

Title: Disabled Clerics in the Late Middle Ages

SW: Hello everybody, welcome back to New Book Network' Disability Studies channel! I am Shu Wan, the host of this podcast. I am delighted to invite Dr. Dubourg to join us and talk about her newest book *Disabled Clerics in the Late Middle Ages*. So, Dr. Dubourg, could you please briefly introduce yourself and research to us?

ND: My name is Ninon Dubourg, I am a thirty + years old French researcher, I'm a bit of a redhead with long hair and straight bangs, and gold-rimmed glasses, and *Disabled Clerics in the Late Middle Ages* is my first book!

To say a little more about me: I have defended my **PhD** at the University of Paris-Cité, in France in 2019.

In this work, I argued that the petitions received and the letters sent by the Papal Chancery between the 12th-14th century attest to the recognition of physical or mental impairment by the Papacy. They acknowledge the existence of a “disability” and allow the supplicant to adapt his or her missions of cleric or Christian according to his or her abilities, as they lie at the boundary between the institutional words and practical documents.

I am now a **postdoctoral** fellow, funded by the FRS-FNRS and hosted in the Unit Research “Transitions” within the University of Liège, in Belgium.

My current project is entitled DISREL “Disabled people’s religious experiences in Western Europe during the Late Middle Ages from the twelfth to the fifteenth century”. It aims to discern the development of a truly personal(ised) worship form and religious experiences for disabled people in the more general rise of an individualistic lay religiosity in the late Middle Ages. I argue that we can see it through accommodations given by the Vatican which recognised the disability in the enactment of Christian rites. Then, I wrote the book based on those researches!

SW: Thanks for your introduction. Then I will invite you to talk about why you are interested in disability studies.

ND: My interest lay in my family heritage, as my mother, grandmother and aunts all worked in specialized institutions. It all comes from my aunt Joëlle who had Down's syndrome, and from her

friendship that pushed me to question myself about disability from my earliest childhood. I think that at that time I did not conceive disability as a "limitation of activity" or "a restriction of participation in society" as defined by French law since 2005. I only became aware of this social meaning of disability when I worked with disabled people in 2008 during an "adapted" vacation camp and from 2010 to 2012 to accompany students during their courses at the university.

On another hand, my interest in history, while I wanted to study archaeology at first, pushed me to question myself about the life of disabled people in ancient times, of which the medieval period was my preference. I then discovered the book written in 2006 by Irina Metzler, entitled *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment in the High Middle Ages*, which was the first book entirely devoted to the subject. It then reinforced my belief that it was possible to study this social and cultural phenomenon during the Middle Ages.

I love to work on disability because it questions blurry and kind-of borderline situations during the medieval period. The topic of disabled clerics is particularly interesting because there is a negotiation to determine the “suitability” (with air-quotes) of the cleric, during which all parties must explain the relevant circumstances and discuss, to try to accommodate to the best. This negotiation around what could be accepted or what could not be accepted in various contexts and by various actors is what interests me the most.

The period under consideration in the book offers a privileged laboratory to observe the implementation of changes in the definition of disability that will participate to allow the emergence of this modern concept in the 20th century. Indeed, the period from the twelfth to the fourteenth century marks the formation, the apogee and the decline of the pontifical monarchy that seized this question. Then, I began with the reign of Pope Paschal II, elected at the beginning of the twelfth century during the Investiture Controversy. This pope was the first to attempt to resolve the conflicts between him and the antipopes appointed by the Emperor Henry IV. And, I ended with the pontificate of Gregory XI, practically three hundred years later, which signs the return of the papacy in Rome, but also the beginning of the Great Western Schism which divided Christians into two factions for about forty years, causing problems of legitimation and a colossal diplomatic production.

