

# The Problem(s) with the Carolingian Reform(s)

Rutger Kramer

In the year 811, Charlemagne, Carolingian emperor of the Franks (768/800–14), issued a capitulary to the assorted counts, bishops, and abbots in his realm.<sup>1</sup> Among many other things, he used this missive, known as the *Capitula tractanda cum comitibus episcopis et abbatibus*, to ask them to take note “that investigation must be made into ourselves, whether we are really Christians”.<sup>2</sup> It is a fascinating statement coming from the mind of an individual—a ruler who was invested in the Christian-ness of his empire. Rather than rest on his laurels, he encouraged his elites, those tasked with shepherding his people towards salvation, to reassess themselves and their faith. As the emperor put it: “This can very easily be recognized by considering our [way of] life and our conduct, if we are willing conscientiously to discuss in front of each other [our] *conversatio*”. Part and parcel of this process was to engage in an open dialogue about changing their very way of life.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than being a straightforward policy document, this capitulary contained a profession of uncertainty. Charlemagne—and those tasked with composing such capitularies in his name—knew that the realm was in a state of perpetual crisis, which should inspire similar anxieties in the capitulary’s recipients.<sup>4</sup> With that, the invocation of this anxiety became a control mechanism

1 Many thanks to Nicola Edelmann, Mateusz Fafinski, and Melissa Kapitan for their help bringing this article to fruition, and to the editor of this volume for his patience and encouragement.

2 *Capitula tractanda cum comitibus episcopis et abbatibus*, ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover, 1883), pp. 161–62, “Quod nobis desiciendum est, utrum vere Christiani sumus. Quod in consideratione vitae vel morum nostrorum facillime cognosci potest, si diligenter conversationem coram discutere voluerimus”. On the anxiety underpinning this capitulary see Janet L. Nelson, “The Voice of Charlemagne,” in *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford, 2001), pp. 77–88, at pp. 85–86.

3 On *conversatio*, see Renie Choy, “The Deposit of Monastic Faith: The Carolingians on the Essence of Monasticism,” in *The Church on its Past*, ed. Peter Clarke and Charlotte Methuen (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 74–86, at pp. 79–80.

4 ‘Crises’ should be understood in the Burckhardtian sense of the word, as ‘accelerated processes’ arising from tensions between opposing political, social, or religious forces: Kurt Meyer, *Jacob Burckhardt: Ein Porträt* (Berlin, 2009), pp. 139–57. Also refer to Janet L. Nelson, “Making a Difference in Eighth-Century Politics: The Daughters of Desiderius,” in *After Rome’s*

meant to harness the hope of those in charge to do better. The unpredictability and uncertainty that came with governing the Carolingian realm, as Jennifer Davis stated, “were not just challenges, they were opportunities”.<sup>5</sup> They were seized by the powerful to effect what we would nowadays like to call ‘reforms’—or at least, to motivate others to help the process along.

Improving the state of the Church had been intrinsic to Carolingian policy-making even before they took over the Frankish throne from their Merovingian predecessors. This was a process that hinged on the question of who would be in the best position to make sure the realm was well ordered and well run: which ruling family would be the best to quell the uncertainties of early medieval life.<sup>6</sup> To that end, the Carolingians tended to encourage, sponsor, or even enforce their version of the *ecclesia* among their followers. From organizing general, pro-active councils that addressed matters “of general use for the Church”, to reorganizing religious life at a local or regional level—for instance by placing monasteries under the authority of the bishops who were in turn beholden to the new rulers, or by nudging them towards the general acceptance of the *Rule of St Benedict* as the new monastic rule *par excellence*—rulers had always been in the business of harnessing the ‘power of prayer’ of not just monastic communities, but everyone under their responsibility.<sup>7</sup> By following these efforts up with actual support, the Carolingians eventually gained access to the intellectual, theological, and administrative prowess of the bishops who

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*Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History: Essays presented to Walter Goffart*, ed. Alexander C. Murray (Toronto, 1998), pp. 171–90 and Christina Pössel, “Authors and Recipients of Carolingian Capitularies, 779–829,” in *Texts and Identities in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Corradini, Rob Meens, Christina Pössel, and Philip Shaw (Vienna, 2006), pp. 253–74.

- 5 Jennifer Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 429–30.
- 6 Yitzhak Hen, “The Christianisation of Kingship,” in *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751: Vorgeschichte, Legitimationsstrategien und Erinnerung*, ed. Matthias Becher and Jörg Jarnut (Münster, 2004), pp. 163–77; Olaf Schneider, “Die Königshebung Pippins 751 in der Erinnerung der karolingischen Quellen: Die Glaubwürdigkeit der Reichsannalen und die Verformung der Vergangenheit,” *ibid.*, pp. 243–75; and Thomas F.X. Noble, “The Papacy in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries,” in *The New Cambridge Medieval History, vol. 2: c. 700–c. 900*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 563–86.
- 7 Alain Dierkens, “Carolus monasteriorum multorum evorsor et ecclesiasticarum pecuniarum in usus proprios commutator? Notes sur la politique monastique du maire du palais Charles Martel,” in *Karl Martell in seiner Zeit*, ed. Jörg Jarnut (Sigmaringen, 1994), pp. 277–94; Mayke de Jong, “Carolingian Monasticism: The Power of Prayer,” in *The New Cambridge Medieval History, 2*, ed. McKitterick, pp. 622–53; Albrecht Diem, “Inventing the Holy Rule: Some Observations on the History of Monastic Normative Observance in the Early Medieval West,” in *Western Monasticism ante litteram: The Space of Monastic Observance in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Hendrik W. Dey and Elizabeth Fentress (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 53–84; and Klaus Zelzer, “Von Benedikt zu Hildemar: Die *Regula Benedicti* auf dem Weg zur Alleingeltung im Blickfeld der Textgeschichte,” *Regulae Benedicti Studia* 16 (1987), 1–22.

maintained these monastic communities, and the abbots who consolidated them.<sup>8</sup> For the ecclesiastical power-brokers themselves, the reasons to attach their fate to that of these lay rulers were manifold: while coercion was at play in several cases, communities also stood to benefit materially and socially from picking the side of a clearly successful aristocratic family.<sup>9</sup> Equally often, they actually subscribed to the monasticism (or indeed, the Church) supported by the Carolingian court—or at least they saw the benefits of having a central point where rules and norms would be gathered and arbitrated.<sup>10</sup> Carolingian policies towards the Church in the late 8th and the early 9th century thus betray the attempts to find new identities within a new system.<sup>11</sup> After all, as court, cloister, and episcopacy came to increasingly rely upon one another, the stakes were also raised. Their (perceived) responsibilities grew—from creating political stability in the region, to ensuring the salvation of everybody under their authority.<sup>12</sup>

But were these ‘reforms’? Were the people spearheading these efforts looking forward, or looking back? Were they trying to kickstart changes, or to stop ongoing developments in their tracks? Justifying the transformations of local customs, or calling upon every single individual in the *ecclesia* to learn to want to change? The self-confidence that we see in the sources emanating from the era should not be mistaken for certainty. Rather, we should take the anxiety expressed in the *Capitula tractanda cum comitibus episcopis et abbatibus* more seriously: as an attempt or an invitation to find one’s place within—and formulate one’s responsibilities towards—a Church that gave as much as it expected in return.<sup>13</sup>

8 Mayke de Jong, “Charlemagne’s Church,” in *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Joanna Story (Manchester, 2005), pp. 103–36 and Thomas F.X. Noble, “The Monastic Ideal as a Model for Empire,” *Revue bénédictine* 86 (1976), 235–50.

9 Ian Wood, “Entrusting Western Europe to the Church, 400–750,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser. 23 (2013), 37–73 and Susan Wood, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 191–310.

