

AN UNINTENDED ORDER: THE CENTRALITY
OF CHARACTER AND CIRCUMSTANCE IN THE
TWELFTH-CENTURY GILBERTINE
COMMUNITIES

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
University of Missouri

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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JULY 2010

The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts

And herby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. Johanna Kramer

For my family, for those still with us, and those long gone, and for my wife. Your support means more than you'll ever know.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work could not have been completed without the support and encouragement of Dr. Lois Huneycutt. I would also like to thank Dr. Johanna Kramer and Dr. A. Mark Smith, both for sitting on my committee and for the lectures and discussions which have further encouraged my studies. Many thanks are also due to my fellow historians in Read hall: Mark Singer, Josh Nudell, Kris Malden, Nina Verbanaz, Autumn Dolan, Katie Sheffield, Alexis Miller, Rebecca Jacobs-Pollez, and Rob Howell. You helped tip the balance on those days when the line between hope and despair was dangerously thin. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Gregory G. Guzman of Bradley University for instilling in me not only a love of the Middle Ages, but also a love of history as a discipline. Thank you all.

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Introduction

Throughout the roughly thousand-year span of the Middle Ages there was perhaps no presence more ubiquitous in the West than the Roman Church. What had originated as a small cult following surrounding a Nazarene carpenter had, by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, acquired sufficient authority to define the boundaries of orthodox theology, check the ambitions of kings and other powerful lay-magnates, and dispatch extensive military campaigns to distant lands. Throughout the centuries the Church was rarely static. Evolving doctrines, changing political necessities, and numerous reform movements ensured that the Church of the eleventh and twelfth centuries looked quite different than it had a thousand or even a hundred years before. Nor were spiritual experiences uniform across the board; perceptions, beliefs, and practices varied widely according to one's time, space, social standing, and sex.

In the closing years of the eleventh century, the West entered into a period of extraordinary spiritual growth. This era was characterized by an "extraordinary tide of religious fervor," which inspired the rich as well as the poor, men as well as women.¹ Indeed, this period "witnessed a religious excitement in the West unparalleled since the era of the Early Church."² Furthermore, the twelfth-century West was the wellspring of a new and reinvigorated Christian monasticism. Innovation came in many forms and varieties. Perhaps the most notable example is that of the Cistercian Order, named for

¹ C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (Harlow: Pearson Education, Ltd., 2001), 178.

² Brian Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order: c. 1130-c. 1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.

Robert of Molesme's original foundation at Cîteaux in 1098.³ Though its early years were characterized by uncertainty and modest growth, the Cistercian Order had, by the time of St. Bernard's death in 1153, developed into a far-flung network of 343 abbeys. The following centuries witnessed continued growth.⁴ Though the Cistercians may represent the most conspicuous manifestation of the new monastic mood, they were certainly not the only new order. In the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries several other reform-minded groups developed, including the Canons Regular, the Carthusians, and the Premonstratensians. This period also witnessed the emergence of two monastic orders in which "religious life for women was the focus."⁵ Both the Order of Sempringham and Robert d'Arbrissel's Order of Fontevraud sought to satisfy the spiritual aspirations of women, aspirations which were, at the beginning of the twelfth century, often assigned to a place of secondary importance.

This thesis addresses questions related to the inception and early history of the Order of Sempringham, an order that provided a meaningful spiritual experience for hundreds of twelfth-century women. While not unique, the order is distinctive in that it placed an emphasis on women's religious needs at a time when many other monastic communities were ignoring them altogether. While the previous scarcity of Gilbertine historiography has been remedied in the last thirty years or so, I was intrigued by unanswered questions about the order's founder, Gilbert of Sempringham. What originally inspired him to found a monastic order and, more to the point, what led him to

³ Lawrence provides a concise yet informative introduction to Cistercian practice in his *Medieval Monasticism*. For an introduction to the Cistercians in England, see Janet Burton's *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain: 1000-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁴ Lawrence, 180.

⁵ Bruce L. Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890-1215* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 14.

establish religious communities that existed largely for the benefit of women? In seeking to answer these questions, I have concluded that it was the contingency of local circumstance, coupled with the distinctive personality of Gilbert himself, that gave the Order of Sempringham its particular character.

Gilbert of Sempringham was born around 1089 in the small rural village of Sempringham, near the desolate fens of the Wash, an area “wrapped in its own dark mist-veil and tenanted only by flocks of screaming wild-fowl.”⁶ The son of a wealthy Norman knight and a native English mother, the future founder of the Order of Sempringham was born with some unspecified physical deformity that made him unfit for his father’s military profession. Rose Graham notes that Gilbert’s father, “bitterly disappointed that he could not make a knight of his misshapen son...determined to give him a clerk’s education.” Gilbert was seemingly little better suited to a life of study than a life of arms, however. His tutor found him to be “a dull and idle pupil” and, having been harshly admonished by his parents, Gilbert soon fled in shame to France.⁷

In France, Gilbert underwent a significant transformation, and he returned to Lincolnshire several years later as an educated *magister*. Upon his return, Gilbert was reconciled with his father who endowed him with the vacant churches of Sempringham and West Torrington, and he soon became renowned both for his pious spirituality and for his local school for boys and girls. Gilbert was eventually summoned to Lincoln, where he served successively in the households of Bishop Robert Bloet and his successor Bishop Alexander “the Magnificent.” Although Alexander ordained him to the priesthood and offered to make him archdeacon, Gilbert instead chose to return to

⁶ Rose Graham, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertines: A History of the Only English Monastic Order* (London: Elliot Stock, 1901), 2-3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

Sempringham where, in 1131, he laid the foundations for what would eventually become the Order of Sempringham, also known as the Gilbertine Order. From Gilbert's initial enclosure of seven local women, the number of Gilbertine religious grew, and Gilbert soon found it necessary to add communities of lay-sisters and lay-brothers to care for the enclosed women. As his creation expanded, however, Gilbert seems to have become overwhelmed by its governance. In 1147 he traveled to the General Chapter of the Cistercians at Cîteaux, in the hope that they might take responsibility for his nascent order. Thoroughly frustrated in this venture, Gilbert added a final element, Augustinian canons, to his order.⁸ In creating a dual order of men and women, Gilbert was not acting without precedent. Rather, as Sally Thompson notes, Gilbert's originality lay in his "deliberate organization of both men and women, lay and clerical, into an order."⁹

This creation, which Rose Graham refers to as "the only English monastic order," existed largely for the spiritual benefit of its female members.¹⁰ Yet what caused Gilbert, who was once unpopular, unmotivated, and even considered lazy, to aspire to the ascetic life, to seek the spiritual transformation of his neighbors, and to found an order that addressed the often-neglected spiritual aspirations of women? The relevant sources suggest that Gilbert was driven by an intense and uncompromising spirituality and a pastoral devotion, first to his parishioners and later to the members of his order. Exactly where this fiery zeal and dedication originated is uncertain; nevertheless both features appear repeatedly throughout the sources. Indeed, Gilbert's peculiar and often

⁸ Ibid, 4-14.

⁹ Sally Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 78.

¹⁰ Graham, v.

mysterious personality influenced the creation and development of the Order of Sempringham in a number of important ways.

While Gilbert's distinctive personality was of critical importance to the order's development during its first century, of equal consequence was a group of interrelated circumstances local to the environs of Sempringham in the twelfth century. From Gilbert's enclosure of the order's first women in 1131 until his death in 1189, local necessity dictated the development of the Order of Sempringham. Gilbert had no grand vision for his order. Of necessity he established a school for local children. Of necessity he founded an order for women rather than men. Of necessity he added groups of lay-sisters, lay-brothers, and canons to his original foundation. In short, local needs, coupled with Gilbert's distinctive personality, were responsible not only for the order's inception, but also for its development and particular character throughout its first generation. This distinctive character, in turn, provided the context for two major scandals. These trials nearly spelled the end of the Gilbertine way of life in the twelfth century and, while the order survived until Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, by the time of Gilbert's death it was already becoming something quite different from what its founder had originally intended. For, as Golding argues, an order originally dedicated to the spiritual aspirations of women had, by the thirteenth century, become one in which the men "were everywhere dominant while the nuns were sidelined and almost irrelevant."¹¹

With a brief sketch of the history of the Order of Sempringham thus completed, we must now address Gilbertine historiography as it currently stands. Prior to Golding's study, relatively little work had been done on the Order of Sempringham, despite the

¹¹ Golding, 4.

substantial amount of Gilbertine documentation that survives.¹² Yet, while a significant amount of source material has passed down to us, not all of it is useful in the context of the present work. Charters, for example, reveal a wealth of information about the social status of donors and what personal motivations may have led them to gift certain assets to the Gilbertines. Yet, these types of sources tell us little about the personality of Gilbert himself, or what other factors might have influenced the foundation and early development of the order.

To answer such questions, we must look at a very particular group of sources. The first and foremost of these is the *Vita Sancti Gilberti*, which Golding describes as “by far the most important surviving source both for the life of the founder and for the early history of the communities.” The *Vita*, almost certainly compiled between 1202 and 1203 by the Gilbertine canon Ralph de Insula,¹³ is part of the larger *Liber Sancti Gilberti*, and survives in three manuscripts. Of these, the first two (Cotton Cleopatra B. i, and Harleian 468) have been shown to have originated within the Order itself and date from the early and mid-to-late thirteenth century, respectively.¹⁴ A third manuscript, Bodleian MS Digby 36, is of fifteenth-century origin, and is substantially different in character, having more in common with books of devotion than traditional *vitae*.¹⁵ Although the *Vita Sancti Gilberti* is also printed in William Dugdale’s seventeenth-century *Monasticon Anglicanum*, for the purposes of this study I have relied upon Raymonde Foreville and

¹² Ibid, 450. For a brief discussion of the extent materials, see Golding, 450-457.

¹³ Ibid, 7. Golding convincingly argues for Ralph’s authorship, a position echoed, if with slightly less certainty, by Raymonde Foreville in her introduction to Gilbert’s *vita*. See Raymonde Foreville and Gillian Keir, eds., *The Book of St. Gilbert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), lxxiv. Other scholars, such as Rose Graham and Sharon Elkins, simply accredit the *Vita* to an anonymous Gilbertine canon. Foreville and Keir suggest that the *Vita* in its full form was most likely composed between October 1202 and February 1203. See Foreville and Keir, lxxiii.

¹⁴ Raymonde Foreville and Gillian Keir, eds., *The Book of St. Gilbert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), lxxiii.

¹⁵ Ibid, lxiv.

Gillian Keir's excellent edition and translation of the *Vita*. This translation is based largely upon the *Vita* in Cotton Cleopatra B. i, with corrections or significant additions found in Harleian 468 and Bodleian 36 included as well.¹⁶

While hagiographical sources can be problematic in many ways, it is undeniable that they are also indispensable in the study of medieval Christianity. Thus, in addition to the *Vita Sancti Gilberti*, I will also examine the *vitae* of two of Gilbert's contemporaries: Robert d'Arbrissel (ca. 1045-1116) and Christina of Markyate (b. ca. 1096). The career of Robert of Arbrissel is particularly interesting in the context of the present study. Not only does Robert's order of Fontevraud provide an interesting foil to Gilbert's creation, it further illuminates some of the spiritual concerns of the twelfth century. Like the Order of Sempringham, Fontevraud was a double-order, composed of both men and women. There are two extant *vitae* of Robert, one by Baudri of Dol (ca. 1118) and the other by Andreas of Fontevraud (ca. 1120). Both of these *vitae* are printed in Migne's *Patrologiae*, but are also available in a critical English translation by Bruce Venarde.¹⁷

The *vita* of Christina of Markyate is another particularly valuable source.¹⁸ Not only was Christina Gilbert's contemporary; they also moved in some of the same circles. Both Gilbert's and Christina's careers, for example, were significantly shaped by Bishop Alexander of Lincoln (d. 1148). Christina's *vita* also highlights some of the issues specific to women seeking to live a consecrated life in twelfth-century England. While she was not a member of the Gilbertine Order, Christina's story is nevertheless

¹⁶ Ibid, lxxi.

¹⁷ Bruce L. Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel: A Medieval Religious Life* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003). For the Latin text, see J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina*, vol. 162, (1854), 1043-1078.

¹⁸ C. H. Talbot's translation of Christina's *vita*, originally from the fourteenth-century Cotton Tiberius E, i, manuscript, is now available in a new critical edition with an introduction by Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser. See C. H. Talbot, *The Life of Christina of Markyate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxvii.

suggestive of some of the contemporary circumstances and motives that might have led women to seek entrance to the Gilbertine monasteries.

