

Carine van Rhijn

Carolingian Rural Priests as Local (Religious) Experts

1 Introduction

The Carolingian Franks, who ruled over large parts of Europe between the eighth and the tenth century, had a special relation with their God. They considered themselves as a Chosen People, the New People of Israel, and just like the first People of Israel, they were led by the stern but just God of the Old Testament.¹ Being a Chosen People had the advantage of having a very strong ally in heaven who would smite enemies and make the land prosper, and who would take care of His people in times of need. On the other hand, all this help and prosperity came at a price: in order to keep their special position, the People of God were expected to obey His laws and be faithful in everything. And here problems began, as Carolingian intellectuals realised, for what exactly was the will of God? The kings of the period relied to a large extent on the wise advice of their bishops and other learned men, who were invited to the court from all the corners of the kingdom.² It were these people who combed the Bible and the writings of the Fathers of the Church for relevant knowledge, and who scrutinized the world around them for signs of the Divine Will. Failed harvests, disease and plundering heathens, to mention but a few examples, were in many cases sure signs of divine displeasure, which should be countermanded by fasting, penance and exemplary behaviour by all.³

1 See Mary Garisson, “The Franks as New Israel? Education for an identity from Pippin to Charlemagne,” in *The uses of the past in the early middle ages*, ed. Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (Cambridge 2000), 114–161; Mayke de Jong, “Charlemagne’s church,” in *Charlemagne, empire and society*, ed. Joanna Story (Manchester 2005), 103–135.

2 See Donald A. Bullough, “Charlemagne’s ‘men of God’: Alcuin, Hildebald, Arn,” in Story 2005 (cf. n. 1), 136–150; Linda Dohmen, “Wanderers between two worlds: Irish and Anglo-Saxon scholars at the court of Charlemagne,” in *Difference and identity in Francia and Medieval France*, ed. Meredith Cohen and Justine Firnhaber-Baker (Ashgate 2010), 77–79; Michael Edward Moore, *A sacred kingdom: Bishops and the rise of Frankish kingship 300–850* (Lanham 2011), esp. ch.7.

3 See, for instance, a letter written by Charlemagne to Bishop Gerbald of Liège, in which he orders Gerbald to organise a period of fasting in his diocese to avert a famine. *Karoli ad Ghaerbaldum episcopum epistula* (805), ed. A. Boretius, MGH Cap. I (Hanover 1883), no. 124, 244–246. On this case see Rob Meens, “Politics, mirrors of princes and the Bible: sins, kings and the well-being of the realm,” *Early Medieval Europe* 7 (1998), 345–357.

This “by all” we should take literally here: it was firmly believed by those in power that the entire Frankish-Christian population should collaborate to ensure future divine favour, from the king and his family down to the humblest peasant. In a world where the majority of the population consisted of the uneducated inhabitants of small, rural settlements, this was an ideal not easily realised. It meant that all these people should be taught how to behave, what to believe and how to think in ways deemed both “correct” and “Christian” by the experts of the day. Only then would they know how to save their souls and enter the Heavenly Kingdom after death. In theory, the king was ultimately responsible for the souls of his entire people, but the episcopate shared in his *ministerium* in the sense that they were expected to care for the spiritual well-being of the inhabitants of their own dioceses. However, these dioceses were often too large for bishops to supervise what went on in every last village, and therefore they delegated the responsibilities of pastoral care and education of the local laity to their priests, who lived with their lay flocks and, at least ideally, looked after their beliefs, morals and behaviour.⁴ It is these local experts that will take centre stage in what follows, for in the larger scheme of things, their expertise was crucial to the well-being of the majority of Charlemagne’s subjects.

The local priests of the Carolingian period probably lived rather isolated lives in their village communities. Because of their ministry they were not allowed to participate in the events that marked the lives of local laymen, such as feasts and hunting, or just having a drink in the local tavern, and they were “on duty” day and night in case an emergency baptism needed to be performed or somebody needed their last sacrament. Priests who did not live in the direct neighbourhood of the episcopal city saw their bishops on no more than a handful of occasions every year (for instance during local synods or the yearly episcopal visitation), so most of the time they were left to their own devices. For practical problems and advice pertaining to their day-to-day duties they were, then, dependent on other local clergy.⁵ All the same, quite a lot of knowledge and abilities was expected of them: their knowledge and pastoral abilities were deemed so important by

⁴ The term “parish” is avoided on purpose in this article, as the term refers to a state of affairs that post-dates the Carolingian period. See Christine Delaplace ed., *Aux origines de la paroisse rurale en Gaule méridionale, IVe–IXe siècles* (Paris 2005). An excellent recent case-study of local communities is Thomas Kohl, *Lokale Gesellschaften: Formen der Gemeinschaft in Bayern vom 8. bis zum 10. Jahrhundert* (Ostfildern 2010). About the duties of Carolingian local priests see Carine van Rhijn, *Shepherds of the Lord: Priests and episcopal statutes in the Carolingian period* (Turnhout 2006).

