

ARTICLE

War, Memory, and Politics: The Case of the French Clergy in the First World War

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SUMMARY

This paper addresses the following question: How did the participation of Catholic priests in the trenches in World War I impact the political climate in postwar France? Using memoirs and archival material, this research builds on the work of other scholars to document how the shared experiences of war ultimately influenced national politics. I argue that shared memory was central to the shifting attitude toward the clergy after the war, and ultimately made it impossible to enforce the anticlerical laws of the 1880s.¹

KEYWORDS: World War I, church-state relations, war and memory, soldier priests, military chaplains, veterans, stretcher-bearers, Teilhard de Chardin

The onset of World War I was preceded by a decades-long effort by the Third Republic to restrict the influence of the clergy in French society and to promote a secularized civic life. Beginning in the 1880s and in reaction to the association of the Catholic Church and the monarchy, legislation prohibited the clergy and religious orders from teaching in schools and evicted clergy from monasteries and residences, thereby forcing the Catholic orders (Franciscans, Jesuits, and others) to leave France. Weddings and burials were legitimized through civil rather than religious ceremonies; prayers were prohibited at public functions; hospitals and cemeteries were laicized; and chaplains were eliminated in the army and the navy. All of these changes served to marginalize the clergy from everyday French life. A journalist writing in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1892 summarized the impact. The typical *curé* was “banished from the school, excluded from the committee directing official charities, regarded with malicious distrust or jealous hatred by the mayor and the schoolmaster, kept at arm’s length as a compromising neighbor by all the minor officials employed by the commune or the State, spied on by the innkeeper, exposed to anonymous denunciations” (McManners 168).² Indeed, by 1914, some people refrained from religious practice for fear of reprisals or discrimination (9–10).

The first law ending the clergy’s exemption from military service, passed in 1889, was one of the anticlerical laws that particularly horrified the bishops. Although it required just one year of service and provided that in case of war, clergy could choose service in the medical corps, the bishops strongly objected. Their protests that the law compromised both the clergy and the military strength of the army fell on deaf ears (Coffey 679–85). But the conscription law passed after the law separating church and state in 1905 increased the number of years a priest or seminarian had to serve from one to two, and made him subject to a combat assignment. The 1905 law also decreed that men of twenty “classes,” or years of induction, could be mobilized, which meant that eight million men would serve under the flag of France during the five years of the First World War

(Liénart and Masson 17).

As a result of these laws, more than thirty-two thousand French priests, religious, and seminarians were called to active duty along with millions of other men. Inadvertently, the conscription laws did the opposite of all the other anticlerical laws. Instead of isolating the priests and seminarians, it placed them in daily contact with their fellows in the many horrifying situations of a long, relentless war. There they developed a sense of brotherhood that transcended the old religious divides and changed priests from pariahs and enemies of the Republic into brothers in arms.

In their letters and memoirs, priests described their newfound friendships. The Franciscan seminarian Xavier Théréssette described his relationship with a former member of the chamber of deputies, who had been undersecretary of state. He wrote that they patrolled together in late 1914 in the area of Verdun and became “a solid pair of friends.” He said that one day they shared a bottle of wine, which they had picked up during a daring reconnaissance. He commented, “Who would have chosen to say two years ago that a former Under Secretary of State would raise his glass so amicably with the glass of a dreadful Capuchin!” (Théréssette and Jérôme 48).

Similarly, the twenty-year-old seminarian Jean Nourisson wrote to a friend from Rouen on 26 August 1914 that despite the physical hardships his life was rather “sweet.” He found sympathy among his fellow soldiers. They questioned him about his *métier*, and he felt that he was dispelling prejudice against priests by his interaction. He wrote again on 10 September 1914 that the men confided in him stories of their families and of their work, of how they lost their faith. In turn, he could explain to them the celibate life of a priest and the social morality of the Church (26–27).

