

The Nobility and the Church in Feudal France

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In eleventh- and twelfth- century France, the local feudal lords including castellans consolidated their power. Also in this period churchmen strengthened their own rights competing the secular lords and especially with the Gregorian Reform in which they tried to distinguish between the secular and priestly life. In this respect, Churchmen including Bishop Adalbero of Laon, Gerard of Cambrai urged that this world was composed of three distinguished orders among those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. This classical distinction has influenced the picture of medieval society for consequent centuries and the traditional scholars have regarded the nobility as the enemy of the reform.

Yet recent regional studies have highlighted not only the close relation between the two but also positive roles that many nobles played in monastic and episcopal development. Now a synthesis is needed to define more precisely the relationship between the two. In this paper I will try to look at next three points: noble entry and relation between two ruling class members, relation between the nobility and monastic reform, nobles' motives in noble entry into the church and their donation.

Since about 1000 when in almost all parts of France independant castellanies began to be formed and lordships of noble families were limited to the fixed local territories, noble families tended to rebuild old ruined churches or found new ones within their own territories and send their relatives into these houses or another ones located nearby. As a result,

church leaders including bishops and abbots were generally from these noble families. For example in Perigord, a diocese in which episcopal reform came early and episcopal power grew steadily from the late tenth through^{out} the mid-twelfth centuries, at least eleven of the twelve known bishops of this time seem to have been drawn from the nobility. In the dioceses of Soissons and Bauvais, the regional nobility controlled the episcopacy itself by dominating the chapters and archdeaconries whose powers of election the Gregorian reform had enhanced. If there was any shift in the social origins of French bishops, it was a gain for the lesser nobility at the expense of the greater.

During most of the eleventh century, Burgundian bishops were generally put into office because of the influence of their secular relatives. Thus, of the bishops elected at the Burgundian sees for which the documents are plentiful, definitely 3/4 can be said to have come from the upper nobility. A number of those bishops of unknown social origins may have been from the nobility. This pattern can be another parts of France. Studies of the bishops of Sens, Auxerre, Liege, Perigueux, Normandy, Brittany, Bordeaux, the Loire valley, Lorraine have shown that in the eleventh century almost all those whose origins are known came from the upper nobility. In this period, the selection of men from the upper nobility as bishop can be attributed primarily to the influence of the great lords of the region. As a result, most sees were dominated by the relatives of the regional counts, viscounts, and powerful castellans. In many cases the great lords merely imposed their relatives on a cathedral chapter.

At the end of the eleventh century, there was change in the episcopal origins. French bishops increasingly came from the middle and lower levels of the nobility rather than the upper nobility. A key element of the Gregorian Reform was the regularization of episcopal and abbatial elections and the chief responsibility for the election of a church leader was given to the cathedral chapter or the abbey's monks. By the way, when the canons of a cathedral chapter were left to elect their leader, they elected one of

their own.

Generally in twelfth century, the origins of nearly from 1/2 to 2/3 of French bishops can be known and most of them came from the ranks of castellans, knights in contrasting to the pattern in the previous century. For example, Bourgogne, Lorraine, and the lower Loire of which documents are relatively abundant, most of twelfth-century bishops came from the lower levels of the nobility than did their eleventh-century predecessors. The castellans who had been incorporated into the the nobility from the eleventh century and the knights who were on the way to joining the nobility from the twelfth century imitated the older nobility in sending their sons into the church.

In case of abbots, most of them tended to be from the middle or lower nobility since the earlier period. At Cluny, from the end of eleventh century to the twelfth century, all abbots except one(Ponce, 1109-1122) who was son of the count of Melgueil were not from beyond the castellan families. Especially abbots of the houses of the Cistercian order were always from the lower levels of the nobility. Above all Bernard of Clairvaux was from the family who was not even important enough to have their own castle. The monastic houses in advance of the cathedral chapters elected their leaders. At any rate, before and after the Gregorian Reform, bishops, abbots and canons were from the nobility. The Gregorian Reform, far from creating separation between ecclesiastical and secular leaders, may have strengthened the ties between the nobility who strengthened their power in this period and the local abbots and bishops.

On the other hand, we can find three kinds of conversion pattern throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Noble members entered the church as child oblates or young adults, or conversed in later years. Especially in the eleventh century, most members of most monasteries tended to enter as oblates, their parents' offering to the monasteries. The churches in which a family decided to set a boy were often houses in which already there contained his relatives. In general a family that sent some

of its sons into the church continued to send them, generation after generation, into the same one or two houses.