⁵ Charles Mériaux, “Ordre et hiérarchie au sein du clergé rural pendant le haut moyen âge,” in

the king and his advisors that we find such requirements in texts composed at the highest political levels. This pre-occupation with the education of the local clergy, which was part of a wider political programme called the Carolingian reforms, connected court and countryside. As I will show below, decisions taken on this subject at the court and transmitted to the priests by their bishops, did at least reach the countryside to some extent – and probably its inhabitants too.⁶

In a famous text called the *Admonitio Generalis*, which was issued in the year 789 by Charlemagne, we can clearly see how this chain of command was envisaged.⁷ The king admonished his bishops to take care that their priests be well-educated and able to deal with all aspects of their ministry; the priests, in turn, should teach the laity what to believe and how to behave as good Christians. The text in its entirety can be read as one big blueprint for the reform, moral correction (*correctio*) and improvement (*emendatio*) of the realm, in which everybody had a part to play. Lay beliefs and behaviour were, understandably, important issues to the king and his advisory committee, and a substantial proportion of the text is devoted to explaining the details of what priests should teach them. In a section addressed to “the leaders and pastors of the Church”, for instance, we find a whole series of matters that were entrusted to our local experts, for instance baptism, teaching the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, preaching and giving instruction about correct doctrine. What exactly this “correct doctrine” entailed is explained later on in the text, where we find a whole list of subjects such as the Holy Trinity, the virginity of Mary, the Resurrection, the Last Judgement and the Afterlife in the Eternal Kingdom of Heaven or, for those less fortunate, in the Eternal Fire. Of course, the average lay Frank should also know what he might do to avoid such a nasty fate, and therefore his local priest should teach him about sins and crimes, about penance and about good works.⁸ All these admonish-

Hierarchie et stratification sociale dans l'Occident médiéval (400–1000), ed. François Bougard, Dominique Iogna-Prat and Régine Le Jan (Turnhout 2008), 117–136.

⁶ About the Carolingian reforms see – among a vast amount of literature on the subject – Philippe Depreux, “Ambitions et limites des réformes culturelles à l’époque carolingienne,” *Revue Historique* (2002), 721–753; Giles Brown, “Introduction: the Carolingian renaissance” in *Carolingian culture: emulation and innovation*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge 1994), 1–52; Matthew Innes, “Charlemagne’s government,” in Story 2005 (cf. n. 1), 71–89.

⁷ Hubert Mordek, Klaus Zechiel-Eckes and Michael Glatthaar ed., *Die Admonitio Generalis Karls des Großen* (Hanover 2012). Note that this new edition numbers the *capitula* differently than the old MGH edition. The importance and working of admonishment (as opposed to enforcing laws, which is an anachronistic notion for this period) is explained by Thomas Martin Buck, *Admonitio und Praedicatio: Zur religiös-pastoralen Dimension von Kapitularien und kapitularienahen Texten (507–814)* (Freiburg 1997).

⁸ *Admonitio Generalis*, c.80, 234–239.

ments in the *Admonitio Generalis* were part of one master plan of moral improvement and education, which should ultimately lead to the creation of a kingdom of Christian Franks, who would serve their God in the right way and thereby keep His favour. It is important here to underline that “serving God” was something that did not only happen in church on Sun- and feastdays: good Christian behaviour was an umbrella that covered every single aspect of life, including things like travelling, building houses, dealing with sickness and even growing beans (see below). This means, in turn, that we should consider Carolingian local priests as more than religious experts in our modern sense: if the itinerary to the Eternal Kingdom of God involved many things that we would nowadays consider to be “secular”, priests needed to be able to educate and steer people in those matters too.

2 Educated priests?

One of the problems that I find particularly interesting in this context is if and how all this knowledge about good Christian beliefs and behaviour in the wide sense of the word was meant to reach the priests and the lay population in the many rural communities of the Frankish world. In the *Admonitio Generalis*, as in many related texts, the task to educate the local laity was entrusted to the local priests, whose education, in turn, was the responsibility of the diocesan bishop.⁹ Rural priests were, in all these texts, considered to be the local religious experts from whom the laity should learn everything they needed to know. However, we have next to no information about their own education, about the lives they led locally, about their backgrounds. The main evidence for the lives of local priests and their communities are prescriptions issued by kings or bishops, and how and in how far these were implemented is a matter on which scholars hold different opinions.¹⁰ The prescriptions by themselves, in other words, give us very little indeed to decide whether or not we should think of local priests as religious

⁹ Steffen Patzold, „Bildung und Wissen einer lokalen Elite des Frühmittelalters: das Beispiel der Landpfarrer im Frankenreich des 9. Jahrhunderts,“ in *La culture du haut moyen âge, une question d'élites?*, ed. François Bougard, Régine Le Jan and Rosamond McKitterick, Haut Moyen 7 (Turnhout 2009), 377–391. See also his *Episcopus: Wissen über Bischöfe im Frankenreich des späten 8. bis frühen 10. Jahrhunderts* (Ostfildern 2008), esp. 118–134.