Thus, *vitae* constitute one important source for Gilbertine history. Another is found in the letters of great men, both ecclesiastical and lay. For the current study, the majority of these letters are to be found in Foreville and Keir's edition of the *Book of St. Gilbert* and relate to the so-called revolt of the lay-brethren, ca. 1165. The *Book* contains thirteen letters from various men, including Pope Alexander III (r. 1159-1181), King Henry II of England (r. 1154-1189), and even Gilbert himself. The letters of two additional men are particularly important to the study of Gilbert and his order. The first is Archbishop Thomas Becket of Canterbury (r. 1162-1170) whose two letters to Gilbert suggest something of the character of the saint of Sempringham.¹⁹ The other is Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167), whose letter to an anonymous "beloved Father" and "dearest friend" remains the only extant account of the shocking events commonly referred to as the nun of Watton scandal.²⁰ The events at Watton not only reveal certain elements of Gilbert's personality; they also, as Golding has suggested and as I will argue below, most likely represented "a catalyst [for] institutional development" within the order itself.²¹

Another important source for Gilbertine history is found in the Gilbertine *Institutes*, which survive in a single manuscript, Bodleian MS Douce 136. As Golding notes, the *Institutes* do not represent a single body of legislation composed at a specific moment in time. Rather, they include

¹⁹ Anne J. Duggan, ed., *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1162-1170: Volume I, Letters 1-175* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). See letters 44 and 89. Duggan's edition is particularly useful as it provides facing-page Latin and English translations.

²⁰ See Jane Freeland's translation in Marsh L. Dutton, ed., *The Lives of the Northern Saints* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006), 20.

²¹ Golding, 38.

Gilbert's own provisions for his communities, the Rule as prepared following Gilbert's return from Cîteaux in 1148, and other additions made between that time and 1238, when the statutes underwent some revision. The manuscript includes these revisions, but also contains records of a number of Gilbertine general chapters, presumably those at which substantial amendments to the Rule were made. These continued to be added to the manuscript until the last years of the order, and are the most important single source for its development.²²

Of particular import for this study is a fragment of a long-lost autobiographical account written by Gilbert, known as *De constructione monasteriorum* or *De fundatione monasteriorum*.²³ Nearly all of this work has been lost. There are, however, small pieces of Gilbert's text embedded in chapter twenty-five of the *Vita Sancti Gilberti* and in the opening section of the Gilbertine *Institutes*. Though it is not nearly as extensive as we might like, this section, as one of the few extant writings of Gilbert himself, is a valuable source for the early history of the Order and its founder.

So much for the primary source material. What of the relevant secondary sources? Rose Graham remarked in 1901 that Gilbert was unknown even in name to many in his own country, despite having founded the only native English monastic order.²⁴ Indeed, her study, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertines: A History of the Only English Monastic Order*, was the first full-length study of the Order of Sempringham. Even more surprising, perhaps, is that it remained so for nearly a century. This problem has only recently been addressed with Brian Golding's 1995 publication of *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order: c. 1130-c. 1300*. Although many articles that focused either directly or indirectly on the Gilbertines were published in the interim

²² Ibid, 455. This manuscript is transcribed, Golding says, with "commendable accuracy" in Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum*, vol. 6, pt. 2, xxix-xcvii.

²³ Ibid, 454.

²⁴ Graham, v.

period and continue to be written up to the present day, Graham and Golding's works nevertheless remain the only book-length studies of the Order of Sempringham.

Though both works provide a survey of Gilbertine history, their authors' approaches remain distinct. Graham's work, for example, outlines the history of the Order of Sempringham from its inception in 1131 to its final destruction during Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in the mid-sixteenth century. Graham focuses particularly on the life of Gilbert, the growth of the order, the Gilbertine *Institutes*, and the order's relationships with various kings, popes, and bishops. She also includes chapters on the Dissolution and the architectural remains of the order. Golding's work, while nearly twice the length of Graham's, is narrower in its focus and more detailed in its approach. Rather than tracing the history of the order from its inception to its downfall, Golding chooses to focus upon the period between ca. 1130 and ca. 1300. This choice is valid, he argues, as "by 1300 the Gilbertine experiment was largely dead."²⁵ Instead of examining the order's history in its entirety, Golding opts instead to begin with a general overview of the saint and his order before providing detailed discussions of the order's individual houses, typical patterns of endowment, and the Gilbertine economy. Thus, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order* was meant to examine aspects of the order's history that had previously been insufficiently addressed.²⁶

Though Graham and Golding's works remain the only thorough studies of the Order of Sempringham, a substantial amount of work has been done on individual aspects of Gilbertine history, the most important of which I will briefly introduce here. The first of these chronologically is M. D. Knowles' "The Revolt of the Lay Brothers of

²⁵ Golding, 4.

²⁶ Ibid, 3.

Sempringham,” published in 1935.²⁷ This article is useful in providing a concise overview of the lay-brethren’s revolt, and marks an important milestone in Gilbertine historiography, as it represents the first time that many of the letters related to the lay-brethren’s revolt were published.

While Knowles’ work examines one of the order’s two significant crises, Giles Constable’s essay on the nun of Watton scandal addresses the other.²⁸ Constable’s article is particularly useful in that it brings to light this significant event in Gilbertine history. For, as he notes, the story of the scandal at Watton had long been known, but because of the ‘disgraceful,’ ‘fanatical,’ ‘distressing,’ and ‘painful’ nature of the events themselves, scholars had largely seen fit to ignore it.²⁹ Indeed, the episode is neglected almost entirely in Graham’s foundational work. While the events at Watton remain distasteful, they nevertheless play a critical role in Gilbertine history, as Constable notes in suggesting that such events “contributed to the formulation of the rigid regulations” of the order which, in turn, eventually led to its complete transformation.³⁰

Quite apart from scandal and revolt, Sharon Elkins’ article in John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank’s *Distant Echoes* examines the emergence of a coherent Gilbertine identity during the twelfth century.³¹ Elkins’ main thesis centers upon the fact that the justifications for the order’s distinct organization given by Gilbert himself and later by

²⁷ M. D. Knowles, “The Revolt of the Lay Brothers of Sempringham,” *The English Historical Review*, vol. 50, no. 199 (July 1935): 465-487.

²⁸ Giles Constable, “Aelred of Rievaulx and the Nun of Watton: An Episode in the Early History of the Gilbertine Order,” in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 205-226.

²⁹ Constable, 205.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

³¹ Sharon Elkins, “The Emergence of a Gilbertine Identity,” in *Distant Echoes: Medieval Religious Women*, vol. I, eds. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1984), 169-182.

his hagiographer are rather different.³² For Elkins, the early history of the Order of Sempringham may be logically divided into three separate stages, and the various necessities of this tripartite division in turn explain how the Gilbertines had, by their saint's death, begun to justify their existence in terms of a millennial, fourfold order.³³

In addition to these three brief works, several additional book-length studies also contain individual chapters or significant portions that address issues related to the Order of Sempringham. These include works by Sally Thompson, Sharon Elkins, and Bruce Venarde.³⁴ While the Gilbertine Order is not the primary focus of any of these works, all three offer important insight into the history and development of the Order of Sempringham.

Thompson's work, for example, provides a brief outline of the order. In addition, she addresses the conditions of hermits and anchoresses and women's relationships with the orders of Cluny, Cîteaux, Fontevraud, Prémontré, and Arrouaise. These brief treatments allow for a more nuanced and complete understanding of the lives of religious women in twelfth-century England. Sharon Elkins also addresses the religious options open to pious women in twelfth-century England and her account is useful in two fundamental ways. First, the author clearly distinguishes between religious trends in the north and south of England, a distinction which is of great importance for a study of the Gilbertines. Second, chapters five through seven of her work deal specifically with the Order of Sempringham and attempt both to explain the evolving nature of the order and elucidate the reasons for its eventual downfall. Finally, Bruce L. Venarde's text demonstrates how, contrary to previous scholarly opinion, the emergence of orders such

³² Elkins, "Emergence," 170.

³³ *Ibid.*, 178-80.

³⁴ See above, notes 5 and 9, and below, note 41.

as Sempringham and Fontevraud allowed the period from the 1080s to the 1160s to become one of the most vibrant eras of expansion for women's monasticism.³⁵ Thus, while none of these three works focus primarily upon the Gilbertines, they nevertheless provide crucial contextual information for the order's development.

In many of these texts, the term "double-order" is used frequently to describe the Order of Sempringham. Indeed, this designation is nearly ubiquitous in Gilbertine historiography. Yet we must be clear in using this term about what we mean and what we do not. Long ago, Mary Bateson acknowledged the difficulties raised by the "half technical term 'double monastery.'"³⁶ Bateson defines the double monastery as an institution "in which a society of 'regular' priests ministered to the spiritual needs of 'regular' women."³⁷ Bateson's definition is quite applicable to the Gilbertine houses, although the Order of Sempringham was certainly not the first monastic group to use such a model. The author goes on to note that "placing the houses of nuns in the immediate vicinity of houses of monks is as old as Christian monasticism."³⁸ The reason for this is quite simple. Bateson explains that:

No monastery could celebrate mass without a priest, and although, as a rule, the early monks were not priests, yet every monastery must perforce contain a sufficient number of priests to conduct its religious services. The ministrations of priests were equally necessary to nunneries, and accordingly we find that those of the founders of Christian monasticism who had devout sisters, allowed them to organize female communities in their neighborhood, which could be served by the priests of the male communities.³⁹

³⁵ Venarde, *Women's Monasticism*, xi.

³⁶ Mary Bateson, "Origin and Early History of Double Monasteries," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, New Series*, vol. 13 (1899), 137.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 138.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 138-139.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 139.

As the author notes, these types of communities had existed in the East since the age of Pachomius (c. 292-346) and Basil (c. 330-378) and may have existed in the West by the sixth century.⁴⁰

Sharon Elkins notes that communities fitting Bateson's definition were certainly present in England in the early years after the Conquest. She argues that:

Generations of scholars have written about "double monasteries," ones that included women and men in their communities; but double monasteries have been treated as a peripheral phenomenon. Considered alongside other monasteries, however, these houses do not appear as anomalous as formerly assumed. Indeed, approximately one quarter of all the new foundations for women were actually for women and men. In certain regions and during certain decades, *most* of the new religious establishments for women also included men.⁴¹

Thus, in instituting communities that contained both men and women, Gilbert was not doing anything unprecedented. After all, Robert of Arbrissel had settled his following of men and women at Fontevraud in 1101. Additionally, the great and wealthy Anglo-Saxon nunneries recounted by Bede are well-known. And, as Bateson has shown, mixed communities of monks and nuns had existed in some form or other ever since the early days of Christian monasticism. Thus, we must be clear in stating that while the Order of Sempringham was distinctive and somewhat unusual, it was by no means unique. Sally Thompson says it best in arguing that it was "the deliberate organization of both men and women, lay and clerical, into an order which was novel."⁴²

Throughout this work I seek to show how the emergence and early development of the Gilbertine Order was a product of two primary factors: Gilbert's distinctive personality and certain needs particular to the north of England in the twelfth century.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 139, 140, 145.

⁴¹ Sharon Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), xvii.

⁴² Thompson, *Women Religious*, 78.

With some qualifications, Gilbert's *vita* provides us with a near-contemporary portrait of the saint and is especially useful when examined in relation to other contemporary documents.⁴³ Together, these sources suggest a man driven by a deep pastoral commitment to the spiritual welfare of first his students, later his parishioners, and finally the members of his order. Yet, this generous devotion was tempered by an unyielding and, at times, severe rigidity and unwillingness to compromise on spiritual matters. The sources present Gilbert as firmly orthodox, but they also suggest that he was perpetually uncomfortable in the conventional twelfth-century religious framework and that he possessed no particular aptitude or fondness for the *minutiae* of administration. These factors, combined with the saint's willingness to experiment with uncommon forms of monastic observance, led Gilbert to address the acute spiritual problems of twelfth-century northern England in particular ways.

I am certainly not the first to stress the importance of necessity in the formation and development of the Gilbertine Order. Previous scholars have noted that Gilbert had no grand vision for the Order of Sempringham. Sharon Elkins, in particular, has suggested that "circumstances and presuppositions dictated the creation of the Order," and that "concrete situation had encouraged [Gilbert] repeatedly to modify his plans until finally his unique institution was devised."⁴⁴ I agree with these claims in entirety. Yet I believe that Elkins stops a bit short. While she makes a convincing argument for the role of necessity in the creation and development of the Gilbertine Order, I argue that it was the combination of local circumstances and necessity with the distinctive personality of Gilbert himself that provided primary impetus for the creation and development of the

⁴³ The particular difficulties of using *vitae* as historical sources are detailed below.

⁴⁴ Elkins, "Emergence," 175, 180.