While during the twelfth century there appeared tendency that the houses of the new monastic orders were peopled chiefly by men who had decided to join the monastery as the young adult. For example, Orderic Vitalis said that a great young nobles flocked to join the Cistersian order and willingly embraced the unaccustomed rigor of its life. In fact, the early explosive growth of new monastic orders including the Cistersian order was possible only because a considerable number of young nobles decided to leave the secular world for the rigorous life. Also we often found the third pattern of conversion, that is, cases that men and women converted to the religious life in old age. Especially noble widows join the religious life in their maturity, generally after their husband's death. Marcigny, a daughter of Cluny, and Fontevraud located between Anjou and Poitou were the best known houses for noble widows.

At any rate, in all these conversions, most members entered the church as their parents' offering or with the consent of their relatives. In other words, a man and woman's decisions to enter the cloister or a collegiate chapter was always influenced by the convert's relatives. Although during the twelfth century the pope's influence was increasing and the cathedral canons were responsible at least in theory for choosing the new bishops, the influence of secular relatives did not decrease largely. Now although it was not easy for entry members to go up to the higher position than the previous period, nevertheless still it was difficult for them to go up without aids of their older relatives in church.

Secular nobles supported the reformed houses. Some modern scholars, by confusing the monastic reform with the Investiture Controversy, have depicted the secular nobility and ecclesiastical reformers as opposing forces. But in fact, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there was

generally an increase in the number of reformed monasteries in France, entailing both the foundation of new houses and reformation of old existing houses. Almost all houses of important monastic orders including Cluny, Citeaux, and Dijong were most consistently built, donated and patronized by men and women who were certainly members of the nobility. In case of Cluny, the counts of Macon founding this house, the counts of Chalon and other secular nobles and bishops gave Cluny ruined or dissolute monasteries, parish churches. In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries great nobles gave the ruined churches they had owned to monasteries like Cluny to reform, expecting monks who had lived in the cloister since childhood to serve these reformed houses. While from the mid-eleventh century new monastic houses were founded, donated and populated, and also in this period, hermits, canons regular, cartusians, and wandering preachers, many of whom had made a conversion to the religious life as young adults, began to appear.

By the way, the reforms of the ruined houses and new foundations of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were possible only because the monastery exercised an attraction for powerful local laymen. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, most monasteries had as advocates those who had founded or patronized those monasteries, and abbots often consulted them. Though these advocates left the election of a new abbot to the monks, they confirmed the elevation of the abbot, promising to defend him as they had his predecessor. The monks turned first to their advocates when they needed help against other laymen and occasionally have asked even nobles they considered a possible threat to accept the advocacy of their house in order to forestall these nobles' attacks. Though the importance of these advocates diminished as a result of the Gregorian Reform, of a new consciousness of the distinction between ecclesiastical and secular positions, clergymen still insisted on the role of the secular nobility especially in protecting churchmen and others who could not protect themselves. By the way, the secular lords who helped found eleventh-century

houses were generally of at least castellan rank, and often powerful, in the twelfth century they were at the most of castellan rank, and generally less powerful. The Cistersian houses were patronized especially by knights, that is, new men who had never appeared in the records before began making small gifts to the monks of a nearby house. At any rate, Considering the positive role of the nobility in reforming monasteries, we can say, in contrast to the traditional view that the church reform was carried out in determined opposition to the local nobility, the establishment of new houses of monks or canons generally took place because of noble initiative.

In addition, to understand positive roles that noble families made in monastic movement, we need to research cases which the members of noble families had converted into monasteries regularly generation after generation. For these conversions vitalized monasticism in this period. For example, William of Volpiano, a great reformer who was given to Lucedio as a child oblate, after all persuaded his parents, his four brothers and nieces to enter the monastery. Especially Cluny was more organized and expanded by this kind of conversions. Before and after Hugh of Semur became an abbot of Cluny, his relatives entered Cluny and Marcigny repeatedly. The members of this family did not converse one by one but by several groups and consequently economic situation of lords of Semur after their conversions accompanied with large donations was worse. Moreover this family had invited his vassals to follow his example and give their fiefs to Marcigny as a gift. As a result about 10 vassal families of Semur accepted this invitation and conversed. So did Monboissier family of Peter the Venerable, also an abbot of Cluny. His mother, her six brothers, and his four brothers and his nephews and nieces in next generation entered Cluny and Marcigny. Perhaps without aids of the members of certain noble family Hugh and Peter the Venerable may not have succeeded to coordinate the members of whole Clunisiens. Also explosive expansion of Cistersian Order will not be comprehensible if we don't consider the fact that Bernard of Clairvaux had entered Citeaux with his thirty relatives who shared with

his conviction.

