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Reconciling Disturbed Sacred Space: The Ordo for "Reconciling an Altar Where a Murder Has Been Committed" in the *Sacramentary of Gellone* in Its Cultural Context

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Reconciliation of an altar at which a murder has been committed

To God, the forgiver of crimes, to God, the cleanser of impurity, to God who has purified the world, hardened through sins from the beginning, through the splendor of his coming, we humbly pray, dear brothers, that he may assist us as a powerful fighter with the guiles of the raging devil in order that if his poisoned cunning has made something in us soiled and corrupted through his daily persecutions, what has become polluted through the devil's fraud will become purified through celestial compassion because as it is his to shatter what is whole and perfect, so it belongs to our creator to restore what has lapsed and to make steadfast what is unstable. Through our lord [. . .]

God whose goodness does not have a beginning nor an end,[1] who, filled with piety, chooses to restore in us what has gone lost rather than to slay what will perish and who, if negligence will have polluted something, or anger perpetrated something wrong, or drunkenness troubled something, or if lust perverted something, through grace preserves so that you would rather purify through grace than strike it by fury and who, the prudent creator of your work, chooses rather to erect what is lying low[2] than to punish that which should be damned; we beseech you with prayers that, appeased, you will benevolently accept the shelter of your tabernacle and that through the infusion of celestial grace you will cleanse your altar that was polluted through the fraud of the enemy who cuts to pieces, and that you will possess it in a purified state. May in the future all spiritual vileness be absent, may the envy of the ancient serpent be eliminated and extinguished and may the throngs of the devil with their frauds be driven away. Let him take away with him the stain that he brought about, let him be condemned to perennial punishments and gather with him the seeds of

> his works so that these may perish. Let no guilt of the elapsed contagion from now on do any harm, let nothing remain that is polluted through the fraud of the enemy, when it is cleansed through the infusion of your spirit. Let the pure simplicity of your church and the brightness of innocence that has been defiled, after receiving grace return to its glory. And may the crowd of the people that congregate here experience that their prayers when being presented, will be fulfilled. Through [our Lord . . .].[3]

This chapter will depart from two prayers. These prayers were said in order to restore the purity of an altar after a person had been killed there. They were therefore part of a process of restoration and reconciliation responding to a serious crisis in a Christian community caused by violence and bloodshed. This contribution will look at these prayers in their historical context in order to better understand their significance. It will therefore look into the sacramentary in which they are found and into the concepts of holiness attached to altars and churches at the time. It will become clear that these prayers mark a significant change in the development of the sanctity of the church building and the altar in the late Merovingian and early Carolingian period.

The prayers are found in a Mass book written in the late eighth century possibly somewhere in the diocese of Meaux, not very far from Paris. Although this Mass book, now known as the Sacramentary of Gellone, therefore dates from the period after the Carolingians usurped royal power among the Franks, it has been regarded as a work marking the transition from Merovingian to Carolingian ecclesiastical culture, particularly from an art historical point of view.[4] The work is known from a single manuscript, now in Paris, a manuscript famous for its rich illuminations.[5] It comprises prayers and benedictions to be used by a bishop. Since the manuscript demonstrates links with Cambrai, it was probably composed for its bishop, possibly to be identified with Hildoard (790–816), who is known for his liturgical interests. Soon after the sacramentary had been composed, it must have traveled, possibly by the agency of Benedict of Aniane, to Aquitaine, where it was employed in the monastery of Gellone (St. Guilhem le Désert) near Benedict's home monastery in Aniane. From this monastery it received its name, the Gellone sacramentary, although its origins clearly lie, as we have seen, much further north.

The Gellone Sacramentary is the earliest representative of a wider group of sacramentaries, which are now generally known as the eighth-century Gelasian Sacramentaries.[6] The prayers for the rededication of a defiled altar are also found in two other representatives of this group, the Sacramentary of Angoulême and

the one from Autun.[7] This group comprises some fourteen sacramentaries that combine elements from the Gelasian and Gregorian sacramentaries and probably go back to an archetype that may have been conceived at the monastery of Flavigny during the reign of the first king from the Carolingian dynasty, Pippin.[8] They contain Roman liturgical prayers in combination with Frankish material that liturgists refer to as "Gallican." One of the rites that liturgists regard as Frankish, and therefore Merovingian, is the consecration rite for churches that we find in them.[9] There is no evidence indicating that in the late antique or early Merovingian period churches were consecrated through a particular liturgical performance. The earliest liturgical evidence for such rites is to be found in the late Merovingian and early Carolingian sacramentaries. Such rites were the result of several tendencies. There is a close connection with the dedication of the altar.

