A Revival of Female Spirituality:
Adaptations of Nuns’ Rules during the
Hiberno-Frankish Monastic Movement

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For women religious of seventh-century Gaul, much had
changed since the days of Caesarius of Arles and the monas-
tic regulations of the sixth century. By the seventh century, the
Irishman Columbanus (540–615) and his disciples had galvanized the
Frankish nobility toward the development of a complex monastic net-
work across the previously neglected regions of northern and eastern
Gaul. In this process, they established around two hundred monastic
communities, many of which housed women in either convents or double
monasteries.

Although Columbanus’s monastic legislation did not include a rule
written specifically for nuns, the mixed rules of Waldebert of Luxeuil (d.
668) and Donatus of Besançon (d. 660), both students of Columbanus’s
monastic center at Luxeuil, reveal the impression that Irish monasticism
had on the expression of female monastic life in the seventh-century
nunnery. The anxiety regarding safety that had dominated the sixth-
century rule of Caesarius of Arles began to fade from the memory of
women religious and their monastic advisers, and the Frankish kingdom
and its monastic communities began to expand beyond the walls of cities
into rural environments. Moreover, the division that had once existed
between Gallo-Roman bishops and their Germanic kings was replaced
by an increasingly involved Frankish nobility whose participation in
new monastic settlements made the boundaries between monastic and
secular politics more permeable. As a result, the tenets of strict enclo-
sure, so essential to the mood of sixth-century female monasticism,
were no longer present in the regulations of seventh-century nunneries.
Instead, the rural environment of northern Gaul, and the religious ide-
als of Columbanus’s Irish upbringing influenced nuns’ rules in such a
way that they revived an intimate and personal dimension of asceticism that had been neglected for the sake of safety and stability. Along with the images of female religious life found in the lives of seventh-century saints, these mixed rules demonstrate that Irish monasticism imbued the communal life of Gallic women religious with the intense fervor once ascribed only to independent ascetics.

Before Columbanus, Irish abbots demonstrated little interest in producing monastic rules as we know them from the traditions of Benedict of Nursia and Caesarius of Arles. Preferring instruction by example to any documented tenets, Irish monasticism emphasized the conduct of the founding or ruling abbot or abbess as a model to imitate. Vitae, therefore, also served as appropriate guidelines for monastic behavior, and they were often composed with the intention of reflecting their subjects’ most admirable, and often conventional, habits. Arguing that hagiography represented an important medium of instruction in the Hiberno-Frankish monastic movement, T. M. Charles-Edwards posits that “a Life, thus understood, had a direct application for the monasteries that looked to the saint as did even a Rule written by the saint himself.”

By the seventh century, though, women in Frankish convents began to expect that their monastic advisors would provide instruction for their communities in the form of a detailed rule. Although Caesarius of Arles’s rule was never implemented in its entirety after the sixth century, his meticulous rule for nuns did set a precedent for female monasteries in Gaul. Columbanus’s disciples, therefore, created mixed rules that incorporated tenets and customs from the more prominent figures in monasticism: Benedict of Nursia, Caesarius of Arles, and Columbanus. In the prologue to his mixed rule for nuns, Donatus of Besançon recognized that the nuns of Jussa were eager to gain instruction for the female monastic life. He told them that:

you have often urged me that, having explored the rule of the holy Caesarius, bishop of Arles, which was especially devoted to Christ’s virgins, along with those of the most blessed Benedict and the Abbot Columbanus, I might cull the choicest blooms... promulgating all that is proper for the special observance of the female sex.
This innovation, that is the writing of rules specifically for convents, was not something that came along with Columbanus or his disciples, but a tradition that Frankish nuns, if not monks as well, seem to have encouraged and even demanded.

Intent more on conveying the importance of spiritual development rather than on the practical aspects of daily activities, Columbanus’s rule lacks any emphasis on the enclosure of monks. Columbanus did not personally address women religious with a guideline for a female community, but the abbot would have grown up in a monastic culture that made little effort to restrict its nuns and abbesses to the confines of their convent walls. When Columbanus was born in 540, monasticism was flourishing in Ireland. In a land without cities, the monastery became an expression of Ireland’s pastoral society and culture. Irish society, which depended on livestock not only as a food source but also as a means of estimating worth, was incredibly mobile, accustomed to herding cattle, pigs, or sheep as needed.

This bucolic environment, likewise, produced an itinerant characterization of the Irish abbot and abbess. The Synod of Patrick, composed around 457, addresses travel by clerics and holy women warning that “a monk and a virgin, the one from one place, the other from another, shall not take lodging in the same inn, nor travel in the same carriage from village to village, nor carry on prolonged conversations together.” In a seventh-century vita of Brigit, the abbess of Kildare in Leinster, Cogitosus depicts the holy woman as a skilled horsewoman, charioteer, and constant traveler. Recognizing this lack of enclosure in the ideals of Irish female monasticism, Christina Harrington notes that “the Irish hagiographers of the seventh and eighth centuries, in their portrayal of the earliest Christian female communities... silently rejected notions that God’s virgins should be enclosed, non-travelling, and subservient to the male clerics.”