10 Albrecht Diem, “The Carolingians and the *Regula Benedicti*,” in *Religious Franks: Religion and Power in the Frankish Kingdoms: Studies in Honour of Mayke de Jong*, ed. Rob Meens, Dorine van Espelo, Bram van den Hoven van Genderen, Janneke Raaijmakers, Irene van Renswoude, and Carine van Rhijn (Manchester, 2016), pp. 243–61.

11 Rutger Kramer, Emilie Kurdziel, and Graeme Ward, “Institutions, Identities, and the Realisation of Reform: An Introduction,” in *Monastic Communities and Canonical Clergy in the Carolingian World (780–840): Categorising the Church*, ed. Rutger Kramer, Emilie Kurdziel, and Graeme Ward (Turnhout, 2022), pp. 13–32.

12 Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean, *The Carolingian World* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 131–53.

13 Renie Choy, *Intercessory Prayer and the Monastic Ideal in the Time of the Carolingian Reforms* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 131–92.

This tension between hope and uncertainty is why it is so difficult to say anything definitive about the ‘Carolingian reforms’.<sup>14</sup> One of the main problems with these reforms is that, while the documents we use to study them tend to appear in the guise of policy in the making, or as improvements to an existing system, they are equally reflective of a deep-seated fear for the future and the simultaneous hope that things will turn out fine in the end.<sup>15</sup> This is a simple observation—that religious thinking influenced political processes in the Carolingian world and vice versa—but it is all too easily forgotten that faith was a deeply personal thing at the time, fed by inner doubts as much as by public certainties.<sup>16</sup> Public expressions of religiosity notwithstanding, behind every political ritual, behind every piece of legislation aimed at changing the lives of the religious, behind every attempt to compose a narrative about these developments, stood individuals for whom these measures were expressions of their faith.<sup>17</sup> As such, they should not be seen as simple orders to effect religious changes, but rather as attempts to entice their recipients to think about their place in the greater scheme of things.<sup>18</sup>

In this chapter, I will focus on the anxiety in our sources, and in the process explain texts as expressions of hope that the changes wrought are the correct ones. I will do so using two exemplary case studies from the reigns of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. Specifically, I will present a reading of the prologues to the *Admonitio generalis* (789) and the *Institutio canonorum* (819), two texts that loom large in our understanding of the Carolingian dynasty’s reform-mindedness. It is important to read such texts against the grain. The sources produced by the court are so persuasive, and their narrative so convincing, that it is tempting to use their version of ‘religious reforms’ as paradigmatic for our appreciation of subsequent developments.<sup>19</sup> However, as

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- 14 For a methodological perspective on uncertainty in narratives see Annika Domainko, *Uncertainty in Livy and Velleius: Time, Hermeneutics and Roman Historiography* (Munich, 2018), pp. 26–62.
- 15 Timothy Reuter, “‘Kirchenreform’ und ‘Kirchenpolitik’ im Zeitalter Karl Martells: Begriffe und Wirklichkeit,” in *Karl Martell in seiner Zeit*, ed. Jorg Jarnut (Sigmaringen, 1994), pp. 34–59, at pp. 40–42.
- 16 Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814–840* (Cambridge, 2009) and Janet L. Nelson, “Carolingian Doubt?,” *Studies in Church History* 52 (2016), 65–86.
- 17 Philippe Buc, “Ritual and Interpretation: The Early Medieval Case,” *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000), 183–210.
- 18 Rutger Kramer, *Rethinking Authority in the Carolingian Empire: Ideals and Expectations during the Reign of Louis the Pious (813–828)* (Amsterdam, 2019), pp. 61–90.
- 19 Rosamond McKitterick, “The Church,” in *The New Cambridge Medieval History, vol. 3: c. 900–c. 1024*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 130–62. This “long shadow of the

much as these sources imply religious change (or lack thereof), I hope to show that this perspective also reveals that court intellectuals were actively aware of their lack of control over the willingness of their subjects to actually change. Our authors, I would contend, intended their efforts to be interpreted as such. Reading the sources in such a way may complicate the ‘Carolingian reforms’, but will also humanize them.

## 1 Studying to Admonish

The *Admonitio generalis* is often presented as the text that caused the Carolingian reform movement to start moving in the first place.<sup>20</sup> Issued in 789, this capitulary, written under the supervision of Alcuin in the name of Charlemagne, gives 82-odd points for the improvement of the Church.<sup>21</sup> As such, it is among the clearest representations of Carolingian intentions, especially given that its stipulations may also be found strewn across later normative texts.<sup>22</sup> The narrative self-consciously presents the king as the one in control: Charlemagne is compared to the Old Testament King Josiah, who tore down shrines to false gods, and reinstated the law of God for the people of Israel. It was simultaneously a dig at the Merovingian predecessors of the Carolingians and a reminder that a single ‘law’ supersedes the existence of a multitude of (potentially disruptive) sanctuaries.<sup>23</sup>

As far as statements of intent go, this is powerful. Nevertheless, although the title *Admonitio generalis* itself was given by its first editor, Alfred Boretius, it should be taken seriously that the text does call attention to its advisory and admonitory nature several times in the prologue—highlighting how it represents an attempt to teach and educate rather than to enforce.<sup>24</sup> The *Admonitio generalis* might be a first attempt at improving the state of the Church, but

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Carolingians” was also visible in rulership discourse: Geoffrey Koziol, “Christianizing Political Discourses,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity*, ed. John H. Arnold (Oxford, 2014), pp. 473–89, at p. 486.

20 *Admonitio generalis*, ed. Hubert Mordek, Klaus Zechiel-Eckes, and Michael Glatthaar, MGH Font. 16 (Hanover, 2012).

21 Friedrich-Carl Scheibe, “Alcuin und die *Admonitio generalis*,” *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 14 (1958), 221–29, at pp. 221–22 and *Admonitio Generalis*, ed. Mordek, Eckes, and Glatthaar, pp. 47–63. Given the nature of the text, the search for an ‘author’ in the modern sense of the word is ultimately fruitless.

22 Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 239–40 and *Admonitio generalis*, ed. Mordek, Eckes, and Glatthaar, pp. 112–47.

23 De Jong, “Charlemagne’s Church,” pp. 115–16.

24 *Admonitio generalis*, ed. Mordek, Eckes, and Glatthaar, pp. 17–20.

it does so by helping its recipients figure out what is necessary. All this, it is explained, should help the “pastors of Christ’s churches” to strive with vigilant care and sedulous admonition (*admonitio*) to lead the people of God to the pastures of eternal life. They should exert themselves to bear the erring sheep back inside the walls of the ecclesiastical fortress on the shoulders of good example and exhortation (*bonorum exemplorum seu adhortationum humeris*), lest the wolf who lies in wait should find someone transgressing the sanctions of the canons or infringing the teachings of the fathers of the universal councils—perish the thought—and devour him.<sup>25</sup>

It is a statement that calls to mind the good shepherd, but, by conjuring the image of the wolves outside the walls, it also instils a sense of fear about being outside the Church: fear that should affect the one carrying the animal—the one conscious of the danger—even more than the “errant sheep” themselves.<sup>26</sup> This concern also seems to have affected the author(s) of the text. Right before the invocation of Josiah’s reforming zeal, the text states

May no one, I beg, deem presumptuous this pious admonition, by which we strive to correct what is erroneous, to cut away what is inadmissible, to strengthen what is right; may it rather be received in a benevolent spirit of charity.<sup>27</sup>

An expression of a central virtue of *humilitas*, this passage either signals the anxiety of the author about the reception of their proposals, or demonstrates how they are aware that the burden of the errant sheep is also theirs to carry.<sup>28</sup> Either way, the use of *studere* in this context signals a work in progress—everybody needs to pay attention, because even if the text never blames anyone outright for the sorry state of the Church, it definitely makes everybody responsible for repairing its walls.