In the early Christian period the first celebration of the eucharist made an altar special and gave it a kind of sacredness. The councils of Agde (506) and Epaone (517) speak of a ritual of anointment with chrism.[10] At the council of Orléans (511) the bishops allowed the consecration of a church that had been used by heretics, in this case Arians, something which the Burgundian bishops assembling in Epaone a little bit later (517) would not permit. It is not clear, however, how such a consecration would look.[11] Although we can see some ritual acts which conveyed a specific quality to the altar and the church building, in late antiquity and the early Merovingian period the sanctity of the church found most of its expression in the community of the faithful gathering there. The *ecclesia*, the church, was in the first place a gathering of people, and much less a material thing like a building. Such a view is, for example, propounded in the sermons that Caesarius of Arles preached on the occasion of the dedication of an altar, where he stressed that although the altar was made of stone, and the church made of wood and bricks and they were made holy through an act involving unction and benediction, for God the holiness of the temples of the hearts and bodies of the believers was what mattered most.[12]

The Gellone Sacramentary contains one of the earliest specimens of the rite for the consecration of a church building. This rite is based on an earlier one found in the Old Gelasian Sacramentary. The Old Gelasian Sacramentary, a work blending Roman and Merovingian material, survives in a manuscript written around the middle of the eighth century, and derived its Roman material from a Roman liturgical book composed between 628 and 715.[13] Its Roman core was enriched with Merovingian liturgical traditions and the prayers and Mass texts for the dedication of a church that are to be found in this work, belong to

these Merovingian enrichments. The Old Gelasian Sacramentary thus contains the earliest prayers for the liturgical dedication of a church.[14] Although the prayers refer to the dedication of the basilica, they mostly focus on the consecration of the altar, thus demonstrating its importance. Moreover, it is only in the context of the consecration of the altar that something of a ritual is described: the altar should be touched in its four corners with a mixture of water and wine and should be sprinkled seven times. The rest of the liquid should then be poured at the base of the altar. Incense should be offered to give it a most sweet smell. In addition, the sacramentary provides prayers for the consecration of three objects closely associated with the altar: the paten, the chalice, and the chrismal.[15]

In the Sacramentary of Gellone, and in two closely related sacramentaries, the Sacramentary of Angoulême and the Sacramentary of Autun, the core found in the Old Gelasian Sacramentary was developed further. The Gellone added formulas that exorcized alien, unholy and polluting substances from the building and beseeched the Lord to send a holy angel to protect all the visitors of the place. It thus stressed the purity of the church space and the need to keep it free from any form of pollution.[16] The Angoulême Sacramentary includes a detailed description of the ritual that is to be followed by the priests and clerics involved in the process. The ritual stresses the importance of the relics that are to be included in the altar, and thus has a similar focus on the altar as the Old Gelasian. It also describes how the priests and clerics should go through the whole church building making the sign of the cross with chrism.[17] The Sacramentary of Autun can be seen as a culmination of these trends, resulting in an elaborate description of the dedication ritual, involving exorcisms, a circuit of the church, a sprinkling of the wall and the pavement, thus stressing the building itself and the space. To emphasize the space even more, an alphabet had to be written on the pavement of the church.[18]

From the evidence provided in these liturgical books, one can conclude that from around the middle of the eighth century in Francia evidence survives of a ritual for the consecration of a church. The core of the ritual is found in the Old Gelasian Sacramentary and then was taken further in a number of eighth-century Gelasian Sacramentaries. In these rituals the altar remained the focus of church dedication, but increasingly the building itself was subjected to a process of sacralization. We can observe that the focus moves from a stress on the community of believers, as we have seen it in the sermons of Caesarius of Arles, to the building itself. Attention is being paid to the altar, the most important liturgical utensils, and to the walls and pavement of the building. This sacralization of space was