¹⁰ Chris Wickham, for instance, isn't very optimistic about this, while Matthew Innes holds the view that such ideals might well have reached the localities. See Chris Wickham, *The inheritance of Rome: A history of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London, 2009), 414–415; Matthew Innes, *Introduction to early medieval Western Europe, 300–900* (London 2007), 456–457.

experts in the first place. In a world where rules could never be imposed, but were dependent on the goodwill and collaboration of all involved, they should, after all, not be interpreted as our modern laws but rather as tools of communication and government. In this sense, the texts that outline the ideals of the Carolingian reforms express intentions rather than what actually happened, so we should be very careful to draw conclusions.¹¹

All the same, we do have a rather large amount of rules and admonishments telling local priests what they should know how to do, ranging from performing a whole series of different masses and sacraments, to dealing with sinners of all kinds, to keeping the local church clean and pure, to being able to calculate the Easter date. Most important of all, perhaps, is that they should know enough to be able to teach, preach and give advice about a bewildering range of aspects of the daily lives of lay Christians.¹² The crucial question that needs to be asked here is this: can we really expect that priests were up to these tasks? Or, in other words, do we have evidence that the ideals that were communicated as prescriptions actually reached their intended audience and had any effect at all? At first glance, scepticism seems to be in order.

One type of prescription was obviously systematically ignored, which is the oft-repeated rule that priests should not be involved with secular business.¹³ Recent research that covers large parts of Carolingian Europe shows priests were active members of the local, land-owning elite, involved in activities very different from teaching and preaching. They wrote, signed and witnessed charters for

11 This point was convincingly made by Buck 1997 (cf. n. 7). The discussion about capitularies as ‘law’ is an old one, see for instance François-Louis Ganshof, *Wat waren de capitularia?*, Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Akademie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Letteren, Verhandeling 22 (Brussels 1955); Carlo De Clercq, *La législation religieuse franque de Clovis à Charlemagne: Étude sur les actes de conciles et les capitulaires, les statuts diocésains et les règles monastiques (507–814)*, 2 vols. (Louvain 1936); Hubert Mordek, „Karolingische Kapitularien,“ in *Überlieferung und Geltung normativer Texte des frühen und hohen Mittelalters: Vier Vorträge, gehalten auf dem 35. Deutschen Historikertag 1984 in Berlin*, idem, ed., Quellen und Forschungen zum Recht im Mittelalter 4 (Sigmaringen 1986). For a more recent interpretation that considers capitularies as tools for communication and government rather than law see 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), 253–274.

12 The most detailed and evocative among these prescriptions are the episcopal statutes, see for instance the first one by Theodulf of Orléans, ed. Peter Brommer, *MGH Capitula episcoporum I* (Hanover 1984), 103–142.

13 The term used is *negotia saecularia*, and such a prohibition can be found as early as the Council of Chalcedon (451), c.3 and 4, repeated in the *Admonitio Generalis* c.23 and many times before and after.

themselves and others, bought, sold and exchanged land and real estate, sometimes together with members of their family, sometimes on behalf of their lay lord. Some of them did well for themselves and became rather wealthy, others became experienced in secular transactions as scribes or witnesses.¹⁴ All in all, the charter material shows a reality rather different from what we find in the prescriptions mentioned above: the hand that offered the bread and wine during Mass could clearly very well write official documents, in the same way that religious know-how and familiarity with land-transactions were not mutually exclusive. That involvement in secular business had been forbidden to priests for centuries by canon law was clearly conveniently forgotten, which reminds us that we should be aware of the fact that no one set of sources tells us the full story. Local priests, then, were neither just the pious shepherds from the Carolingian prescriptions nor were they only the experienced businessmen of the charters, but both, and even more than that.