Order of Sempringham. And I believe we can go further still. I will argue that these dual motivators did more than simply determine the development of the order in its earliest years. In dictating that the order developed as it did, they were largely responsible for the two major twelfth-century crises of the order, trials so serious that they nearly destroyed the Order of Sempringham before the death of its founder. And, although the order did survive the trials of the scandal at Watton and the lay-brothers' rebellion, the Gilbertine Order was, in its second generation, a far different sort of organization than it had been in its earliest years. Gilbertine scholars have generally attributed this shift in policy to the fallout of the aforementioned scandals, a conclusion supported by the evidence.

While my thesis owes much to Sharon Elkins' original argument in her article on the origins of a Gilbertine identity, it owes just as much to Felice Lifshitz's article on using hagiographical texts as sources of medieval history, which raised questions that encouraged me to look for distinctive elements of the 'historical' Gilbert that might be found behind a wall of hagiographic convention. It thus became my goal to show how the early development of the Gilbertine Order resulted not only from the necessity of circumstance (as Elkins has argued), but also from the personality of Gilbert himself.⁴⁵

To support these conclusions, I have chosen to rely heavily upon a few important sources. Gilbert's *vita*, particularly after it has been stripped of a good deal of its hagiographic convention, reveals a great deal about the personality of the saint, especially when combined with other contemporary accounts of his actions. In addition, we are fortunate that a small portion of Gilbert's *De constructione monasteriorum* (as preserved by Dugdale) has survived. This account is particularly useful when compared to the

⁴⁵ Here I owe many thanks to Dr. Johanna Kramer and my fellow seminar students for the various discussions that prompted me to think more deeply about these issues.

hagiographical text written by Ralph de Insula. In addition, the letters of several prominent churchmen and laymen alike, as found in the *Liber Sancti Gilberti* and elsewhere, are significantly illuminative.

While Dugdale's *Monasticon* contains both the *Vita Sancti Gilberti* and the *Gilbertine Institutes*, I have limited the extent to which I have drawn on this collection for various reasons. First, I have found Foreville and Keir's critical edition of the *Liber Sancti Gilberti* to be both more useful and more accessible than Dugdale's original printing. Additionally, while I make use of Gilbert's own work as included in the preface to the *Institutes*, I have chosen to rely primarily upon Graham's and Golding's treatments of the *Institutes* themselves, a choice that I feel justified in making as I am not here primarily concerned with the day-to-day observances of the Gilbertine monasteries. Finally, in constructing a portrait of the religious climate of twelfth-century England, I have chosen to rely primarily upon secondary source material, as illuminated by more specific supporting evidence. I believe that this choice is well-justified, considering the particular focus of this essay.

Chapter I: Setting the Stage

In order to conduct a meaningful study of the Gilbertines it is first necessary to situate the Order of Sempringham within its historical context. Towards this end, we need to address several points. First, we must briefly discuss the highlights of monastic reform in the West up to the twelfth century for, in so doing, we shall be better able to gain an understanding of the Order of Sempringham's place in the context of contemporary religious reform. Second, we must examine some of the societal and religious portrayals of women that had developed up to the twelfth century, so that we might more fully grasp the significance of Gilbert's preference for addressing the needs of women's spirituality. Third, we need to briefly discuss some of the other options open to twelfth-century Englishwomen who sought to live a religious life, in order to understand how the Gilbertine life related to other contemporary monastic models and what it really offered to its nuns. Finally, we must examine the geographical milieu from which the house of Sempringham emerged ca. 1131, in order to understand how certain particulars of place contributed to the order's development.

Gilbert was born sometime before 1089 and possibly as early as 1083 in a small village on the edge of the Lincolnshire fens.⁴⁶ While Ralph fails to reveal his subject's exact age, he suggests that Gilbert was more than one hundred years old when he died on February 4th, 1189.⁴⁷ It is quite possible that the Conqueror (d. 1087) still ruled in England at the time of Gilbert's birth. At the very least, Gilbert witnessed the reigns of William Rufus (d. 1100) and Henry I (d. 1135) and the anarchical years of Stephen (d. 1154) and Matilda (d. 1167). He died in 1189, the same year as did King Henry II. Thus,

⁴⁶ Foreville and Keir, xv.

⁴⁷ Graham, 1.

the English political landscape was significantly different at the time of Gilbert's death than it had been a hundred years before, and the Order of Sempringham was, like other religious orders, certainly affected by the changing of the political tides. Raymonde Foreville has noted, for example, that the rapid growth of the order during the reign of Stephen may be credited, at least in part, to men "stimulated by the incentive to make amends, by a charitable deed, for the depredations in which both sides had indulged as a result of their involvement in the civil war."⁴⁸ And, as Golding suggests, Gilbert was an ally of Thomas Becket for some time, though his order also enjoyed the significant patronage of King Henry II.⁴⁹ The geographical environment from which the order emerged had much to do with its particular constitution as well. Yet, while the Gilbertine Order was certainly not unaffected by political and geographical realities, contemporary religious events played an even greater role in its development.

Medieval Christianity, already well-established by the end of the early Middle Ages, came of age in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Indeed, one prominent Church historian has described this time as one of the "most dynamic periods in Europe," an age which "sparkled with inventiveness and experimentation, with intellectual vigor and spiritual integrity."⁵⁰ These centuries witnessed the emergence of a number of increasingly vibrant and dynamic reform movements, which profoundly altered both the regular and secular branches of the Church. For our purposes, it will be sufficient to highlight some of the more important developments in monastic culture throughout the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries.

⁴⁸ Foreville and Keir, xxx.

⁴⁹ Golding, 40.

⁵⁰ Lester Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 61.

Christian monasticism first emerged in the late third century in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine.⁵¹ Early Christian monasticism developed in the Egyptian desert in two distinct ways. The earliest monks lived the eremitic life of hermits. The most influential of these men was St. Antony (ca. 251-356). St. Pachomius (ca. 292-346), on the other hand, is credited with establishing the first fully-communal, or cenobitic, monastery sometime in the early fourth century. These two distinct models proved to be influential not only in the third and fourth centuries; they continued to inspire monastic founders throughout the Middle Ages.⁵²

Western Christian cenobitic monasticism largely owes its existence in its present form to a sixth-century Italian abbot, Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480-550). Benedict was, however, by no means the first Western monk. He was preceded by many others, including John Cassian who brought Eastern monastic concepts to Gaul in the early fifth century.⁵³ Other important figures in the early history of Western monasticism include Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 315-367), St. Jerome (ca. 331-420) and Martin of Tours (ca. 316-397).

What sets Benedict apart from his predecessors is his *Rule for Monks* which, as C. H. Lawrence points out, “for many centuries in the medieval West...provided the standard pattern of monastic observance.”⁵⁴ This is not to say that Benedict’s rule was not entirely without precedent. Historians generally credit St. Augustine (354-430) with

⁵¹ For a brief yet inclusive account of the rise of Christian monasticism, see C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2001), 1-17 and Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1-81.

⁵² Lawrence, 4.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

composing the first monastic rule in the West.⁵⁵ In fact, there were probably at least a half-dozen *regulae* circulating in the West prior to Benedict's composition.⁵⁶ Indeed, the two *regulae* of Caesarius of Arles (ca. 470-542) and the anonymous *Rule of the Master* (very early fifth-century) provided Benedict with many of the ideas he articulates in his own *Rule for Monks*.⁵⁷ While the *Rule* may not have been entirely original, it nevertheless provided a clear and orderly model of monastic life that remained influential for centuries.

The careful observance delineated in Benedict's *Rule*, however, was not universally followed in the early Middle Ages, nor did all Benedictine monasteries follow the *Rule* in the same way. For example, many seventh-century monasteries in Gaul, Spain, and England combined elements of Benedictine observance with those of the Rule of Columbanus.⁵⁸ Monastic practice was nowhere uniform. Indeed, by the Carolingian Age, many churchmen felt that a significant reform of continental monasticism was necessary.

Charlemagne (768-814) was himself a major proponent of monastic reform. The Emperor sought to implement a uniform monastic observance throughout his realm and, in turn, to use monastic support to bolster his own political authority. For Charlemagne, adherence to the Benedictine *Rule* was the best way to accomplish this. Yet, at the end of his life there was still widespread diversity of practice in the Frankish realms. It was left to his son, Louis the Pious (814-840), and a reform-minded monk, Benedict of Aniane (c.

⁵⁵ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 64.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵⁷ Lawrence, 22, 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 48, 51, 56.

750-821), to bring the emperor's plans to fruition.⁵⁹ The *Rule* as prescribed by this second Benedict had an immense impact on the future of Benedictine monasticism. Yet, somewhat ironically, this reformed Benedictine observance differed significantly from the *Rule* as intended by its original author.

Under Benedict of Aniane, the Benedictine liturgy was significantly expanded and became more complex, which necessitated that the monks spend more time in choir. Lawrence notes that, "in this way the old equilibrium between prayer, work and study, that the *Rule* advocated, was destroyed. The divine office, which had always been a central point in the life of the monk, now became almost his exclusive occupation."⁶⁰ The reformed Benedictine observance also changed the way that nuns experienced Benedictine life. Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg notes that "reform legislation aimed at total enclosure for women. With the Carolingian reforms, the issue of claustration had become, for the first time, one of the most important topics of church legislation for women under monasticism."⁶¹ Nuns were, Schulenburg suggests, required to keep a much stricter enclosure than their male counterparts and were, at the same time, made increasingly dependent upon the local bishop for their "dealings with the outside world."⁶²

Yet, as Jo Ann Kay McNamara notes, "the Carolingian reforms had little lasting effect beyond their ideological impact on monastic life," for "the new empire was born in

⁵⁹ Ibid, 73.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 77.

⁶¹ Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Strict Active Enclosure and its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500-1100)," in *Distant Echoes: Medieval Religious Women, Volume I*, John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, eds. (Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1984), 58.

⁶² Ibid, 59.

warfare and peace never came.”⁶³ As a result, by the tenth century, many churchmen, both on the Continent and in England, had begun to express the desire for a thorough reorganization of monastic observance. The push for reform began at the Burgundian abbey of Cluny in 909. In the rise of Cluniac monasticism, we see a widespread desire for a return to the purer and stricter form of Benedictine monasticism as it had existed in the age of Louis the Pious and Benedict of Aniane.⁶⁴ While the Cluniac desire to restore the purity and austerity of traditional Benedictine observance would prove inspirational for several centuries, it too eventually needed reform. Indeed, much of the ardor of the eleventh and twelfth-century reforms arose from a desire to address the shortcomings of the Cluniac observance.

The tenth century was also a time of great religious reform among the English. The tenth-century monk Asser had claimed, in his *vita* of King Alfred, that “for many years past the desire for the monastic life had been utterly lacking in all [the English] people, and also in many other nations, although there still remains many monasteries founded in [England], but none properly observing the rule of this way of life.”⁶⁵ This situation was remedied, however, during the reign of King Edgar (r. 959-975) when three English churchmen, Dunstan, Aethelwold, and Oswald, carried out a sweeping religious reform. Aethelwold was perhaps the most radical of these three men, and it was he who

⁶³ Jo Ann Kay, McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 162.

⁶⁴ Lawrence, 83.

⁶⁵ Patrick J. Geary, ed., *Readings in Medieval History: Volume I, The Early Middle Ages* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2003), 250.

wrote the *Regularis Concordia* which imposed a uniform monastic observance throughout England.⁶⁶

Yet even the most sweeping religious reforms did not necessarily guarantee a more pious observance. Cluniac monasticism soon enjoyed immense popularity, but this growth resulted in a variety of changes. A flood of endowments, for example, brought substantial wealth which, in turn, allowed for buildings of “incomparable magnificence” and an increasingly elaborate and formal liturgy to match.⁶⁷ Numerous donations necessitated other changes as well. For example, in addition to the increasingly complex liturgy, Lawrence notes that there was a “constant addition of psalms for benefactors” and suggests that “on some days [the psalmody] must have been almost continuous.”⁶⁸ In the twelfth century, many pious men and women began to question the validity of the Cluniac observance. To some, the overwhelming corporate wealth and worldly involvements of the abbeys were problematic. Others were reacting against what Lawrence describes as the “crushing burden of vocal prayer and external ritual” which “made no concession to the need of the individual for solitude, private prayer, or reflection.”⁶⁹ Still others lamented that, in the new monasteries, St. Benedict’s mandate that monks engage in physical labor was now almost uniformly ignored. The desire to address these and other concerns contributed to a dynamic era of monastic reform in the twelfth century which, combined with other factors, provided the context for the rise of the Gilbertine Order.