accompanied by a growing emphasis on the purity of the building. The church needed to be exorcized before dedication and had to be guarded from impure contagions. This increasing attention being paid to the concept of the church as a sacred building has recently been analyzed in interesting detail by Miriam Czock. From her analysis of liturgical sources, conciliar legislation, and penitential books, she was able to establish that it was only in the eighth century that the idea of the church building as a sacred place became entrenched in Gaul.[19] Czock discerns three major developments contributing to this idea of the church as a holy place. First there is the close relationship between the altar and relics. The practice of placing relics in altars led to a growing reverence for the altar. Then there is the late Roman practice of sanctuary that was adopted in Merovingian secular and ecclesiastical legislation. The legislation demarcated the church building and surrounding areas as a space in which a refugee was not to be harmed and thus a space was defined which had to remain free of violence and shedding of blood. Thirdly, we can observe an attempt to keep the church apart from people and things that were regarded as unclean. Particularly in penitential literature that was introduced in Francia from insular sources and found an eager reception there, we encounter many rules intended to keep the church building free from pollution, thus demonstrating in effect a certain reverence for the building as such.

These three developments came together in the eighth century, resulting not only in the emergence of a ritual for church dedication as we find it in the Gellone Sacramentary, but also in the creation of the ritual that we started with: the ritual for the reconciliation of an altar where a murder had been committed. In the following I will briefly sketch these three developments, in order to better understand the ritual in the Gellone Sacramentary.

First, there is the question of relics and altars. The Fifth Council of Carthage (401) required that altars in the countryside that contained no relics of martyrs had to be destroyed, thus establishing a close connection between relics and altars.[20] It was only at the second council of Nicaea (787) that it was decreed that every altar should house a relic, but in the fifth and sixth centuries a close connection between altars and relics was generally established. Such a connection is also evident in Merovingian Gaul. Gregory of Tours, for example, takes great care to provide relics for an oratorium that his predecessor Eufronius had used as storeroom and that Gregory then consecrated in honor of Martin and several other saints.[21] The custom to build a church over graves of martyrs and saints, again a case exemplified in Tours, where the basilica built on top of the grave of St. Martin grew into a major religious site in the Merovingian kingdom, added another layer to the connection between the altar and relics.

The sanctity of the church was further enhanced by legal developments. The sacred bodies resting in churches not only attracted people seeking healing from diseases or protection against misfortunes, but they also attracted men and women escaping the persecuting power of the emperor, the king or their representatives. In the early fifth century the Roman emperors had issued legislation recognizing the practice of people seeking asylum in church buildings, and these rules had been incorporated into the *Codex Theodosianus*, a text that circulated in Merovingian Gaul.[22] In 511 the Merovingian king Clovis called for a general council to be held in Orléans. This council ruled that murderers, adulterers and thieves seeking refuge in a church, its surrounding courtyard or the house of the priest, were not to be harmed. Clovis' successor, Chlothar I, corroborated the decisions reached at the council. That these legal provisions were an answer to existing practices is demonstrated by the work of Gregory of Tours, who mentions many men in dire straits seeking safety in a church, and in particular described the difficult situations in which he could find himself when people had sought refuge in the basilica of St. Martin in Tours.[23] The right of sanctuary, which was at least partly inspired by a concern to protect the purity of the church building, could paradoxically also lead to a defilement of a church. In some cases, the fact that someone sought refuge in a church led to serious confrontations and sometimes even bloodshed in a church.[24]

Merovingian bishops, apparently, did not worry a lot about the purity of the church building. Apart from the topic of church asylum, they issued no rules concerning the purity of the church space. We do find such rules, however, in penitential literature that was introduced into Merovingian Francia from the end of the sixth century. Particularly the penitentials attributed to Theodore, the seventh-century archbishop of Canterbury, abound with rules prohibiting entrance to a church to people that were for some reason or another considered to be impure. Theodore ruled, for example, that someone who had killed another person on the order of his lord, should stay away from church for 40 days.[25] It seems therefore that shedding blood, even without any form of personal responsibility, was irreconcilable with entering a church. Sex, or perhaps semen, was also regarded as problematic in regard to visiting a church as the following rules suggest. Newlywed persons had to stay away from church for 30 days, probably because of the association of a wedding and sexual intercourse.[26] A man should wash before entering a church after having had sex with his wife.[27] A cleric who slept in church and had an involuntary seminal emission there had to do penance for three days.[28] Women were also regarded as impure when they menstruated or had given birth. Theodore ruled that menstruating women—lay