The little that we hear about local priests in narrative sources of the Carolingian period shows us individual cases that describe negative examples, highlighting the ideals behind them. For instance, one priest, famously mentioned in a letter by Pope Zachary to Boniface, did not know his Latin and baptised in the name of the Fatherland and the Daughter (*patriae et filiae*), a next one was suspected of living with a woman, a third one tried to kill somebody after a fight in a local tavern.¹⁵ All authors who wrote about these cases, mostly bishops, express strong disapproval, which means that at least they were well aware of the ideals of priesthood. Still, one may wonder if these people were really the local religious experts of the *Admonitio Generalis*, who ought to be shining examples of virtuous living for the laity in order to make the Carolingian reforms a success. Were these people ignorant, or did they conveniently forget what they had been taught? Were such priests the exceptions that merited special attention as bad examples, or did they represent a majority? Although there is no way to answer such questions, we can say that without educated priests who stuck by what they had learned, the whole undertaking of *correctio* and *emendatio* on which Charlemagne *cum suis* embarked, would be doomed to fail.

14 A series of case-studies will be published in Steffen Patzold and Carine van Rhijn ed., *Men in the middle: Local priests in early medieval Europe* (forthcoming, Berlin 2015).

15 The famous letter mentioning this case was sent by Pope Zachary to Boniface in 746 and is no. 68 in the edition by Michael Tangl, *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, MGH Epp. sel. I (Berlin 1916), 141–142. There are various cases of priests suspected of co-habitation with a woman, for instance a priest called Hunold about whose case Hincmar of Rheims wrote a letter, see J.-P. Migne ed., *PL* 126, *Epistola XXXIV*, col. 253C–254C. The case of Trising, who tried to murder somebody, is also discussed by Hincmar, *Ad Adrianum papam*, *PL* 126, col. 646–648.

The “Kampf um das Expertentum” was, in this sense, not so much a battle between competing religious opinions, as efforts to ensure that well-educated experts were available locally in the first place. Or, as Peter Brown has put it so well, the effort of reform boiled down to an empire-wide battle against ignorance.¹⁶ Whether Charlemagne and his advisors managed to organise this, is a matter for debate, and if we only look at charters and listen to these anecdotes, things do not sound very hopeful. But there is another side to this discussion, which brings us to manuscripts used by local priests.

3 Priests’ manuscripts

The question whether or not we should believe that rural priests knew enough to fulfil all the responsibilities that the prescriptive texts contain has thus far been mostly conducted on the basis of the prescriptive texts themselves, the anecdotal evidence, and scholarly ideas about the (lack of) possibilities to implement prescriptions locally. Unsurprisingly, the conclusions drawn are often not very optimistic. However, the entire discussion leaves to the side an important collection of manuscripts that, to my mind, changes the outlook of the problem substantially. Over the past decades, a handful of articles has seen the light, each of which discussing one or two manuscripts that may well have belonged to local priests.¹⁷ In 2002 and again in 2012, numbers of priests’ manuscripts recognised as such went up quite dramatically when the late Susan Keefe published her work about baptismal tracts and Creed comments respectively and, as a sideline, identified some twenty handbooks for local priests and some thirty manuscripts probably intended for the education of the secular clergy.¹⁸ Rudolf Pokorny, in turn, added another twelve manuscripts to this collection, and new additions to the corpus surface on a regular basis.¹⁹ Presently, the total number of ninth-century manuscripts that were probably used by priests, or studied by them during

¹⁶ Peter Brown, *The rise of western Christendom: Triumph and diversity, A. D. 200–1000* (Oxford 2003), 426.

¹⁷ For instance Raymond Étaix, “Un manuel de pastorale de l’époque carolingienne (Clm 27152),” *Revue Bénédictine* 91 (1981), 105–130; Yitzhak Hen, “Knowledge of canon law among rural priests: the evidence of two Carolingian manuscripts from around 800,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 50 (1999), 117–132.

¹⁸ Susan A. Keefe, *Water and the word: Baptism and the education of the clergy in the Carolingian empire*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame 2002), esp. vol. I, 160–163 and eadem, *A catalogue of works pertaining to the explanation of the Creed in Carolingian manuscripts* (Turnhout 2012), passim.

¹⁹ Rudolf Pokorny, *MGH Capitula episcoporum IV* (Hanover 2005), 9.

their education, stands at about 75, but this number will no doubt go up. It is these manuscripts that I will talk about hereafter, for I think that they may help to understand how knowledge about God, religion and many other matters was dispensed to local lay communities via their priests. The manuscripts used and studied by priests, in other words, show what shape local “Expertentum” took in this period.

