

deacon, but he was certainly well educated enough to be the second priest in Brigstock appointed by the vicar to care for St. Peter's church in Stanton.

As a hand of churchmen in Brigstock parish, Master William personified the ambivalent status of rural clergy. On the one hand, William was a commoner, a local boy. Older people remembered him as a child; his friends sweated beside him in field and pasture; children played with his nephews and nieces. Most days, he got up and did exactly what his neighbors did. He went into the fields to plow, sow, and weed; he tended to the health of his sheep and cultivated fruits and vegetables in his garden. When he attended the manorial court every three weeks, he never served as juror, ale-taster, or other manorial official, but he otherwise acted like his brothers. He purchased land from his neighbors; he pledged for the good conduct of his friends, and he made excuses for those unable to get to court. Like everyone else in Brigstock, William was a peasant, well known to his neighbors and busied by the same tasks.

On the other hand, William, as a cleric, had special stature within Brigstock parish. First, he was better educated than most people. There were no seminaries to train priests in medieval Europe, so most would-be priests had to rely on local clergymen to teach them to read Latin and to train them in the rituals of the mass. William might have received some basic training from the vicar of Brigstock during his childhood, and for many years, their education ended there. As a result, priests in rural parishes were often minimally trained for their duties. Some were so ignorant that they could barely mumble the first lines of the mass, and others even unwittingly led peasants into theological error. William's title of "Master" suggests that he received a better education than most priests, and when he left Brigstock for nine years, he may have studied with some learned men. His education was exceptional for a rural cleric. Yet whether highly educated or roughly trained, rural priests had more learning than their parishioners. Many read with difficulty and understood only rudimentary Latin, but they were, at least, literate.

Second, William was special because he did not marry, at least not in a technical sense. The Catholic Church had long encouraged priests to practice celibacy, and from the eleventh century, clerical marriage had been explicitly forbidden. Nevertheless, many priests interpreted this prohibition loosely. Some sought casual liaisons, and others, although they refrained from contracting legitimate marriages, settled down with women, fathered and raised children, and sometimes even trained sons to become clerics and take over the family business. Everyone looked the other way; it was irregular but it was common. William, for whom no "wife" is mentioned in the courts of Brigstock, had at least one child, the son John to whom he gave his properties in 1326. Although the mother of this son, might have lived in Kingsthorpe, a village about eighteen miles southwest of Brigstock, or she might have moved

⁵⁰pledging, as an important part of manorial courts. A pledge stood before the court to guarantee that another person would fulfill a stipulated obligation or pay a stipulated fine. Most transactions in manoria courts required the guarantee of a pledge, and almost all pledges were adult men.

from Kingsthorpe to live with William in Brigstock. If so, she lived like numerous other "priest's concubines" in medieval villages; much like other wives in most respects, they were always vulnerable to gossip, criticism, and even Church sanction. One medieval tale related how a priest's concubine reacted to word that the bishop was coming to inspect the parish and, among other things, order her to leave. Fixing up a basket of cakes, eggs, and other good foods, she set out to meet the bishop on the road. When he asked her where she was going and why, she replied, "I'm taking these gifts to your mistress who has lately been brought to childbed." The bishop, thus reminded of his own sexual relationship, left her and her family alone. William's family was also left alone. His son John not only inherited William's lands but also became a cleric like his father. Treated kindly by his aunt Cecilia when she was on her deathbed, John seems to have been an accepted and well-loved member of the Pentader family.

Third, William and other clerics enjoyed a special legal status. He was protected by the king's justice and he could be sued in civil courts for unpaid loans or other business gone wrong, but if he committed a crime, he was punished in ecclesiastical courts, not secular ones. "Criminous clerks" had been the cause of a great argument at the end of the twelfth century, an argument that had pitted Thomas Becket, then Archbishop of Canterbury, against his former friend and king, Henry II. Becket supported the Church's claim to judge clerics under the procedures of canon law; Henry II thought it outrageous that he could not punish all those who committed offenses within his realm. Becket lost his life in this argument, killed before the altar of Canterbury by four knights who thought they were carrying out the wishes of Henry II. But Becket's viewpoint finally prevailed. Arrangements differed throughout medieval Europe, but in most places, the Church successfully asserted its right to judge clerics for rape, murder, arson, treason, theft, fraud, and other offenses.

Fourth, if, as is likely, William was ordained as a priest, he was also a special person in Brigstock because of his sacerdotal powers. Of all the people in Brigstock, only he and the vicar could celebrate the mass, impose penance on sinners, anoint the dying, and otherwise ensure, through their special powers, God's grace and God's salvation. As someone empowered to administer the sacraments of the Church, he stood as a critical intermediary between ordinary people and their God. A priest's words were understood to transform bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ; his absolution wiped away sins; his blessings baptized infants, sanctified marriages, and eased the dead toward salvation. If the Pentaders saw William celebrating mass when they went to St. Peter's on Sunday, they understood little of the Latin he mumbled and not much about the symbolic significance of all he did, but they knew that he, alone of all of them, had a special relationship to the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ.

The duties of the vicar of Brigstock and his assistants were carefully specified. They were to celebrate the mass, to preach sermons at least four times each year, they were to teach their parishioners about the

Brewer, D., A Medieval Life, 1999.