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12 Conclusion: Early medieval priests – some further thoughts

> "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."

With this well-known sentence, which has become almost proverbial, L. P. Hartley opened his novel *The Go-Between*, published in 1953. He captured something of the essence of historiography of the second half of the twentieth century with this recognition of the difference between the past and the present and its contingent emphasis on the otherness of the past. Particularly the *Annales* school made us aware that many historical phenomena that had been taken for granted, for example emotions and gestures, had a history of their own. Topics such as love, kissing, youth and death were all historicized. They were no longer seen as ahistorical and therefore timeless categories of human experience, but as phenomena that were constantly changing and shifting in their form and meaning. Yet, much of the research of the *Annales* school devoted to the history of mentalities, as it was then often called, took for granted the clear distinction between clerical and popular culture. Clerical culture was learned and written, while popular culture was oral and rather simple. In the eyes of someone like Jacques Le Goff, these cultures were also antagonistic. The clergy tended to monopolize all higher forms of culture, particularly when writing was involved. Although clerical culture was able and obliged to accommodate particular aspects of the culture of the masses in order to gain access to the lay world, its attitude towards the culture of the masses was in principle one of refusal.[1] This basic outlook of a clerical world that was qualitatively different from the world of the majority of the people still determined the outlook of Aaron Gurevich, who, however, in his study of medieval popular culture put much more emphasis on the constant interaction between the clerical and the lay world.[2] Le Goff and Gurevich were most of all interested in the lay world and tended to see the clerical world as monolithic as well as antagonistic. Peter Brown not only distrusted the two-tier model of culture that Le Goff and Gurevich employed but also acknowledged the need to see regional varieties and chronological developments in late antique and early medieval christendom.[3] Variety is also a key term in this volume.

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1 J. Le Goff, 'Culture cléricale et traditions folkloriques dans la civilisation mérovingienne', in *idem*, *Pour un autre Moyen Age. Temps, travail et culture en Occident: 18 essays* (Paris, 1977), pp. 223–235, at p. 225.
2 A.J. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge, 1988).
3 P. Brown, *The Cult of Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981). See also his The Rise of Western Christendom. *Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000* (3rd edition Malden, 2013).

While Le Goff regarded ecclesiastical culture as monolithic, Gurevich made a welcome distinction between the intellectual clerical elite and parish priests. The latter catered for the pastoral needs of their flock and were constantly trying to change their stubborn traditional ways of viewing the world with the help of pastoral texts such as sermons, saints' lives or penitential books. These texts had to incorporate popular dispositions so that they became comprehensible and attractive to their lay audience. Parish priests in the eyes of Gurevich were cultural brokers, middlemen mediating between the world of religious thinking and ecclesiastical legislation, on the one hand, and an almost inert timeless world view of the peasants living in their parish, on the other. What historians such as Le Goff or Gurevich did not question or properly historicize was the notion of a priest or a parish priest itself. Who were these priests? Can we say something about their social background and status? Were they rich or poor? Did they function in a parochial setting? Were they well educated or not? How did they acquire their ministry? Where such questions have been addressed in the past, this resulted mostly in a far-from-flattering image of priests. Jan Dhondt, for example, presented the following gloomy picture of Carolingian priests: "At the lowest level of the clergy stood the simple parish priest: an unfree man whom the lord of the village had chosen for this office and whom he punished corporally if he acted contrary to his wishes. The village priests were extremely ignorant; they were mostly married or living in concubinage."[4] Such views ultimately derive from the idea that lay lords owned and controlled churches, as Ulrich Stutz has elaborated for the *Eigenkirchen*.[5]

The chapters in this volume show that we can say a lot more about early medieval priests. The first part of the book, chapters 2 to 7, demonstrates most of all the social setting in which priests functioned. This part is mainly based on charter material, which allows us to see priests in action as donors, buyers or sellers of movable and landed property, but also as people who drew up the charters and witnessed the transactions. In short, the sources indicate that the priests belonged to the local elite as landowners and witnesses and performed the important task of public writing. In many of the regions discussed, for example in Tuscany, Iberia, Bavaria, Northern Francia, Alemannia and Alsace, we can observe priests heavily involved in local affairs. This was much less obvious in England at the time, where particularly in the early period, pastoral care issued in general from more collegiate centres, such as

4 J. Dhondt, *Das frühe Mittelalter*. Fischer Weltgeschichte 10 (Frankfurt a.M., 1968), p. 235: 'Auf der untersten Stufe der Geistlichkeit stand der einfache Dorfpfarrer: ein Unfreier, den der Grundherr, zu dessen Besitz das betreffende Dorf zählte, für dieses Amt bestimmt hatte und den er körperlich züchtigte, wenn er sich seinen Wünschen widersetzte. Die Dorfpfarrer waren außerordentlich unwissende Leute; sie waren meistens verheiratet oder lebten im Konkubinat.' See also pp. 41–43 for a more detailed but similar negative picture.