In this context, the invocation of the Old Testament king Josiah makes the author seem like a teacher who hides their self-doubt with strictness—who attaches to their role as an educator a feeling of self-aggrandizement that

25 *Admonitio generalis*, ed. Mordek, Eckes, and Glatthaar, prologue, pp. 180–83.

26 Refer to Monika Suchan, *Mahnen und Regieren: Die Metapher des Hirten im früheren Mittelalter* (Berlin, 2015), pp. 155–64, who fails to mention the danger posed by the wolf.

27 *Admonitio generalis*, ed. Mordek, Eckes, and Glatthaar, pp. 182–83: “Ne aliquis, queso, huius pietatis ammonitionem esse praesumptiosam iudicet, qua nos errata corrigere, superflua abscidere, recta coartare studemus, sed magis benivolo caritatis animo suscipiat”.

28 Hans-Hubert Anton, *Fürstenspiegel und Herrscherethos in der Karolingerzeit* (Bonn, 1968), pp. 45–49 and Enrico Boccaccini, *Reflecting Mirrors, East and West: Transcultural Comparisons of Advice Literature for Rulers (8th–13th Century)* (Leiden, 2022), pp. 125–26.

may not always come across well with students.<sup>29</sup> It has been pointed out by Mayke de Jong that Josiah's interpretation of "visitation, correction, and admonition" (*circumeundo, corrigendo, ammonendo*) involved a lot of violent destruction. A threat seems implied,—but not the active, personal involvement of the ruler.<sup>30</sup> His role was, as also explained in a poem by Theodulf of Orléans, to be above the fray, appoint the right people for the job, and make sure everybody does their best.<sup>31</sup> But the comparison comes with a warning, too. Josiah, after all, met his demise on the battlefield after ignoring a command from God not to interfere in a war that did not involve Judea directly. Although written a generation later, a comment by Agobard of Lyon in his *Book against the Law of Gundobad*—a critique of legal pluralism in the Carolingian realm—shows that Carolingian intellectuals must have been aware of the implications of this invocation.<sup>32</sup> If this later reception of the Josiah-comparison tells us anything, it is that this seemingly authoritarian warning, often cited as a statement of intent, might have shown a measure of self-reflection that probably was not lost on discerning readers at the time.<sup>33</sup> Josiah, too, had to study (*studere*). Even he could not avoid falling victim to his own hubris in the end.<sup>34</sup>

29 An observation based on Edward F. Pajak, "Teaching and the Psychology of the Self," *American Journal of Education* 90 (1981), 1–13; also John J. Contreni, "Carolingian Monastic Schools and Reform," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, ed. Alison Beach and Isabelle Cochelin (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 450–65. On Josiah's story and its implications for the self-image of the Church, see Isabelle Rosé, "Le roi Josias dans l'écclesiologie politique du haut Moyen Âge," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* 115 (2003), 683–710.

30 De Jong, "Charlemagne's Church," p. 116 and Mayke de Jong, "Religion," in *The Early Middle Ages: Europe 400–1000*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Oxford, 2001), pp. 131–64, at pp. 139–40.

31 Peter Godman, *Poets and Emperors: Frankish Politics and Carolingian Poetry* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 70–72.

32 Agobard, *Adversus legem Gundobadi* 1x, ed. Lieven Van Acker, CCCM 52 (Turnhout, 1981), pp. 19–28, at pp. 25–26; also Irene van Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 206–29.

33 Gerda Heydemann, "The People of God and the Law: Biblical Models in Carolingian Legislation," *Speculum* 95 (2020), 89–131.

34 That the Carolingian rulers knew this is argued in Janneke Raaijmakers and Irene van Renswoude, "The Ruler as Referee in the Theological Debates: Reccared and Charlemagne," in *Religious Franks*, ed. Meens, van Espelo, van den Hoven van Genderen, Raaijmakers, van Renswoude, and van Rhijn, pp. 51–71 and Rutger Kramer, "Adopt, Adapt and Improve: Dealing with the Adoptionist Controversy at the Court of Charlemagne," *Ibid.*, pp. 32–50.

“Knowing comes before doing”, we already read in the *Epistola de litteris colendis* from 781, a precursor to the *Admonitio generalis*.<sup>35</sup> Charlemagne’s 789 capitulary shows a court in the process of calibrating its power and authority, still figuring out what exactly they were trying to achieve. Taken as a whole, the prologue steers a course between implying that something is wrong, inviting the recipients responsible (bishops, priests, abbots) to become the teachers needed by the Church, and explaining that the court is there to help their efforts. It is significant that the text ends with a warning against the false teachers that precede the Antichrist, but it seems even more significant that the First Letter to Timothy that is evoked there calls out those false teachers who are too strict rather than too lenient.<sup>36</sup> The truth, the *Admonitio generalis* wants to say, is not served by certainties, even if the very existence of a capitulary like this one makes it easy to believe it was. What the *ecclesia* needed were people who were just as cautious as the authors of this text—watchmen who took care of themselves as they watched the rest of their flock.<sup>37</sup>

## 2 Aspiring to Institutions

A similar mentality underpins another text closely associated with the ‘Carolingian reforms’: the *Institutio canonicorum*, one of the main texts to emerge from a series of councils organized under Louis the Pious in Aachen between 816 and 819.<sup>38</sup> The text manifests itself as a florilegy of canonical and patristic texts, supplemented with a smaller appendix containing ‘new’ rules for canonical communities.<sup>39</sup> Due to the newness of this latter part, however,

35 *Epistola de litteris colendis*, ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH Capit. 1:78–79: “Quamvis enim melius sit bene facere quam nosse, prius tamen est nosse quam facere”. See also Thomas Martin, “Remarks on the *Epistola de litteris colendis*,” *Archive for Diplomatics* 31 (1985), 227–72.

36 *Admonitio generalis*, ed. Mordek, Eckes, and Glatthaar, pp. 238–39.

37 De Jong, *The Penitential State*, pp. 112–21 and Van Renswoude, *Rhetoric*, pp. 190–92. This sentiment was made explicit in the *Relatio episcoporum compendiensis* (833), in which the episcopacy took collective responsibility for the failure of the empire, albeit by blaming the emperor: Rutger Kramer, “Justified & Ancient: Bishops and the Bible in the *Relatio Compendiensis*,” in *Politische Kultur und Textproduktion unter Ludwig dem Frommen / Culture politique et production littéraire sous Louis le Pieux*, ed. Martin Gravel and Sören Kaschke (Ostfildern, 2019), pp. 181–96.

38 *Institutio canonicorum*, in *Concilia aevi karolini, Pars 1 (742–817)*, ed. Albrecht Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2 (Hanover, 1906), 1:312–421 and ed. and trans. Jerome Bertram, *The Chrodegang Rules: The Rules for the Common Life of the Secular Clergy from the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* (Aldershot, 2005), pp. 96–131.

39 Kramer, *Rethinking Authority*, pp. 91–122.



this text has usually been regarded as a set of rules for the canonical life prefaced with a massive *florilegium*, with the original part becoming the focus of modern scholarship. Coupled with the fact that the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* edition presents this as the *acta* of the Councils of Aachen, it is tempting to see this text as a set of prescriptions emanating from the court. Looking at the prologue, however, shows that here, too, uncertainty reigned supreme. The audience was invited to use this compilation to reflect on their position in the Church—and again, there is a considerable overlap between the intended audience and the authors' intentions.