We know that during the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the ecclesiastical institution held a spiritual as well as a temporal supremacy over all of Christendom. I then argue that it played a preponderant role in the definition of impairment and disability. The public power that allowed it to settle multiple clerical or religious problems through epistolary exchanges spread throughout Europe was linked to its power of grace - the prerogative of the greatest monarchs of the medieval era - used to soften the rules.

Defining disability is then a political act, an act of government in my opinion. In my work, I try to show how, in the last centuries of the medieval period, the pontifical institution was able to define and then to recognize disability through its answers to petitions.

Then, that is the idea of various definitions of what is a disability, and the one made in relation to an institution that was of particular interest for me.

SW: Thanks for sharing your experience again. Then I want to invite you to discuss the legal origins of the prohibition against impaired clerics (6')

ND: Well, the question of the legal origins of the prohibition against impaired clerics is particularly interesting, because the Church created canon law that contains several types of defects that prohibit clerics from entering orders. These irregularities qualify situations where the person is not suitable. For example, a bastard postulant is accused of birth defects. A suppliant who is too young is guilty of a defect of age. A suppliant suffering from a physical or mental impairment is judged as having a defect of body or mind. From the fifth to the twentieth century, those physical or mental defects caused an irregularity and prevented a person who had not obtained a grace from joining the clerical state or a cleric from maintaining his ecclesiastical status.

The notion of physical or mental defect was constantly being developed between its origins and the thirteenth century, during which canon law concretized its constitution, thanks to the Decree of Gratian and the Decretals of Gregory IX. In those texts, the **irregularity *ex defectu corporis*** (defect of body) **or *ex defectu mentis*** (defect of mind) is effective when an impairment prevents a cleric from exercising ecclesiastical functions correctly.

This **irregularity** is a perpetual disqualification that forbids someone to receive orders and the oblate to become monk or nun. In the same way, when the cleric became impaired after his ordination and cannot perform certain tasks any more, he is therefore declared irregular. The term

"irregular" comes from the list - or canon - in which the clerics ordained under the name of regulares are listed from the 11th century onwards. Those prohibited from practicing because of a disability must be removed from this list and were thus called "irregulars". The examples mobilized in canon law reflect only definitive situations (as mutilation, leprosy, etc.). They illustrate a difference between temporary illnesses called "impediments" and conditions that create irregularities in the long time, that can be compared with disabilities.

Moreover, medieval jurists distinguish two types of irregularity in the defect of body and mind: one, **total** and the other, **partial**. The total irregularity makes it impossible to exercise the ecclesiastical function. It affects, for example, a bishop who, with a mutilated tongue, could not say Mass. Partial irregularity, on the other hand, reduces the scope of action of clerics according to their abilities. Thus, a blind bishop can continue to confess the laity, but can no longer read the sacred texts to say Mass. We can think, in view of canon law, that impaired people were certainly discouraged from applying for entering the clergy. Indeed, the reception of orders and tonsure crystallizes almost all the debates compiled in canon law - defects of body or mind representing only a part of them.

In concrete terms, irregularity for defect of body or mind take two forms:

On the one hand, the pontifical institution wants clerics to possess certain physical or mental **aptitudes** so that they are capable of fulfilling their duties. The mute, the deaf and the blind have been excluded from the priesthood since the first canonical texts on the basis of capacity. Indeed, they cannot read aloud and thus exercise this office properly. For example, in the fifth century, Ammonius mutilated his ear to avoid becoming a bishop, and threatened to cut off his tongue to prevent him from speaking if his electors tried to force him to do so again.

On the other hand, the pontifical institution seeks to verify the *claritas* of the cleric. That means that they had to monitor that these incapacities do not devalue the **image** of the Church, first in the context of divine service, since it decrees that ordinands must be perfect to say Mass and distribute the sacraments, and secondly, in the **representation** of the impaired people, who must not cause scandal among the parishioners. Then, medieval disability must not only be understood from the perspective of the impersonator's experience (he or she is capable), but must also be seen from the perspective of the Christian faithful attending the service to be fully understood. These

apprehensions are formed around the impurity of the administrator, the visibility and publicity of the impairment, and not the abilities, as before. In these cases, the physical imperfection of the priest risks affecting the sacredness of the places of worship and degrading the image of the institution among the faithful.