Let me first, briefly, sketch what kinds of manuscripts we are dealing with here. All these books, often simple, undecorated, small manuscripts, contain up to two dozen different texts that are, in one way or the other, connected to aspects of the priestly ministry.²⁰ We mostly find texts that should help priests in their daily tasks, for instance explanations of Mass, of baptism, of the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, handbooks of penance, collections of canon law, sample sermons (often falsely ascribed to Fathers of the Church), questions and answers about a wide range of subjects related to the Church, episcopal instructions, prayers. Many if not most of these texts are anonymous, in many cases they are rather short and to the point in the sense that they, for instance, explain a prayer line by line or word by word, but without lengthy and sophisticated theological expositions. Some manuscripts, often schoolbooks, may also contain longer and more complicated texts, such as extracts from Amalarius of Metz’ *Liber officialis*, texts about *computus*, or lengthy explanations of Mass.²¹ Even though the Latin used in the manuscripts is in many cases not very much like that employed by the intellectuals of the time, the books do make a wide range of knowledge available. I think we can, therefore, conclude that the priest who knew the contents of such a book might rightly be called a local expert. This does not mean that the entire Frankish empire was filled with well-educated rural priests, but given the distribution of these manuscripts such people did exist throughout the realm, and they were trained to know their jobs and teach the laity, as well as fulfil a series of other functions.

In what follows I would like to discuss three fields of expertise, relevant to local priests and their communities, which on the one hand shows how priests were central figures in their communities because of their expertise, but also that religious and other knowledge were not always clearly discernable, which means that we should consider these priests as more than religious experts alone. The way in which knowledge about God was made available to local lay communities

²⁰ See Keefe 2002 (cf. n. 18), II for the contents of many such manuscripts.

²¹ A good example is an anonymous explanation of Mass called the *Dominus vobiscum*, which survives in over a dozen of priests’ manuscripts. See J. M. Hanssens, *Amalarii opera liturgica omnia I* (Vatican City 1948), 284–338. The text is no longer ascribed to Amalarius.

is the first, for here we can clearly see how the priest's duty of "preaching and teaching" demanded his explanation of abstract and complicated concepts to an uneducated audience that might nevertheless ask difficult questions. Secondly, I will briefly go into the implications of the priests' knowledge of *computus*, the reckoning of time, texts about which are a recurrent element in their manuscripts. Of course these texts and tables were needed to calculate the Easter date and all dates derived from it, but they could also be put to wider uses that might have been highly relevant for local communities. One very interesting collection of "prayers for everyday use" will, finally, show us how priests were expected to be experts about virtually every problem that might occur in a local agricultural community, and how they offered alternatives to non-Christian usages that were frowned upon as "superstitious" or outright "stupid" by the bishops of the day. Taken together, all this will hopefully show that early medieval religion did not just happen in church, and that priests therefore had to acquire expertise in many areas in order to live up to the expectations of their bishops and lay flocks both.

4 Knowledge about God

In the handbooks for local priests, knowledge about God comes in many shapes and forms, and runs through many different texts. The emphasis, however, is on straightforward explanations and often practical knowledge rather than on lengthy theological expositions. Even though the subjects are often far from easy to grasp for the uninitiated layman (for instance the Holy Trinity, the Immaculate Conception or the dual nature of Christ), the authors of the texts do their best to explain them in simple language. A few examples from a northern French priest's handbook (now Laon, Bibliothèque Municipale ms 288) dating from the second quarter of the ninth century bear this out. The manuscript is a small book of 91 folia, written by four different not very practiced hands (plus one later corrector) in rather creative Latin. The manuscript contains explanations of the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, a Mass commentary, a set of questions and answers about religious subjects and a series of homilies.

Woven throughout these texts is a lot of basic, to-the-point information about what good Christians should know and believe. A good example is a very brief, matter-of-fact explanation of the Holy Trinity that is part of a longer, line by line explanation of the Apostles' Creed. It reads as follows:

In the same way that we believe in the Father, we should also believe in the Son and in the Holy Spirit, who are three *personae* in one deity, and equal in glory, co-eternity and majesty.²²

The next text in the manuscript, a commentary on the Athanasian Creed, warns against the mistaken beliefs by Arius and Sabellius, and emphasises in various ways how the three members of the Trinity are equal and one – so, for instance, we should not consider them as three Gods, nor should we think that one of these three might be less omnipotent than the other two.²³ This is something we often find in the priests' books: the same idea or principle is explained in different ways, which is a clear sign of the educational purpose of such a text. It also underlines how important correct knowledge of the Trinity was considered to be for all Christian Franks.

We also find slightly more exotic material, for instance an explanation about the creation of Adam, who was, according this text, created by God out of eight different materials: loam, sea, sun, clouds, wind, stone, Holy Spirit and light of the earth. In the text, all these components are identified as parts of Adam's body: his heart was made of loam, his blood of the sea, his eyes of the sun – and so forth. After this explanation, the meaning of these materials is explained: the wind, for instance, of which Adam's breath was made, stands for both his quick temper and his velocity.²⁴ The reach of these books is, in other words, wider than just the very basics of Christianity and shows how even simple local priests would be acquainted with, for instance, some sense of the different layers of meaning in biblical texts.