In a strictly political sense, the Councils of Aachen featured among the many things Louis the Pious did to assert authority over the realm following the death of his father in 814.<sup>40</sup> As such, they represent an attempt by the court to impose a measure of centrality on an ongoing debate. The main goal was to synthesize the advice formulated by regional power-brokers in the course of five regional councils in 813, which, as I argue more extensively in my monograph, were not aimed at implementing reforms at a local level, but geared towards providing the imperial court with ideas on how to stabilize (and thereby correct) the Church.<sup>41</sup> Framed as a set of talking points on how to improve the fate of the faithful, the *acta* of the 813 councils indicate that the bishops and abbots tasked with formulating these proposed improvements welcomed the invitation to participate. Everyone involved accepted that the Carolingians would bolster their authority by re-starting this debate at an imperial level, which was, at this point, as important as actually effecting change.<sup>42</sup> Together, these texts provide a somewhat optimistic picture of the early 9th century *ecclesia*, but it was an optimism tempered by the realistic *caveat* that consensus and communication across the empire needed to remain guaranteed—that these were 'generalized remedies' proposed to counter local problems.<sup>43</sup> The divergent nature of the contents of these pieces of advisory literature does not require us to distill them into actual reforms: as the result of collective decision-making, they were

40 De Jong, *Penitential State*, pp. 14–31.

41 Kramer, *Rethinking Authority*, pp. 59–90.

42 Sebastian Scholz, "Normierung durch Konzile: Die Reformsynoden von 813 und das Problem der Überschneidung von geistlicher und weltlicher Sphäre," in *Charlemagne: Les temps, les espaces, les hommes: construction et déconstruction d'un règne*, ed. Rolf Große and Michel Sot (Turnhout, 2018), pp. 271–79 and Mayke de Jong and Irene van Renswoude, "Introduction: Carolingian Cultures of Dialogue, Debate and Disputation," *Early Medieval Europe* 25 (2017), 6–18, esp. pp. 11–14.

43 Janet L. Nelson, "How Carolingians Created Consensus," in *Le monde carolingien: Bilan, perspectives, champs de recherches*, ed. Wojciech Falkowski and Yves Sassier (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 67–81, at p. 69.

voices in an ongoing dialogue, not the last word in anything. What mattered to the Carolingians was convincing their subjects that they were capable of improving themselves just as they were capable of improving others.<sup>44</sup> In the context of what we like to understand as ‘religious reforms’, the simple act of organizing a synod was more important than the written *acta* they produced.<sup>45</sup>

The *Institutio canonicorum* should be seen in a similar light. Taken at face value, this impressive compilation fills a niche in the Carolingian discourse by providing canonical communities with a code of conduct, and explaining what sets them apart from the other religious communities in the realm.<sup>46</sup> In the process, it appears to be giving a more ‘monastic’ direction to these communities, which may be a reflection of Louis’s own interests, but which, as always, is only part of the picture. The text also functioned as a moral treatise for the higher clergy: it is an ‘education in the canons’ as well as an ‘education for canonical clergy’. And, it was framed as an invitation to learn and to reflect—not a set of rules to obey or not. In the prologue, the initiative is given to the emperor, who, rather than invoking the image of wolves at the gate, used the rumour that “certain *praepositi* ... were taking insufficient care of their subordinates”, to gather a group of prelates to take “many useful and necessary measures for the improvement of the holy Church of God”.<sup>47</sup> Using the

44 Brigitte Meijns, “Confusion and the Need to Choose? A Fresh Look at the Objectives Behind the Carolingian Reform Efforts in Capitularies and Conciliar Legislation (c. 750–813),” in *Monastic Communities*, ed. Kramer, Kurdziel, and Ward, pp. 99–127.

45 Rutger Kramer, “Order in the Church: Understanding Councils and Performing *ordines* in the Carolingian World,” *Early Medieval Europe* 25 (2017), 54–69.

46 The main proponent of this top-down view is Josef Semmler, “Die Beschlüsse des Aachener Konzils im Jahre 816,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 74 (1963), 15–73; (the same), “*Monachus – clericus – canonicus*: Zur Ausdifferenzierung geistlicher Institutionen im Frankenreich bis ca. 900,” in *Frühformen von Stiftskirchen in Europa: Funktion und Wandel religiöser Gemeinschaften vom 6. bis zum Ende des 11. Jahrhunderts – Festgabe für Dieter Mertens zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Sonke Lorenz and Thomas Zotz (Leinfelden-Echterdingen, 2005), pp. 1–18; and (the same), “Mönche und Kanoniker im Frankenreiche Pippins III. und Karls des Grossen,” in *Untersuchungen zu Kloster und Stift* (Göttingen, 1980), pp. 78–111. On Semmler’s legacy, see Charles Mériaux, “The Monastic Reforms of 816–19: Ideals and Reality,” in *Monastic Communities*, ed. Kramer, Kurdziel, and Ward, pp. 33–45.

47 *Institutio canonicorum*, ed. Werminghoff, p. 312: “Cum in nomine sanctae et individuae trinitatis christianissimus ac gloriosissimus Hludowicus superno munere victor augustus ... Aquisgrani palatio generalem sanctumque convocasset conventum et coepisset secundum ardentissimam erga divinum cultum sibi caelitus inspiratam voluntatem multa congrua et necessaria de emendatione sanctae Dei ecclesiae” and “immo consulendo admoneret super quibusdam ecclesiarum praepositis, qui partim ignorantia, partim desidia subditorum curam parvipendebant et hospitalitatem minus iusto diligebant, quid facto opus esset”.

palace library, these prelates turned a huge collection of patristic excerpts into a coherent treatise on the correct way of life. The resulting text would provide its audience with a “pattern for the education” (*forma institutionis*) of the simple and less capable members of the clergy.<sup>48</sup> So, while the ‘original’ part is indeed a *Rule* for canons (and canonesses, who are mentioned in the prologue almost as an afterthought), those involved in its inception had cast their nets wider.<sup>49</sup> The prologue describes an emperor concerned with taking an active part in the development of the *ecclesia*, and a supporting staff set on helping him improve matters.<sup>50</sup> As they acclaim the results *consona voce*, divinely inspired unanimity and consensus reign supreme; everybody had done their job to further the improvement of the Carolingian Church.<sup>51</sup>

It is no surprise that the *Institutio* is almost holistic in its approach, and that its composers were aware that changing one of the institutions within the *ecclesia* would entail changing its entire apparatus. This actually is the main cause for uncertainty underlying the patristic collection: how can bishops be expected to become leaders of a canonical community if they do not even know the canons, let alone what it means to be a leader? This may be why the segue to the ‘original’ part of the text ends with an overview of which rules are applicable to monks exclusively, and which to all Christians. This is followed by a reminder, reminiscent of the *Admonitio generalis* and the *Epistola de litteris colendis* before it, that members of the clergy were to distinguish themselves by “making themselves an example to others.”<sup>52</sup> This, together with the emphasis on reputation throughout the *Institutio*, drives home the point that ideals of reform go hand in hand with a recontextualization of venerable patristic teachings. As such, it is noteworthy that the bishops composing the work were actually their own audience, being the de facto leaders of the monks and canons in their dioceses, and exercising an exemplary and authoritative function as overseers of the Church. They were reminding themselves of their status as

48 Ibid., p. 312.

49 Gerhard Schmitz, “Aachen 816: Zur Überlieferung und Edition der Kanonikergesetzgebung Ludwigs des Frommen,” *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 63 (2007), 497–533 and Michael Eber, “Loose Canonesses? (Non-)Gendered Aspects of the Aachen Institutiones,” in *Monastic Communities*, ed. Kramer, Kurdziel, and Ward, pp. 217–38.

50 Karl-Ferdinand Werner, “*Hludovicus Augustus*: Gouverner l’empire chrétien – idées et réalités,” in *Charlemagne’s Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious (814–840)*, ed. Peter Godman and Roger Collins (Oxford, 1990), pp. 3–123, esp. pp. 101–02.