5 As discussed by Van Rhijn and Patzold in the introduction, pp. 3–5.

monasteries and communities of clerics (minsters), and where local priests are almost invisible in the sources.

In the other regions for which we have charter evidence about priests, we can also see that they generally relied heavily on their family network. This suggests that priests were employed in the localities where they were born and raised and that a priest's relatives and friends may have used their influence in order to secure his ministry. In Tuscany we can observe that the community attached to a specific baptismal church held a place of some prominence in local affairs touching upon the church and its priest. According to canon law, priests were under the control of the bishop. In the charter material, however, bishops occur only occasionally, with the exception of Tuscany. In Iberia, bishops do not seem to have exerted close control on priests, unless they owned the churches in which priests served. In Bavaria, Alemannia and the northern regions of Francia, bishops were apparently more active in supervising their priests. It stands to reason that priests obtained their training also in a local setting, although we often lack precise information on how this was done. Several chapters of this volume indicate that cousins (*nepotes*) were privileged in the sense that they often took over the office from their uncle (the chapters by Kohl, Davies and Zeller); in Tuscany, in this context, reference is frequently made to sons, and we might assume that this was also done in such a familiar setting that they often received the necessary education and formation.

On the basis of the studies assembled in this volume, it can be concluded that bishops interfered more often in the affairs of local priests in the regions dominated by the Franks. In Tuscany episcopal control over local churches apparently grew from the late eighth century onwards, a timing which might suggest Carolingian influence. For Frankish regions, there are indications that the control of the bishop over the priests in their diocese grew stronger in the same period, the late eighth and ninth centuries. This is almost certainly connected with the reforms the Carolingian rulers advocated in their realm. The Carolingians ruled by God's grace and this was taken very seriously. As Steffen Patzold indicates, God's wrath could manifest itself in many disastrous ways, such as the occurrence of extremely bad weather, crop failures, famine and military defeat. To appease God, the Franks had to pray, fast and perform other acts of penitence. An extensive program of *correctio* was devised in order to secure God's grace for the Frankish nation.[6] In this program bishops played a leading role. They had to perform a kind of "Christian quality management," as Patzold calls it. The most well-known instrument that Carolingian bishops devised for quality management were the episcopal statutes (or *Capitula Episcoporum*), which have been edited and studied, thanks mainly to Peter Brommer, Rudolf Pokorny and Carine van

6 Amply discussed in R. McKitterick, *Charlemagne. The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 292–380.

Rhijn.[7] With the help of these texts, bishops indicated what they expected of their priests. If we take the many manuscripts containing these works into account, it seems reasonable to assume that these texts reached local priests, although possibly not all of them.

Episcopal statutes formulated ideals about priestly conduct, their education and their pastoral service to the Christian community. Whether or not priests in their localities abided by the rules formulated by the bishops in these statutes is a question that is, of course, hard to answer. We have indications that priests murdered, stole, fornicated and dabbled in religious practices that can hardly be considered Christian. In these respects, they engaged in social life in ways similar to many laypeople of those times. Yet, bishops told priests time and again that they had to live an exemplary life. They had to be living sermons, practicing what they were preaching and thus educating their flocks through their way of life. Since our sources in general inform us only about priestly conduct when priests were not behaving in an exemplary way, it is hard to tell in how far bishops succeeded in their efforts to influence their priests' behaviour. What we can observe, however, is that the bishops' texts reached a certain amount of the priests in their diocese, if not all of them. We can also observe that books were composed that helped priests to perform their tasks. Evidence demonstrates that priests owned books not only in Frankish regions but also in Iberia, where episcopal control was less evident, as Wendy Davies has shown in Chapter 7. What these books looked like, in all their diversity, is discussed by Yitzhak Hen (Chapter 9) and Carine van Rhijn (Chapter 10) and Francesca Tinti (Chapter 8) for late Anglo-Saxon England. The contents of such books enabled priests to pass their priestly exams, another kind of text meant to enhance quality management of the priesthood, that appears in the Carolingian age.[8] The books that priests were using might also give us an idea about the pastoral tasks that the priests were fulfilling (or were meant to fulfil). Preaching, singing Mass, providing baptism, hearing confession and caring for the sick and dying seem to be the most important among these, but they might also be blessing animals, praying to ward off hail and thunderstorms and singing litanies for the safety of the king and the army. Another task of the priesthood concerned the education of the laity.[9] They ought to know what it meant to be a good Christian. They had to know about the rules governing a Christian sex life or what a Christian diet should be. They were also to take care that the Christians committed to their care knew at