The Jesuit Paul Dubrulle, a thirty-four-year-old second lieutenant, wrote that he “was bursting with admiration and enthusiasm,” leading his men in an assault during the battle of the Somme. He wrote:

I felt that I was free and that I was a part of a superior being, immeasurably large, and a tiny atom lost in the ocean, I abandoned myself. Unconscious of myself, I was drawn as if by a magnet, into the fray, obsessed with the idea that the enemy was there and it was necessary to crush him. (Dubrulle and Bordeaux 232–33)

Commissioned when the war began, he served in the battlefields of Champagne and Verdun and died leading a charge near Craonne on 16 April 1917.

Noncombatants also voiced the affection and mutual trust that developed on the battlefield. Thirty-seven-year-old stretcher-bearer Albert Bessières, in the hospital for a contusion on his foot, reflected as he was falling asleep one night:

I am happy to sleep among you as one of you. You work so hard, like you do at the front, to show me your respectful sympathy by addressing me in ways, which affirm your desire to compensate for, I know not what official bullying dimly perceived. You call me: “Little father, grandfather, Monsieur l’abbé, Monsieur Chaplain.” I am only your older brother and have no more pride than that. (118)

Chaplain Paul Doncœur took great pleasure in visiting the soldiers on the front line or in their trenches. He brought them cigarettes and news of the sector, and at the same time he offered his priestly services of confession or communion to those who wanted them. When they were in the rear, after evening prayers, five or ten *camarades*, especially the young ones, often came to his shelter for a “grog of friendship.” His biographer attests that Doncœur, who was just fifteen years older than most of the soldiers, relished the daily contact with these young men, an experience he had never had, since he was separated from them by his exile as a young Jesuit. He felt strongly all that he had missed of youthful companionship. The young men too appreciated his kindness and his attention to all the details of their lives. For them he was “the father in the middle of his children” (Mayoux 107).

When he received a new assignment in March 1915, Abbé Liénart wrote that he felt “truly heartbroken to be separated from the men whose lives, anxieties, and sufferings he had shared intimately . . . I received from them the most moving expressions of this virile friendship” (Liénart and Masson 23).

Following the Armistice, the French soldier returned from the front with a sense of loss and physical deprivation, as well as the profound memory of comradeship. Many historians agree with Antoine Prost, who studied veterans’ associations between World War I and the outbreak of World War II, that the experience and memory of the brotherhood of the trenches was the most long-lasting feeling that gave meaning to the war experience for the veterans. He wrote, “Living means giving meaning to what one lives through” (24). To describe the roots of this feeling, he cites a memoir in which a soldier explains that by 1916 disillusionment and weariness hung over everything, and the meaning of life collapsed into a very narrow world. Instead, the soldier was fighting “out of integrity, habit and strength . . . because he could not do otherwise. . . His dwelling changed from a house into a dugout, his family into his fighting companions” (24).

André Ducasse described the reaction of soldiers who were not particularly religious to the role of priests on the battlefield. He gathered testimony from rank-and-file soldiers for his 1932 volume *La Guerre racontées par les combattants: Anthologie des écrivains du front (1914–1918)*. He wrote, “Living very near the men (who never would confide entirely in an officer or a stranger) [the priests] knew them better and would never betray them; they were moved with compassion” (Ducasse 22). The Catholic newspaper *La Croix* quoted an adjutant, who affirmed one day after returning from battle: “I am not a buddy of *curés*. My testimony is not therefore suspect. Well, believe me, friends, without the *curés*, many wounded would have died on the battlefield without being noticed” (*La Croix* 1:1).

The bishops and the Catholic press soon realized that the conscription of the clergy could be used to document the loyalty of the church to the nation and, indeed, to the republic. The press assiduously portrayed the contributions of the clergy to the war effort throughout the war, publishing priests’ letters describing their work. Readers’ responses inspired the editors with the idea of putting together a *Livre d’Or* to document the contributions of priests and religious to the war effort. By 31 March 1915, the newspaper *La Croix* announced the beginning of the work (Boulestaix and Bordeaux xli–xlii).