As for motives for which nobles founded or renewed local churches and made their children enter the cathedrals or cloisters, detailed studies of particular families seem to show that they resulted from family members' conscious efforts to avoid the division of their patrimony. In other words, these studies tried to demonstrate that noble families sent their children into the church, not allowing younger sons to marry as a convenient place to dispose of the excess sons. For example, G. Duby, G. Beech and L. Genicot have found that when members of noble family of Macon, Gatine, and Liege entered the cathedral chapters, it was to take up the highest offices and these places served the needs of powerful local nobles. Also J.F. Lemarignier and Newman described the dignitaries of cathedral chapters as living like their lay relatives, occupied with temporal administration and warfare, gaining their ecclesiastical offices due to family influence. We can recognize this motive to a considerable degree. In fact as a result of family members' conscious effort, although a single generation might produce a large number of children, the overall size of a group of relatives did not increase greatly from generation to generation. Moreover we can find cases of extinction of some noble families. But I think that before wholly accepting conclusion that the principal motivation in sending sons into the cathedral chapter was to provide a livelihood for them without depleting the family patrimony, we must consider another motives additionally. For an examination of the sources shows that the situation was much more complicated.

First, it should be noted that placing children in the church was not a cheap way to assure them a living. Because manasteries, nunneries, and cathedrals chapters seemed to have required the large entry gift comparable to what it would cost the parents to give a son a share of the inheritance or a daughter a dowry. Often repeated donations including entry gift used

to weaken noble families and consequently resulted in conflicts between descendants of donors and church. For example, Geoffroy I who was a brother of Hugh, an abbot of Cluny and in next generation his son had generously donated to Cluny, Marcigny and rejected their own rights for the purpose of attending to the monastic life, while Geoffroy IV, his grandson had attacked Marcigny exercising his seigneurial rights because he hoped to recover the weak condition of his family due to repeated donations. Also we need to consider that foundation of reformed manasteries and their independance from bishoprics were possible with these donations. Therefore in some cases, it seems in fact to have been economically sounder to keep younger sons in the secular world, where their share of the inheritance would remain attached to their older brother's patrimony.

Second, we must consider the fact that some families became weakened and occasionally experienced extinction by regularly sending their children into church generation after generation, and also consider that noble families made the bulk of pious gifts to the new reformed houses of the region where their sons did not enter. In short, while not denying modern notions of practical gain onto the actions of those medieval families which sent children into the church, it may be more profitable to add the very motive of spiritual return. As A. Murray and C. B. Bouchard described, often noble families felt the need of effective prays which a relative in the cloiter would provide.

In spite of the insistence of several churchmen that the world was composed of three orders and these orders were distinguished one another in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, two ruling orders of 'bellatores' and 'oratores' were related biologically and socially. Chief churchmen including abbots, bishops, canons were almost from the houses of duches, counts, castellans, and knights. Noble families sent their members into church and these younger members of the family could count on the influence

of older relatives already in the church, while after the Gregorian Reform to be higher churchmen more priestly ability with the influence of relatives was required, and therewith the influence of pope increased. Also bishops, abbots of the twelfth century tended to be recruited from the castellan or even knightly families who had grasped independent powers instead of the family members of dukes and counts of the eleventh century.

Also in contrast to the traditional opinions, noble families patronized the monastic reform movement and to some extent from the early eleventh century to the late twelfth century the changes in this movement can be correlated with the changing structure of the noble class and the changing needs of the noble families that made gifts to monasteries and provided their members. New orders including Cistercian houses arose just when the castellan and the lesser nobility had consolidated their position and those members began to send their sons into the cloister and make pious gifts. By the way, it would not be desirable to regard the church only as a product of the nobility's secular interests. Throughout these centuries, nobles reformed old houses or founded new ones by inviting monks from monasteries that were not under their control, and often vitalized monastic movement regularly.