In seventh-century Gaul, the lives of female saints and the monastic rules recommended for them suggest that although occasional concerns for the safety of female communities remained, the need to enforce strict enclosure for protection rarely dominated the writing of monastic authorities or the lives of nuns. In the life of Saint Sadalberga (ca. 605–670), the abbess of Laon, Sadalberga reluctantly leads her religious...
community to settle in the city of Laon rather than in the more deserted outskirts of Luxeuil as she had first intended. Although Sadalberga chose to found her convent in Laon at the recommendation of her monastic advisor, Waldebert, she travelled to the city with a caravan of over one hundred nuns, a sight that not only testifies to the leadership of abbesses, but also to the mobility of women religious during this century. Even if it was not commonplace to see nuns traveling en masse in seventh-century Gaul, Sadalberga’s expedition to Laon does point toward a freer and less threatening environment for the seventh-century nun than what had existed for religious women of the sixth-century.

Waldebert’s rule, which historians have ascribed to the foundation of Laon, provides no indication that strict enclosure was ever a consideration for the convent. The adaptation Waldebert makes in order to compose an appropriate rule for women in the spirit of Columbanus suggests that there could be impartial considerations regarding enclosure for both monks and nuns. In his rule, Waldebert adapts for nuns a chapter of the Benedictine rule in which the author suggests a more relaxed enclosure as it applied to monks. Benedict allows the monk up to three opportunities to return to the community if he “through his own evil action departs from the monastery.” Likewise, Waldebert reassures the community that:

if a sister is ever lost to the Christian religious and flees from the walls of the monastery, and, having fled outside, later recalls her original religion and returns full of fear of eternal judgment, she must first make all emendation to the monastery. Afterwards, if their penance is believable, then she may be received again within the monastery walls. Even if this happens two or three times, she shall be extended like piety.

Although the language of the chapter that Waldebert included is certainly that of Benedict, the spirit of the chapter as it was directed to women was decidedly that of Columbanus and the Irish.

This suggestion of gender equality in Columbanus’s monastic tradition is grounded in the Irish Christian’s understanding of penance. Although monastic life under the penitential rule of Columbanus and Waldebert might seem to make living conditions harsh and unreasonable,
the implications of penance provided for a forgiving and hopeful interpretation of salvation. In Columbanus’s rule, which is expressed much like a penitential, the opportunities for transgressions seem ubiquitous, but the use of private penance and confession sent the message that very few were without hope of salvation. Those who confessed swiftly and made satisfaction were in fact wiping the spiritual slate clean. Moreover, the penitential was no less forgiving of holy women than it was of clerics. According to the *Penitential of Finnian*, which Columbanus drew on to form his own penitential instructions, the nun, if she made satisfaction, was to be welcomed back into the community even if she had strayed so far from her vows as to have had children. Penance was also often the same for clerics as it was for holy women. The *Synod of Saint Patrick* orders that a pregnant nun “who bears a child and her sin is manifest, < she shall do penance > for six years < with bread and water >, as is the judgment in the case of clerics, and in the seventh year she shall be joined to the altar, and then we say her crown can be restored and she may don a white robe and be pronounced a virgin.” Even though Columbanus did not directly address women religious with a rule, the outlook of his predecessors, who saw no reason to differentiate between the penance and satisfaction of clerics and holy women, no doubt influenced his mindset and that of his Frankish successors. Waldebert, therefore, saw no reason why Benedict’s allowances for the errant monk could not also be extended to the nun.

Waldebert’s rule claims that nuns were given the opportunity to leave and return to the monastic life as they needed up to a point, but we should not assume that seventh-century nuns in Merovingian Gaul became accustomed to freely abandoning the religious life or venturing far from their convents. Gallic monasticism’s own tradition and church councils implied that some sense of enclosure, if not strict enclosure, was expected of women religious. According to the ecclesiastical councils of the sixth century, the Council of Macon (581) and the Council of Lyons III (583), the threat of excommunication existed for any nun who strayed from her convent. Church councils, on the other hand, gave monks the option of returning. Even if monks had abandoned the religious life and married, the punishment exacted was merely their exclusion from holding church offices. Donatus of Besançon notably did not choose
to include Benedict’s chapter on allowing monks to leave and reenter the monastery into his own mixed rule for nuns, even though it practically mirrors the Benedictine rule in its organization. Furthermore, although Waldebert extended to nuns the Benedictine option to leave and return to the community, he warns that the sister who departs “incurs the stain of sinful flight.”

The hagiography of the seventh century addresses instances when nuns chose to leave the nunnery in a way that also indicates that monastic authorities and churchmen on the continent were unwilling to relax tenets of enclosure to the extent of the Irish tradition. Rather than implying that they were allowed to leave on their own accord these vitae suggest that nuns were somehow encouraged to return through divine intimidation or by the search efforts of the convent. At Faremoutiers, Burgundofara’s convent and a daughter house of Luxeuil, a nun gave accounts of fellow sisters who sought escape from the convent and the demanding discipline to which they were held there. In one case, discontented nuns had appropriated a ladder for their flight, but even as they prepared to climb toward the ground, the monastery was shaken by divine flames that spread toward the convent’s three gates and promptly blocked the nuns’ exits. This dramatic demonstration of heavenly displeasure was effective as it provoked the nuns to immediately make their confession and return into the good graces of the community.