The editors collected news of citations published in newspapers and compared them with the records of the ministry of war. To obtain and verify information, they actively corresponded

with mobilized priests and religious, with bishops, and with the families of those who had died on the battlefield (xliii–xliv). They counted more than twenty-three thousand parish priests and more than nine thousand members of religious orders. Of these, more than four thousand were killed and thousands were cited for bravery on the battlefield (xlv). Ultimately, the entries comprised two volumes, listing individuals in alphabetical order and including their ecclesiastical or religious designation, their changes in military rank during the war, the battles in which they participated, and the text of citations and decorations they received (xlv).

It is clear from their memoirs and letters that the priests entered the war recognizing that their compatriots had little respect for them and for religion. They hoped their devotion to duty would prove their patriotism and their loyalty to France and thus would earn them not only respect but also inclusion in the body politic. The Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who later gained a worldwide reputation as a paleontologist and philosopher, provided a thoughtful and brutally honest account of his experiences as a stretcher-bearer throughout the entire war, on battlefields in Belgium, Picardy, and Verdun, in letters to his cousin, Marguerite Teillard-Chambon. Born in 1881 to an aristocratic family from the region of Clermont-Ferrand, he had been called up to serve in the military at nineteen but was deferred because he was in the novitiate. The call to war in 1914 was inconvenient, but his motto was “Like the others.” Two of his brothers were at the front, and two more were in training; the youngest one of six sons had just been killed (Teilhard de Chardin 24–25). His “class” of 1901 was one that was allowed to choose noncombat duty if mobilized in time of war. He chose to be a stretcher-bearer and served with the 8th regiment of Moroccan riflemen, which also included *zouaves* (a regiment of assault troops). He saw the war as “a chance to act as a person in his relation with men whose life he was sharing” (29). He stated, “For us soldier-priests, war was a baptism into reality” (26).

In his early letters he was enthusiastic in his belief that he had a great opportunity to influence the religious convictions of the men. From Marest in the Oise, he wrote on 9 February 1915, “I feel increasingly happy at having been posted to a regiment in which, as I told you, I am the only priest, and where there is a large number of men who, when the time comes, will turn to me for help. I hope really to have found my right place” (48). A few days later in a letter dated 24–25 February 1915, he described his activities and his hopes for influence:

[F]rom my point of view, what is really interesting has been to find that in my cellar and its vicinity the men were very approachable. I haven’t, of course, made any conversions, nor given anyone absolution (the dangers we encounter are, at the moment, too trifling: not one man has been wounded during the past ten days); but I have made contact with many fine lads. . . . On Sunday I said mass in the colonel’s cellar, and dined with one of the officers: —on Monday I shared the machine-gun sergeant-major’s stew; and so on. . . . all this, I hope, will gradually establish me as the priest-comrade to whom a man can turn when things go wrong. Pray hard that this may come about. (50–51)

In the opening days of the war, Abbé J. M. Bourceret volunteered at the age of forty-four to serve as a sergeant-nurse. Before the war, he had been a professor at Notre-Dame-des-Champs in Paris and a vicar at the Cathedral of Saint-Ouen in Rouen. He had already served his military duty in 1891 and had been discharged. Bourceret was surprised and pleased by the favorable greetings he received as he crossed Paris on his bicycle with the flag of the Red Cross. The sense of relief and even vindication implied in his comments reflects his experiences during the period

of the separation in which the school at which he was a professor in Paris had to be moved to Fontenay-aux-Roses, a commune southwest of the city. He observed, then exulted:

How many men, in fact, who had ceased practicing, who had no longer come to our churches, have quickly invaded them from the first days of the alert. Openly or in secret, they have put their consciences in order; very many have received in their hearts the God of the strong Faith was not dead at all, only numbed; a moment of surprise was sufficient to stimulate it and make it active. (7)

After describing a full church near the opening battlefields of the Meuse, Bourceret later states, “We complain, we clergy, of not having enough men in our churches, and then the war arrived with its threats, its dangers, with death which reaps our ranks without ceasing, reduced human respect and resuscitated the somnolent faith” (135). In fact, he predicted that “the war will make France more pure; it will destroy all that divides it, to make it one in generosity, in heroism; it will make reign, after the brotherhood of arms, social brotherhood, *‘l’Union Sacrée’*” (136).

