collection de la Casa de Velázquez, 87), ed. Benoît Pellistrandi, Madrid 2004, pp. 121–135.

Born in the 4th century, ecclesiastical history long was the mere story of episcopal successions, and 19th-century France confirmed this orientation by formalizing the genre of episcopal biography. Usually written by someone close to the bishop, either a collaborator or a relative, and published with the approval of his successor, it follows the “hero” from childhood to death in a rather hagiographical tone – with some nuances. From the early 20th century though, the formula fell out of use as a result of the crises of Catholicism, the reshuffle of the episcopal body wanted by the papacy, the decline of ecclesiastical scholarship, and the lack of money for publishing.⁵ But the biographical approach did not disappear and Catholic historians adopted it during the interwar period in order to develop a history of the Church subject to new scientific criteria. Most of them were priests who presented their research within a state doctoral thesis and were integrated into the community of historians (Jean Leflon, Ernest Sevrin, Charles Ledré, and Paul Droulers). Some were laymen, university professors, or high school teachers (André Latreille and Roger Limouzin-Lamothe). All of them turned towards the study of the first half of the 19th century, allowing them to avoid recent issues (law of separation, modernism), but also to analyse their roots (Concordat, gallicanism, ultramontanism, and social question) by cross-referencing both public and diocesan archives. Sometimes diversifying by abandoning the global story for a more specific approach – diplomacy for Cardinal Fesch, enforcement of the Concordat for Cardinal Cambacères, and the social question for Cardinal d’Astros – biography therefore appears central in the methodological convergence between ecclesiastical and university history.⁶ However, in the 1960s and 1970s, it could not avoid criticism by researchers who were keen to develop a non-denominational religious history in dialogue with other fields of history and other humanities or social sciences.

“Religious biography”, according to the authors of the 1975 reference book, is “deeply conservative, less by the historian’s treatment of the sources than by the fact that they reinforce the prejudices of an immediate reading of history, and more specifically the idea that most bishops or laymen were generally selected because of non-religious and often political activities”.⁷ Everything converged to reduce the place of

5 Christian Sorrel, ‘La biographie impossible: Mgr Lacroix et la *Vie de Mgr Landriot*’, in *Histoires antiromaines II. L’antiromanisme dans l’historiographie ecclésiastique catholique (XVIIe–XXe siècles)*, eds Franz Xaver Bischof & Sylvio De Franceschi, Lyon 2014, pp. 239–253.

6 Major scientific biographies: Parisis (Charles Guillemand, 1916–1924), Boisgelin de Cucé (Eugène Lavacquerie, 1921), Champion de Cicé (Léon Lévy-Schneider, 1921), Freppel (Eugène Terrien, 1931–1932), Fesch (André Latreille, 1935), Bernier (Jean Leflon, 1938), Cambacères (Charles Ledré, 1943), d’Astros (Droulers, 1954), Clausel de Montals (Ernest Sevrin, 1955), de Quélen (Roger Limouzin-Lamothe, 1955–1957), de Mazenod (Jean Leflon, 1957–1965), Affre (Roger Limouzin-Lamothe, Jean Leflon, 1971).

7 Jean Baubérot & Claude Langlois, ‘Problèmes et propositions’, in *L’Histoire religieuse de la France – 19e–20e siècle. Problèmes et méthodes*, ed. Jean-Marie Mayeur, Paris 1975, p. 205.

episcopal biography: a criticism of institutional and political history in line with the *École des Annales*, an interest in the Christian people related to Fernand Boulard's pastoral sociology and the promotion of laymen by the Second Vatican Council,⁸ an affirmation of the history of mentalities, and a project of serial analysis in the long term. And those who specialize in Catholicism are by no means indifferent to the criticism of historians and sociologists who see biography as "an anachronistic and limited model of rationality" marked by the "excess of sense and coherence", the "illusion of the all-out relevance of a particular experience", and the "utopic quest for an integral knowledge of the individual".⁹ When referring to Michel de Certeau, the authors of the 1975 reference book subsequently conclude to the necessity of changing "the very place of biography": "The choice [of the figures] must be the result [...] of a pre-existent problematic linked to a serial study. In return, the biographical approach, by introducing a necessary distance, somehow sets the qualitative boundaries of the field of investigation and also reveals, as a counterpoint to explicative schemes, the *ir-reducible* part of history".¹⁰