Another set of fugitives from Faremoutiers did manage to escape beyond the convent walls and to flee toward their families. The vita, however, claims that “pursuing searchers” returned the resentful nuns to the convent. They were not excommunicated as the Gallic church councils would have advised, but instead they underwent a program of discipline according to the rule. Their admission back into the community depended on their confession and the subsequent satisfaction of an assigned penance. The nuns, however, refused to confess, an example of insubordination that would have warranted separation from the community according to Waldebert’s rule. In the hagiography, which often served as a narrative of proper conduct for women religious, the contentious nuns who refused to repent did not leave as monastic anathemas, excommunicated as the Church Councils prescribed, but came to swift deaths. The hagiographer makes it evident that only those possessed
by the devil would have been so eager and determined to leave the community. For these nuns, it was not the rule that dictated the enclosure of the convent, but rather divine judgment and the mischief of devils.

Although the complete abandonment of the convent and the religious life it supported was strongly discouraged for nuns, there is also some evidence in hagiography and mixed rules that the world in which the seventh-century nun existed had expanded since the monastic age in which Caesarius wrote. Sadalberga herself is depicted as walking beyond the enclosure of her convent and even outside the city walls of Laon when she made requests to the monks who gardened for the female community. This journey outside of the monastery may not be an illustration of a freedom extended to the entire community. As abbess, it was Sadalberga’s responsibility to ensure that the convent received the appropriate amount of supplies, which in this particular case was lettuce. Nevertheless, Sadalberga’s interaction with the monk Landefrid reflects a modest display of authority, which only served to enhance her reputation as a chaste holy woman. According to her hagiographer, the abbess asked that he bring the lettuce, “communicating with him more by intimation than enunciation as the brother, who is still here, is wont to tell the tale. Wonderful to say! The voice which was but a breath of air heard by no other, came to the brother’s ears as though she had spoken directly to him. Yet there was a distance of four stadia or more between them.”

Although Sadalberga interacted directly with Brother Lindefrid, she did so at a respectable distance of about eight hundred yards. It seems, then, that even if the relaxation of enclosure were extended beyond the abbess to other members of the community, this applied only to enclosure in the physical sense, for ensuring that one’s chastity remained unquestionably pure was a timeless concern of the virtuous nun.

Sadalberga’s journey outside of the monastery and the image of the garden does support, though, an image of a seventh-century female monastery that was more physically free than those in the previous century. In the case of Sadalberga, this physical freedom was primarily related to the rural interests and opportunities afforded to the seventh-century convent. As historians have noted and as had been the case in Ireland since its conversion, the agricultural or pastoral implications of a more rural environment made the tenets of strict enclosure no longer
appropriate for the lives of nuns in seventh-century Gaul. Donatus of Besançon notes in the prologue of his rule that “though holy Caesarius dedicated his own rule to virgins of Christ, like yourself, their enclosure of place is not in the least suitable to your circumstances.” Although Sadalberga’s convent was located within an urban population, evidently the gardens it shared with the male monastery were located outside of the city walls. Waldebert’s chapter on manual labor also mentions picking ripe fruit. This cooperation of monks and nuns in the cultivation of rural estates as indicated by the life of Sadalberga and Waldebert’s rule does give some indication as to the possible flexibility of enclosure for nuns during this century in Gaul.

In addition to the relaxed tenets of enclosure implied by the agricultural responsibilities of the convent, there are other duties of the nuns that also suggest that the community was not shut away from the surrounding population. According to Waldebert’s monastic regulations, the female monastery served an active role in providing charity and hospitality to outsiders. As the gatekeeper of the convent, the portress was charged with the task of tending to any approaching visitors. According to the rule, she “should take all care for paupers, pilgrims, and guests for in them [the nuns] receive Christ.” The chapter further elaborates on the charitable function of the monastery, mentioning the meals and services available to pilgrims. Even though the nuns were never allowed to dine with pilgrims, these religious visitors were fed in the kitchen with the cook and servants. Moreover, Waldebert’s rule did not require the services of a male prior to represent the female community to the poor.

More indicative of the nuns’ active charity is the mention of the hospice. For the sake of those guests in need of care, Waldebert states that the community “shall minister to all comers outside in the hospice (hospitali), as honor demands through the ordination of the abbess.” Historians such as Andrew T. Crislip have traced the connection between monasteries and public health facilities to the earliest centuries of monasticism, with Basil of Caesaria’s community serving as the most prominent example of the monastery’s ability to provide aid to the poor and sick. Although Irish Christianity and its reliance on the penitential often stressed spiritual rather than medical healing, charity and hospitality
were no less stressed in the customs of Irish society. In the sagas and the *vitae* of native Irishmen, hospitality is a moral requirement.