Abbé Jean Lagardère, who in his fifties became chaplain to a division in the 4th Army, admitted that he went into battle dreaming of rehabilitating “the priest and religion by his example” (Beaufort 200–01). He hoped “to have the right, if he survives the war, to cry out to certain villains who will want to tyrannize us anew, that he is as French as they are and perhaps more than them” (233).

As the war progressed, priests were asked their opinions on the possibility of reconciliation between church and state. In a letter dated 11 May 1917 to the Bureau of Volunteer Chaplains, Jules Lévêque, a military chaplain at a field hospital, predicted that the future of relations between church and state would be changed by the interaction between priests and soldiers during the war:

I may be really able to affirm for all that I have seen personally that after the war the religious question will emerge in a different manner. . . . In the sick rooms where I spend each afternoon I greet soldiers who are always at least very polite but very often very cordial and they appear happy to be able to have a conversation for some time with someone who is concerned exclusively with their interest. (Fonds Veillot)

At least some of the priests realized that both they and church authorities had a part to play in this hoped-for reconciliation. They felt that they had learned a good deal from their wartime exposure to men from all walks of life, and they expressed a desire to continue to reach out to them after the war. They spoke of a change in their methods of ministry that needed to take place. Achille Liénart, who went on to a distinguished career as archbishop of Lille and later cardinal, fervently believed that he would “profit from the intimate knowledge of the popular soul acquired by the contact of all these days to glorify God more and to worthily serve France in peace” (Liénart and Masson 118).

His biographer Catherine Masson explained that Liénart was especially marked by the emotional dimension of the war experience, which characterizes the mentality of the veteran. His first-hand encounters with the horrors of war made him dedicated to pursuing peace among men at every level. His direct contact with people from varying religious backgrounds, milieus, and races guided him in his pursuit of social action and of interreligious dialogue. He became known

as “the cardinal of the workers” as well as a zealous advocate for ecumenism before and throughout the Second Vatican Council. Liénart maintained a lifelong special relationship with the members of the 201st infantry. He continued to meet with them throughout his life, making detours during his pastoral visits to take part in their family celebrations of marriages, births, baptisms, and sometimes funerals. The bonds woven on the battlefield were present even as late as 1973 when veterans participated in Liénart’s funeral ceremonies (8).

Stretcher-bearer Jesuit Albert Bessières believed that France would change if priests continued to work after the war as arduously as they had during the *Chemin des Dames* offensive in 1917. He wrote:

Ah! If tomorrow, we the priests of France, if those at least, who God allows to live . . . knew how to bring to that which was and remains . . . our unique vocation, the rescue of souls, the same energy, the same tension of all the human strength up to the point of exhaustion, the same inexorable will to succeed, the same decision, and the same imperious desire, the same speed of execution and the same contempt for fatigue, for risks . . . France would know, again, great days. (77)

At the end of the war, Teilhard de Chardin expressed his hopes for the future of the church and humanity, and the role he hoped to play. He wrote from Strasbourg on 10 December 1918:

I’m delighted to agree that this year our common intention should be the one you suggest: to work and pray that our Lord, at the dawn of a new world-cycle, may descend among us ever more and more living. . . .

There are some things that force me, when I come up against them, to summon up all the great incentives that urge one towards peaceful tolerance, if I am not to give way to irritation. At the moment, the Church, or rather its administrators, have no understanding of what real life is. To do my own small part to create in her a movement towards progress would seem to me an excellent use of the period that’s just beginning. (264)

In his letter of 15 December 1918, he continued this line of thinking, stating that he was convinced that it was necessary for the church to present dogma in a more real, universal way (267–68). And on 5 June 1919, he told his cousin that he was collecting material to write an article entitled “Notes towards the evangelization of new times,” in which he would provide a brief plan for an apostolate in the hope of initiating a “movement and bringing into being some schemes for practical institutions” (272–73).

