

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy

July 12, 1790



BACKGROUND: *The Civil Constitution of the Clergy was passed by the National Constituent Assembly on July 12, 1790. It was an effort to reform the French Church and make it accountable to the French nation, as opposed to existing as a privileged "Estate" as it had before the Revolution began. As you read, consider this document in the context of [liberalism](#). To what extent was the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in line with liberal values? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this legislation?*

Active Reading

The National Assembly, after having heard the report of the **ecclesiastical**¹ committee, has decreed and do decree the following as constitutional articles:

Title I

ARTICLE I. Each department shall form a single **diocese**,² and each diocese shall have the same extent and the same limits as the department.

II. The seat of the bishoprics of the eighty-three departments of the kingdom shall be established as follows: that of the department of the Lower Seine at Rouen; that of the department of Calvados at Bayeux.

All other bishoprics in the eighty-three departments of the kingdom, which are not included by name in the present article, are, and forever shall be, abolished....

Title II

ARTICLE I. Beginning with the day of publication of the present decree, there shall be but one mode of choosing bishops and parish priests, namely that of election.

II. All elections shall be by ballot and shall be decided by [a] majority of the votes....

VI. The election of a bishop can only take place or be undertaken upon Sunday, in the principal church of the chief town of the department, at the close of the parish mass, at which all the electors are required to be present.

VII. In order to be eligible to a bishopric, one must have fulfilled for fifteen years at least the duties of the church ministry in the diocese, as a parish priest, officiating minister, or curate, or as superior, or as directing vicar of the seminary.

XIX. The new bishop may not apply to the pope for any form of confirmation, but shall write to him, as to the visible head of the universal Church, as a testimony to the unity of faith and communion maintained with him.

XXI. Before the ceremony of consecration begins, the bishop elect shall take a solemn oath, in the presence of the municipal officers, of the people, and of the clergy... to be loyal to the nation, the law, and the king, and to support with all his power the constitution decreed by the National Assembly and accepted by the king....

Title III

ARTICLE I. The ministers of religion, performing as they do the first and most important functions of society and forced to live continuously in the place where

¹ Having to do with the Church

² Administrative subdivision of the Catholic Church, led by a bishop. The National Assembly had reorganized French provincial governments into 83 departments.

they discharge the offices to which they have been called by the confidence of the people, shall be supported by the nation.

II. Every bishop, priest, and officiating clergyman in a chapel of ease shall be furnished with a suitable dwelling, on condition, however, that the occupant shall make all the necessary current repairs... Salaries shall be assigned to each, as indicated below.

III. The bishop of Paris shall receive fifty thousand livres; the bishops of the cities having a population of fifty thousand or more, twenty thousand livres; other bishops, twelve thousand livres.

V. The salaries of the parish priests shall be as follows: in Paris, six thousand livres; in cities having a population of fifty thousand or over, four thousand livres; in those having a population of less than fifty thousand and more than ten thousand, three thousand livres....

VII. The salaries *in money* of the ministers of religion shall be paid every three months, in advance, by the treasurer of the district.

XII. In view of the salary which is assured to them by the present constitution, the bishops, parish priests, and curates shall perform the episcopal and priestly functions *gratis*.

Title IV

ARTICLE I. The law requiring the residence of ecclesiastics in the districts under their charge shall be strictly observed. All vested with an ecclesiastical office or function shall be subject to this, without distinction or exception.

II. No bishop shall absent himself from his diocese more than two weeks consecutively during the year, except in case of real necessity and with the consent of the directory of the department in which his see is situated.

III. In the same manner, the parish priests and the curates may not absent themselves from the place of their duties beyond the term fixed above, except for weighty reasons, and even in such cases the priests must obtain the permission both of their bishop and of the directory of their district, and the curates that of the parish priest.

VI. Bishops, parish priests, and curates may, as active citizens, be present at the primary and electoral assemblies; they may be chosen electors, or as deputies to the legislative body, or as members of the general council of the communes or of the administrative councils of their districts or departments.

Questions to Consider:

1. What problems with the French Church was the Civil Constitution of the Clergy designed to correct?
2. To what extent was the Civil Constitution of the Clergy a *liberal* document? To what extent was it not?
3. Would you have supported the Civil Constitution of the Clergy? Explain why or why not.