During its rehabilitation at universities, biography as a genre therefore acquired a previously unattained relevance in connection with the "rediscovery" of political history and the renewal of less class-centred social history studies. As early as 1968, Jean-Marie Mayeur had demonstrated just that with his "Lemire", a portrait of the leading figure of the "abbés démocrates" of the "Leo XIII generation". In it, he focused on the study of an intellectual career to understand the relationship between "intransigent" thought and Christian democracy, while avoiding the trap of reducing the biography to a pretext describing an era. Indeed, he assigned his character with "the central and dominant place in a network of connections with his environment and his time":¹¹ "the knowledge of an era is essential to understanding a man. Conversely, the troubles of a time are reflected in the mirror of an existence".¹² After Jean-Marie Mayeur, some historians turned towards the study of priests and notables (Maret, future bishop *in partibus*, Michon, Portal, and de Mun). This allowed a re-evaluation of intellectual and political stakes in the 19th century (neo-gallicanism, liberal Catholicism, the Vatican Council, the *Ralliement*¹³). However, the historians ignored the active bishops in of-

8 *Des chiffres et des cartes ... Approches sérielles et spatiales en histoire religieuse. Les « Matériaux Boulard » trente ans après*, ed. Christian Sorrel, Lyon 2013.

9 Giovanni Levi, 'Les usages de la biographie', *Annales économiques, sociétés, civilisations* 6, 1989, p. 1326 and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le raisonnement sociologique. L'espace non-poppérien du raisonnement naturel*, Paris 1991, pp. 185–192.

10 Jean Baubérot & Claude Langlois, *supra* n. 7, pp. 205–206.

11 Jacques Le Goff, 'Comment écrire une biographie historique aujourd'hui?', *Le Débat* 54, 1989, p. 50.

12 Jean-Marie Mayeur, *Un prêtre démocrate. L'abbé Lemire (1853–1928)*, Paris 1968, p. 9.

13 Jean-Hippolyte Michon (Claude Savart, 1971), Henri Maret (Andrea Riccardi, 1976; Claude

fice in dioceses, with two exceptions: Xavier de Montclos, whose thesis on Lavigerie benefited from a congregation's mobilization in favour of its founder and announced the mutations of the biographical genre, and Marc Agostino, who retraced the career of Lecot, archbishop of Bordeaux, who rallied to the Republic.¹⁴

Bishops did not disappear from the historiography of Catholicism, but they were mainly included through diocesan monographs, which were triumphing and which valued the study of the simple clergy and the congregation.¹⁵ While contemporary biographies elaborated on intellectual careers, monographs focused more on pastoral action by presenting humble characters, without always respecting the chronology of episcopacies. They also drew attention to the episcopal body as a whole – even though it had no legal existence before the mid-20th century – and facilitated the reception of the prosopographical method, borrowed from the study of previous centuries: “it presupposes a serial analysis, and highlights the individual and the exceptional only to bring out the collective and the norm by contrast”.¹⁶

This approach, which cannot always be properly used because collecting homogenous data is time-consuming, triumphs in Jacques-Olivier Boudon's exemplary investigation on the recruitment of Concordat bishops, and is continued in Séverine Blenner's reflection on the extent to which the bishops' way of life and action matched the Roman model.¹⁷ Moreover, it inspired the presentation of bishops in the early Third Republic and the analysis of their political discourse by Jacques Gadille.¹⁸ The approach also guided works on the 20th-century episcopate, without being completely implemented: the study of the episcopal body between 1905 and 1962 (limited by the fact that only printed sources were studied), the sociological survey of the bishops in office in the 1970s and 1980s based on their answers to an anonymous questionnaire,

Bressolette, 1977 and 1984), Fernand Portal (Régis Ladous, 1973 and 1985), Albert de Mun (Philippe Levillain, 1983).

14 Xavier de Montclos, *Lavigerie, le Saint-Siège et l'Église, de l'avènement de Pie IX à l'avènement de Léon XIII, 1846–1878*, Paris 1965; Marc Agostino, *Le Cardinal Lecot (1831–1908). Un évêque face au monde moderne*, PhD diss., Université de Bordeaux III, 1974.