Initially, signs from the government were not promising for reconciliation in the postwar period. Out of concern for maintaining a strictly secular state, Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau refused to have President Raymond Poincaré and the president of the chamber of deputies, Paul Deschanel, attend the *Te Deum* celebrating the war’s successful conclusion at Notre Dame Cathedral on 17 November 1918 (Dansette 333). Quickly the Republicans in the chamber of deputies affirmed that the laws they had passed to secularize the state and education were “sacrosanct.” Some Catholics wanted to fight this interpretation, but when the November 1919 elections brought into power the right-wing National Bloc party, Cardinal Amette of Paris agreed to the compromise language, which stated: “Secularization must be harmonized with the liberties

and the rights of all citizens whatever their religious views and in this way religious peace will be assured to the country” (335).

While the National Bloc was in power, Prime Minister Alexandre Millerand declared:

[I]t would appear impossible to me that, the war ended, one would escort to the border the religious who had crossed it to come to the front to take part in the dangers with their French brothers. . . . I simply ask that religious like laymen have the same right to assemble under the law, to uphold and to propagate their opinions. (Mayoux 136)

Millerand also pursued renewed relations with the Vatican, to which Pope Benedict XV was very open. Although the secular laws still existed, some were no longer applied and others were enforced with moderation. The religious orders returned to teach in the schools and colleges they had earlier relinquished to the care of secular priests or lay staff (Dansette 345).

After years of excluding them from public ceremonies, officials now invited priests to participate in memorial services for their fallen brethren. Annette Becker wrote that the presence of these priests at public memorials seemed as natural to participants as it had been on the battlefield. Both during and after the war, unprecedented crowds gathered at cemeteries on 1 November, the religious feast of All Saints, which was traditionally a day to honor the dead. The coincidence of the November armistice reinforced the religious link and emphasized the importance of that feast (116–20).

Municipal and prefectorial officials forgot the prewar sectarian tension as they joined former commanders and veterans at public ceremonies for the installation of bishops who had fought beside them in the war. In his study of the French episcopate in the postwar period, Frédéric Le Moigne recounts the first time municipal and prefectorial officials attended an episcopal installation. Msgr. Maurice Feltin, who had been an officer during the war, held his ceremony as bishop of Troyes at a war memorial. In his discourse, Feltin remarked, “At the front, we were profoundly united whatever were our opinions. In addressing you for the first time, I ask you to continue this beautiful union” (63).

In witness to their affection, common soldiers applauded when their former priest comrades were promoted to the episcopate. A group of fellow soldiers sent a pectoral cross as a gift to Msg. Lamy of Amiens with the inscription “À notre camarade, Frédéric Lamy.” The bulletin of the *Anciens du 39^e Régiment d’Infanterie* commented on the nomination of Georges Choquet to the bishopric of Langres, stating that “everyone remembered the very great largesse of spirit that made him so friendly with all the *poilus* no matter what their religious opinions” (63).

Le Moigne found that the vast majority of bishops selected in the postwar period, 79 out of 115 were veterans of the war who had served as stretcher-bearers or ambulance workers, and that some were in the infantry and the artillery. They had been closely involved in the daily life of the soldiers, much more than chaplains would have been. Le Moigne suggests that these bishops understood the bonds and the solidarity established in the trenches and meant to profit by it to expand the spirit of *entente* (53). Bishops and veteran priests alike reinforced their positions as what Le Moigne calls “agents of the cult of memory” through their roles as chaplains of regimental veterans associations, which were vital in continuing a sense of community and memory. Like the

future bishop of Périgueux, who led the veterans of the 329th Infantry Regiment to battlefield sites where they had lost comrades, many priests organized pilgrimages (60).