The strain between the spiritual duties of the monastic community and its charitable endeavors on behalf of society was somewhat relieved by how the nuns may have interpreted their services for the sick and poor. Waldebert makes it evident that efforts of charity and hospitality were priorities for the convent. He instructs the abbess that “she should lead the way in solicitude for pilgrims and guests and thoughtful care for the sick and [for] the needy poor with her wealth.” Waldebert’s address to the abbess and his entreaty that the nuns provide service in the hospice “as honor demands” suggests that for the nuns at Laon, charity to the public was expected and may have even served as a part of the nuns’ ascetic program. Based upon Basil’s enduring model of the monastic hospital, the monk’s or nun’s participation in the hospice was not necessarily a contradiction to or infringement on their monastic vows. As Crislip notes, “in Basil’s monastic system, the care for the sick outsiders became an ascetical labor like any other but regulated in such a way that monastics were neither overburdened nor distracted from their prayers by worldly concerns.”

Notably, there is no mention of a hospice in either the nuns’ rule of Caesarius of Arles or that of Donatus of Besançon. Even the Benedictine rule, which describes in some detail the administration of the monastery’s guest house, does not mention a hospice or any other charitable facilities that were located outside of the monastery. This relaxation of enclosure, without which the nuns of Laon would never have been able to pursue the “ascetical labors” of tending the sick, provided this female community of seventh-century Gaul with new opportunities for ascetic and spiritual expression.

In addition to the relaxation of enclosure, female communities of seventh-century Gaul were more closely tied to local ruling families than the Gallo-Roman communities of Caesarius of Arles’s era. Although the sites of the Hiberno-Frankish monastic movement are often described as based on the frontiers of the Christian world, the land was closely connected to the rising families of the Frankish nobility who, since the reign of Clovis (466–511), had attempted to meld their heritage with the prestige of the Christian Church. Nor did the tradition that Columbanus
grew up in discourage interaction between abbatial authorities and the likes of kings and nobles. In fact, unlike the monasteries of the Desert Mothers and Fathers they desired to emulate, Irish monasteries primarily received members from elite social ranks. Moreover, most monasteries in Ireland were tightly intertwined with the lives and agendas of noble kin-groups. Recognizing the extremes to which Irish monastic communities could participate in political agendas, Liam de Paor argues that “as the dominant kin-groups moved towards dynastic and aggrandizing politics by means of what is, in detail, a prolonged tedium of ferocious family quarrels, the monasteries served to keep records, to produce propaganda, to provide resource-bases in various ways.”33 As much as Jonas of Bobbio depicts Columbanus taking ascetic excursions into the forest, a large portion of his life in Gaul was spent interacting with and advising kings and noble families.34 Columbanus’s monastic movement tapped directly into the network of aristocratic families in Gaul. Both of his successors at Luxeuil, Eustasius and Waldebert, were the sons of dukes. Burgundofara, whom Columbanus personally consecrated, and Sadalberga, whom both Eustasius and Waldebert recruited, were daughters of the landed nobility.

The connection between the rising Frankish nobility and the explosion in monastic development is evident in the lives of seventh-century female saints, whose decision to take religious vows usually provoked family controversies. Where the lives of sixth-century nuns suggest that women took the veil as captives or in response to violence, the hagiography of seventh-century saints stresses the dramatic break between nuns and their families, with daughters often making every effort to evade their fathers’ marriage plans.35 The argument between daughters and their families that arose from the intentions of young women to take religious vows is sometimes disregarded as a literary trope. Once the Frankish nobles had gained control over Gaul, however, the stability and prosperity of these noble families depended upon the marriages of their sons and daughters. Suzanne Wemple argues that “an aristocratic group could maintain political leadership only as long as it had a number of compliant daughters and sons of marriageable age.”36 Perhaps the most explicit example of this conflict between political and religious ambitions is the life of Saint Gertrud (628–658). As the daughter of Pepin the Elder (ca.
 Gertrud was expected to make a marriage that would further her family’s political aspirations. Evading her father’s marital schemes until his death, Gertrud eventually took religious vows and founded the monastery of Nivelles along with her mother. Although Gertrud’s *vita* only casts the saint’s suitors as the pawns of the king and her father’s machinations, Wemple notes that “the church might have lost a saint, and Carolingians might have gained political ascendancy sooner, had Pepin the Elder lived long enough to prevail upon his second daughter, Gertrud, to marry the son of an Austrasian duke.”

The seemingly clichéd demonstration of holy devotion and determination that daughters used to evade their secular responsibilities also masks the firm connection between the Frankish aristocracy and monastic properties. The *vita* of Glodesind (ca. 600), one of the first in a long line of Austrasian nobility to take the veil, elaborates on the young girl’s struggle to have the legitimacy of her religious life recognized. Almost as a side note to her rise to abbatial authority, her hagiographer briefly mentions that her noble family endowed the nun with the land on which she had built her monastery. Although families did not always applaud their daughters’ unrelenting perseverance for the religious life, once their daughters took the veil, the aristocratic family often became as invested in their religious careers as the women themselves.