15 Michel Lagrée, 'La monographie diocésaine et les acquis de l'historiographie religieuse française', in *Études d'histoire religieuse* 61, 1995, pp. 9–41; Christian Sorrel, 'Échelles et espaces : le diocèse. Réflexions sur l'historiographie française contemporaine', in *L'Histoire religieuse en France et en Espagne* (Collection de la Casa de Velázquez, 87), ed. Benoît Pellistrandi, Madrid 2004, pp. 225–247.

16 Claude Nicolet, 'Prosopographie et histoire sociale : Rome et l'Italie à l'époque républicaine', *Annales économies, sociétés, civilisations* 25, 1970, p. 1226.

17 Jacques-Olivier Boudon, *L'épiscopat français à l'époque concordataire 1802–1905. Origine, formation, nomination*, Paris 1996; Séverine Blenner, *Une élite dans la France du XIXe siècle. Les évêques concordataires face au modèle romain (1802–1906)*, PhD diss., Université Paris IV, 2006.

18 Jacques Gadille, *La pensée et l'action politiques des évêques français au début de la IIIe République, 1870–1883*, 2 vols, Paris 1967.

the identification of a Great War generation who governed dioceses from 1930 to 1960, and the analysis of the episcopal discourse at the beginning of John Paul II's papacy.¹⁹ At the same time, dictionaries prepared or continued the prosopographical approach by gathering source material and ordering it into brief portraits that brought life to the bishops, acknowledging their singularities, despite how disparate the documentation and the writing of notices were.²⁰

It is in the context of this renewed interest for episcopal staff – seen as a Church and society élite – that from 1990 university researchers rediscovered episcopal biography, without abandoning the other actors (secular priests, men and women religious, and notables)²¹. “Writing the biography of a bishop is no longer anachronistic”, wrote Gérard Cholvy in 2007, one of the advocates of the new religious history, with its recent production centred on two major moments: the crises of the early 20th century and the Second World War.²²

The first group of new episcopal biographies consists of four works, published between 2002 and 2007. Three of them are about prelates named at the end of the Concordat era and who remained at the margins of the French episcopate because of their position on the Separation of Church and State and on modernism.²³ Mgr Mignot, bishop of Fréjus then archbishop of Albi, won recognition for his intellectual stature that allowed him to master the theological issues of exegesis and to rethink the relationship between the Church and modernity. Mgr Lacroix, bishop of Tarentaise,

19 Marc Minier, *L'épiscopat français du Ralliement à Vatican II*, Padova 1982; Catherine Grémion & Philippe Levillain, *Les lieutenants de Dieu. Les évêques de France et la République*, Paris 1985; Frédéric Le Moigne, *Les évêques français de Verdun à Vatican II*, Rennes 2005; Martial Busuttill, *Episcopat français. La fin d'un modèle (1978–1990). De la collégialité à l'« individuation »*, PhD diss., Université Lyon 2, 2005.

20 Jacques-Olivier Boudon, *Les élites religieuses à l'époque de Napoléon. Dictionnaire des évêques et vicaires généraux du Premier Empire*, Paris 2002; *Dictionnaire des évêques français au XXe siècle*, eds Dominique-Marie Dauzet & Frédéric Le Moigne, Paris 2010; *Les évêques français de la Séparation au pontificat de Jean-Paul II*, eds Frédéric Le Moigne & Christian Sorrel, Paris 2013.

21 Louis Duchesne (Brigitte Waché, 1992), Emile Anizan (Jean-Yves Moy, 1997), Augustin de Lestrangé (Augustin-Hervé Laffay, 1998), Paul Donceur (Dominique Avon, 2001), Marie Odier de La Paillone (Dominique-Marie Dauzet, 2001), Hélène de Chappotin (Marcel Lounay, 2001), Frédéric Ozanam (Gérard Cholvy, 2003 and 2012), Marie-Joseph Lagrange (Bernard Montagnes, 2004), Georges Goyau (Jérôme Grondeux, 2007), Frère Exupérien (Gérard Cholvy, 2008), Marie-Benoît de Bourg d'Iré (Gérard Cholvy, 2010), Jean Guiraud (Aurore Deglaire, 2013).