Moreover, the pontifical institution also has to **assess the way** in which the disability occurred. In the petitions, the suppliant's objective was to show that his imperfection was not related to a moral impurity, that is, that he was not responsible for his impairment. The cleric must present the incident that rendered him impaired in such a way as to appear irresponsible in order to prove his irregularity *ex defectu*, whether for good reason (by a doctor to avoid an illness, for example), or because of the fault of another person (as in war). Thus, it appears that the papal grace was **only** granted when the intention of the cleric and the reasons for his act were known to the Chancery or excused by certain extenuating circumstances such as 'self-defense' and 'ignorance of the law'.

This legal definition allows the pontifical Chancery to **automate** the treatment of the petitions it received and to classify the petitioners, even if it did not necessarily name the juridical status to which it refers. Then, the supplications sent to the popes and the papal letters sent in answer help to define disability as a juridical object since they contribute to the legal elaboration of the defect of body and mind. This institutional construction of impairment allows the Apostolic See to set a norm on bodies, in order to distinguish the functional body from the abnormal one. The Chancery thus delineated a physical standard in which any different body was considered defective, unsuitable.

The letters studied implement the prerogatives of canon law and the recommendations of the numerous decrees issued. They even go **beyond** these legislations since they allow their softening. They testify to the use of the legal category of defect of body or mind by the Chancery to take into account the physical and social consequences of impairment. It is clear that incapacity, as a canonical irregularity, is a shifting concept, as disability. It varied according to the situations faced by the impaired people and the consequences of his or her unsuitability. In fact, if the physical or mental incapacity does not influence the capacity and function of the person, it does not represent a defect, a disability.

Mobilizing this object, the Chancery decided whether the impairment constituted a defect or not, that is, a disability or not. It can then recognize the disability through the petition process. It is this legal recognition that the petitioners sought to acquire through their speeches.

SW: Thanks for your answer again. I want to invite you to talk about how the supplicants defined their impairments through dialogue with the Papal Chancery in the petition process. (15')

ND: The disabled clerics could write to the papal chancery in order to soften those prohibitions, according to certain conditions. That means that they had to tell something about their physical or mental situation in their petitions. Those **petitions** express the request of the impaired supplicants to the Chancery and reflect their desire to maintain a social utility. In those letters, they had to negotiate their graces by consciously taking part in this institutional game, whether they were its subjects or victims. They had an active role in the relations of power - not necessarily to free themselves from them, but to benefit from a margin of maneuver, called agency.

Supplications represented a single administrative channel through which such negotiations could take place. On the other side, the **pontifical chancery** was responsible for papal correspondence, and gained autonomy as the institution strengthened its administration during the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries. It was responsible for granting graces, as the gracious policy was developed before the second half of the 12th century and became fully effective in the 13th century. The letters it issued then constituted a formal guide for the daily activity of the clergy to whom they were addressed. Because of their stylistic codification and their juridical value, letters could become a legal tool to circumvent the norm in the hands of the addressees, bringing the voice of the pontifical institution to a very local level. This type of correspondence undoubtedly reinforced the theocratic essence of the power of the popes, based on a centralized administration where everything is recorded.