⁶⁶ For a brief history of the *Regularis Concordia* in its historical context and facing-page translations of the Latin and English text itself, see Thomas Symons, transl., *Regularis Concordia Anglicae Nationis Monachorum Sanctimonialiumque* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd, 1953).

⁶⁷ Lawrence, 97.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 96, 97.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 147.

Thus there were, by 1100, a variety of reasons why some Christians might desire an alternative to the Cluniac observance of Benedictine monasticism in this era of particularly dynamic and intense spirituality. New orders proliferated and, though they differed in many ways, they had one common theme; each sought “disengagement, solitude, poverty symbolized and actualized by the need for manual labor, and simplicity.”⁷⁰ The most prominent example of the new religious mentality may be seen in the rise of the Cistercian Order, so named for its founding house of Cîteaux. As Martha Newman has suggested, the motives and intentions of the earliest members of the Cistercian Order are somewhat unclear. Two decades after Robert of Molême’s (c. 1027-1110) initial foundation at Cîteaux in 1098, however, his successors suggested that they had originally sought to return to a purer and simpler form of Benedictine life.⁷¹ Lester Little suggests that, at the very least, the desire for “a strict and literal adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict,” can be comfortably ascribed to Robert.⁷² This vision included a rejection of the elaborate liturgy of the Cluniacs, a reinstatement of manual labor in the monastic routine, and a return to simplicity in all matters of daily life.⁷³ The Cistercians, along with several other reform-minded orders, were reacting against what they saw as “the corporate wealth, worldly involvements, and surfeited liturgical ritualism” that had impinged upon Benedict’s original vision.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Martha Newman, *The Boundaries of Charity: Cistercian Culture and Ecclesiastical Reform, 1098-1180* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1. The traditional view that Cistercian practice largely emerged as a product of the vision of Robert of Molême has since been questioned. See Little, 90, for a brief introduction to some of these questions. Additionally, Constance H. Berman has provided a controversial reexamination of early Cistercian development in *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2000).

⁷² Little, 91.

⁷³ Newman, 1.

⁷⁴ Lawrence, 172.

The rise of the Cistercian Order was but the most prominent example of what Lawrence has characterized as a widespread “quest for the primitive” in eleventh and twelfth-century monasticism.⁷⁵ This quest involved a rejection of the increasing worldliness and wealth of the great abbeys, the excessive ritual of the Cluniacs, and a desire to return to a simpler, purer form of observance.⁷⁶ Proponents of this reforming mood cited three primary inspirations: the lives of the Desert Fathers, the concept of the *vita apostolica*, and the original simplicity of the Benedictine *Rule* itself.⁷⁷

The Cistercians were by no means the only manifestation of the new religious consciousness. The orders of Savigny, Tiron, Obazine, and Chartreuse, for example, shared many of the same goals. Yet, while these new foundations claimed to offer a purer form of monastic observance to those who sought a holy life, this way of life was not indiscriminately offered. While some of the new orders accepted women, at least initially, others rejected them outright. Sally Thompson, for example, notes that “the early Cistercians were remarkable for their hostility to the feminine sex.”⁷⁸ Other orders, like that of Prémontré, did not focus on women’s spirituality, but accepted women into their ranks nonetheless. There were some orders, however, that embraced female spirituality as their *raison d’être*. The orders of Fontevraud and Sempringham are representative of this third group. We must necessarily address the communities at Prémontré and Fontevraud, as they provide valuable context for the rise of the Gilbertine Order. Yet, before examining these two orders which catered to the religious needs of

⁷⁵ See Lawrence, pp. 146-171. In this chapter Lawrence examines some organizations other than the Cistercians who sought a return to a simpler form of Benedictine life, including the orders of Savigny, Obazine, and Tiron, as well as the Carthusian Order, the Order of Fontevrault, the Order of Prémontré, and the Canons Regular.

⁷⁶ Lawrence, 147.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 147, 148.

⁷⁸ Sally Thompson, “The Problem of the Cistercian Nuns in the Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Centuries,” in Derek Baker, ed., *Medieval Women* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 227.

women, it seems fitting to investigate just how religious women, and women in general, were viewed by their twelfth-century male counterparts.

From Christianity's earliest days, women had played a variety of important roles in the new religion. Indeed, as McNamara notes, Galilean women were prominent among the earliest Christian community, and it would have been impossible to have built a Church without their efforts.⁷⁹ And as Lisa Bitel suggests, "in all periods, women took part in expanding and deepening religious conviction among their neighbors and kin, and Christian documents featured females as exemplars."⁸⁰

Yet, from Christianity's earliest days, some Christians sought to limit women's influence within the new religion. By the early Middle Ages women no longer served as deaconesses, as the sacraments (especially the sacrament of the Eucharist) became more central to the liturgy.⁸¹ And although Bitel suggests that "Christian women found more freedom of religion...in Europe between 500 and 900 than in any other period in pre-modern history," she nevertheless concedes that women throughout the Middle Ages often found it difficult to avoid the harsh strictures of certain theologians who "were always ready to criticize all women, even clean-living celibates."⁸²

The idea that women were inferior to men was not unique to the Middle Ages. Bitel notes that "ambivalence about women's very nature...was so ubiquitous that it influenced every major religion of the classical Mediterranean world."⁸³ From its inception, Christianity had embraced complex and contradictory views of women. The

⁷⁹ McNamara, 9, 13.

⁸⁰ Lisa Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe: 400-1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115.

⁸¹ McNamara, 34, 35.

⁸² Bitel, 96, 97.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 102.

Apostle Paul had, for example, suggested that one's sex was of no concern to the Lord, yet he demanded that women keep silence in church and submit themselves wholly to the authority their husbands.⁸⁴ And while Paul was ambivalent, other writers were not. Bitel quotes Tertullian, a second-century bishop of Carthage, who addressed women in the following manner:

You are the Devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the son of God had to die.⁸⁵

This sort of rhetoric was common in the high Middle Ages as well as in antiquity. Idung of Prüfening, a twelfth-century Cistercian monk, complained that women were tainted by the "lust of the flesh and frivolous feminine inquisitiveness" and that they were prone to a "natural fickleness" which their "womanly weakness" was unable to overcome.⁸⁶

Such portrayals of women's depravity developed from basic Christian doctrines concerning woman's responsibility for the Fall and her subsequent flawed character. In other words, for many writers, the cause of women's corrupt nature was essentially spiritual. Others however, believed that a woman's inadequacy lay in her physical constitution. The thirteenth-century Dominican, Albertus Magnus, for example, viewed women's supposed moral inferiority as a product of her composition. Since women are of a cooler and moister complexion than men, they:

are unconstant and always seeking something new. Hence when she is engaged in the act under one man, if it were possible, she would like at the same time to be under

⁸⁴ Blue Letter Bible. "Paul's Epistle - 1 Corinthians 14:34 - (VUL - Latin Vulgate)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2010. 27 May 2010. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=1Cr&c=14&t=VUL>> and Blue Letter Bible. "Paul's Epistle - Ephesians 5 - (VUL - Latin Vulgate)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2010. 27 May 2010.

<<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Eph&c=5&t=VUL>>.

⁸⁵ Bitel, 103.

⁸⁶ Schulenburg, 62, 63.

another...in short, I should say, every woman is to be avoided as much as a poisonous snake and a horned devil.⁸⁷

Though such sentiments were far from universal, it seems as if the more radical condemnations of early churchmen, rather than the voices of their more moderate brethren, proved most inspirational to many high-medieval theologians.⁸⁸

Why did many medieval clerics harbor such vehement mistrust of women? Basic medieval views on sexuality lay at the root of the issue. Ruth Mazo Karras suggests that the medieval Church was highly concerned with regulating sexual activity because sex was seen as by far the most serious of the many fleshly desires that corrupt Man. For many churchmen, the act of intercourse polluted and corrupted those involved, and women were reduced to “temptresses who led men astray.”⁸⁹ The medieval Church taught that sex was not *always* evil; the act was, for example, acceptable if it was done merely to satisfy one’s marriage debt or to produce an heir. Nevertheless, chastity, and especially virginity, was always preferable to marriage and the “itching of the flesh.”⁹⁰ And, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when clerical marriage was increasingly condemned and the sexual purity of the clergy was uniformly demanded, it is perhaps not surprising that such vigorous polemic found a captive audience.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Differences in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 185.

⁸⁸ Bitel, 103.

⁸⁹ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Medieval Sexuality: Doing Unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 28.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹¹ The First Lateran Council of 1123 clearly addressed this issue. “We absolutely forbid priests, deacons or subdeacons to live with concubines and wives, and to cohabit with other women.” The Second Lateran Council of 1139 repeats this prohibition. The statutes of the Third Lateran Council in 1179 add to this demand, suggesting that “if any cleric without clear and necessary cause presumes to frequent convents of nuns, let the bishop keep him away; and if he does not stop, let him be ineligible for an ecclesiastical benefice.” See Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Volume I, Nicaea I to Lateran V* (Washington: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 191, 198, 217, 218.

Karras notes, for example, that “chastity...played a major role in the medieval church, and monasticism was its main vehicle.” Indeed, the idea of sexual purity was central to Christian monasticism, as the ascetic life of physical renunciation was construed as a form of martyrdom.⁹² Yet there was a clear double-standard present. Schulenburg notes, for example, that “an unequal emphasis has been placed over the years on the ideal of strict, unbroken claustration for women.”⁹³ Women’s sexuality was typically thought to be more virulent and dangerous than men’s, due to their “innate weakness.” On account of this weakness, many theologians believed, it was far more difficult for a woman to remain chaste than it was for a man, and thus, a greater level of control over them was necessary.⁹⁴

Caesarius of Arles (c. 470-542) clearly articulated the need for religious women to be firmly cloistered. This claustration, Caesarius argues, is for the nun’s own protection:

For a soul chaste and consecrated to God should not have constant association with externs, even with her relatives, either they coming to her or she going to them; lest she hear what is not proper, or say what is not fitting, or see what could be injurious to chastity.⁹⁵

Caesarius’ Rule for Nuns lost most of its influence in Gaul after the seventh century, but with the Carolingian reforms came a new emphasis on strict, unbroken claustration for nuns.⁹⁶ Between 750-850 over a dozen pieces of legislation were enacted which stressed the necessity of rigorous cloistering. And, while the Carolingian reformers sought to

⁹² Karras, 37.

⁹³ Schulenburg, 51-52.

⁹⁴ Karras, 39.

⁹⁵ Schulenburg, 54.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 56.

ensure that monks withdrew from the world as well, restrictions for men were “neither as sweeping, nor as strict as the legislation for female religious.”⁹⁷

The tenth-century Cluniac reform advanced these trends and it can be argued with some justice that the reform was, in many ways, detrimental to women’s spiritual ambitions. Monastic observance, for example, began to focus more fully on the sacrament of the Mass, the celebration of which was forbidden to women.⁹⁸ McNamara explains:

To the Cluniacs and the generations they inspired, reform meant freedom—freedom from the world, as exemplified by the proprietary nobility and freedom from the flesh, best exemplified by women. Rather than seeing nuns as partners in the spiritual enterprise...the Cluniac monks equated manliness with self-control, producing a rhetoric dominated by the implication that women were simply not capable of conforming to the demanding Benedictine rule. Tied to the world by their inability to escape secularization under Cluny’s wing, and to the flesh by male systems of classification, women were easily demonized. Carolingian reformers had attempted to split male and female monastics, and their successors continued to teach their brothers to define women as a source of corruption and to treat their presence as an onerous and dangerous intrusion.⁹⁹

Indeed, McNamara adds, “the fear of women ran very deep among men of the time. The self-control that gave Cluny moral power depended on emphasizing the seductiveness and vulnerability of women.”¹⁰⁰ Increasingly rigid restrictions upon clerical celibacy necessitated that both secular and regular religious alike declare the moral danger posed by the proximity of women.¹⁰¹

The early Cistercians were particularly notorious in their contempt for women.¹⁰²

R. W. Southern once suggested that “there was no religious body more thoroughly

⁹⁷ Ibid, 58.

⁹⁸ McNamara, 208.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 210.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 216.

¹⁰¹ Lawrence, 219.