22 Gérard Cholvy, *Le cardinal de Cabrières (1830–1921). Un siècle d'histoire de la France*, Paris 2007, p. 13.

23 Yves Blomme, *Emile Le Camus (1839–1906). Son rôle au début de la crise moderniste et lors de la séparation de l'Eglise et de l'Etat*, Paris 2002; Christian Sorrel, *Libéralisme et modernisme. Mgr Lacroix (1855–1922). Enquête sur un suspect*, Paris 2003; Louis-Pierre Sardella, *Mgr Eudoxe-Irénée Mignot (1842–1918). Un évêque français au temps du modernisme*, Paris 2004.

a historian rather than a theologian, a journalist and a political intermediary, shared the same concern of reconciling Catholicism and society – so much that he presented himself as “the bishop of modernists”. Mgr Le Camus, bishop of La Rochelle, trod more carefully in the field of exegesis that he knew well, but did not lack boldness on a political level. The three of them soon became suspect for the Roman curia, and Lacroix had to resign in 1907 to avoid being deposed. Therefore, the biographies of these figures allow the renewal of knowledge of political and intellectual issues in Catholicism around 1900, by cross-referencing dossiers that were long treated separately and by creating a reflection on the deviation from standard. The same goes for the more central figure of the Concordat episcopate, Cardinal de Cabrières, whose longevity – he was bishop of Montpellier from 1873 to 1921 – allows Gérard Cholvy to read contemporary religious history differently, while still granting the religious life of the diocese a more prominent place than had previous works.²⁴

The contrast between the bishop’s personal path and the experience of his diocesans also varies widely in the second group of recent biographies that study prelates promoted by Pius XI, who wished to re-orientate the Church of France after the condemnation of the Action française.²⁵ Whether the subjects of the biographies were major figures (Liénart, Gerlier, Suhard, Saliège) or lesser-known ones (Rémond, Théas) whose careers sometimes stretched as long as after the Second Vatican Council, they all played a major role during the Second World War. The latter largely justifies the authors’ choice to sometimes isolate the chronological sequence, and explains why the books were debated. There are many controversial questions – support of the Vichy government, attitude towards the Jews, the résistants and the workers sent to Germany – and the analysis is sometimes stained by ideological presuppositions (Suhard).

Although the episcopal biography is being renewed, it does have limits. It has only partially covered the 19th century,²⁶ and figures of the Concordat era such as Mgr

²⁴ Cholvy supra n. 22, p. 519.

²⁵ Ralph Schor, *Un évêque dans le siècle: Monseigneur Paul Rémond (1873–1963)*, Nice 1984; Sylvaine Guinle-Lorinet, *Pierre-Marie Théas. Un évêque à la rencontre du XXe siècle*, Tarbes-Toulouse 1993; Jean-Louis Clément, *Mgr Saliège, archevêque de Toulouse 1929–1956*, Paris 1994; Catherine Masson, *Le cardinal Liénart, évêque de Lille, 1928–1968*, Paris 2001; Jean-Pierre Guérend, *Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard, archevêque de Paris, 1940–1949*, Paris 2011; Olivier Georges, *Pierre-Marie Gerlier, le cardinal militant (1880–1965)*, Paris 2014.

²⁶ Marie-Claude Pierre, *Les idées politiques de Mgr Turinaz, évêque de Tarentaise (1873–1882), évêque de Nancy (1882–1918)*, PhD diss., Université de Nancy, 1982; Jean Manceau, *Monseigneur Marie-Dominique-Auguste Sibour, archevêque de Paris (1848–1857)*, Paris 1987; François Renault, *Le cardinal Lavignerie, 1825–1892. L’Eglise, l’Afrique et la France*, Paris 1992; Gabriel Mas, *Le cardinal de Bonald et la question du travail (1840–1870)*, PhD diss., Université Lyon 2, 2007; Charles Chauvin, *Mgr Darboy, archevêque de Paris, otage de la Commune*, Paris 2011; Jacques-Olivier Boudon, *Monseigneur Darboy (1813–1871), archevêque de Paris entre Pie IX et Napoléon III*, Paris 2011.