As the discursive material contained in **papal letters** was based on the information supplied in petitions, the Chancery recapitulated petitioners' own testimony in order to draft a suitable epistolary text for the official pontifical grace. This entails supplications' formal transformation, a process through which the discourses were standardized and normalized. Notwithstanding such modifications, these documents allow readers to access the authentic experiences of impaired

clerics through discursive analysis! Moreover, supplicants were active participants in the petition process. They shrewdly pursued discursive strategies to present their impairments to the Chancery in the most persuasive way, and thereby maximize the chances of their success. In that context, the way of presenting themselves in order to appear disabled was of crucial significance. To do so, supplicants tend to present their impairment, and its cause, in vague terms. The most commonly used terminology is polysemous: *infirmitas*, *debilitas*, and *imbecilitas*. The meaning of these Latin terms is slippery: they all denote impairment, weakness, inability to perform certain actions, and/or a disease. By contrast, supplicants were much more forthcoming about their lived experiences of disability, the ways in which their physical and/or mental condition affected their functioning in the world. Petitioners could not invent things out of whole cloth, however. Nor could they wildly exaggerate. Their accounts had to be credible, and their requests proportionate in order to achieve their goals.

The **choice of vocabulary** was of vital importance both for the petitioner and the Chancery. The former had to ensure that his condition and its effects were properly understood; the latter rendered its judgment in large part based on the avowed consequences of impairment, as disclosed by the petitioner. Ultimately, narratives legitimized the inclusion or exclusion of clerics from the ecclesial body.

The **analysis of my corpus**, made of 142 petitions from the fourteenth century and 743 letters from the thirteenth and fourteenth century, reveal that the majority of supplicants in the corpus were disabled by bodily weakness, both congenital and acquired (65%). I gather under the terminology of ‘physical weaknesses’ undefined infirmities and diseases in order to respect the imprecision of medieval terms. The next most frequent causes of disability were age-related incapacity (12%) and sensory impairments, both congenital and acquired (10%). The remainder are ascribed to: mutilation, such as limb loss (6%); physical impairment, such as mobility-limiting conditions both congenital and acquired (5%); leprosy (1%); and mental weaknesses both congenital and acquired (1%). I gathered those conditions into 4 categories: Congenital impairment (that is from birth), accidentally acquired impairments, geriatric impairments (in relation to old age), and disease-related impairment.

Then, in my analysis, disability as a **category** includes, for example, chronically ill people and people with static physical, mental, and sensory impairments. Whilst acknowledging the difference in life experiences is of course key, chronic illness was viewed as a kind of impairment, as it is today. It seems relevant, then, to include some illnesses in the analysis of premodern disability, if only because of the ambiguity of terminology in the period.

In the petitions and papal letters, the **personal and the institutional** are inseparable. These documents contain diverse accounts of impairment, with requests varying according to the specificities of a given cleric's circumstances. Such heterogeneity necessitated a flexible institutional response. Church authorities' treatment of impaired clerics and the irregularity generated by their conditions was as variable as the clerics' own experiences. The Chancery was far more interested in the practical consequences of impairment – petitioners' disability – than forensic examination of its physical or mental cause.

The corpus indicates that, for the Church, two principal categories of impairment sufficed for **administrative purposes**. The first applied to clerics with facial, hand, or any bodily disfigurements who requested entrance to the major orders or other promotion. For this group, impairment was grounded in the notion of irregularity. Chronically ill and/or elderly clerics seeking accommodations fell into a second category. Petitioners of this kind requested the provision of additional assistance for their current role, or the permission to resign their office outright, all whilst retaining their benefices.

SW: Thanks for your answer again. For the next question, I want to invite you to talk about the tests used by the Church to determine disability (25')

ND: The recognition of disability is subject to a verification of physical or mental conformity to the expected standards. The institution must define the notion of idoneity / **suitability**, insofar as it used it to delimit the characteristics of a good cleric. The word suitability can be used when an individual conforms to set criteria as established by an order, a community, even a single monastery. The disabilities experienced by impaired individuals result in the creation of a state different from that of a man recognized as healthy or suitable, encompassing those with defects of body or mind who were not allowed to enter or remain in the clergy.