In part, this link between the monastery and its noble benefactors represented the essential exchange of earthly protection for heavenly assurance. In exchange for prayers and spiritual intercessions, the nobleman and his family were eager to establish and support monasteries and convents. Another result of this enthusiastic participation in the spread of monasticism was the cooperation of family, often brothers and sisters, in the administration of the convent or double monastery. But as this new monastic movement was spreading alongside the growing influence of the Frankish aristocracy, the endowment of monasteries was not without political repercussions. Even though the Frankish nobility desired and managed to dominate administrative roles in the operation of monasteries, it is important to emphasize that these estates were developed by and for the sacred and, therefore, off limits from the political agenda of other aristocratic families or from the encroaching authority of the king.
With such close connections among Frankish nobles, bishops, and monastic leaders, the autonomy of the Gallic monastery was at times questionable. At first glance, however, Waldebert seems unconcerned about addressing the risks to the convent’s administrative autonomy. Besides a general statement warning that the nuns should dine alone, throughout the rule he makes no specific mention, much less caution, regarding bishops and churchmen. There is, however, a conspicuous absence of secular clergy in the lives of the female saints from this period. In an effort to demonstrate the humility of Sadalberga, her hagiographer recalls an instance when the abbess cooked a large fish for the entire community. The fish had been a gift from the archdeacon Basinius, but the *vita* gives no indication that the nuns entertained him with a feast or banquet inside the monastery.\(^{42}\) The *vita* does note that Sadalberga summoned a priest to confirm the occurrence of a miracle in the kitchen, but he only praises the abbess’s well-disciplined community.\(^{43}\) There is no reference to his other duties or the sacramental role of churchmen in the community. For instance, while the death of a nun was a prominent theme in the hagiography of this time, a priest never appears at the deathbed of a woman religious. Surrounded by their spiritual sisters, the nuns at Faramoutiers die only to the sound of religious chanting. Nor is there any indication that ailing nuns waited to receive extreme unction from a priest; once a nun had confessed to the abbess and made satisfaction for her sins, her soul was free to leave.\(^{44}\) In one instance, Burgundofara herself issued the Eucharist to dying nuns, and JoAnn McNamara theorizes that the abbess may have kept a consecrated supply for such occasions.\(^{45}\)

Although men and women did cooperate in the founding of monasteries in seventh-century Gaul, the actual administrator and spiritual mentor of the community was unequivocally the abbess. For Columbanus, monastic autonomy was not something guaranteed through the enforcement of monastic rules, but more often than not through the stern principles of monastic leaders. In Ireland, where the monasteries were closely integrated into the local community, episcopal overseers were rarely given authority beyond what was necessary to issue the sacraments, and even then monastic communities could render this responsibility unnecessary by ordaining a monk to the priesthood. As Katherine Hughes notes, “bishops within such monasteries fulfilled
their own functions of order, but under the abbot’s jurisdiction, and the abbot’s authority was so far accepted that a bishop might be forced into action of which he disapproved.”

To make these monastic leaders more powerful, the abbacy in both Ireland and in seventh-century Gaul was often treated as a hereditary post. Unlike the rules of Caesarius, Benedict, and Donatus, those of Columbanus and Waldebert do not make any effort to ensure that abbatial elections occurred in the community. More often than not, the abbot or abbess in these communities selected his or her own successor.

We find images of this abbatial power in the hands of women in the administration of large nunneries and double monasteries. Faremoutiers, established around 617, was likely France’s first double monastery, and Burgundofara ruled there over a community of both men and women. At Laon, Sadalberga oversaw approximately three hundred nuns in her convent in addition to those monks who resided in the attached monastery. According to JoAnn McNamara, these abbesses “enjoyed many of the administrative (but not the sacramental) prerogatives associated with bishops and expressed by the shepherd’s crook, which they bore as an iconic attribute.”

Besides the extensive authority of the abbess, monastic autonomy was also attained through the legal efforts of royal patrons. In particular, Queen Balthild (d. ca. 680) was responsible for gaining exemptions from episcopal interference for both male and female monasteries.

Although the seventh-century convents appeared to provide considerable resistance against prying bishops, the proprietary relationship that churches shared with their noble patrons made it more challenging to ensure that the religious community stayed free from the political concerns of family and secular lords. Despite the evidence that Columbanus served as the mentor of monarchs and the close advisor of noble families and their children, he did not permit his monastery to become a pawn of the secular government. He refused to admit the king’s own men into the center of the monastery and threatened to refuse gifts and aid from the king, thus breaking the monastery’s pledge to provide intercessory prayer for the royal family. Columbanus’s platform of monastic independence from royal or episcopal intervention, which likely stemmed from his Irish upbringing, came to define the religious

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experience of the Hiberno-Frankish movement. G. S. M. Walker argues that “the exemption of monasteries from diocesan control, destined later to raise whole armies of independent monks, was practically initiated by Columbanus in his struggle with the French hierarchy.” As an Irish *peregrinus*, though, Columbanus’s decision was not clouded by familial loyalties in Merovingian Gaul.

In the female community, whose members were closely tied to local families, the most effective way to separate the convent from its secular influences was to enforce the rule and immerse the nuns in a communal spirituality. Columbanus’s emphasis on discipline and penance, which Waldebert adopts in his mixed rule, served to provide the religious community with a cohesive, and codependent, spiritual identity. Suzanne Wemple suggests that “to discourage the formation of kinship circles in double monasteries, Waldebert’s rule stressed spiritual sisterhood as the essence of communal life.” Waldebert is not subtle in his criticism of familial ties, and he forthrightly announces that “in no way do we consent to permit anyone to defend a neighbor or relative in the monastery.” As nuns, these women were expected to have abandoned their secular ties in exchange for the shared love and religious life within the community. The expression of female spirituality in the context of a monastic rule reflects a revival of female spirituality that had been left unaddressed in the previous century’s regulations.