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7 See the four volumes of the *MGH Capitula Episcoporum* and C. van Rhijn, *Shepherds of the Lord. Priests and Episcopal Statutes in the Carolingian Period* (Turnhout, 2007).

8 C. van Rhijn, 'Karolingische priesterexamens en het probleem van "*correctio*" op het platteland', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 125 (2012), pp. 158–171.

9 R. Meens, 'Religious instruction in the Frankish kingdom', in E. Cohen and M.B. de Jong (eds), *Medieval Transformations. Texts, Power, and Gifts* (Leiden, 2001), pp. 51–67.

least the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, the minimum requirement for Carolingian Christians.[10]

How important it was for a ruler such as Charlemagne that his subjects knew the Creed and the Lord's Prayer is revealed by a capitulary that probably dates from the later years of the emperor's reign in which he orders that those who do not know these texts were to be corrected through fasting and whipping, and if men did not comply, they were to be sent to the emperor: surely a dreadful prospect for many.[11] Patzold's brief analysis of the little treatises that we encounter in manuscripts that were meant to instruct priests, who in turn had to instruct the Christian community in their charge, stresses the contribution of the Christian message to the coherence of the Frankish polity. The Franks should avoid internal strife and conflict, because they were all sons of the same father: our Father who art in heaven. This basic idea not only related to the position of the emperor as the ruler of all, but furthermore called for a kind of cooperation between different social groups, for example between the poor, the rich and the powerful. In this way local priests contributed to a feeling of Christian Frankishness, to an ideology of rulership as well as to the formation of a polity.

This collection of studies examining local priests provides insight into the social position of priests mainly on the basis of the charter material and through the study of manuscripts meant to be in the hands of priests, and reveals something of what they were expected to do. Such expectations must have been grounded in priestly conduct and thus give us an impression of what priests were doing while taking care of their flocks. The studies assembled in this volume point to the existence of important regional differences. In England, for example, as Francesca Tinti describes, local priests seem to have been frequently working from a clerical or monastic community (minster), while we lack the specific charter material indicating the social position of priests. Topography suggests that churches were very much dependent on manor houses, and priests are therefore thought to have been chosen by their lords and depending on their authority. In Tuscany priests were generally free, rather wealthy and were important as money lenders, but we do not seem to have evidence that they owned books. Handbooks for priests mainly survive from Frankish regions and late Anglo-Saxon England. Evidence for priests owning books is found in Iberia, Bavaria and northern Francia. Such regional differences may, of course, be the result of the kind of sources that have survived from particular regions, but the sources that survived up to a point also reflect the sources that were produced in a particular historical context. A comparative approach as presented in

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10 For such minimum requirements in the period between 1000 and 1500, see N. Tanner and S. Watson, 'Least of the laity: the minimum requirements for a medieval Christian', *Journal of Medieval History* 32 (2006), pp. 395–423.

11 Discussed by Patzold, p. 205.

this book, therefore, raises an interesting set of questions, which for a part still remain unanswered.

A topic that is not addressed directly in this collection, but which surfaces in almost every chapter, is that of language. Christianity is a religion of the book and the language of its ritual is Latin. The measure in which Latin, which certainly also evolved over time, was understood by Christians who were in contact with local priests probably differed quite significantly. Some books meant for priests, such as the so-called Weissenburger Katechismus, contained elements in the vernacular, while in England, homilies and penitentials were composed or translated into Old English. Old High German glosses often explained liturgical or other religious texts. Priests not only held an important social position because they acted as scribes but also, significantly, wrote in Latin. Carolingian bishops were anxious that preaching was done in the vernacular, as the council of Tours decreed in 813.[12]