As we said before, physical and mental perfection are indispensable for access to the priesthood. When a person is afflicted by a bodily defect, he is not allowed to enter the orders or to obtain the tonsure. Then, a **first examination** was set up to enter the orders. It took place at the bishopric level for all clerics. This control always took place in the same way. First, an inquiry was made of the relatives of the future ordained to gather information about him before he presented himself before the bishop. Next, the postulant must provide letters of recommendation, written by other ecclesiastical authorities who supported the application. However, these letters were not sufficient to examine the candidate according to canon law. In fact, the man must then be declared suitable by the bishop's thorough inspection, a few days before the ordination ceremony. This examination judged the character, qualifications and knowledge of the aspirant. In non-contentious cases, the candidate received a title of benefit.

In **contentious cases**, the supplicant needed a pontifical grace to enter the orders. He then had to undergo a second examination conducted by the Chancery, which is not well known. This examination, organized by persons appointed by the Apostolic See, assessed reading and singing, unless the person had graduated from a university. Indeed, such clerics could be extremely useful for the Church, and they often possessed rare and sought-after capacities. In their rhetoric, disabled supplicants sought to market themselves in terms of their aptitudes according to the Curia's ongoing needs and expectations. Educational excellence was a highly desirable recruitment criterion in the eyes of the ecclesiastical institution – hence the rigorous entrance examinations to ensure that only the most competent individuals were hired.

It was the same for the **regular clerics** when they entered the monastery as novices and ultimately made their vows. According to the pontifical letters, some impaired clerics could no longer follow the rules to which they were subject, nor work for the monastery as they were supposed to do. The petitions and pontifical letters additionally testify to the supreme importance of suitability when accepting monks and nuns into an order. This imperative was found in the rules of community life and in the various prescriptions followed by each order, even by each monastery; and this was the case for male and female entrants alike. In some cases that I detailed in the book, there were even restricted councils, composed of 'mature and wise men', that evaluated the morals and knowledge

of the applicant and had to see if the candidate was not hiding any infirmity or illness that would prevent him from wearing the monastic habit!

The extreme control exercised by the papacy was not limited to the Church's lower ranks, but rather intensified for appointments to higher orders. These examinations were then repeated in even greater detail at the time of **promotions**, especially for the positions of priest, because they could preach and give the sacraments. As with any ecclesiastical promotion, the entrance exam for major orders was carried out by the bishop, or his delegate. However, examiners in these cases had to be even more rigorous when it came to the ordination of a person in receipt of a benefice with care of the souls. In litigious cases, the Popes had to intervene in order to guarantee suitable clerics for the laity. It was even more reinforced in cases of bishops and abbot's promotions. They had to go to the Roman or Avignonese Curia and pay tribute to the Popes, alongside undergoing another assessment of their skills and physical suitability to their new role, one which came with substantially increased visibility and responsibility.

The obligation for the petitioner to receive a grace in order to be able to fulfill his or her job allows the pontifical institution to control the ordained persons and their qualities. Then, the universal application of legislation allowed the ecclesiastical institution to standardize practices across the entire Church, thereby solidifying its centralized authority. Moreover, by examining the bishops who themselves evaluated all postulants to the clergy, the Curia ensured that it only had a minimum of known members with bodily or mental irregularities who were otherwise suitable. And in those cases, recognised disabled clerics could have the rights to some accommodations...

SW: The following question involves the consequences of the 'failure' of such disability tests and of clerics' disclosures of impairment in petitions (31')

ND: Well, as we only have access to accepted pontifical graces, the consequences are mainly positive ones! As this process of petitioning created a metaphorical place conducive to negotiation, where disabled clerics could disclose their physical and/or mental difficulties to advocate for themselves, they could request accommodations from the Church!

Those accommodations could take several forms according to the situations and the impairment. Firstly, they could ask for the **nomination of an assistant, called a coadjutor**. Where a secular and regular cleric wished to remain in charge, the pontifical institution could relieve him or her of

the tasks they can no longer perform in order to ensure the daily fulfillment of pastoral and administrative duties. Consequently, it authorized a disabled cleric to hire or directly employ an assistant to carry out certain well-defined tasks in the name of the "public good". Then, the popes could ensure that the office became suitable for the impaired supplicant and his abilities, so that he could retain some of their functions.