Spiritual programs that emphasized the individual’s asceticism and the mortification of the physical body were not innovations of the seventh century, nor did they originate from Celtic Christianity in the monasteries of Ireland. Caesarius himself was well versed in ascetic ideals. The abbot of Lerins sent Caesarius away from the prestigious island monastery on account of his over ambitious devotion to mortification and his severe demonstrations of ascetic endurance. As is evident from his rule for nuns, however, the responsibilities and pressures of urban monasticism in the sixth century overwhelmed any intention he might have had of using the monastic rule to articulate the spiritual pursuits of nuns. Besides Caesarius’ concern for the enclosure and safety of the community, the bishop provided little input regarding the specific methods of discipline, and he made no effort to link one’s obedience to the rule to her spiritual wellbeing.
According to Venantius Fortunatus, Radegund of Poitiers participated in a remarkably strenuous ascetic tradition. In addition to wearing hair shirts and fasting, the royal nun is also reported to have used a mechanical contraption to restrain herself and even to have burned the sign of Christ onto her flesh. These extreme efforts of self-mortification and examples of independent asceticism were not necessarily applauded at the time. In a letter to Radegund, Caesaria II, the niece of Caesarius of Arles, warns against pursuing harsh ascetic practices, which tend to place the needs of the individual before the well-being of the community. Caesaria reminds Radegund to “do everything reasonable if you would live for [Him] and do as you are able. For if you fall ill through excess, which God does not will, afterwards you will need delicacies and you will lose time and you will not be able to govern the blessed ones.”

This admonition is an indication of the more moderate spirituality that is associated with the rise of the Benedictine rule and that began to replace the more independent asceticism of the Cassian tradition. For Radegund and other ascetics who chose to endure physical hardship, however, these personal demonstrations of spiritual might were an example of martyrdom. Describing an example of self-mortification in which Radegund hugged a basin of hot coals to her body, Fortunatus recognizes that “she drew it to herself so that she might be a martyr though it was not the age of persecution.”

Expectations for obedience and maintaining discipline can also be found in the Benedictine rule, but for Columbanus and those trained in the nuances of Irish Christianity, the discipline of the body through penance enabled the obedient monk or nun to achieve a status equivalent to that of the early Christian martyrs. In early Christian sources, Church Fathers described two varieties of martyrdom: one which was a sacrifice of life and the other withdrawal into seclusion. Christians of the Irish church associated martyrdom with the colors red, white, and blue (or green), but blue martyrdom stands out as an adaptation on the part of Irish Christians in particular. According to the religious outlook of Irish Christians, whose late date of conversion made red martyrdom unlikely, the act of rejecting the world and disciplining the desires of one’s earthly body was in fact a form of sacrifice. Given the principal role of private penance in the Irish Church, in addition to the red and
white varieties of martyrdom, the Irish also recognized martyrdom in acts of satisfaction and mortification. In his rule for monks, Columbanus assigns one of his ten chapters to the discussion of mortification. Addressing the sin of pride, Columbanus argues that mortification of the body was the route to true humility that secured for the soul the peace of being under Christ’s yoke. He also connects mortification to martyrdom, adding in the same chapter “we must know that neither this bliss of martyrdom nor any other benefit that follows can be perfectly fulfilled by any, save him who has given particular attention to this, that he be not found unready.”60

Discussing continental references to this form of martyrdom, Clare Stancliffe notes the writing of the fifth-century monk Bachiarius, who claimed that “through penitence, his friend may be able to wash his robe, not in blood, but in tears; if penitent, his friend will blush for his sins; and in penitence, he should bring his body into subjugation.”61 Although the disciplinary methods of penance could be daunting, the promise of satisfaction it entailed was better than the eternal damnation of excommunication.62 From Bachiarius’s statement it is evident that some Christians were aware of this connection between private penance and martyrdom before the arrival of Irish missionaries on the Continent, but only with the monastic movement of Columbanus did Gallic Christians begin to embrace the concept of private and repeatable penance. Stancliffe and many other historians attribute the galvanization of monastic and lay spirituality in Gaul to Columbanus’s and other Irishmen’s preference for private penance and the emphasis they placed upon the interpretation of penance and mortification as a form of martyrdom.63

In the lives of women religious, in particular, this revival of martyrdom, although bloodless, restored an expression of devotion and sacrifice that had once created equality between the sexes. For early Christian women, red martyrdom served as a way of conquering their female bodies, which churchmen often interpreted as obstacles to true religious virtue. Through the voluntary acceptance of physical torture and eventual execution, female martyrs demonstrated that their spiritual determination and virtue were not only strong enough to resist concerns for the body, but also that as martyrs their spirituality and virtue matched
that of men. Since the legalization of Christianity, however, martyrdom was rarely, if ever, an option, and discussions of female spirituality were constantly overwhelmed by the struggle to reconcile the proposed spiritual equality of Christians with the notorious physical disparity between men and women. Yet with the arrival of Columbanus, his Irish concepts of martyrdom reawakened the spirituality of Gallic women religious and provided their communities with a revived fervor for religious perfection. The life of the abbess of Chelles, Bertilla, who had trained at the Hiberno-Frankish abbey of Jouarre, demonstrates the eagerness with which seventh-century nuns approached this new opportunity for martyrdom. As her hagiographer comments, “Blessed Bertilla would gladly have bowed her neck to gratify her great desire for martyrdom, had there been a skilled executioner ready for the task. But we believe that even though that passion was not fulfilled, yet she completed her martyrdom through mortification of her own body and blood.”