What we also encounter throughout the texts are answers to questions that a layman may have asked his priest. Such a layman would, for instance, have learned that God is Almighty and that He can do everything, but might have wondered if this could be really true. For if he can do everything, can he also fail? Can he die? Can he end? Can he fall ill? The answer to these questions is, of course, a resounding “no”:

22 Laon BM 288, f.4v: “quomodo credimus in patre ita debemus credere in filium et spiritum sanctum que tres personas in una deitate aequalis gloria coeterna maistas (sic)”. This exposition has not been edited, but survives in several Carolingian priests' manuscripts, see Keefe 2002 (cf. n. 18), II, 26 n.2; the text is no. 353 in Keefe 2012 (cf. n. 18), 184.

23 The text is the earliest commentary on the *Quicumque vult*, known as the “Fortunatus-commentary”, see Keefe 2012 (cf. n. 18), no. 269, 155. Laon BM 288 ff.6r–15r.

24 Another unedited text, explaining the creation of Adam and his sins. Laon BM 288, ff. 55r–59r. That this text, titled somewhat misleadingly “Interrogatio sacerdotialis”, was considered to be important is evident from its many corrections.

He cannot fail, for He is Truth; He cannot fall ill, for He is health; He cannot die, for He is immortal; He cannot end, for He is infinite and eternal.²⁵

In this way, many texts in the manuscripts for priests seem to be connected to the practice of pastoral care, and prepared the priests for interaction with attentive lay people who might ask difficult but common-sense questions. In the examples just mentioned, we are still firmly with matters religious in our modern sense of the word; that this was only part of the priest's expertise is born out by other texts in the same manuscripts, for instance those about *computus*.

5 The many uses of *computus*

The term *computus* has two early medieval meanings: first of all, the ability to calculate time and dates and work with a calendar; secondly it describes the texts and tables needed to do so. We therefore find a *computus* in lists of books that every priest should have, but *computus* is also required knowledge for priests.²⁶ Usually, both are taken to refer to the same thing: a priest needed to be able to calculate the correct Easter date, for which he needed texts and tables. After all, all moveable dates that mark the Christian calendar derive from Easter. At least as important to Carolingian priests was the fact that it was only allowed to baptise at Easter or Pentecost, which was one of their main duties. Being able to calculate the correct Easter date was therefore a fundamental skill, and doing so was something that required education and practice, for Easter falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the beginning of Spring. For its calculation one needed to use a table for the movements of the moon (a cycle of 19 years) and one for the sun (a cycle of 28 years)²⁷, as well as a table that shows how they move in relation to each other, plus a method to find out when it would be Sunday at any

²⁵ This is part of the Fortunatus-commentary cited above, f. 8v: "Falli non potest, quia veritas est, infirmare non potest, quia sanitas est, mori non potest, quia immortalis uita est, finire non potest, quia infinitus et perennis est."

²⁶ This is a general requirement in the episcopal statutes, see for instance in the *Capitula Moguntiacensia*, where the ability to calculate time is meant, MGH Cap.ep.I, 180, c.7. For the general definition see U. Ebel, „Computus,“ *Lexikon des Mittelalters* III, col.107.

²⁷ The astronomical beginning of spring depends on the cycle of the sun: spring starts when night and day are of the same length. On Carolingian *computus* see Arno Borst's introduction to *Der Karolingische Reichskalender und seine Überlieferung bis ins 12. Jahrhundert*, MGH Libri mem. II (Hanover 2001) with extensive bibliography.

given day in the future. And it went without saying that errors should be avoided at all cost, for the God of the Franks did not like imprecisions at all.

Small wonder, then, that many manuscripts used for the education of future priests contain a *computus* in the sense of a set of texts related to the reckoning of time. However, no two of such collections of texts are the same. The relevant tables for the calculation of Easter are always there (including handy shortcuts, such as a brief text telling you what to do “if you are unable to calculate the age of the moon”²⁸), but in addition related texts may be included that are especially interesting here, for some of them are not about the calculation of the Easter date at all. A rather famous “schoolbook” from Lorsch, Vatican library pal. lat 485, for instance, shows that *computus* could be used for more than calculating feast days. This manuscript contains everything needed to calculate the Easter date, but also a list of so-called “Egyptian days”, unlucky days of the month on which it was unwise to do bloodletting or take medicines. It is followed by a list of days of the moon (counting from the new moon), indicating how likely it was to get better when falling ill for every specific day (for instance: “On the seventh day of the moon he will struggle and survive. On the eighth day of the moon he shall not live long.”²⁹) Yet another list tells the reader what best to eat and not to eat in each month of the year (“In August don’t eat cabbage but leeks, and don’t drink beer and mead”³⁰.) A later addition to the quire lists the days of the moon when bloodletting is safe. *Computus*, then, was also considered to be closely related to matters of health and disease, and whoever could work with a moon-table and knew the right texts had access to this important knowledge.³¹

Another type of text found often in the context of computistic collections are calendars, which as far as I know always contain more than saints’ feasts and were often added to by different users in the course of time. The calendar in the manuscript just mentioned, for instance, also includes astronomical information

28 As in manuscript Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek lit 131, f. 58r: “de aetate lunae si quis computare non potest.”