Dupanloup, bishop of Orléans, or Mgr Freppel, bishop of Angers, have only been the subject of very brief studies. The second half of the 20th century is no better studied, except for the portrait of an auxiliary.²⁷ Yet, this period is marked by the evolutions spurred by the Second Vatican Council, described by actors in their memoirs.²⁸ But public archives have been of little use since the “administration des cultes” disappeared (formerly under the Minister of Worship), and there is variable access to ecclesiastical archives, which do not always hold a wealth of information. This is particularly the case for bishops who ended their career within the Roman curia and whose papers are protected by the strict rules of the *Archivio segreto vaticano* (Villot, Garrone). In contrast, Etienne Fouilloux’s remarkable biography of Cardinal Tisserant, in office in Rome from 1908 to 1972, was only possible because the prelate had chosen to transfer his private papers to France.²⁹

Obviously, the quantity and nature of available sources (printed sources, letters, diaries) have an impact on the orientation of episcopal biographies. But many historians apparently still hesitate to explore the prelates’ spiritual life and favour the study of their pastoral or political action. Is it from a lack of competence on delicate matters? A difficulty to comprehend implicit choices? A will to legitimate the historical investigation by centring it on the Church and society? A mediocre reputation of the episcopate, from which only one member – Eugène de Mazenod, bishop of Marseille and founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate – was canonized in two centuries?³⁰ The explanations may be many. But the question of the internal life and its link with public action, tackled by hagiographers in the 19th century, cannot be ignored any longer by 21st-century historians.³¹ The same goes for the episcopal style, rarely described despite the changes associated with the Second Vatican Council, or for the construction of the prelates’ memory.³² By following these paths and without

27 Odile Broucqsaault, *Mgr Jules Harlé, un pasteur du monde rural (1916–1999)*, PhD diss., Université du Littoral, 2009.

28 François Marty, *Chronique vécue de l’Eglise de France*, Paris 1980; Armand Le Bourgeois, *Un évêque français*, Paris 1986; Gabriel Matagrín, *Le chêne et la futaie. Une Eglise avec les hommes de ce temps*, Paris 2000.

29 Etienne Fouilloux, *Eugène, cardinal Tisserant (1884–1972). Une biographie*, Paris 2011.

30 The procedures concerning three archbishops of Paris (Affre, Darboy, Richard) are suspended. See Christian Sorrel, ‘La sainteté entre hagiographie et histoire’, in *La Sainteté*, ed. Gérard Cholvy, Montpellier 1999, pp. 5–30.

31 Sorrel supra n. 23, pp. 441–448 (“La foi en question”); Cholvy supra n. 22, pp. 453–494 (“Culture, piété, spiritualité”); Dominique-Marie Dauzet, ‘La vie spirituelle des évêques de France au XXe siècle’, in Le Moigne & Sorrel, eds, supra n. 20, pp. 172–184.

32 Yvon Tranvouez, ‘Le charme discret de l’épiscopat français’, in *Catholicisme et société dans la France du XXe siècle. Apostolat, progressisme et tradition*, Paris 2011, pp. 259–299.

claiming any dominant position, the episcopal biography may contribute to the permanence and renewal of a history of Catholicism, at a time when authors increasingly turn to the study of spirituality, liturgy, and prayer.³³

* * *

The biographical genre, once discredited, regained a significant place in French historiography. Religious history followed, first by turning to priests and laymen, before returning to the long-favoured bishops. The parallel affirmation of prosopography and of a renewed biographical approach reveals the tension and complementarity existing in the religious field (as in other sectors) between collective social facts and individual paths, in their irreducible singularity or representativeness. In this sense, the episcopal biography, free from the “obstacles behind which fake problems blocked it”, confronts the historian “in a particularly acute and complex way” with the main requirements of his profession: “a real biography”, writes Jacques Le Goff, “is primarily the life of an individual, and the legitimacy of the historical genre is achieved through respect of this goal – presenting and explaining an individual life within history, but a history that new historiographical conceptions shed light on.”³⁴

³³ *Le Catholicisme en chantiers. France, XIXe–XXe siècles*, eds Bruno Dumons & Christian Sorrel, Rennes 2013.

³⁴ Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis*, Paris 1996, p. 15 and *idem* supra n. 11, p. 50.