These bonds of brotherhood and loyalty proved a bulwark against the renewed anticlerical policies proposed by the *Cartel des Gauches*, which won control of the chamber of deputies after the elections of 1924. Radical Republicans and Socialists united in a coalition similar to the ones that had passed the anticlerical legislation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. On 17 July 1924, Édouard Herriot, the prime minister, asserted that the first aims of his government were to give the country a “social peace” by granting amnesty to those who had been deserters during the war. At the same time, he rekindled sectarian quarrels, announcing his intention to close the new French embassy at the Vatican and to expel religious orders. Despite earlier government promises, he announced that the full body of secular legislation would be applied to the newly acquired territories of Alsace and Lorraine, where Germans had honored the 1801 Concordat after the 1870 conquest (Mayoux 137).

Unlike in the earlier period, Catholics mobilized quickly throughout France, but especially in Alsace and Lorraine. Numerous protest meetings in Obernai, Colmar, Mulhouse, Metz, and Strasbourg, and resolutions passed by municipal and departmental councils, caused Herriot to back down precipitately on his plans for Alsace and Lorraine (Dansette 348). The Jesuit former chaplain Paul Doncœur quickly published an editorial in the journal *Études* on 20 July, entitled “Le tocsin qui sonne.” He wrote, “Thus amnesty is prepared for the number of rebels, and without doubt some traitors, but condemnations are readied for the Frenchmen and Frenchwomen, who, as faithful to their country as to their God, returned to serve at that perilous moment” (Mayoux 137).

In late 1924, veterans from religious orders formed two organizations, the *Ligue des Droits des Religieux Anciens Combattants* (DRAC) and the *Ligue des Prêtres Anciens Combattants* (PAC). Jesuit Albert Bessières called for a “*Union catholique*” in *Études* on 20 October and shortly thereafter met with General Édouard de Castelneau, chief of the general staff under General Joseph Joffre. The general agreed to head up the movement called the *Fédération Nationale Catholique* (FNC). Supporters quickly organized in January 1925 at both the local and regional level with the formal approval of church leaders (Mayoux 137).

By the end of 1924, bishops, senators, deputies, and other officials came together by the thousands calling for religious peace. The first demonstration, on 5 October, took place in La Roche-sur-Yon, followed by demonstrations in November and December in Toulouse, Rodez, Bordeaux, Avignon, Lyon, Tours, and Reims. The largest of these demonstrations took place at Folgoët in Finistère on 8 December 1924, where fifty-two thousand persons gathered near the basilica to protest against the policies of the Herriot government. The bishop of Quimper and Léon, General de Castelneau, a senator, and three deputies all took turns speaking. Mayors and priests from nearby towns took part along with the crowd, brandishing placards against the expulsion of religious and the closing of religious schools in Alsace-Lorraine (Toulza 138–39).

Between October 1924 and the end of the year, the groups held 392 public meetings, published monthly bulletins, and inaugurated a campaign of lectures (Dansette 349). DRAC blanketed the country with posters and tracts with such titles as “L’indignation d’un ancien combattant” and “Nous ne partirons pas” by Paul Doncœur and “Des congregations en France . . .

Pourquoi pas?” by Abbé Thellier de Poncheville. Paul Doncœur crossed France giving speeches to audiences enthusiastically responding to his battle cry, “Nous ne partirons pas” (DRAC 1924–27).

As these demonstrations increased, worried public officials monitored the activities. A note labeled “confidential” from the minister of the interior to the minister of war and dated Paris, 20 February 1925, complained that Doncœur, as principle speaker at a political meeting in Avignon on 10 February, was particularly violent in his attack on the religious policy of the government. What most troubled the minister, however, was the attendance of soldiers and noncommissioned officers in military uniform and of the commander of the 7th Regiment of Engineers, Colonel Mevel, in civilian clothes.