On the other hand, the Apostolic See tried to **prevent the general ruin** of the Church that disabled clerics could cause, mainly because of their spiritual functions of preaching and giving the sacraments but also sometimes because of their temporal functions of managing the Church's goods. Indeed, the assistant's main task was to take care of the cure of the souls. In this case, he must receive a part of the benefit he was taking care of, in order to be able to live comfortably.

At the end, assistants may sometimes **succeed** the individuals they replaced upon their death or resignation. The electors of the bishop or the popes often preferred to elect the assistant who was legally managing the benefice rather than appoint a new person, since the one chosen as coadjutor was usually the most capable and knowledgeable about local practices. The assistant replaced the new retiree, with the aim of facilitating the transfer of the office so that the benefice does not suffer, thus creating a "power transfer scheme".

Secondly, petitioners might have asked for the **softening of monastic rules**. Grants of pontifical grace offered something of a loophole to the harsh monastic rules. Petitioners could receive permission to contravene religious vows, including those mandating enclosure, in cases in which, as Thomas Aquinas put it, 'the thing [vow] would become absolutely bad or useless'. Only the Church's highest authority, the Popes, could take up the question of breaking such vows. Impairment, old age, or illness could provide a legitimate rationale for breaking vows (including enclosure), if the action was undertaken in order to avoid generating scandal or to remove the disabled supplicant from a dangerous situation.

Thus, the letters could relax the rules concerning the harsh monastic lifestyle around deprivation, confinement, and communal living that could, and did, lead to physical and mental impairments. As a practical measure, institutions had to provide accommodations for community members' physical weakness, to facilitate the smooth running of the facility whilst also making space for monastics with weaker health. Whilst some monastic rules and instructions issued by Church

councils routinely emphasized the need to lighten the workload allocated to weak or sick monks and nuns, the pontifical letters did go further to allow prohibited things, as eating in the cells, outside of the refectory, or as bringing in a doctor to look after a sick brother or sister, or as having several servants, for example. Pontifical letters sometimes even allow the transgression of the enclosure by allowing monks and nuns to relocate from their monastery or convent to another, and, even, to change of religious order altogether, notably for reasons of health or capacity.

Thirdly, the letters could **exempt clerics from some professional obligations** because of mobility issues. On one hand, physical disability also had an impact on the pastoral function of priests, insofar as they had to travel to perform various ecclesiastical tasks. Indeed, the secular clergy must first of all remain able to come and go in his own benefit. On another hand, if he was a bishop, abbot, prior, etc., his office obliged him to visit his diocese or its dependencies and to go to ecclesiastical gatherings. Finally, clerics might be asked to travel long distances to carry out diplomatic missions or to respond to a summons to the Apostolic See. In all those cases, papal letters indicate that seculars and regular clerics with reduced mobility could sometimes be exempted by the Chancery from certain theoretically obligatory trips.

In a lot of cases, the Pope delegated certain powers to the recipients of the letters, who were not independent actors, but rather, traditional **relays of pontifical authority**. Deputized by the papacy, these executors – mainly bishops and abbots – ensured that edicts issued at the top of the ecclesiastical hierarchy flowed down to, and were respected at, the local level. They had to ensure that the measures being sanctioned were justified, making it clear that all exemptions were voided if the supplicant had lied. The objective here was to prevent any grace being issued as a result of fraudulent appeals, that also functioned as control mechanisms more generally: to specify restrictions to pontifical sentences or issue conditions upon it.

But that is, of course, if the impaired clerics wanted to stay in the clergy!