51 Klaus Oehler, “Der *Consensus omnium* als Kriterium der Wahrheit in der antiken Philosophie und der Patristik: Eine Studie zur Geschichte des Begriffs der allgemeinen Meinung,” *Antike und Abendland* 10 (1961), 103–28.

52 *Institutio canonicorum*, ed. Werminghoff, c. 115, p. 397.

shepherds, and that they could only function in that capacity if their flocks kept accepting—and thus following—their leadership.

If a concern with ‘reputation’ was one theme of the *Institutio canonicorum*, ‘authority’ was a close second.<sup>53</sup> The rules themselves did not need reforming—the classics from the patristic era had given them more than enough food for thought.<sup>54</sup> Rather, repeating these norms was a reminder that those tasked with their upkeep should adjust their behaviour accordingly. It is Michel Foucault’s ‘paradox of pastoral power’ applied to actual pastors—aimed at improving the lives and afterlives of people within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but stressing time and again that a better world started with themselves.<sup>55</sup> In the context of ‘reforms’, the councils and the ensuing *Institutio canonicorum* represent a kind of consensual self-reflection—a reiteration of responsibilities rather than a need for ‘reform’ in the modern sense of the word.<sup>56</sup> The one indication we have that this text was meant to have impact are the letters written in the name of Louis the Pious to accompany copies of the compilation sent to bishops who had not been able to attend the council, or who had to leave early.<sup>57</sup> These letters emphasize the unchanging nature of the text as well as its place in the court library, and warn the bishops to keep a version in their libraries so that the knowledge gathered in it could benefit future generations.<sup>58</sup> The letters thereby become a kind of seal of approval for the work done, and impress upon their recipients (Arn of Salzburg, Magnus of Sens, and Sicharius of Bordeaux) that these guidelines were produced “by said sacred council ... in order to promote the dignity of the leaders of the Church and the salvation

53 On the overlap between reputation and authority, see among other studies Abigail Firey, “Blushing before the Judge and Physician: Moral Arbitration in the Carolingian Empire,” in *A New History of Penance*, ed. The same (Leiden, 2007), pp. 173–200, esp. pp. 195–96.

54 Rutger Kramer and Veronika Wieser, “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle: Episcopal Self-Reflection and the Use of Church Fathers in the *Institutio Canonicorum*,” in *Monastic Communities*, ed. Kramer, Kurdziel, and Ward, pp. 179–215.

55 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 115–34 and Janet L. Nelson, “Law and its Applications,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, vol. 3: Early Medieval Christianities, c. 600–1100*, ed. Thomas F.X. Noble and Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 299–326.

56 Julia S. Barrow, “Ideas and Applications of Reform,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity 3*, ed. Noble and Smith, pp. 345–62.

57 *Hludowici imperatoris epistolae ad archiepiscopos missae*, in *Concilia aevi karolini, Pars I (742–817)*, ed. Werminghoff, 1:456–63; ed. and trans. Bertram, *The Chrodegang Rules*, pp. 171–74.

58 Doris Haberl, “Die Hofbibliothek Karls des Grossen als Kristallisationspunkt der karolingischen Renaissance: Geschichte, Umfeld, Wirkungen,” *Perspektive Bibliothek* 3 (2014), 11–39 assesses the importance of the court library for the establishment of the court’s intellectual authority.

of the souls”.<sup>59</sup> The *Institutio* focuses on the actual rules for canons and nuns mostly, but these ought to be updated in order to keep their office plausible and their flocks faithful. That, in the end, is also why it is announced that in one year’s time, *missi* will check on the progress made.

Here, too, the issue is not obedience per se. The *missi*, it is explained,

expect to find that all obstacles to its observance have been removed, and that both superiors and subjects will be found faithful in observing this salutary education to the extent that the Lord gives them the ability.<sup>60</sup>

The message is: it is not necessary to follow these instructions to the letter, but do make sure that the right people are in the right place, ensuring that others will be able to give it their all. Given the circumstances, this was as much as the emperor could hope for. An early 9th-century manuscript containing a copy of the letter sent to Arn of Salzburg allows us a glimpse of how this letter was seen to function—not attached to the *Institutio canonicorum*, but embedded in another collection of texts aimed at explaining a bishop’s job, to a bishop—possibly Arn’s successor. Effectively, this collection implies that these are the things worth keeping an eye out for.<sup>61</sup> The collection was meant for a prelate operating in Bavaria specifically, meaning we see general texts such as exegetical treatises by Isidore of Seville followed by miscellanea, ranging from short chronicles to an overview of the old Roman gods (“demons”) and a number of texts dealing with the day-to-day business of being a shepherd within the empire.<sup>62</sup> This category includes excerpts from the *Lex Baiuvariorum*,

59 *Hludowici imperatoris epistolae*, ed. Werminghoff, p. 457: “Sacrum et venerabile concilium divino nutu nostroque studio in Aquisgrani palatio nuper adregatum, in quo multa ob propagandam aecclesiasticam dignitatem, praecedente et subsequente gratia Christi, diligenter tractata atque instituta sunt, tuam nullatenus credimus latere sanctitatem”.

60 *Hludowici imperatoris epistolae*, ed. Werminghoff, p. 458: “missos nostros per imperium a Deo nobis conlatum destinaverimus, remota cuiuslibet difficultatis obpositione, eiusdem salutiferae institutionis et praelati et subditi, prout Dominus posse eis dederit”.

61 This is the early 9th-century manuscript Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 532 Helmst., available online at <https://diglib.hab.de/?db=mss&list=ms&id=532-helmst> (accessed 14 December 2021). Max Diesenberger, *Predigt und Politik im frühmittelalterlichen Bayern: Arn von Salzburg, Karl der Große und die Salzburger Sermones-Sammlung* (Berlin, 2015), at p. 69 implies that this was a priest’s handbook, but given the level of its contents I am inclined to think that the recipient was a member of the higher clergy.

62 Otto von Heinemann, *Die Handschriften der Herzoglichen Bibliothek Zu Wolfenbüttel, Abth. 1: Die Helmstedter Handschriften* (Wolfenbüttel, 1886), pp. 20–22 and Bernhard Bischoff, *Die südostdeutschen Schreibschulen und Bibliotheken in der Karolingerzeit, 2: Die vorwiegend österreichischen Diözesen* (Wiesbaden, 1980), p. 148.

instructions on the organization of a synod, the so-called *Capitulare monasticum*, and, prefacing that text, Louis's letter as a reminder of the reach of the empire. A reminder that someone is, in fact, watching the watchmen.

The *Institutio canonicorum*, its adjacent texts, and the context in which these may be found thus exemplifies the problem with, as well as the solution to, the Carolingian reforms: potential for personal improvement was often presented as a bouquet of patristic texts, gathered by bishops, from an imperial garden. Although the *Institutio canonicorum* itself would retain importance as an archive, the letter written to the absentee bishops also shows that the Carolingians considered the true reforms to have been the gathering of the prelates and their deliberations: the letters make the recipients part of the proceedings after all. Manuscripts, from the big codices containing the *Institutio canonicorum*, to the eclectic Salzburg manuscript, are part of an ongoing process of improving the Church: reacting to impulses from above, as the starting point of new learning processes, or as advice to peers and superiors alike. They represent the potential to gain momentum, but never the actual leap forward.