Let me finish by looking in more detail at a letter exchanged between Charlemagne and Bishop Ghaerbald of Liège, a correspondence also discussed by Patzold. In this letter interpreters are mentioned and therefore the question of language plays a role. Interpreters are to inform the huge population of the Carolingian realm about the contents of the emperor's wishes. In the first decade of the ninth century – there is no certainty about the precise date, both 805 and 807 have been suggested – Charlemagne wrote to Ghaerbald, and to all the bishops in his realm, as we may infer from the letter, announcing the institution of a special three-day fast.[13] The background of this letter and the fast was clearly penitential. The Franks were in this way to atone for their sins. God's wrath, which manifested itself in many ways, for example in the form of bad weather, failing crops and pagan incursions that had befallen the Franks, had to be appeased through prayer, processions and Masses. In this letter Charles constantly stressed the importance that everyone living in his empire should participate in this fast. The letter keeps drumming on the theme of general participation by everyone, with the constant repetition of the words *omnes*, *per omnia* and *unusquisque*. The letter describes in detail what this fast ought to be like. Everyone had to abstain from wine and meat until the ninth hour. At the ninth hour everyone had to go to the nearest church (*ad ecclesias vicinas*), and in the last part of their journey, they had to walk in a procession chanting psalms when entering the church. After hearing Mass with a devoted mind, everyone should return

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12 Council of Tours (813), c. 17, ed. A. Werminghoff, *MGH Concilia* 2,1 (Hanover, 1906), p. 288.

13 For the traditional date of 807, see the edition in the MGH and Patzold in this volume, p. 199; for 805, see A. Dierkens, 'La christianisation des campagnes de l'Empire de Louis le Pieux. L'exemple du diocèse de Liège sous l'épiscopat de Walcaud (c.809–c.831)', in P. Godman and R. Collins (eds), *Charlemagne's Heir. New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious (814–840)* (Oxford, 1990). pp. 309–329, at p. 314; H. Mordek, *Bibliotheca capitularium regum Francorum manuscripta. Überlieferung und Traditionszusammenhang der fränkischen Herrschererlasse* (Munich, 1995), p. 41; McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, p. 273.

home and could eat, but with appropriate sobriety. The bishops, so Charlemagne decreed, had to read and announce the emperor's letter in such a way that everybody was able to understand the reason why this fast was to be held. Moreover, the bishops had to take care that the message reached every baptismal church and they had to send good interpreters (*bonos interpretes*) who could get the message of the letter across. The same had to be done from every monastery.[14] This image of a three-day fast, which was upheld throughout the empire, and of all the Franks going to church at the same hour is a powerful one, stressing unity and uniformity. One could question, however, whether this powerful image was realistic. Was it in any way conceivable that Charlemagne's bishops, priests and subjects would be informed about the emperor's wishes, or was the aging emperor at the time in such a deep psychological crisis that he had lost touch with reality?[15] Should the letter be viewed as another unrealistic and unsuccessful attempt to bring order to the Carolingian state?[16] The studies assembled here, however, suggest that Charlemagne had his wits together when issuing this letter to the bishop of Liège. The ideals that the emperor and his courtiers envisaged at their palace in Aachen (or elsewhere), could in fact, so these studies suggest, be passed on to the bishops in the realm, who in turn were able to reach the local clergy who could then convey the imperial order to the emperor's subjects. If further study confirms these views, which are persuasive but still tentative, the importance of local priests as cultural brokers and 'bottlenecks of *correctio*' in the Carolingian Empire of the ninth century is highlighted even further.[17] Whether this was true for the Carolingian world and how the Carolingian situation might compare to other regions and periods remains an intriguing field of study. The studies in this volume have abundantly shown that a careful analysis of material that is often neglected can bring new and highly interesting results.

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14 Karoli ad Ghaerbaldum episcopum epistola, ed. A. Boretius, *MGH Capitularia* 1 (Hanover, 1883), no. 124, pp. 245–246.

15 For the assumption of the emperor's psychological crisis, see F.L. Ganshof, *Frankish institutions under Charlemagne* (New York, 1970), p. 6–7.

16 A. Murray, 'Confession before 1215', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 3 (1993), pp. 51–81, at p. 58: 'Charlemagne once tried to dig a canal to join the Rhine and Danube river systems, and found eventually the soil was too damp and kept falling back. That image of ambition and eventual failure is an image of his "state" '.

17 C. van Rhijn, 'Priests and the Carolingian reforms: the bottlenecks of local *correctio*', in: R. Corradini, R. Meens, C. Pössel, P. Shaw (eds), *Texts and Identities in the Early Middle Ages*. Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 12 (Vienna, 2006), pp. 219–237.