29 BAV pal.lat.485 f.13r: “Lunae vii laborabit et resurget. Lunae viii non diu uiuit.” On this manuscript see Fred Paxton, “*Bonus liber*: a late Carolingian clerical manual from Lorsch (Bibliotheca Vaticana MS Pal.lat. 485),” in *The two laws: Studies in medieval legal history dedicated to Stephan Kuttner*, ed. Laurent Mayali and Stephanie A. J. Tibbetts, Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Canon Law vol. I (Washington 1990), 1–30.

30 BAV pal.lat.485 f. 14r: “Mensis augusti nullo penitus caule manducet, agriamen manducet, ceruisam et mettum non bibet.”

31 On the connection between *computus* and matters of health see Margaret S. Schleissner ed., *Manuscript sources of medieval medicine: A book of essays* (New York / London 1995) and especially the article by Faith Wallis, who also discusses the Vatican manuscript: “Medicine in medieval calendar manuscripts,” 105–143.

(“sun in Aquarius” or “beginning of summer”), important events from the bible (“the first day of the world”, or “the devil was defeated by the Lord”), local events (“bishop Hruodgang died” or “the holy Nazarius arrived in Lorsch”) and also contemporary “historical events” (“War between Charles and Louis”).³² In this sense, a calendar may be considered as a window on the wider world that gave its users a sense of different kinds of history or chronology (local, biblical, Christian, Frankish). Up to a certain extent, it also tied the many regions of the kingdom together. Although no two calendars in these manuscripts are the same, comparison between them shows that at least parts were shared: for instance, people could celebrate a whole range of saints’ days and religious feast days everywhere which sits well with royal and episcopal decisions about feast days that should be celebrated everywhere in the realm.

A priest who knew his *computus* and owned the right texts, then, was able to do more than calculate the main Christian feast days correctly. With the aid of the same tables he would use to establish the Easter date, he had access to knowledge about health and disease that would be highly useful to his flock. What is more, such knowledge anchored as it was in patently Christian *computus*, provided alternatives to more traditional (or, in the opinion of Carolingian bishops, “superstitious”) forms of medicine that were often strongly disapproved of.³³ This last point is born out even stronger in the final example, which also demonstrates how what we would call “religious” knowledge blends into other expertise without clear distinction.

6 Alternative practices

As the examples concerning health and disease have shown, well-educated local priests were capable of offering approved Christian alternatives to local practices considered superstitious or otherwise misguided. It is important to emphasise that we should not interpret this as a “battle against pagan remnants” or something like it – bishops of the time consequently wrote about “stupid superstitions”

³² The calendar can be found on ff.6r–11v.

³³ One only needs to consult a handbook of penance, also part of every priest’s library, to find examples of unapproved forms of healing, see for instance the well-known *Paenitentiale pseudo-Egberti* VIII,2, that imposes five years of penance to women who put their children on the roof or in the oven in order to cure their fever. Hermann Joseph Schmitz ed., *Die Bussbücher und das kanonische Bussverfahren: Nach handschriftlichen Quellen dargestellt*, vol.II, 663–674. This prescription and similar ones can be found in most handbooks of penance.

held by people who knew no better, and do not use the term “pagan” in this context.³⁴ These were areas where priests needed to educate their flocks and to teach them the difference between *superstitio* and *religio*, between bad behaviour and its good Christian alternative. One way of doing so was simply by giving local laymen the right example: one oft-repeated requirement for a good Carolingian priest was to teach by both word and example. That a local priest could be called upon in a wide range of circumstances, including those of spiritual and physical health, can be gleaned from an extensive collection of prayers (sometimes interspersed with other bits of liturgy), included in the same Vatican manuscript that contains the medical material. It claims to be “From the authentic sacramentary of the holy pope Gregory of the city of Rome”, after which 123 mostly very short prayers follow.³⁵ Fred Paxton has shown how the collection is a mix between Gregorian texts, material from Frankish Gelasian sacramentaries and bits and pieces with yet a different provenance, as well as unprecedented prayers that might have been new creations.³⁶ Many themes addressed in the prayers are conventional: prayers for the sick, prayers related to baptism and penance, prayers of exorcism for those possessed by a demon, prayers for the dying. Mixed in with these well-known themes, however, we find much that would have taken the priest out of his church to other areas of the lives of his lay flock. There are prayers to influence the weather, for instance, when it rains too much or too little, or to avert lightning. Other prayers are related to life on the farm in other ways, such as a couple for sick livestock, or those that ask for a good harvest of grain, green beans or olives. We find blessings for newly dug wells, or houses just finished. There is one peculiar prayer to be said over “pots found in an old place” (*oratio super vasa in loco antiquo reperti*), and one to be said before having one’s hair cut. The collection is, in other words, a very mixed bag indeed, but all the same it is very well suited for a local priest teaching, and supporting his lay flock in every possible way. Clearly,