¹⁰² Thompson, “The Problem of the Cistercian Nuns,” 227.

masculine in its temper and discipline than the Cistercians, none that shunned female contact with greater determination, or that raised more formidable barriers against the intrusion of women.”¹⁰³ Southern continues, citing St. Bernard, who suggested that it was easier to raise the dead than to be constantly in the company of a woman and not give over to the basest carnality.¹⁰⁴ The Cistercians, however, were not the only churchmen who harbored such sentiments. Bernard’s views are echoed by Bishop Marbode of Rennes who, in a letter to Robert of Arbrissel, warned that “with one look [women] pour caressing poison into the marrow and tempt the recesses of the mind with insatiable lust.”¹⁰⁵ McNamara paints a dismal picture indeed, in suggesting that:

As reform ideology spread, fear and hatred of women spread with it. In the eleventh century, zealots transformed the respectable relationships of the married clergy into a swamp of corruption and led at last to a revolution in the structure of the church itself, forever separating the male clergy, monks and seculars, from the imperfect laity, stigmatized by its association with women.¹⁰⁶

In such an environment, she argues, laymen agreed that the *cura mulierum*, the care of women, was the specific responsibility of the clergy.¹⁰⁷ The clergy, for their part, generally accepted the burden, if somewhat unwillingly.¹⁰⁸

Yet, there is substantial evidence which suggests that not all clerics viewed women in such negative terms. Despite the condemnatory views of many leading churchmen, there were, from the early days of Christianity, men to whom the physical proximity of women presented a less ominous threat. Here we speak in particular of the so-called ‘double-monasteries,’ of which the Order of Sempringham provides a prime

¹⁰³ R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 314.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, 94.

¹⁰⁶ McNamara, 220.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 262.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 263.

example. As Bateson notes, the practice of placing houses of nuns in close proximity to male houses was as old as Christian monasticism itself.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the early monastic communities of Pachomius and Basil were situated near sister communities of nuns.¹¹⁰ And, since the sixth century, the West had known double-monasteries as well. In the double communities:

There was no promiscuous mixing of the sexes; the monastery is double, not mixed. The amount of association is small compared with the amount of separation, though association is the distinguishing feature. Early in the sixth century, and perhaps earlier, those religious houses in which men and women served God together were known as ‘monasteria duplicia,’ and the term has since been used to describe monasteries in which a society of ‘regular’ priests ministered to the spiritual needs of ‘regular’ women. This is the one essential and original character.¹¹¹

In the seventh century, Gallic double-monasteries such as Chelles, Brie, and Andelys had acquired such a reputation that many English noblewomen were sent to study there.¹¹² It was in Anglo-Saxon England, however, that the double-monastery would prove to be particularly successful. Under the rule of Abbess Hilda (d. 680), for example, the dual community at Whitby became an important political, spiritual, and literary center.¹¹³ Nevertheless, while this model was quite popular in the seventh century, it began to decline during the Carolingian Age. Though the institution of the double-monastery survived into the eleventh century in Spain, Foreville notes that it was beginning to disappear in other parts of Europe by the ninth century.¹¹⁴ As Barbara Yorke has noted, “nearly all the early [Anglo-Saxon] nunneries had ceased to function, at least as

¹⁰⁹ Bateson, 138-139.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 139, 140.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 138.

¹¹² Ibid, 155.

¹¹³ Ibid, 171. We owe much to the Venerable Bede for our knowledge of Hilda. For his discussion of the abbess, see Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 154, 210-214.

¹¹⁴ Foreville and Keir, xliii.

predominately female communities in the charge of an abbess, by the end of the ninth century.”¹¹⁵

Gilbert of Sempringham is often credited with reviving the institution of the double-monastery in England, but this view may not be entirely correct. Sally Thompson has noted that there may well have been, prior to Gilbert’s foundations, a variety of monastic institutions in England which might, with some justice, be described as double communities.¹¹⁶ And, while Gilbert’s distinct institutionalization of the dual community is one of the most striking of the Middle Ages, there are numerous examples of men and women religious working together which predate Gilbert’s foundation of Sempringham in 1131. It will serve our purposes here to briefly address three examples of such cooperation. An examination of the orders of Prémontré and Fontevraud and the life of Christina of Markyate not only provide context for Gilbert’s foundations; they are also illuminative of some of the motives which might lead twelfth-century women to seek entrance into one of the new orders.

It is with these motives that we must begin. The new religious atmosphere of the high medieval period proved inspirational to women as well as to men. Many women, like their male contemporaries, were dissatisfied with the religious life that had hitherto been available to them. The *vita apostolica*, with its call to voluntary poverty and the ascetic lifestyle, appealed to many women, though they clearly could not take part in public preaching or mendicancy.¹¹⁷ Jacques Dalarun notes that, in the twelfth-century, the life of a religious appealed to a variety of women, for a variety of reasons. For example, the community at Fontevraud drew “wives rejected by husbands or in flight

¹¹⁵ Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London: Continuum, 2003), 47.

¹¹⁶ Thompson, *Women Religious*, 55.

¹¹⁷ Lawrence, 222.

from them,” as well as those who, “little inclined to give up the pleasures of the world, entered the cloister with regret, near death, only to ensure their imperiled salvation.”¹¹⁸ Some women religious were the victims of husbands who had suddenly found, in new matrimonial legislation, a convenient justification to be rid of them. Others found themselves casualties of new Church policies, in which they were made “immoral, ‘incestuous,’ or ‘concubines’ by virtue of those ties [i.e. marriage to members of the clergy] that had until then appeared perfectly natural.”¹¹⁹

Additionally, as Venarde points out, there were, in the twelfth-century West “a multitude of situations in which there were, simply put, too few marriageable men for too many nubile women, and others in which marriage, potential or actual, might be a less than wholly desirable fate.”¹²⁰ Yet, there were never a sufficient number of places for those women who sought entrance to the monasteries.¹²¹ Thus, it should not be taken for granted that women desirous of entering religion could necessarily do so. Often, there was simply no place for them. As Elkins notes, before Archbishop Thurstan’s foundation of St. Clement’s at York in 1130 and Gilbert’s foundation of Sempringham a year later, there were, for women, “virtually no options for religious life in the entire [north of England].”¹²²

On other occasions, outside circumstances might intervene to prevent women from submitting to the religious life. The *vita* of Christina of Markyate is particularly informative here. Christina had, from an early age, decided to devote her life to holy

¹¹⁸ Jacques Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: Sex, Sin, and Salvation in the Middle Ages*. Translated by Bruce L. Venarde. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 69.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 72.

¹²⁰ Venarde, *Women’s Monasticism*, 95-6.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, xiii.

¹²² Elkins, *Holy Women*, 76. In defining “the north” as the English lands north of the Welland, I follow Elkins who was, in turn, quoting Knowles.

virginity. In this, she was supported by Sueno, “a certain canon of Huntingdon.”¹²³ Yet not everyone approved of Christina’s decision. According to her *vita*, when she was but a young girl Bishop Ranulf of Durham attempted to rape her.¹²⁴ When he was frustrated in his scheme, Ranulf determine to force Christina to marry, so that if he could not violate her himself, someone else might. Towards this end, the bishop convinced a certain nobleman named Beorhtred to ask for her hand in marriage, and prompted Christina’s parents to agree to the marriage.¹²⁵ When Christina refused to submit to the marriage, her parents “cajoled,” “threatened,” “flattered,” “reproached,” and “even threatened and punished her.”¹²⁶ Yet the maiden would not be moved. Greatly angered, Christina’s parents then “at night...let her betrothed secretly into her bedroom so that, should he find the maiden asleep, he might suddenly violate her.”¹²⁷ And although Christina eventually escaped the clutches of her adversaries and was able to live the life she chose, she had to first overcome a series of daunting obstacles. Christina’s *vita* is thus suggestive of the difficulties faced by some twelfth-century women seeking an entrance to the religious life.

Finally, for some twelfth-century women, current monastic legislation simply ceased to properly address the needs specific to their sex. The most eloquent expression of this complaint may be found in one of Heloise’s (ca. 1100-1163) letters to her one-time lover and tutor, Abelard (1079-1142):

At present the one Rule of St. Benedict is professed in the Latin Church by women equally with men, although, as it was clearly written for men alone, it can only be fully obeyed by men, whether subordinates or superiors. Leaving aside for the moment the other articles of the Rule: how can women be concerned with what is written there about cowls, drawers, or scapulars? Or indeed, with tunics

¹²³ Talbot, 4.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 6, 7.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 9.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 11.

or woollen garments worn next to the skin, when the monthly purging of their superfluous humours must avoid such things? Which is more fitting for our religious life: for an abbess never to offer hospitality to men, or for her to eat with men she has allowed in? It is all too easy for the souls of men and women to be destroyed if they live together in one place, and especially at table, where gluttony and drunkenness are rife, and wine which leads to lechery is drunk with enjoyment. And even if they admit to their table only women to whom they have given hospitality, is there no lurking danger there? Surely nothing is so conducive to a woman's seduction as woman's flattery, nor does a woman pass on the foulness of a corrupted mind so readily to any but another woman... Finally, if we exclude men from our hospitality and admit women only, it is obvious that we shall offend and annoy the men whose services are needed by a convent of the weaker sex.¹²⁸

Heloise's request thus represents a particularly poignant testament to some of the difficulties experienced by pious women in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The societal position of twelfth-century women, even religious women, was fairly ambiguous. Lawrence reiterates that many monastic reformers regarded women as a "hazard to their souls to be avoided at all costs," and notes that with their inability to celebrate the mass, women religious were generally valued less by lay patrons as well.¹²⁹ Additionally, other circumstances might intervene to prevent pious women from achieving their spiritual goals. Christina of Markyate's parents, for example, went to extreme lengths to frustrate their daughter's ambitions to remain a virgin, because the family's financial aspirations might be frustrated if she retired to the religious life.¹³⁰

Heloise's plea, then, exemplifies the "widespread and growing demand for new forms of monastic life suited to the needs of women," that arose in the twelfth century.¹³¹ Golding suggests that it was this desire for a more meaningful spiritual life that was responsible for the wide range of monastic experimentation typified by the careers of

¹²⁸ Betty Radice, transl., *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 94, 95.

¹²⁹ Lawrence, 220.

¹³⁰ C. H. Talbot, transl. *The Life of Christina of Markyate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21.

¹³¹ Lawrence, 221.

Gilbert of Sempringham and Robert of Arbrissel.¹³² And, while some of the new orders eschewed the *cura mulierum*, others took up the responsibility willingly. Gilbert of Sempringham was one of the most profound exemplars of this new concern with women's spirituality but he was by no means the first. Women occupied an important role in the early Premonstratensian communities and also held a central place in Robert of Arbrissel's Order of Fontevraud.

In 1120, having felt the call of apostolic poverty and a renunciation of the world, Norbert of Xanten (ca. 1080-1134) retreated with a group of forty or so clerics and laymen to the wilderness site of Prémontré, in northeastern France. To these he gave the white habit of the Canons Regular and the Rule of St. Augustine.¹³³ From its earliest days, the Order of Prémontré incorporated both laymen and canonesses into its organization.¹³⁴ The female members of the order partook, albeit in a limited way, in the spiritual life of the community, and lived a humble existence serving in hospices and laundering the clothing of the male community.¹³⁵ Though Norbert had originally envisioned his as an order of double-monasteries, his successor demanded in 1137 that henceforth the houses of canonesses be separated from those of the brethren.¹³⁶ Thus, while the Order of Prémontré experimented with dual houses in its early years, it had, by its second generation, developed into a more traditional monastic order.

The institution of the double-monastery proved to be more enduring in Robert d'Arbrissel's Order of Fontevraud, whose foundation predated Gilbert's first community

¹³² Golding, 77.

¹³³ Cornelius James Kirkfleet, *The White Canons of St. Norbert: A History of the Premonstratensian Order in the British Isles and America* (West de Pere: St. Norbert Abbey, 1943), 6, 9.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 9.

¹³⁵ Lawrence, 223.

¹³⁶ Kirkfleet, 10.

at Sempringham by some three decades. The order was established quite early in the twelfth century by Robert of Arbrissel (ca. 1045-1116), a Breton priest. Robert was born around 1045 in the town of Arbrissel to the wife of Damalioch, the parish priest. It was common practice in the first half of the eleventh century for clergy to marry, and it is likely that there was little to distinguish Robert's family from many of the other small freeholders of Arbrissel.¹³⁷ Robert seems to have had a predilection for study from a young age, and soon went to pursue an education in Paris.¹³⁸ While in Paris, his reputation became such that he caught the attention of bishop Sylvester of Rennes, who made him an archpriest. Robert's morality was unquestioned, as was his dedication to the aims of the reforming papacy. Baudri of Dol, the author of one of Robert's two *vitae*, tells us that "while restoring peace among those at odds, freeing the church from shameful servitude to lay people, and putting a stop to the sinful fornications of clergy and laity, he utterly abhorred simony, and manfully opposed all vices."¹³⁹

Yet, Venarde notes that Robert's spirituality "both conformed to and diverged from the program formulated in Rome."¹⁴⁰ For, on his many peregrinations preaching and teaching the word of God, Robert attracted vast crowds of both men and women.¹⁴¹ In fact, "many men of every rank flocked to him, and many women gathered, poor and noble, widows and virgins, old and young, whores and those who spurned men."¹⁴² Unlike many of his contemporaries, Robert did not flee the presence of these women. In

¹³⁷ Dalarun, 11.

