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The Making of the French Episcopate, 1589–1661 (Book Review)

John B. Roney

Sacred Heart University, roneyj@sacredheart.edu

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Book Review by John Roney, History Department, Sacred Heart University

**Bergin, Joseph. *The Making of the French Episcopate, 1589-1661*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996.
ISBN 0-300-06751-8**

This volume is a source from which books are written. To date, Joseph Bergin offers the most thorough study of the French episcopacy during the period. Previous studies have focused on particular bishops; most notably, in addition to Bergin's, those by Norman Ravitch, Michel Peronnet, Frederic Baumgartner, and Marilyn Edelstein. Bergin is to be commended for presenting an interesting study, despite its 557 pages of text, with theory and analysis followed by case studies. A bibliographical dictionary of 162 pages listing 351 bishops offers a resource to the general reader and the scholar alike.

France represented the pinnacle of feudalism in continental medieval Europe, and it stabilized its territory in the Renaissance by dismantling the power of the local nobility and English-held territory. Despite the moderate success of the monarchy to placate regional power, the age of humanism and Reformation brought some of the bloodiest civil wars (1562-1629) in Europe. The monarchy restored order but not without the help of the French episcopate, which became more powerful than elite churchmen in other countries. The French monarchy grew wealthy by confiscating land from the very powerful monasteries and, in the absence of the Inquisition, lowered the power of mendicant orders. Thus, the monarchy cemented its relationships through granting privileges and nominating sons of nobility for episcopal office, and a symbiotic relationship developed (especially from 1589 to 1661) between crown and episcopate.

The two most well-known bishops of this period, Richelieu and Mazarin, have been thoroughly studied. With 113 dioceses, however, there were, until now, scores of bishops whose stories had gone untold. Without the organization of the extant evidence there have been, in Bergin's view, "often contradictory generalizations about the character of the episcopate" (3). What is striking about a survey of the French episcopate is the high degree of nonresident, nonconsecrated bishops in the sixteenth century. Although started as benefices for a majority of bishops who had little or no education or ecclesiastical interests, the episcopate became a much more religious position by the seventeenth century, when theological education and the ability to preach became commonplace. Bergin outlines three distinct periods: (a) until 1590, when the office was held by many *ills de famille* (95 percent nobility), who had an interest in *commerce des benefices*; (b) 1590 to the 1630s, when, under the Richelieuan reforms, many more commoners (*hommes de merite*)--only 50 percent noble birth--attained the office; and (c) the 1640s to the 1660s, when there was a return to a higher percentage of nobility, who now took education, consecration, and residency seriously. The one constant element was that bishoprics were never hereditary; yet to be well born and well bred, to develop patronage, and to offer *services rendu* remained important.

JOHN B. RONEY, Sacred Heart University