women and nuns—should not enter a church or take part in Holy Communion.[29] Women entering a church after having given birth but before they were purified from blood, a period lasting for forty days according to Theodore, should do penance for three weeks.[30] The issue of entering a church in a state of impurity caused by sex, menstruation or childbirth, had already been a topic of concern in the earliest days of the English Church, as is evident from the responses of Gregory the Great to queries from Augustine of Canterbury, gathered in the so-called *Libellus Responsionum*.[31] Theodore's penitential rulings were well-known in later Merovingian Francia. In the first half of the eighth century they were added to the Merovingian canon law collection, known as the *Collectio Vetus Gallica*, when monks from the monastery of Corbie reworked this systematic canon law collection that had originated in Lyon somewhere around the year 600.[32]

The Old Gelasian Sacramentary is now preserved in the Vatican, but part of the original manuscript has been separated and is now kept in Paris. Quite a few eighth-century Gelasian sacramentaries are combined with penitential books. This is also true for the Old Gelasian Sacramentary. The Paris section of the codex contains an early Frankish penitential that derives most of its material from the penitential of Columbanus, the Irish peregrinus, who arrived in Gaul around 590 and who not only founded a number of monasteries but also introduced Irish penitential books. In the penitential that was originally connected to the manuscript of the Old Gelasian Sacramentary and is known as the *Paenitentiale Parisiense simplex*, there is an intriguing sentence prohibiting to have sex in a church.[33] This is quite unusual for early penitential books, but there is a parallel in the ninth-century *Paenitentiale Vindobonense C*, in a series of sentences that is probably deriving from an early insular text.[34] Particularly noticeable is the lifelong penance that is being prescribed, indicating the seriousness of the offense.

The three factors just mentioned, the close relationship between relics, altars and churches, the importance of the legally defined right of asylum and the penitential regulations safeguarding the purity of the church, all seem to have contributed to the development of a liturgical ritual for the consecration of a church and that for the re-consecration of a church that had been defiled by bloodshed, that we have seen emerging in the Old Gelasian Sacramentary and its early, eighth-century successors. The eighth-century Gelasian Sacramentaries demonstrate other signs of being influenced by conceptions of the pure and the impure as we encounter them in insular and early Frankish penitential literature. The Gellone Sacramentary, for example, contains a prayer for those who have eaten carrion, the consumption of which was prohibited in penitential literature

because of its impurity.[35] The prayer for someone who was being vexed by a demon, uses exactly the same words to describe such a person as Theodore's penitential.[36] The Gellone Sacramentary contains an exorcism prayer for a well which has been contaminated by negligence. Contamination of a well is a theme that is regularly discussed in penitential literature.[37]

If we look at the ritual in the Gellone Sacramentary, we can detect the concern for purity. The two prayers abound with terms related to forms of uncleanness, such as *sordes*, *maculatus*, *corruptus* and *pollutus*. On the other hand we encounter many terms related to purification: *mundare*, *purificare*, *purgare*, *restituere*.[38] The first prayer is less concerned with the altar or the church building and focuses on the state of mind of the believers, while the second talks explicitly about the altar and the place where it is housed (*tabernaculi receptaculum*). At the end the second prayer mentions the pure simplicity of the church that needs to be restored, which might be deliberately ambiguous in that it can refer to the community of believers as well as to the church building.

Although the rubric clearly states that the ritual is meant for being used when an altar had been defiled by murder, such an act is not explicitly addressed in the prayers. Several kinds of sins are mentioned that might have contributed to the defilement of the altar, such as anger, drunkenness and lust. That such sins can lead to violence seems evident in these cases, but the prayer also refers to negligence in this context, which is harder to link with violence. Possibly this is related to another way in which an altar can be polluted, i.e. through the neglectful handling of the host. Again, this is a topic that receives ample attention in penitential literature. The seventh-century Irish penitential of Cummean, for example, contains a long chapter dealing with such cases. It discusses the case when mice eat from the eucharist, when worms are found in it, when the eucharist loses its taste and color because it was not properly stored. It also discusses negligent ways of handling the host by the priest in cases where the eucharist is dropped, when it can no longer be found, when wine is spilled from the chalice and other forms of negligent behavior. Particular concern is also expressed when someone after consuming the eucharist has to vomit, thus exposing the eucharist to even more serious forms of defilement, such as being lapped up by dogs.[39] In the context of the connection between the sacramentary and conceptions of purity that we find in penitential books, it seems that the ritual as we find it in the Gellone Sacramentary may also have been meant to be used in other circumstances when an altar had been defiled. The formulations of the prayers are certainly general enough to be usefully employed on other occasions, for apart from the title it received the prayers contain no specific references to murder or bloodshed.