¹³⁸ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, 10.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, xxi.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 17.

fact, their sheer proximity elicited a number of sharp reproofs from contemporary churchmen.

Marbode, bishop of Rennes (ca. 1035-1123), was particularly critical of Robert's arrangements. In a letter to Robert, Marbode alleges:

You are said to love greatly cohabitation with women—in which matter you once sinned—in order that you may strive to purify the contamination of old wickedness, purportedly in the name of new religious practice, using the same material. You deign to join women not only by day at a common table but also by night in a common bed—or so it is reported...They say that women follow you on your wanderings and are constantly by your side when you preach...How dangerous is this practice the wailing of babies, to not put too fine a point on it, has betrayed.¹⁴³

Marbode continues, warning that “it is not safe to sleep long with a serpent nearby,” as “such serpents are accustomed to inflict wounds even on the vigilant.”¹⁴⁴ Geoffrey, abbot of Verdôme, voiced similar criticisms, noting that “you quite often speak with [women] in private, and even that frequently you do not blush to sleep among them at night.”¹⁴⁵

It is quite obvious from these complaints that Robert's experimentation with syneisactic living arrangements had not endeared him to the religious establishment.¹⁴⁶ Baudri of Dol notes that, “lest anything be done ill-advisedly, since women should remain with men, [Robert] resolved to seek out a place where they could live and share communal life without concern for scandal.”¹⁴⁷ This place, then, was to become the community at Fontevraud. In this new double-house, he gave the nuns over to lives of

¹⁴³ Ibid, 93.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 94.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 104.

¹⁴⁶ McNamara defines syneisactism as “women and men living together chastely without regard for gender differences,” and notes that this concept was one of the most radical ever produced by Christianity. By the mid-twelfth century, she continues, clerics had “begun to attack the syneisactism that joined religious men and women in a common enterprise and that defied the carefully nurtured fear of women at the base of the clerical reform. By the thirteenth century, the forces of separation had successfully equated syneisactism with heresy.” This is just the sort of behavior that Marbode and Geoffrey were criticizing. See McNamara, 12, 236.

¹⁴⁷ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, 15.

prayer and contemplation, while to the men he prescribed “the duties of the active life.” There were both clerics and laymen at Fontevraud, and they “went about together, except that the clergy sang psalms and celebrated Mass, while the lay-folk voluntarily submitted to labor.”¹⁴⁸

In many respects Robert’s monastery at Fontevraud was similar to the Gilbertine foundations. Both orders, for example, embraced the concept of the double-house, and adapted it in new and creative ways. Both orders accepted both lay-persons and clerics. And both were the product, not so much of a premeditated design, as a response to pressing circumstance. Robert, for example, was seemingly forced to develop a formal pattern of organization for his followers as a result of clerical unease. Indeed, Jacqueline Smith notes that “it was not Robert’s original intention to establish a permanent house for women, but the need to do so was thrust upon him by the force of circumstance.”¹⁴⁹ This description is reminiscent of Elkins’ claims about the Gilbertine Order when she notes that, “circumstances and presuppositions dictated the creation of the Order,” and that “concrete situation had encouraged [Gilbert] repeatedly to modify his plans until finally his unique institution was devised.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, it is clear that the Orders of Fontevraud and Sempringham indeed had much in common.

Yet, the two orders were also different in a number of important ways. The first and most obvious difference lay in the relative amount of power allotted to the two sexes. At Fontevraud, ultimate authority resided with the nuns. Andreas of Fontevraud, in his *vita* of Robert, relates how, on his deathbed, the founder clearly stipulated that the nuns

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Jacqueline Smith, “Robert of Arbrissel: *Procurator Mulierum*,” in Derek Baker, *Medieval Women* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 180.

¹⁵⁰ Elkins, “Emergence,” 175, 180.

should be in charge: “I have commanded you to obey the handmaids of Jesus Christ throughout your entire lives, for the salvation of your souls, and to serve them out of love of their bridegroom Jesus, and you will be rewarded for it in the blessed realm of Paradise.”¹⁵¹ This authority, however, was tempered, at least in a small way, by Robert’s instruction to Abbess Petronilla, when he instructed her thusly: “If you wish to do anything new, never do it without the counsel of your religious brothers.”¹⁵²

Indeed, the power of the aristocratic women at Fontevraud was a distinguishing factor of the order throughout its history and, as Thompson notes, the level of female supremacy at Fontevraud was considerable.¹⁵³ And, while Robert and his charismatic preaching were responsible for the origin and early growth of the order, Jacqueline Smith argues convincingly that he ought not to be styled *procurator mulierum*, as he has been in the past. While allowing that Robert was indeed aware of and sensitive to the problems of twelfth-century women religious, she argues that “he certainly did not consider them a priority in his chosen field of work.”¹⁵⁴ Indeed, Robert left the community of Fontevraud to Abbess Petronilla precisely so that he could resume a life of itinerant preaching.¹⁵⁵

Gilbert’s community at Sempringham was significantly different from that of Fontevraud in several ways. Perhaps the most noticeable difference was the relative roles of the canons and nuns. While the nuns were decidedly the senior partners at Fontevraud, at Sempringham the canons were firmly in charge, second only in authority to the *magister*. This difference became increasingly apparent after the canons’ introduction, sometime after 1147. Golding argues that by 1300, the Gilbertines were “an order in

¹⁵¹ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, 56.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 56, 57.

¹⁵³ Thompson, *Women Religious*, 116.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, 184.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 183.

which the men, the canons, were everywhere dominant while the nuns were sidelined and almost irrelevant.”¹⁵⁶

Another significant difference between the orders of Fontevraud and Sempringham concerns the relative power of their respective *magistri*. As Venarde notes, preaching was perhaps the primary motive in Robert of Arbrissel’s life; indeed, he devoted the last twenty years of his life to itinerant evangelism, leaving an abbess in charge of Fontevraud.¹⁵⁷ Jacqueline Smith has driven this point home, suggesting that “while Fontevraud came to enjoy success and popularity, Robert, its founder, had played a comparatively small part in this achievement.”¹⁵⁸ And Baudri of Dol relates that “Robert did not want to assist the workmen, nor could he have, since he had to preach to many peoples. Concerned [with the issues of management] up until then, Lord Robert was never afterwards distracted from preaching.”¹⁵⁹ On the contrary, Gilbert of Sempringham played a decisive role in the ongoing governance of his order. Golding notes that, in contrast to other dual-communities:

the authority of the Gilbertine *magister* or *prior omnium* was virtually untrammelled. Supreme in the order, the fact that the Gilbertines were exempt from diocesan visitation, and episcopal interference was limited to the ordination of canons and the blessing of nuns, meant that the *magister* was independent of his local bishop too.¹⁶⁰

This is clearly a different model of authority than that represented by Robert of Arbrissel in his community at Fontevraud. If we were to use one word to describe Gilbert’s rule, it might be “autocratic.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ Golding, 4.

¹⁵⁷ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, xxii.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, 184.

¹⁵⁹ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, 18.

¹⁶⁰ Golding, 102.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 134. Sharon Elkins also notes the oddity of Gilbert’s autocratic style of rule. See Elkins, *Holy Women*, 135.

Then, finally, there is the issue of the *conversae*, or lay-sisters. In the Gilbertine Order, lay-sisters were the second of the four communities of which the order was eventually comprised, the first group added after the initial enclosure of Gilbert's seven original women. Gilbert had added the lay-sisters to his original community, Ralph tells us, "because he learnt from wise religious that it is not safe for young girls in secular life who wander about everywhere to serve those in religious orders."¹⁶² The Gilbertine *conversae*, Ralph continues, "suffered in their poverty," and "the labor of begging forced these women to undertake difficulties willingly so long as they were assured of a permanent livelihood."¹⁶³ The efforts of these poor women, Golding argues, were "indispensable, since it was doubly essential to ensure that the nuns remained untainted by the world."¹⁶⁴

While the sources clearly show that there were *conversae* at Fontevraud, it seems that these women served in a different capacity than those at Sempringham. As Golding notes, the Rule of Fontevraud only refers to the *conversae* once, and their function is ambiguous.¹⁶⁵ Yet Andreas of Fontevraud's *vita* of Robert may shed some light on the Fontevrist *conversae*. Andreas relates that Robert pleaded upon his death:

I ask you one thing: it is permitted me to name a lay convert as abbess...I know, I know: the dignity of this office calls for a virgin, for indeed it is written that whosoever watches over virgins should be a virgin. But how will any claustral virgin, who knows nothing except how to chant psalms, be able to manage our external affairs suitably? Therefore, I do not want to entrust this office to any claustral virgin if in so doing I knowingly give a charge to one who does not know how to manage...Let Mary attend ceaselessly to celestial concerns, but let us choose Martha, who knows how to minister wisely to external affairs.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Foreville and Keir, 35.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 37.

¹⁶⁴ Golding, 119.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 121.

¹⁶⁶ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, 28, 29.

Bruce Venarde suggests that when Robert refers to his preference of a ‘lay convert’ (*conversa laica*), he is not referring to lay-sisters as they existed in the Order of Sempringham. Rather, this title simply indicates the abbess’s “status as a relative newcomer to religious life after an adulthood in the world as a married woman.”¹⁶⁷ This, then, seems to suggest that the distinction made between cloister nuns and *conversae* in the Fontevrist sources may well have had more to do with the sexual (or lack of sexual) history of the particular sister, rather than a division between workers and choir nuns, following the Gilbertine model.¹⁶⁸

While some twelfth-century women had a variety of avenues through which they might express their spirituality, such opportunities were not universally available. This essay examines how a combination of local necessity with the unique personality of Gilbert of Sempringham led to the creation of a distinctive form of monastic life in the twelfth-century north of England. While Gilbert’s personality and many of the specific instances of local necessity will be addressed in the next chapter, we may here briefly discuss the way in which the local monastic landscape greatly influenced the formation of the order. For, had the situation in Lincolnshire been different circa 1131, it is quite

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 130, n. 8.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 143, n. 38. The “cloister nuns,” Venarde notes, were those “veiled and virginal religious women” about whom Andreas spoke in his *vita*. Here again, the distinction seems to hinge upon sexual history. There is, as far as I am aware, no evidence that the Order of Fontevraud had lay-sisters of the Gilbertine ilk. Venarde seems to support this, claiming that “Robert assigned women entirely to prayer...and men to work.” See Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, 126, n. 42. Berenice Kerr notes that, in the context of the early Fontevrist communities, “*conversae* clearly refers to late entrants—the opposite of *virgines* or *nutritae*.” Kerr also suggests that the meaning of the term itself, as used by the Fontevrist houses, likely changed with time. The English house of Nuneaton, for example, had four *conversae* in 1256. However, Kerr continues, “we know that in the early days of the foundation of the order many mature women, thus described, joined the community at Fontevraud. By the middle of the thirteenth century the term had been extended to mean those engaged in manual work who, because of their ignorance of Latin, were excused from choir duties.” In other words, the Fontevrist houses may have eventually included a lay-sisterhood similar to the Gilbertine model, but it seems that the early Fontevrist *conversae* were quite different from their Gilbertine counterparts. See Berenice Kerr, *Religious Life for Women: c. 1100-c.1350, Fontevraud in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 42, n. 155 and 143-144.

possible that Gilbert never would have laid the foundations for his order, and may never have achieved any sort of renown.

The rise of the Gilbertine Order contributed, in a significant way, to the blossoming of female monastic culture which took place in the north of England during the mid-twelfth century. Sharon Elkins notes that:

In the North, between 1130 and 1165, in just thirty-five years, women acquired forty-six new monasteries, an average of more than one a year. Before women were given these monasteries, they had virtually no options for religious life in the entire region. Until 1130, the North was completely devoid of religious houses for women (except possibly for Holystone and Newcastle priories, which may already have existed in Northumberland).

Foremost among the many affinities shared by these communities was the tendency for men to be included in them. Indeed, between 1148 and 1154, the period of greatest expansion, some three-quarters of the new nunneries included a male component. In a great number of these, the women lived in a dual community “with a master and/or lay brothers.”¹⁶⁹

The preference for this particular form of organization (of which the Gilbertines remain the most conspicuous example) stemmed from a variety of factors. Elkins suggests, however, that the primary motivation was that this dramatic expansion occurred within a vacuum. After quoting David Knowles’ avowal of the paucity of northern monastic houses prior to 1130, Elkins explains that “with so few monasteries for men in the North, women could not depend on support from abbeys, nor were there enough hermits to affect female religious life significantly.”¹⁷⁰ In other words, double-houses developed because there were no prior nunneries to join, nor were there sufficient male

¹⁶⁹ Elkins, *Holy Women*, 76..