34 See, for instance, the tract by bishop Agobard of Laon against people who claimed they could send or avert thunderstorms and the different interpretations it has received in recent scholarship, as explained in Rob Meens, *Penance in early medieval Europe, 600–1200* (Cambridge 2014), 1–2. A lot has changed in the way in which scholars regard early medieval paganism, and it is outside the scope of this article to enter into this discussion here. See James Palmer, “Defining paganism in the Carolingian world,” *Early Medieval Europe* 15 (2007), 402–425; Jonathan Couser, “Inventing paganism in eighth-century Bavaria,” *Early Medieval Europe* 18 (2010), 26–42. The discussion is well summarized in Meens 2014, “Introduction”.

35 See ms Vatican, pal.lat. 485 f.49r–63v: “Ex authentico libro sacramentorum sancti Gregorii papae urbis Rome.”

36 Paxton 1990 (cf. n. 29), 15–18. As far as I know, this collection of prayers is unique, although other, comparable collections exist, for instance in ms Sélestat, Bibliothèque Humaniste 132, ff.32–63v.

praying for the sick was as relevant as blessing a house just finished, in the same way that one needed prayers for both exorcisms and blessings of the harvest. Moreover, all these activities, both inside and outside church, were equally part of a Christian life, and every single activity seems to have required an approved Christian way of going about them. A priest was needed as a local expert in all these matters.

Interestingly, again the theme of physical health and disease appears in the collection of prayers, indicating once again that priests were concerned with more than their flock's spiritual well-being alone. This is all the more interesting in the light of the doubts that bishops of the time voiced about traditional ways of healing, which they often considered to be superstitious or even diabolical. In conciliar decrees of the time, for instance, practices such as incantations were forbidden, but one may wonder how different a prayer chanted by a priest sounded to the ears of the bystanders.³⁷ The same goes for the prayers about the weather, which provided alternatives for what a disgruntled bishop of the period called "stupid superstitions" of weather magicians.³⁸ Taken as a whole, the prayer collection shows how a priest who owned it was well-equipped to participate in all the important events that marked the life of a local community, including threats to people, cattle or harvest. Any division between "religious" and "secular" is absent in the collection: for local priests and their flocks the outlook on life as a whole was Christian, no matter if one was in church or ploughing a field. Divisions between religious behaviour and its secular counterparts are likewise informed by anachronistic notions of religion as a separate sphere of life that can be isolated from other spheres – to the priests of the Carolingian period, such divisions did not exist. There was no single aspect of life uninformed by Christian ideas, and perhaps one could say that early medieval Christianity should be regarded as a comprehensive way of life (including religious aspects) rather than a religion in the modern sense of the word. Here lies, to my mind, the connection to ideals of *correctio*: priests were not only trained and equipped for their tasks in and around the church, but should be able to be jacks-of-all-trades and in that sense central members of the local community. It was to the priest that laymen should go for advice about anything that worried them; it was to him that they should look for solutions to problems – especially those traditionally solved in ways that were no longer deemed acceptable and would certainly not please God.

³⁷ A prohibition of this kind can be found in the *Admonitio Generalis*, cc.18 and 64.

³⁸ See note 34 above.

7 Conclusion

Witnessing the rather large corpus of Carolingian manuscripts for local priests, we can, I think, safely assume that there existed such a thing as “local Expertentum” about God, Christianity and the Church in this period, but such knowledge blended into other kinds of expertise that we nowadays would not immediately consider to be “religious”. Yet, to the early medieval priests, there was no clear distinction: whether he said Mass, heard confession, blessed salt to cure a sick cow or sang a prayer to avert thunder, it was all part of doing things “in the right way” so as to please the stern God of the Franks. Both by their preaching and teaching, and by their knowledge of good Christian ways of doing more or less everything in daily life, they were, within their communities, the people to whom laymen could go for advice on all aspects of their lives. At this stage of the middle ages, the battle for expertise was, I think, most of all about getting all this knowledge to the people as a whole, and about making sure that local experts were educated enough to fulfil their many tasks. It is through their manuscripts that we can discover what exactly local priests knew, and the wide range of material in these books shows how diverse local Christianities were in this period.