SW: The last question today about the fate of the disabled men who were less fortunate, those who had to leave the clergy entirely, either of their own volition or due to the severity of their disability (39)

ND: Poor health or impairments sometimes forced clerics and laymen to resign from their positions as they became unable to perform their duties. **Resignations** due to physical or mental disabilities are found in large numbers among the clergy, especially in the 13th century, when 58% of supplicants stipulated such impairment as the motivator for their departure! Strikingly, this figure declined sharply in the following century as only less than 15% of the clerics asked to leave the clergy. This drop tallies with the fact that the concerns of ecclesiastical authorities were broadening during the fourteenth century, a period in which the Chancery dealt with fewer clerical matters overall, and therefore processed fewer renunciations.

Supplications and papal letters testify to these voluntary departures due to physical or mental incapacity. Letters whose subject is the resignation of a cleric are called **letters of revocation**. They were used to withdraw the power that the pope had previously entrusted to these clerics: they were not deposed or removed, but were allowed to abandon their function. These clerics for example asked to leave the priesthood because they were likely to cause a scandal because of their defect of body. In these cases, the Church took care of the older and weaker clerics: canon law states that no one can be appointed in the place of a bishop, even if the latter becomes ill and useless, if he does not ask for his resignation.

The various supplicants who appeal to the popes to resign their office are all at the top of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The minor ecclesiastics do not indeed have to address the popes to withdraw from their function, but only to their own hierarchy. The letters then concern abbots, priors, rectors, bishops and archbishops. Following the reign of Innocent III, the pope's right of review was affirmed and it became mandatory to receive a missive of grace in which the cleric or his superior detailed a legitimate reason to resign. The reasons given were mainly related to old age and/or explicitly permanent conditions (such blindness, paralysis, incurable disease, etc). By looking at the text of the letters, it seems that all supplicants seeking to resign were over 60 years old which corresponds to an age that is familiar to us. The resignation could be presented positively, because it prevented the ruin of the goods and ecclesiastical affairs, or rather negatively, when the person was no longer able to manage his benefit and the ruin had already begun...

In all cases, retirees **could benefit from financial compensation to avoid precariousness. This allowance was explicitly granted in only about half of the cases. The sum of money allowed by the Chancery was to allow the person to live without lacking anything. The amount varies, but it seems to be about one third of the salary previously held. These elderly or impaired clerics became "pensioners", whose existence is attested as early as the 13th century. In these cases, they used their allowance to cover their expenses until their death, since they lost the income from their benefice when they resigned. On the other hand, the poorest clerics who were already earning little money, were sometimes bought out of their pensions by patrons or entered a hospital or a monastery in order to continue to live comfortably. In principle, all clergymen were to receive a pension, so as not to tarnish the dignity of the office they had previously held - following the same argument as the construction of special hospices for former clerics.**

Indeed, in case they lost their rank or if their pension was not sufficient, some clerics went to **live in hospices or private houses put at their disposal until their last days.** The papal institution sometimes devoted some efforts to specialist institutions for impaired clerics, or into condition-specific hospitals like leprosaria for leprous clerics or ‘hostels of God’ for the blind clerics for example, adapting the grace to an individual’s unique circumstances. But clerics could also enter a **monastery** or remain there if they were already living in community, because it was supposed to be a good place to live! However, as we have seen, many religious orders firmly stipulate that old age, impairment, or illness may prevent an applicant from being accepted, as he may not be able to withstand the rigors of monastic life. However, it was possible for secular clerics to enter a convent, sometimes even in crucial positions, through papal letters. Abbots were simply demoted as monks in their own community or in a neighbouring convent.

But in all cases, the Papal Chancery showed a genuine interest in providing care to those in need, including impaired clerics, as part of its overarching remit of managing medieval society. This is, I think, what I am trying to show in the book: the petitions received and the letters issued by the Papal Chancery between the twelfth and the fourteenth century attest to the recognition of disability by the pontifical institution. They record the existence of supplicants’ physical or mental

impairment and, on a case-by-case basis, authorized petitioners to adapt their duties, both as clerics and as Christians, according to their abilities.