Although the penitential rules of Columbanus and Waldebert called for an individual sense of responsibility, the maintenance of the community’s spiritual wellbeing remained essential. Mortification, according to Columbanus, was not a source for religious independence or ascetic pride. Unlike the ascetic activities of Radegund, for example, which set her apart from the community, mortification and penance according to Columbanus were designed to bring the community closer together, forcing them to depend on each other for spiritual approval. In his rule, the abbot notes that “thus there is a threefold scheme of mortification: not to disagree in mind, not to speak as one pleases with the tongue, not to go anywhere with complete freedom.” By conditioning oneself according to the guidelines of the rules, the nun not only ensured the salvation of her own soul, but also contributed to the creation of a more holy community. By intertwining ascetic performance with the spiritual well-being of the community, the monastery no longer had to be a “wrestling arena for monks,” as Cassian’s monastic environment was termed, but rather a spiritual family whose goal was to create the most perfect monastic community.

By aligning obedience to the rule with the salvation of the soul, communal life within the convents took on a dynamic that reflected the constant development of its members’ spirituality. While they maintained
peace and efficiency within the monastery according to the rule, nuns were likewise following a strict spiritual program. In a chapter stressing communal love and obedience, Waldebert emphasizes the importance of forgiveness. Invoking the biblical adage, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” Waldebert reminds the community that as its members forgive each other, so shall God forgive them. When the resentful maintain grudges, they not only disturb the harmony of the community, but they also risk being denied admittance into heaven. Gibitruide, a nun in the community of Faremoutiers, died only to be returned to the earthly world because of the residual bitterness she held toward another sister in the convent. When her body released her soul, Gibitruide recalls that:

Angels lifted her into the ether and brought her before the tribunal of the eternal judge. . . . she saw the white-garbed troops and all the militia of heaven standing before the glory of the Eternal Judge. She heard a voice from the throne saying: “Go back, for you have not fully relinquished the world. It is written: ‘Give, and it shall be given unto you’: and elsewhere, in the prayer: ‘Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.’ But you have not settled with all your companions and you still nurse grievances for slights inflicted upon you. Bear this in mind: three sisters have borne witness against you for their wounded souls which have not been healed by the medicine of full forgiveness for the inflicted injury. Therefore, mend your ways: soothe these souls which you have soiled from indifference or neglect.”

Gibitruide was given thirty days to complete her penance before her soul would be released again from the world, purer and cleaner than before. Gibitruide’s vision reinforced the communal ties among nuns, encouraging the nuns to seek their spiritual salvation in the harmony of the community.

Waldebert and the authors of saints’ lives also interpreted the correction and discipline of nuns in terms of communal spirituality and education. Although nuns confessed to cleanse themselves of sin, the purging of sin also prevented the corruption of the entire female community. Waldebert warns that “if anyone has committed a major fault
which might lead to the damnation of more souls, she should reveal it to the abbess privately through pure confession lest, ashamed for a time to uncover her soul’s guilt, she conceals the face of the devil within when accused of crime.”69 Those nuns who refused to give their confession, nuns like the runaway women from Faremoutiers, provided examples of the spiritual consequences of ignoring confession. When the girls refused to confess the sins of their escape from the convent, the “doors were forced open with resounding blows and they saw black shadows standing there and heard numerous voices calling the pair by name.”70 The abbess located the tombs of these contentious nuns away from the community, and when Burgundofara went to check on them, all that was left in the tombs was glowing ash. Assuming that this was the verdict of a “just Judge,” the narrator of the account considers this a lesson to the community: “The punishment imposed on the dead was a correction to the living and the health which threatened to fade from religion because of negligence or indifference or even hardness of heart was thus increased through the energetic efforts of the survivors.”71 In instances such as this, the pedagogical role of hagiography is evident. At the point when a nun prepared for death, her cell was crowded with members from her community who were there to chant at the passing of their sister and, more importantly, who stood to observe the judgment of a nun. With an emphasis on confession and penitence, the ability to learn from the mistakes of others was key to nuns’ spiritual training.

Just as nuns observed the impact of disobedience on spiritual health, they also witnessed models of the ideal nun and the rewards of preparing a pure soul. Warned of her approaching death, angels instructed Faremoutiers’s Leudebertana to quickly fulfill her requirement of confession before her soul was released to its judge. As she lay on her deathbed, her soul purged of sin, the nun announced the arrival of Saint Peter, who had arrived to usher her soul to heaven. To have earned such an illustrious escort, Leudebertana’s virtue and spiritual devotion is assumed. According to the hagiographers of Irish saints’ lives, the most pure abandoned their physical restrictions and interacted with celestial figures.72 Although Leudebertana’s vision of Peter was not visible to her companions, the expression on her face, delighted at her soul’s joyous release from the world, made a notable impression on her companions. The narrator
observes that “the Makers of things had permitted her tongue to testify in that shaky voice so that others would be moved to follow the example of her life. And so He showed those who were leaving this light in awe and love, the abundance of His endless gifts from above.”

