



# Priests of the French Revolution: Saints and Renegades in a New Political Era

*Joseph F. Byrnes*

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The 115,000 priests on French territory in 1789 belonged to an evolving tradition of priesthood. The challenge of making sense of the Christian tradition can be formidable in any era, but this was especially true for those priests required at the very beginning of 1791 to take an oath of loyalty to the new government—and thereby accept the religious reforms promoted in a new Civil Constitution of the Clergy. More than half did so at the beginning, and those who were subsequently consecrated bishops became the new official hierarchy of France. In *Priests of the French Revolution*, Joseph Byrnes shows how these priests and bishops who embraced the Revolution creatively followed or destructively rejected traditional versions of priestly ministry. Their writings, public testimony, and recorded private confidences furnish the story of a national Catholic church. This is a history of the religious attitudes and psychological experiences underpinning the behavior of representative bishops and priests. Byrnes plays individual ideologies against group action, and religious teachings against political action, to produce a balanced story of saints and renegades within a Catholic tradition.

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