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 76-77.

religious to attend to the nuns' needs.¹⁷¹ In creating an order of nuns, canons, and lay-religious, Gilbert handily addressed these difficulties and, in doing so, did much to “account for the North’s distinctive organizational preference.”¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 76.

¹⁷² Ibid, 77.

Chapter II: The Character of Gilbert of Sempringham

Now that we have examined the place of the Gilbertines in the wider context of twelfth-century monasticism, we can proceed to a discussion of Gilbert himself and the foundation of his order. In the following chapters I argue that the combination of local circumstance and necessity with the peculiar personality of Gilbert of Sempringham significantly influenced both the foundation and the early history of the Gilbertine Order. Of the relevant source material, the *Vita Sancti Gilberti* provides the most personal account of Gilbert's life and the order's early years. Nevertheless, as a piece of hagiography, it necessitates a somewhat different approach than do other types of historical sources. Medieval hagiography is, as a genre, permeated with certain repetitive *topoi*, and Gilbert's *vita* is no different. Indeed, Golding describes the *Vita* as "thoroughly permeated by biblical allusions and images" and notes that "[Gilbert's] virtues are the same as those found in hundreds of similar works."¹⁷³

How then are we to approach this crucial source? When numerous settings, events, and characters in the *vita* are strikingly similar to those recounted in scores of others saints' lives, how might we gain a more 'historical' understanding of the saint of Sempringham and his order? The first step is to acknowledge the basic purpose and nature of hagiographical writing. Hagiography is, at its most basic, writing that "intends primarily to engender, propagate, [and] strengthen...the cult of the saint."¹⁷⁴ Thomas Heffernan characterizes the *vitae sanctorum* as "sacred stories designed to teach the

¹⁷³ Golding, 9.

¹⁷⁴ Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre: Hagiographical Texts as Historical Narrative." *Viator*, 25 (1994): 96.

faithful to imitate actions which the community had decided were paradigmatic,”¹⁷⁵ and notes that, “For sacred biographers, there existed a veritable thesaurus of established approved actions which they could employ in their texts. The repetition of actions taken from Scripture or from earlier saints’ lives (often this practice extended to appropriating the exact language) ensured the authenticity of the subject’s sanctity.”¹⁷⁶ Golding suggests that the *Vita* is quite typical of twelfth-century hagiography in many ways. Ralph describes Gilbert primarily in terms of his abstinence and chastity and portrays him as a wonder-worker.¹⁷⁷ The *Vita*’s description of Gilbert also conforms to a wealth of other hagiographical tropes, some of which will be addressed shortly. Yet, in order to gain a better understanding of who Gilbert was as a man and how his distinctive character shaped the order which bears his name, we must focus on elements outside of hagiographic convention. Towards this end, we must first identify and discard some of the most common hagiographical *topoi* present in the *Vita*.

A thorough discussion of those *topoi* remains outside the scope of this study. Instead, I am here content to briefly address a few of the most common of these themes. Such a discussion is warranted in order that those passages in the *Vita* which are not as typical of those in much of medieval Christian hagiography may be more clearly recognized and emphasized. In Ralph’s account three common hagiographical themes are particularly apparent: those dealing with social rank, chastity, and spiritual zeal.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷⁸ These themes are clearly present in the *Vita Sancti Gilberti* and are also found in numerous other *vitae* throughout the early Christian period and the Middle Ages. For the sake of this discussion, I will refer not only to common biblical models, but also to Athanasius’ *Life of St. Antony*, Sulpicius Severus’ *Life of St. Martin of Tours*, and Gregory the Great’s *Life of St. Benedict*, texts which had a pervasive influence on future Christian writing. I will also refer to the *vita* of Gilbert’s contemporary, Christina of Markyate.

The connection between social status and sanctity is a common theme in many medieval saints' lives. The foundational *vitae* of Antony, Martin, and Benedict all associate holiness with noble lineage. Athanasius, for example, remarks that Antony's family was "of good birth and good means" and that he was raised in "a fairly rich home."¹⁷⁹ Though Antony later abandoned his inheritance for the solitude of the desert, Athanasius still sees fit to remark upon the saint's previous social standing. Likewise, Sulpicius Severus notes that St. Martin was of no mean birth.¹⁸⁰ Gregory the Great relates that Benedict of Nursia was born of "distinguished parents" who were wealthy enough to send their young son to Rome for a classical education.¹⁸¹ Gilbert's contemporary, Christina of Markyate, was similarly born to a wealthy family.¹⁸² Thus, we see that nobility of birth not only played a significant role in many foundational *vitae*, and that this quality was still valued by sacred biographers in the twelfth century.

In keeping with this theme, Ralph de Insula relates that Gilbert was born "of a distinguished family." Gilbert's nobility is worth noting, Ralph suggests, as gentle birth "usually and properly acts as an encouragement to virtue."¹⁸³ Golding has since demonstrated that Gilbert's father Jocelin was not a member of the high nobility but rather of the knightly classes, and that he was a man of only local importance.¹⁸⁴

Furthermore, Golding notes that other twelfth-century hagiographers similarly

While Christina's circumstances differ from Gilbert's in many ways, there are also some important similarities; they were both supported by Alexander of Lincoln, for example. Additionally, Christina's *vita* contains many of the same hagiographical *topoi* present in the earlier *vitae* and in Ralph's account of Gilbert's life, suggesting the continuity of these ideals from the early Christian centuries up through the twelfth century.

¹⁷⁹ Mary-Ann Stouck, ed., *Medieval Saints: A Reader* (New York: Broadview Press, 1999), 57.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁸² Talbot, 3.

¹⁸³ Foreville and Keir, 11.

¹⁸⁴ Golding, 11.

exaggerated the social standing of their saints.¹⁸⁵ That Ralph seems to have purposely amplified the social standing of Gilbert's family, as did other contemporary hagiographers, is indicative of the continuing association between sanctity and noble lineage in twelfth-century hagiographical writings.

Another of the most common and striking hagiographical *topoi* used throughout the Middle Ages was the remarkable chastity shown by the saints. In many medieval *vitae* the battle against sexual temptation provides the focus for some of the most memorable passages in a saint's life. Antony, after retreating to the desert, was sorely tempted by "the weapons that hang at his waist." Even in the desert, temptation was never far away. Athanasius remarks that the Devil himself appeared to the saint one night in the guise of a beautiful woman.¹⁸⁶ Gregory the Great relates that Benedict struggled violently with lust in the desert as well. Indeed, he was so afflicted that he threw his naked body into a bed of thorns in an attempt to quell his desire.¹⁸⁷ Christina's biographer relates how the Devil could not overcome her, "though he titillated her flesh and put ideas in her head. And though she herself was struggling with this wretched passion, she wisely pretended that she was untouched by it."¹⁸⁸

In like manner, Gilbert was well-known for his battles against the carnality of the body. Like both earlier and contemporary holy figures, Gilbert was confronted with, and overcame, sexual temptation. Early in his vocation, for example, Gilbert and his chaplain had lodged with a local family. This family had a beautiful daughter about whom both

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 10.

¹⁸⁶ Stouck, 59.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 173.

¹⁸⁸ Talbot, 46.

Gilbert and his chaplain had a sexual dream.¹⁸⁹ Rather than risk the sin of fornication, both men fled the house and moved their dwelling to the church yard.¹⁹⁰ On another occasion, when seriously tempted by a woman, Gilbert “spurned the inducements of the filth attached to her, that he might be clean to bear the vessels of the Lord.”¹⁹¹ Indeed, Ralph tells us that “no one has ever heard that he touched a woman, from his youth to the end of his life.”¹⁹² Gilbert’s dedication to chastity is further corroborated by Gerald of Wales. Giles Constable relates how Gerald wrote of a certain Gilbertine nun who had looked upon Gilbert’s aged body, “most unsuited for the purposes of lust,” and desired it. Gilbert, learning of these matters, flew into a rage during the following day’s sermon. Throwing off his clothing to stand naked before her, “hairy, emaciated, scabrous and wild,” he cried “Behold the body on account of which a miserable woman has made her body and soul worthy of being lost in Hell.” While Constable acknowledges that this source is not entirely trustworthy, given what we know of Gilbert’s temperance (and temperament, as we shall soon see), this scenario seems quite plausible.¹⁹³ Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that Gerald’s story might not be so far-fetched after all. Indeed, Ralph relates in the *Vita* that “with a sharp reproof [Gilbert] cured a nun, inflamed with an unbridled lust by the devices of the wicked Enemy.”¹⁹⁴ Is it not possible that the nun alluded to in Ralph’s account is the same woman Gerald references?

In addition to battling numerous physical appetites (sexual desire was perhaps the strongest, but there were many others), Christian saints often showed immense zeal in

¹⁸⁹ Foreville and Keir, 17.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 59. Foreville translates the Latin *pulsatus* as “vigorously wooed” or “deeply disturbed.” See Foreville and Keir, 58, 59, n. 4.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁹³ Constable, 222.

¹⁹⁴ Foreville and Keir, 61. Giles Constable suggests, however, that the nun that Gilbert cured was most likely the nun of Watton. See Constable, 225.

their spiritual undertakings. The goal of Christian perfection, after all, had been clearly espoused in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter five verse forty-eight.¹⁹⁵ It was often not simply enough to be holy; sanctity could, at times, evolve into what C.H. Lawrence refers to as “competitive asceticism.”¹⁹⁶ Antony’s *vita* provides a good example of this sort of rigorous austerity. Athanasius relates that his subject often spent the entire night without sleeping and ate but once a day. Even when he did eat, his food was meager and unsatisfying.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, Antony constantly subjected his body to fasting, the wearing of a hairshirt, and a lack of basic hygiene.¹⁹⁸ Martin of Tours was likewise known for his conspicuous zeal and dedication to the Christian life, though his devotion often took the form of study. “Never did a single hour or moment pass,” Sulpicius Severus claims, “in which he did not engage in prayer or apply himself to reading.”¹⁹⁹ Christina of Markyate’s spiritual mortifications were even more acute. Her hagiographer tells us that “through long fasting her insides contracted and dried up. There was a time when her burning thirst caused little clots of blood to bubble up from her nostrils.”²⁰⁰ Christina’s mortifications took such a toll on her body that in later life she “suffered from grievous ailments which she had contracted through the various trials she had endured.”²⁰¹

Ralph relates that Gilbert was well-known for the rigors and austerities of his life as well. The saint was known to engage in nearly constant prayer throughout the day, and often throughout the night as well. His zeal and dedication in his prayers were

¹⁹⁵ Blue Letter Bible. "Gospel of Matthew 5:48 - (VUL - Latin Vulgate)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2010. 25 May 2010. < <http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Mat&c=5&t=VUL>. *Estote ergo vos perfecti sicut et Pater vester caelestis perfectus est.*

¹⁹⁶ Lawrence, 7.

¹⁹⁷ Stouck, 60.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 72.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 158.

²⁰⁰ Talbot, 40.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 50.

almost legendary. Ralph recounts how, on one occasion, Gilbert invited a fellow clerk to pray with him. Gilbert was accustomed, it seems, to throw himself upon the ground “*ubicunque occurrit nomen Domini vel Dei.*”²⁰² Unable to keep up with the holy man’s prayerful calisthenics, the clerk vowed never to pray with Gilbert again. Gilbert’s frequent prayers were also known to keep visitors to the bishop’s household awake at night. On one occasion, a visiting bishop saw Gilbert’s shadow rising and falling throughout the night, and the next morning jokingly berated his host for keeping a dancer beneath his roof.²⁰³ Gilbert was as zealous in his abstinence as in his prayers. Ralph says that he gave freely to others, but was sparing in his own life, that he abstained from meat unless desperately ill, and that during Lent his fasting made him so weak that his fellow monks worried he would faint “through excessive weakness.”²⁰⁴ His rigor did not fade even in his final months. Though his body was weak and frail, he insisted upon coming down from his chamber to eat with the brethren at meals and continued to fast as well, even though his weakened body would hardly allow it.²⁰⁵

We are thus able to discern how the *Vita Sancti Gilberti* largely fits within the established framework of medieval Christian hagiography. In many ways this text is similar to numerous other *vitae*. Like countless other medieval saints, Gilbert was characterized by his noble birth, remarkable chastity, and his intense spiritual zeal. Even a cursory reading of the *Vita* suggests that Gilbert conformed to a host of common hagiographical tropes. In addition to the aforementioned qualities, his *vita* also recounts certain portents of his holy birth, his remarkable charity, and the presence of the

²⁰² Foreville and Keir, 22. “Whenever the name of the Lord or of God occurred.” The translation is my own.