Meetings continued even after 10 April 1925 when Herriot’s government fell and was replaced by Paul Painlevé’s, who did not pursue the same policies. His minister of foreign affairs, Aristide Briand, maintained the French embassy at the Vatican. The DRAC held its first general assembly on 14 June 1925. According to an article in *Liberté* published on 15 June 1925, thirty-five regional groups participated. Cardinal Dubois of Paris celebrated mass at Montmartre in memory of religious, priests, and Catholic combatants dead on the field of honor. Former combatants and friends joined hundreds of priests in a procession to the Arc de Triomphe, where a member of a religious order, blind from the war, lit the flame of honor. The official report described the meeting as peaceful and energetic and noted that the closing procession to the Arc de Triomphe passed through the middle of a sympathetic crowd. There were shouts of “Bravo!” and of “There they are, the ones Herriot wanted to banish.” The author of the report wrote that speakers during the day claimed that the new tone of the Painlevé ministry meant victory:

[T]he threatened members of religious orders congratulated themselves in front of a sympathetic crowd for having protected the cause of the ‘religious’ under the most surely accepted aegis of “former religious combatant.” (DRAC 1924–27)

A report on a meeting organized by DRAC and PAC and held on 16 December 1925 in the Grande Salle at Luna Park, the recreational park in the outskirts of Paris near the Porte Maillot, asserted that eight thousand persons attended. An article from the Catholic newspaper *Echo de Paris* claimed that there were twenty thousand. General Castelnau attended, and the speaker was former official chaplain Abbé Daniel Bergey, who had been elected to the chamber of deputies from the department of Gironde. Famous for his oratorical skills, Bergey asked the crowd, comprised of elected officials and well-known personalities, to fight the laic laws. He affirmed that the veteran priests and their supporters wanted peace but would conduct war if Caesar wanted it. When Doncœur took the podium, the audience greeted him with cries of “Vive Doncœur!” and his own slogan, “Nous ne partirons pas.” At the end of his presentation, there was loud and prolonged applause (DRAC).

An official governmental report detailed the DRAC’s plans for the following year, 1926. First, there would be a mass for the religious who died on the field of honor, celebrated at the Basilica of Montmartre, with a speech by Abbé Bergey. After meetings and a banquet, the members would assemble at the Metro Georges V on the Champs-Élysées and form a column with priests and religious mutilated or decorated in the war in the lead, followed by delegates from Paris and from the suburbs, to march to the Arc de Triomphe. There they would relight the flame at the

tomb of the Unknown Soldier. They had plans to assure order and predicted that many members of the public would attend, making an escort for the veteran priests as they processed to the Arc de Triomphe. After the event, *La Croix*, on 24 June 1926, described “a triumphal day.” Crowds greeted the religious veterans, yelling “Vivent les religieux!” and “Ils ne partiront pas!” (DRAC).

To conclude, the role of priests during the war had a profound influence on the relationship between the Catholic priests and their fellow citizens. Although the laic laws were never abrogated, they were not enforced. In the 1950s, when Léonce Raffin, who had served as stretcher-bearer, then volunteer chaplain in the war, gathered his war notebooks for publication, he assessed the lasting effects of *union sacrée*:

The most opposite spirits have fraternized faced with the national peril. Religious prejudices have fallen; the suspicions of the ostracism the priests suffered for forty years vanished. We recognize that today some of them remain. We, the old ones, experience no more the sharp and insulting laicism. Alas! That does not include adherence to the religion of Christ for the sons and grandsons of the combatants. (18–19)

Although they might still wish for widespread return to the Catholic faith, the priests had come to realize that they enjoyed the respect of their fellow compatriots, despite the measure of religious practice. Their brothers in arms and their families might not raise practicing Catholics, but they would not allow the priests to become the pariahs they had been by the end of the nineteenth century. The words of Paul Doncœur reverberate for the entire clergy: “Since then, the religious are full-fledged Frenchmen” (Mayoux 143).

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Notes

¹ Portions of this article appear in *Patriot Priests: The Odyssey of French Catholic Priests in World War I* and are published with permission of the University of Oklahoma Press.

² Unless a translator is listed in the work cited, all translations are my own.