Given the spiritual experiences of women such as Gibitruide and Leudebertana, the community at Faremoutiers does not appear devoid of spiritual energy. The essential role of confession and penitence for the salvation of the soul, as implied in the monastic rule of Waldebert, created a community that thrived on the religious experiences of its members. With spiritual incentives such as martyrdom, the harsh discipline associated with the penitential tradition of Columbanus was tolerable and even welcomed. This is not to suggest that women of the sixth century, who lived under notable rules such as that of Caesarius of Arles, were without a vibrant female spirituality. In seventh-century Gaul, however, there were factors that reshaped female monasticism in a way that permitted monastic authorities to use the nuns’ rule to express more than anxieties regarding safety and stability. The arrival of the Irish peregrini and Columbanus’s influence on the Frankish nobility’s participation in a primarily rural monastic movement created an environment for convents in which strict enclosure and the monastic regulations that accompanied it were no longer necessary. Without these overwhelming physical concerns, monastic authorities were able to use rules to direct women in their spiritual journey, which depended to a great extent on their relationships with their spiritual sisters.

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END NOTES


4. Donatus of Besançon, Regula ad virgines, in The Ordeal of Community,


9. Ibid., 186. Sadalberga had originally established a convent on her family property near Langres. According to her hagiographer, she had moved the community to Laon predicting the political strife and instability that would erupt near her original site following the succession of her daughter as abbess.


16. Ibid., 529.

17. Waldebert, *Rule of a Certain Father*, c. 21, 98.

18. According to McNamara and Halborg, these accounts from within the convent may have been sent to Jonas during the 640s while he was in Gaul researching for his *vita* of Columbanus. See *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 160.

20. Ibid., 172.
22. Sadalberga, Abbess of Laon, 191.

23. Although Laon is by definition a city, its location in northern Gaul makes it a very different city compared to Arles, Lyon, and Marseille. More of a strategic location than a long-standing center of civic activity, Laon’s urban environment in the seventh century was likely tied more to the interests of the villa and the growing landed Frankish aristocracy rather than those of a Gallo-Roman city. This stands in stark comparison to Caesarius’s Arles, once the seat of the praetorian prefecture and a resilient urban center and metropolitan area from Late Antiquity into the early Middle Ages. In fact, Chris Wickham’s Framing the Early Middle Ages does not mention Laon in his section on cities, but rather chooses to discuss it and the sources that pertain to it in his chapter on land management and estates. See Wickham, Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 179–81, 505–14, 665–67.

24. Donatus of Besançon, Regula ad virgines, 32.
25. Waldebert, Rule of a Certain Father, c. 12, 90.
26. Ibid., c. 3, 79.
27. Ibid., c. 3, 80.
28. Ibid., c. 3, 80. For the Latin PL 88, 1057.
34. Friedrich Prinz, “Columbanus, the Frankish Nobility and the Territories East of the Rhine,” in Columbanus and Merovingian Monasticism, 81–82.

35. Monegund (d. 570) decided to adopt the life of a recluse after her daughters died from fever. Before she founded Holy Cross, Radegund (525–587) had been a Thuringian princess whose family’s war against the Franks had led to her capture and subsequent marriage to Chlothar. Her vita and the surviving poetry of Fortunatus Venantius also reveal that her husband’s assassination of her brother contributed to her overall dissatisfaction as Chlothar’s queen. And finally, the religious life of Rusticula (556–632) began as a young girl when she was imprisoned in the convent of St. John of Arles.


37. Gertrude, Abbess of Nivelles, in Sainted Women of the Dark Ages, 220–1, 224.

38. Wemple, Women in Frankish Society, 54.


41. Jonas of Bobbio, The Life of the abbot Saint Columbanus, Bk II, 159.

42. Ibid., 190.

43. Ibid., 191.

44. Ibid., 168.


47. Sadalberga, Abbess of Laon, 188.


49. Ibid.


52. Wemple, Women in Frankish Society, 163.

53. Waldebert, Rule of a Certain Father, c. 23, 100.


59. John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), 400. The “Cambria Homily,” a seventh- or eighth-century Irish sermon, mentions specifically the three categories of martyrdom: “The white martyrdom for someone is when they part for the sake of God from everything that they love, although they may suffer fasting and hard work thereby. The blue martyrdom is when through fasting and hard work they control their desires or struggle in penance and repentance. The red martyrdom is when they endure a cross or destruction for Christ’s sake.” See *Celtic Spirituality*, trans. Oliver Davies with Thomas O’Loughlin and James Mackey, 53–54, 369–70.

60. Columbanus, *Monks’ Rule*, in *Sancti Columbani Opera*, c. 9, 141.


67. Waldebert, *Rule of a Certain Father*, c. 16, 94–95, c. 5, 83.


71. Ibid., 173.