### 3 Looking at Change through a Carolingian Lens

It is tempting to posit a straight line between the *Admonitio generalis* and the *Institutio canonicorum*, and call it progress. However, although these two texts are obviously related, they are no more than “blurry snapshots of an intricate machine in motion”.<sup>63</sup> The existence of one did not render the other obsolete, and the shifts in context between 789 and 819 make it all but impossible to extrapolate an ongoing Carolingian programme from two essentially static texts.<sup>64</sup> There is, in other words, no way of knowing if the differences between these texts was the result of intentional agency or of shifts in the context. It remains uncertain where ‘changes’ end and ‘reforms’ begin. It is equally vague what constituted the ‘Carolingian’ aspects of the ongoing changes in the religious makeup of the early medieval west.<sup>65</sup>

The Carolingian-ness of the Carolingian reforms is a beast that continuously lurks in the background, and which has inadvertently skewed the historiography

63 Kramer, *Rethinking Authority*, pp. 205–26.

64 This was one of the main conclusions of the Round Table “Carriers of Change and Records of Reform: Texts and/as Ideals of Religious Life in the Early Middle Ages” at the Leeds *International Medieval Congress* in 2021, which included contributions by Alison Beach, Albrecht Diem, Johanna Jebe, Melissa Kapitan, and Steven Vanderputten.

65 Thomas F.X. Noble, “Talking about the Carolingians in Eighth- and Ninth-Century Italy,” in *After Charlemagne: Carolingian Italy and its Rulers*, ed. Clemens Gantner and Walter Pohl (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 17–82, esp. pp. 17–18.

in the direction of the court. The very term implies a dynastic component that runs counter to the ideals of unity and unification that are usually associated with the ideology behind their same reforms.<sup>66</sup> ‘Visigothic’ or ‘Lombard’ kingdoms are easy to treat as polities filled with a certain kind of people, but the distinction between Carolingian and Merovingian rulers of the Franks makes the ruling family, not the people they ruled, the centre of attention—and given the Carolingian propensity to equate themselves and their ideals with the people they ruled, this is easily taken for granted.<sup>67</sup> The re-emergence of the Roman empire in the West in the year 800 and the religious (and eschatological) connotations given to that empire by subsequent commentators accounts for some of this shift in perspective.<sup>68</sup> Tied closely to this is, once more, the seductive nature of Carolingian discourse—the relentless propaganda by the supporters of the new rulers, who expertly crafted, in the words of Rosamond McKitterick, an “illusion of royal power” by insisting on its inevitability but also its necessity.<sup>69</sup> The Carolingians set themselves up—and were propped up—as the ones who would ‘fix’ the Church and thereby be a better bet in the long run than the Merovingians.<sup>70</sup> Much has been done to deconstruct this image, but still it persists. For instance, much 20th-century scholarship has had a tendency to think in terms of ‘Carolingian’ Reforms, whereas the changes in the religious makeup of the Frankish Church under the Merovingians were mostly framed in terms of conflicts between the rulers and reformers like Colomanus or Leodegar.<sup>71</sup> Through this simple expedient, the reform

66 On what made the Carolingian world ‘Carolingian’, see Costambeys, Matthew, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, pp. 9–16; and Stuart Airlie, “The Cunning of Institutions,” in *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Medieval Studies*, ed. Jennifer Davis and Michael McCormick (Aldershot, 2008), pp. 267–71, at p. 270.

67 Stefan Esders and Helmut Reimitz, “Diversity and Convergence: The Accommodation of Ethnic and Legal Pluralism in the Carolingian Empire,” in *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic Worlds, 400–1000 CE*, ed. Walter Pohl and Rutger Kramer (Oxford, 2021), pp. 227–52 and Helmut Reimitz, “*Omnes Franci*: Identifications and Identities of the Early Medieval Franks,” in *Franks, Northmen, and Slavs: Identities and State Formation in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Ildar H. Garipzanov, Patrick Geary, and Przemyslaw Urbanczyk (Turnhout, 2008), pp. 51–70.

68 Miriam Czock, “Creating Futures through the Lens of Revelation in the Rhetoric of Carolingian Reform, ca. 750 to ca. 900,” in *Apocalypse and Reform from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, ed. Matthew Gabriele and James T. Palmer (New York, 2018), pp. 101–20.

69 Rosamond McKitterick, “The Illusion of Royal Power in the Carolingian Annals,” *English Historical Review* 115 (2000), 1–20.

70 Paul Fouracre, “The Long Shadow of the Merovingians,” in *Charlemagne*, ed. Story, pp. 5–21.

71 Albrecht Diem, “Gregory’s Chess Board: Monastic Conflict and Competition in Early Medieval Gaul,” in *Compétition et sacré au haut Moyen Âge: Entre médiation et exclusion*, ed. Philippe Depreux, Francois Bougard, and Regine Le Jan (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 165–91.

efforts spearheaded by this dynasty and their successors become ‘central’ as well, and thus makes the rulers responsible for them, rather than the reformers themselves. The rest are given the choice to obey or not: the monster created by the Carolingian takeover is the idea that the *ecclesia* actually became institutionalized by virtue of being imperial, not the other way around. We might instead regard the reforms as a broad movement that sought to inspire and instil new ideals among the elites, and which took institutional change as an added bonus rather than a goal unto itself.<sup>72</sup> It remains to be seen, however, if that means the new power-brokers were truly in control of the monster they created.

As Alexandra Walsham has argued in an article on religious change in the early modern era, reform in a historiographical sense is tied up with post-Reformation ideas of progress that privilege a connection between change and an inexorable move towards modernity.<sup>73</sup> Sometimes, however, changes are just that—changes, brought about by a plethora of different circumstances, not the least of which is the point of view of the individuals crafting the narrative afterwards. In fact, one answer to the ‘problem with Carolingian reforms’ lies in formulating a way of dealing with these self-assured sources, produced at the top of the ecclesiastical food chain, in which credit is taken for changes that might be the result of grassroots initiatives, or which were quite simply a response to a changing context. Reforms, seen from that angle, are a courtly stamp of approval given to changes that manifested themselves during the reign of a given dynasty, regardless of who might ultimately be seen as bearing responsibility for their implementation.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, even if we accept that ‘Carolingian’ ‘reforms’ are merely changes to the Church, it was thinkers associated with the court who took up the task of giving meaning to these shifting circumstances. The current trend of going back to individual manuscripts, local communities, or individual authors, which started with Rosamond McKitterick’s 1977 monograph, has worked wonders to deconstruct the image of empire-wide reforms that were implemented by a small community at the top of the hierarchy.<sup>75</sup> In that

72 Janet L. Nelson, ‘Religion and Politics in the Reign of Charlemagne,’ in *Religion und Politik im Mittelalter: Deutschland und England im Vergleich*, ed. Ludger Körntgen and Dominik Waßenhoven (Berlin, 2013), pp. 17–29.

73 Alexandra Walsham, ‘Migrations of the Holy: Explaining Religious Change in Medieval and Early Modern Europe,’ *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 44 (2014), 241–80.

74 Joachim Wollasch, ‘Monasticism: The First Wave of Reform,’ in *The New Cambridge Medieval History* 3, ed. Reuter, pp. 163–85.