The non-specificity of the prayers may have had other advantages as well. They do not address explicitly the actual deeds that caused the defilement of the altar and by implication the church building, but only speak about the root causes of the infraction in rather general terms: the vices of negligence, anger, drinking and lust, as well as the ruses of the devil. Such non-specificity, perhaps, functioned as a means of avoiding having to address specific acts and thus existing conflicts and persons. We can assume that violence taking place in a church upset the local community. Murdering someone in church probably caused great social upheaval, fueling forms of local discord and division, that might lead to vengeance and feud. The prayers seem to evade to tackle such existing problems in the community head-on and instead stress the community of the faithful in their pure simplicity and innocent splendor. By emphasizing the deeper causes of a specific act of violence, the prayers were able to shun explicitly addressing conflicting issues and to stress the restored innocence of the community. How exactly the rifts within a community were healed remains unclear, but the prayers suggest that the liturgy of purification was the outcome of a process of negotiation, sealing a conclusion, so to speak, rather than being an essential part of the negotiations themselves. The liturgy probably functioned primarily as a way of demonstrating the restored unity of the Christian community, and at such a moment it could be inconvenient to address specific issues and thus persons. If someone was killed in a church this was a breach of the right of sanctuary, and in such cases the priest or bishop was probably involved in the protection of the refugee and the process of mediation in order to settle the issue at hand.[40] As the person presiding over the liturgy of purification, it was the bishop, or perhaps on a local level the priest, who was a central figure in the ritual demonstratively proclaiming the reconciliation.

We have seen how a ritual of purification for a defiled altar survives in two sacramentaries composed at the end of the eighth century. The ritual probably had a local Frankish origin and may go back to the late Merovingian period. The concepts of the church as a sacred space certainly does. The right of sanctuary and the custom of building churches on top of holy graves are moreover unquestionably major components of the Merovingian world, as is violence near an altar. Historiographical texts demonstrate that already before the late eighth century, people were being killed in churches. Although concepts of the church as a holy place may have been less pronounced before the first half of the eighth century—when, as we have seen, insular notions strengthened existing Merovingian tendencies—spilling blood within a church was seen as a serious offense. The work of Gregory of Tours, although mentioning quite a few cases of

bloodshed in churches, does not provide any evidence for a liturgical rite of reconciliation for a church or an altar that had been defiled in such a way. Gregory's work does demonstrate, however, that breaches of the right of sanctuary were not taken lightly, and conciliar legislation suggests the same.[41] This raises the question of how people dealt with such problems before the period for which we have evidence for the existence of such rites.

We have seen that the Old Gelasian Sacramentary contains the earliest evidence for the existence of a ritual for the dedication of a church, and that in an earlier period the first Mass being sung over an altar constituted an act of consecration. In the case of blood being shed at an altar, the first liturgical celebration after such an event must also have had special significance. It would have functioned as a kind of reestablishment and reinforcement of pre-existing relations within the community, although in fact these relations might, of course, have changed because of what had happened. The liturgical celebrant, the local priest or bishop, presiding over such a celebration must somehow have appeased the community and restored the proper order, thereby at least symbolically healing existing rifts within the community. The first liturgical celebration after the defilement of a church, therefore, can be seen as a parallel to the first Mass through which an altar, and to a certain extent the church building, were normally "consecrated," if one can use this word in this context. The sources speak mostly of dedication. We do not know how this went about in practice although the anointing of an altar with chrism seems to have been an important aspect of it. One can imagine that a similar ritual was used when a church had been polluted by bloodshed, but any evidence supporting such a proposition is lacking. Once a more formal form of church dedication had developed, the need for a ritual of rededicating a church after it had been violated was apparently felt quite quickly. The ordo for the rededication of a defiled altar that we find in the Gellone Sacramentary should be seen as the response to this need.