75 Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms, 789–895* (London, 1977).



system, monasteries, clerical communities, bishops, and others were invited to follow their proposals—or not. Seen from the ground up, local communities appeared to have quite a lot of autonomy in shaping their own fate, even if they were perhaps weighed down by tradition, imperial authority, and ecclesiastical peer pressure.<sup>76</sup> The diocese of Milan, for instance, clung to their Ambrosian liturgy, even as the Rome-oriented monastery of Civate in that same region commissioned the Frankish monk Hildemar of Corbie to explain the new (Carolingian?) norms attached to the *Regula Benedicti*.<sup>77</sup> An identity crisis at the heart of the empire, revolving around the question of whether the community of Saint-Denis should become canonical or properly monastic, lasted over a generation, despite the imperial court's best efforts to defuse the situation.<sup>78</sup> The community of Fulda found itself in the throes of a conflict between monks who wanted to stick to the ideal of austerity they felt was propagated by the Carolingians, and their abbot, whose building programme showed his adherence to the imperial and ecclesiastical ideals he felt were propagated by those same Carolingians.<sup>79</sup> At Sankt Gallen, the famous manuscript Cod. Sang. 914 not only contains a copy of a copy of the copy of the *Regula Benedicti* procured by Charlemagne from Montecassino in 787. It also contains signs of scribal interference not dissimilar to modern editorial practices, as well as a letter by Abbot Theodemar of Montecassino about a potential point of conflict between the prevalent Roman liturgical practices and the liturgy prescribed by the 6th-century abbot.<sup>80</sup> In one instance where the interpretation of the *Rule*

76 Rutger Kramer, "Teaching Emperors: Transcending the Boundaries of Carolingian Monastic Communities," in *Meanings of Community Across Medieval Eurasia: Comparative Approaches*, ed. Eirik Hovden, Christina Lutter, and Walter Pohl (Leiden, 2016), pp. 271–88.

77 Hildemar, *Commentarium in Regulam s. Benedicti* 18, ed. Ruppert Mittermüller, *Expositio Regulae ab Hildemaro tradita* (Regensburg, 1880), pp. 31–12; also Choy, *Intercessory Prayer*, pp. 35–37; Jesse Billett, "Discerning 'Reform' in Monastic Liturgy," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism*, ed. Beach and Cochelin, pp. 415–32, at pp. 421–24; and Jessica Berenbeim and Matthias Röder, "Milanese Chant in the Monastery? Notes on a Reunited Ambrosian Manuscript," in *Ambrosiana at Harvard: New Sources of Milanese Chant*, ed. Thomas F. Kelly and Matthew Mugmon (Cambridge, MA, 2010), pp. 5–21.

78 Ingrid Rembold, "The 'Apostates' of Saint-Denis: Reforms, Dissent and Carolingian Monasticism," in *Monastic Communities*, ed. Kramer, Kurdziel, and Ward, pp. 301–21.

79 Janneke Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community of Fulda, c. 744–c. 900* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 99–174 and Josef Semmler, "Studien zum *Supplex Libellus* und zur anianischen Reform in Fulda," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 69 (1958), 268–97.

80 Johanna Jebe, "Debating the *una regula*: Reflections on Monastic Life in Ninth-Century Manuscripts from St Gall," in *Monastic Communities*, ed. Kramer, Kurdziel, and Ward, pp. 332–56 and Sven Meeder, "Monte Cassino and Carolingian Politics around 800," in *Religious Franks*, ed. Meens, van Espelo, van den Hoven van Genderen, Raaijmakers, van Renswoude, and van Rhijn, pp. 279–95.

of *St Benedict* actually did lead to a conflict (*contentio*) between two abbots at court, subsequent commentators seized the opportunity to use their debate to teach subsequent generations a lesson about conflicts and conflict-solving.<sup>81</sup> In each case, the speed with which new ideas found footing within communities led to tensions. It is the resolution of those tensions that we, with the benefit of hindsight, like to call reforms.<sup>82</sup>

A renewed focus on individualized narratives and sources shows that ‘reforms’ cannot be discerned at a local level—or rather, that reforms were a ‘process’ instigated by every community individually.<sup>83</sup> This, however, does not preclude the fact that, seen from the top down, a concerted effort to make improvements happen could be seen across the entire *ecclesia*.<sup>84</sup> Somehow, everyone with a stake in (or, responsibility for) the salvation of the faithful strove to acquire the means, muster the motives, and create the opportunities to make the most of the situation they found themselves in.<sup>85</sup> To call this a movement—specifically *a* movement in the institutional teleological sense of the word—however, is to mischaracterize the many forms these attempts would take. Some initiatives deployed by the court could indeed be seen in terms of a controlled initiative, others were more akin to attempts at controlling crises, while yet others might just as easily be regarded as attempts to stop progress in its tracks. The Carolingian tendency to privilege monasteries across the realm, paradoxically, accomplishes both these aspects of the “kinetics of discontent”, as Mehmet Dösemeci called it in a recent article.<sup>86</sup> As

81 Rutger Kramer, “Benedict of Aniane, Adalhard of Corbie, and the Perils of *Contentio*,” *The Heroic Age* 20 (2021), <https://www.heroicage.org/issues/20/kramer.php> (accessed 14 December 2021).

82 Rutger Kramer, “Monasticism, Reform and Authority in the Carolingian Era,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism*, ed. Beach and Cochelin, pp. 432–49.

83 Steven Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representations in Medieval Flanders, 900–1100* (Ithaca, NY, 2013), on p. 187 warns against “the common misunderstanding that the reform of individual monasteries can be adequately explained as ‘exogenous shocks’” and adds to this that it “can be understood only if it is placed explicitly in the context of the long-term development of each individual institution and its societal context”.

84 Mayke de Jong, “*Ecclesia* and the Early Medieval Polity,” in *Staat im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Stuart Airlie, Walter Pohl, and Helmut Reimitz (Vienna, 2006), pp. 113–32.

85 Tilman Struve, “*Regnum* und *Sacerdotium*,” in *Pipers Handbuch der politischen Ideen 2: Mittelalter*, ed. Iring Fetscher (Munich, 1993), pp. 189–240, at p. 192 and Yves Sassier, “Représentation, délégation, *ministerium* dans les textes législatifs et parénétiqes du règne de Louis le Pieux,” in *La productivité d’une crise: Le règne de Louis le Pieux et la transformation de l’empire Carolingien*, ed. Philippe Depreux and Stefan Esders (Ostfildern, 2018), pp. 175–83.

86 Mehmet Dösemeci, “The Kinetics of our Discontent,” *Past and Present*, 248 (2020), 253–89.

newly founded intellectual, religious, economic, and archival powerhouses, they became bridgeheads for Carolingian control in a given region.<sup>87</sup> But at the same time they also served as barricades to progress, their very regularity a symbol for the idea that lack of movement is good, actually.

#### 4 Certainly Uncertain

Are the texts at the core of this chapter part of the same movement, or merely paradigmatic of the kinetics of religious change at the same time? The cases mentioned here all share the common belief that those involved in the ‘Carolingian Experiment’ wanted to keep members of the *ecclesia* on their best behaviour—which also meant keeping them on their toes. The cautious wording of the *Admonitio generalis*, the emphasis on collective deliberations rather than foregone conclusions in the *Institutio canonicorum*: the justification for these texts presents them as collective efforts and as attempts to change individuals within that same collective.<sup>88</sup> Given that individuals are hard to predict and even harder to control, this made any attempt at ‘reform’ inherently uncertain.<sup>89</sup>

One of the problems with Carolingian reforms resides in the fact that we, as historians, have a tendency to take the prescriptive and hierarchical nature of our courtly sources at face value, and use that to explain changes to the system—as consequences of the ripple effect that would have occurred after a new courtly initiative was thrown in the tranquil waters of the *ecclesia*. This gives a home field advantage to the composers of those texts. They operated at the Carolingian court; their texts caused change to happen; *ipso facto* those changes are also Carolingian. Curiously, that last aspect is salvageable, as long as we explain the historiographical bias inherent in the choice to use that

87 Julia Smith, “Confronting Identities: The Rhetoric and Reality of a Carolingian Frontier,” in *Integration und Herrschaft: Ethnische Identitäten und soziale Organisation im Frühmittelalter*, ed. Walter Pohl and Max Diesenberger (Vienna, 2002), pp. 169–82.

88 Geoffrey Koziol, “Leadership: Why we have Mirrors for Princes but None for Presidents,” in *Why the Middle Ages Matter: Medieval Light on Modern Injustice*, ed. Celia Chazelle, Simon Doubleday, Felice Lifshitz, and Amy G. Remensnyder (London, 2012), pp. 183–98, at pp. 194–95.

89 On the individuality inherent in *correctio*, see Carine van Rhijn, “Manuscripts for Local Priests and the Carolingian Reforms,” in *Men in the Middle: Local Priests in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Steffen Patzold and Carine van Rhijn (Berlin, 2016), pp. 177–98 and Steffen Patzold, “*Pater noster*: Priests and the Religious Instruction of the Laity in the Carolingian *populus christianus*,” *Ibid.*, pp. 199–221.

name. The other two, however, remain in the eye of the beholder—a beholder looking through a Carolingian glass, darkly.

If we see texts like the *Admonitio generalis* or the *Institutio canonicorum* as new or reiterated rules, we buy into the rhetoric of centralization that comes with them. If, however, we consider that the deliberations preceding their composition were the main carriers of reform, we might be able to better connect the local and the imperial “levels of community”.<sup>90</sup> Conciliar *acta* and capitularies such as the Council of Paris of 829 present hierarchically ordered models for the empire, but they remain just that: models. Such texts could conceivably come to reflect reality but only if the proposed model actually appealed to the individuals who were in a position to align the existing (hierarchical) structure with the one described.<sup>91</sup> They were aware of the fact that broadcasting decisions across the entirety of the realm was not a simple matter, and the reception of such ideas was even more difficult to predict. The best they could do was to remind everyone involved of their responsibilities time and again, including their place within the theoretical machine that made things tick.<sup>92</sup> It was all they could do to create a sense of community among the elites at these councils, and then give them the tools to communicate that sense of togetherness at a local level. The resulting texts became a guideline to setting agendas, with the hope that these local initiatives adjusted their ideals accordingly.

Such deliberations should make it difficult to study reforms and the texts that carry them. Should we focus on intent, or on audience, or on reception? Is it important to gauge why people fell in line with the Carolingian initiative, or should we analyse their reasons for resisting? To what extent could there even be resistance if the reform efforts were structured around debates rather than decisions? The nature of the sources at our disposal creates the idea that reforms were a *fait accompli*, but in actuality they seem to either anticipate the uncertainties inherent in the system, or to respond to local necessities created by the general developments within the Carolingian Christian constellation. At the confluence of local initiative and imperial impulse, change manifests. The texts we have, however, do not allow us to go beyond that conclusion.<sup>93</sup>

90 Andrew Mason, *Community, Solidarity and Belonging: Levels of Community and Their Normative Significance* (Cambridge, 2000).

91 *Concilium Parisiense, Concilia aevi karolini, Pars 1 (742–817)*, ed. Werminghoff, 1:605–80; also Josef Semmler, “*Renovatio regni francorum: Die Herrschaft Ludwigs des Frommen im Frankenreich 814–829/830*,” in *Charlemagne’s Heir*, ed. Godman and Collins, pp. 125–46.

92 On the (im)possibilities of Carolingian government, see Costambeys, Matthew, and MacLean, *The Carolingian World*, pp. 170–93.

93 On this see also Steven Vanderputten, *Medieval Monasticisms: Forms and Experiences of the Monastic Life in the Latin West* (Berlin, 2020), pp. 39–54.

Contemporary actors were aware of the unpredictability of these ideals and models in reality. They show this in the rhetorical framing of their ideas. This monster called uncertainty, in turn, allows us to approach the mentality of the reformers setting things in motion—or stopping things.

In creating their own history, the Carolingian elites set themselves up as the ultimate spin doctors of the *ecclesia*. In the process, they must have realized they were also setting themselves up to fail. To base their power on the narrative that they, and they alone, were able to improve the Church inadvertently created expectations they might not be able to live up to. And that, in turn, means that many of the texts that insist that everything was going according to plan, have built-in reminders of the uncertainties and anxieties held by the those at the top: the fact that there is a plan does not guarantee a successful outcome, after all. And these uncertainties, in the end, were meant to inspire the people instigating changes on the ground. In such instances of self-awareness, when we see the movers and shakers of the Frankish Church show their hand, we catch a glimpse of what ‘reforms’ actually entailed. Everyone was making slow, arduous progress whilst also being swept up in the swing of things, without knowing where or how it would end. They just knew that, while there would always be an infinite number of potential paths to follow, some might work better than others. Everyone was invited—if not obligated—to follow the shepherds who were trained to find the best course. In so doing, everyone could partake in present discontentment and to seek out successes of past ‘reformers’, in what Svetlana Boym has dubbed “reflective nostalgia”.<sup>94</sup> It was this invitation, not the desired effect, that ensured that “the ‘bright and burning dream’ [of *Carolingian Civilization*] belonged not just to the Carolingian family but to the Franks as a whole”.<sup>95</sup>

If anything makes this particularly ‘Carolingian’, it is not that the court was the institution steering the efforts and distributing the results. Rather, the fact that the court asked the questions and used those to allow their followers to formulate their own answers—within an acceptable bandwidth—might mark the Carolingian strategy out as being separate from that of its predecessors or successors.<sup>96</sup> Certainties, hard-and-fast rules, and even teachers who were too strict could only lead to permanent disagreement. However, self-awareness,

94 Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” *The Hedgehog Review* 9 (2007), 7–18.

95 Matthew Gabriele, “The Glimmering Gold of Memory and the Rust of Discontentment: A Reflection on *Carolingian Civilization*,” in *In This Modern Age: Medieval Studies in Honour of Paul Edward Dutton*, ed. Anne Latowsky and Courtney Booker (Budapest 2023), pp. 473–89.

96 On archbishops’ multiple responses to Charlemagne’s inquiry about the nature of baptism, Owen Phelan, *The Formation of Christian Europe: The Carolingians, Baptism, and the Imperium Christianum* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 147–206.

doubt, and the debates sparked by the soul-searching that followed, could lead to improvements—to a sense of unity, even.<sup>97</sup> After all, if salvation was at stake, the twin concepts of hope and fear should be taken seriously as driving forces behind the reforms. The hope of reaching heaven, and the hope of helping others do the same, should always be tempered by the fear of not doing the right thing and the uncertainty that comes from knowing that, bar the occasional vision from the afterlife, everyone would only figure out if they were on the right track after they had finished walking.<sup>98</sup>



The problem with the Carolingian reforms is that they are not certainties building upon certainties—products of a clear vision for the future rather than desperate attempts to reconcile ideal and reality.<sup>99</sup> But we should allow our bishops, abbots, and emperors to live in a world that was as complex as it was unpredictable, and in which the written word was one of the few means at their disposal to create a semblance of order. However, we should not allow that written order to dictate our sense of how things might have been. When Charlemagne expressed his doubts about the faith of his subjects, he recognized that the problem with his reforms was not that they were complicated. It is that they were unpredictable.<sup>100</sup>

97 Raymund Kottje, "Einheit und Vielfalt des kirchlichen Lebens in der Karolingerzeit," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 76 (1965), 323–42.

98 On the relation between 'hope' and 'fear' in the Carolingian mindset, Agobard of Lyon, *De spe et timore ad Ebbonem*, ed. Lieven Van Acker, CCCM 52 (Turnhout, 1981), pp. 439–54. And on the patristic roots of this interpretation, Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge, 1991).

99 Michele Gaillard, "De l'interaction entre crise et réforme: La politique monastique de Louis le Pieux et de Benoît d'Aniane," in *La productivité d'une crise*, ed. Depreux and Esders, pp. 313–27.

100 It was too late in the production of this volume to include several pertinent references to *Rethinking the Carolingian Reforms*, ed. Arthur Westwell, Ingrid Rembold, and Carine van Rhijn (Manchester, 2023).