²⁰³ Ibid, 23.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 63.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 91.

miraculous in his life. These were qualities shared by countless other medieval saints. What is it then that differentiates Gilbert from his contemporaries? What makes him distinctive? What were the specific character traits that, when combined with local circumstance and necessity, led to the formation of the Gilbertine Order?

Gilbert seems to have been distinguished by several particular personality traits which set him apart from many of his contemporaries and which, I believe, had a decisive impact upon the foundation and character of the Order of Sempringham. Gilbert was always something of an outsider and never seemed entirely comfortable within traditional societal roles. He had a lifelong ambivalence towards positions of power and, though staunchly orthodox in his beliefs, was often somewhat unorthodox in the way he practiced them. He had a strong pastoral vocation and a firm dedication to women's spiritual needs and was utterly unwilling to compromise on spiritual matters. For this reason, Gilbert demanded the most rigorous observance from his parishioners and the members of his order. He was at times merciful and even kind, but at others displayed a spiritual rigor that bordered on cruelty.²⁰⁶ Thus, Gilbert emerges from the sources as an intriguing and complex individual. The portrait of Gilbert sketched by Ralph de Insula is fascinating and, at times, confusing. Yet, many of the personality traits that Ralph ascribes to Gilbert can be corroborated in other contemporary sources and, by examining the *Vita* in the context of this additional evidence, we may gain some insight into Gilbert's enigmatic persona and the way in which it shaped the events in his life.

From his earliest days, Gilbert was something of an outsider. Although the 'saint as outsider' is a common occurrence in medieval hagiography, Gilbert's *vita* provides

²⁰⁶ The focus of this essay necessitates that we focus upon the latter elements of Gilbert's character. Nevertheless, there is evidence to support a much more amiable, friendly saint. See Foreville and Keir, 75, 115.

some very specific evidence to support this characterization.²⁰⁷ For instance, Ralph relates that in his youth, Gilbert suffered complete social ostracization. The *Vita* suggests that:

at his earliest period he was as modestly endowed with distinction and virtue as with age, and occupied such a lowly position in his father's house that, as he used to tell us, even the household servants refused to eat with him. In addition, his bodily form was misshapen and disfigured, and no greatness of soul had yet emerged to redeem the misfortune of his external deformity.²⁰⁸

Ralph cryptically fails to provide any specific details about the nature of Gilbert's physical abnormality. The importance of his deformity, as Graham has pointed out, is that it "unfitted him for the calling of arms" and brought down upon him "the ridicule of the rough Norman household."²⁰⁹ Thus, while many foundational *vitae* stress the sanctity of their subject's childhood, Gilbert's hagiographer tells a somewhat different story.²¹⁰

Gilbert's childhood seems to have been desperately unhappy. Though the *Vita* suggests that Gilbert was "destined for study whilst still very young,"²¹¹ Graham is probably somewhat nearer the truth in suggesting that Gilbert's father, "bitterly disappointed that he could not make a knight of his misshapen son...determined to give him a clerk's education."²¹² Gilbert was likely his father's firstborn, and thus his deformity must have seemed even more shameful, as it meant that he could not carry on the family's military legacy.²¹³ Gilbert, however, does not seem to have taken to his

²⁰⁷ Golding, 11.

²⁰⁸ Foreville and Keir, 13.

²⁰⁹ Graham, 3.

²¹⁰ For some representative examples, see the *lives* of Antony and Martin in Stouck, pp. 57 and 139, respectively, as well as Talbot, pp. 5, 6.

²¹¹ Foreville and Keir, 13.

²¹² Graham, 3.

²¹³ The *Vita* does not state directly that Gilbert was Jocelin's eldest son, but Golding notes that Gilbert's younger brother Roger inherited their father's land "since Gilbert as a cleric could not himself inherit." This seems to suggest that Gilbert would probably have been his father's primary benefactor, had he not been a cleric. See Golding, 199.

studies. Whether this resulted from some personal inability or from being “inadequately instructed” is uncertain.²¹⁴ Whatever the case, Gilbert was chastised by those around him and fled in shame to France. While there, he underwent a momentous change of character that affected the rest of his life.²¹⁵ Dedicating himself to scholarly and spiritual pursuits, he “put away childish things” and even “gave off a whiff of the religious life to which he aspired.”²¹⁶

In France, Gilbert attained the title of *magister*.²¹⁷ Upon returning home, it seems that his father’s previous displeasure was wholly forgotten. He presented his son with “costly and elegant clothes befitting the dignity of his birth,” began to cherish him “with fatherly affection,” and even made him rector of two local churches, at Sempringham and Torrington, in which the family had a stake.²¹⁸ Although he had gained a respectable place within his father’s household, Gilbert seems to have been uncomfortable with the traditional vocational options available to him at the time.

As the son (and most likely the firstborn son) of a wealthy knight, with a career at arms denied him, Gilbert had little choice but to seek entrance to the Church in some capacity. Golding suggests that, in this situation, most men in Gilbert’s position would have sought a post in a cathedral school or entered monastic or priestly orders.²¹⁹ However, Gilbert did neither. Instead, “clothed in secular dress” he organized a local school for boys and girls in which he taught them “not merely the rudiments of learning

²¹⁴ Foreville and Keir, 13. Ralph notes that some “difficulty in learning, which often hampers boys seriously” affected Gilbert, but seems to suggest that his tutor may have been somewhat ineffective as well.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 13, 15.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 15.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 17.

²¹⁹ Golding, 13.

but also moral and monastic discipline.”²²⁰ Gilbert’s young male pupils were made to follow something of a modified monastic regime. They were forbidden “to jest and wander about at will,” were bidden to “keep silence in church, to sleep together as if they were in a dormitory, to talk and read only in places where this was allowed, and to practice other things characteristic of a good life.”²²¹

We know few particulars about Gilbert’s school. We are ignorant, for example, of whether the boys and girls were educated together, though we do know that some of the girls gained a working knowledge of Latin.²²² What is particularly interesting about Gilbert’s decision to found a school is that, as Golding points out, it was not what most men in Gilbert’s position would have done. I think it most likely that Gilbert’s decision to found a school, and to found it in the particular manner that he did, stemmed from three primary factors: his discomfort with the other professions open to him, his strong pastoral inclinations, and the necessity of local circumstance.

It is particularly interesting that Gilbert incorporated quasi-monastic ideals into his regime. While this indicates his increasing spiritual zeal, it seems a bit unusual, especially for someone who was neither priest nor monk and who was likely in no more than minor orders at this time. Gilbert’s exact status as schoolmaster is unknown. The *Vita* suggests that he wore the finery appropriate to his social station, but that he did so unwillingly.²²³ It seems likely that Gilbert had not yet taken religious orders; indeed, we hear nothing of this until he came to reside in the household of Robert Bloet.²²⁴ We

²²⁰ Foreville and Keir, 15.

²²¹ Ibid, 15, 17.

²²² Graham, 5.

²²³ Foreville and Keir, 17.

²²⁴ Golding, 14. The exact date of Gilbert’s departure for Lincoln is uncertain. Golding simply notes that it was “some time before 1123.”

know for certain that Gilbert was not yet a priest, but we do not know what other specific rank he might have held.²²⁵ Here clearly was a man whose piety was such that he wished to impose monastic discipline upon those under his care, yet who was not comfortable within contemporary, established forms of religious expression. Although Gilbert seems to have had something of a monastic calling, even at this early age, he opted neither to be ordained nor to take monastic vows. From this, we must be led to the conclusion that Gilbert simply found the traditional religious options to be lacking. Why he chose to begin his own school, as opposed to joining a preexisting institution is uncertain as well, though I present one hypothesis below.

Yet if his position was ambivalent, his piety was not subject to question. While he was endowed with two churches, Gilbert was not yet a priest. Nevertheless, though occupied with his school, he did not neglect his churches. Ralph relates that:

He occupied a dwelling in the churchyard of St. Andrew's at Sempringham, and with a chaplain of proven virtue called Geoffrey, he too led a solitary and commendable existence. Earlier they had both lodged with a family in the town. But a hidden infection [in the form of a sexual dream] stole upon them both from the beauty of the daughter of the household, who looked after them attentively.²²⁶

Golding notes that Gilbert, not yet a priest, nevertheless “thereafter...proceeded to the reform of the parish.”²²⁷ Ralph relates that Gilbert “was constant in holy meditations within the church and...imparted such instruction to those who heard him that to a large extent even seculars observed the rule of monastic life.” This may be a bit of an exaggeration, but the *Vita* does detail some specific changes in the parishioners of Sempringham. Gilbert, for example, drew them away:

²²⁵ It is quite possible that Gilbert had, at this time, taken minor orders (acolyte, lector, exorcist, or doorkeeper), though Golding suggests he may already have advanced to the level of deacon. See Golding, 13, n. 27.

²²⁶ Foreville and Keir, 17.

²²⁷ Golding, 14.

from rioting and from wantonness, from evil displays and from public drinking-bouts, [and] they learned to perform works of mercy and scrupulously to pay church dues. Whenever they entered church they could be distinguished from the other parishioners of Sempringham by their devoutness at prayer and humble bows, taught them by Gilbert, their religious superior.²²⁸

As we shall later discover, his wards' sufficient tithing was of particular interest to Gilbert.

The successful conversion of sinful parishioners by the example of a saint's holy lifestyle is another fairly common hagiographical *topos*. Nevertheless, in Gilbert's case, I believe that Ralph's claims warrant further attention, if for no other reason that it fits with everything else we know about Gilbert's character. We have already seen how he held his pupils to a stricter code of behavior than was typical. That he should attempt to reform those directly under his spiritual tutelage to observe behavior far above common levels of holiness seems fitting with what we know of Gilbert. For, as we shall see, he was zealous not only in his own life, but demanded the same spiritual rigor from those under his care as well.

Thus, the peculiarity of Gilbert's position becomes clear. Golding summarizes the situation eloquently, asserting that "the saint's position was clearly an ambivalent one within the lay world: provided with an income by his father, still not a priest, and yet following in many respects a monastic regime."²²⁹ It seems curious, then, that when Gilbert was summoned to the court of Robert Bloet, bishop of Lincoln, Ralph credits him with accepting because "he considered it wise to live under the rule of the bishop and to attend to one who always attended to him, rather than running hither and thither with

²²⁸ Foreville and Keir, 19.

²²⁹ Golding, 13.

unbridled license like men who acknowledge no authority.”²³⁰ This seems rather out of character for Gilbert, and Golding’s suggestion that Ralph was likely “trying to exonerate the unpriested and theoretically irregular Gilbert from charges of unlicensed preaching, a problem which troubled ecclesiastical authorities throughout the century” seems a good deal more likely than Ralph’s claim.²³¹ This explanation seems to fit with current scholarly opinion. Golding, for example, characterizes the *Vita* as “aggressively defensive in tone,” while Elkins suggests that in writing the *Vita*, Gilbert’s biographer was attempting to provide a “self-conscious rationale for the Gilbertines” at a time when Gilbert’s decision to include women in his order was increasingly being called into question.²³² In light of these arguments, we can perhaps suggest that Ralph might have ascribed this particular motive to Gilbert to avoid or deflect from the order the sort of criticism Robert of Arbrissel often encountered for his somewhat unregulated (at least in its early stages) religious activity.

Gilbert’s reluctance to conform to established patterns of religious observance continued into his extreme old age. In addition to initially refusing to be ordained a priest and subsequently utterly refusing to assume responsibility for an archdiaconate, Gilbert even refused to become a canon in his own order until his brothers begged and beseeched him to join. Even then, Gilbert only did so lest, after his death, “some outsider might be intruded into his position by force or through princely influence—a common event—if the man to whom their first profession was made did not belong to their number.”²³³

²³⁰ Foreville and Keir, 21.

²³¹ Golding, 14-15.

²³² See Golding, 8 and Elkins, “Emergence,” 170 and 174, respectively

²³³ Foreville and Keir, 69.

Related to his discomfort with traditional models of religious observance is Gilbert's lifelong ambivalence towards positions of power.²³⁴ This aversion can first be seen in his reluctance to be ordained to the priesthood under bishop Alexander of Lincoln. In his time at Lincoln, Gilbert lived a praiseworthy life. Ralph tells us that:

His dress was not luxurious but moderate and suitable for a clerk; he ate temperately and drank sparingly; he kept the crown of his head bare and was properly tonsured; he displayed modesty in speech and dignity in his gait; so that even at that time he could have been taken not for a secular clerk but a regular canon.²³⁵

It should not be surprising, given this reputation, that Alexander soon saw fit to make him a priest. Nor is it surprising that Ralph relates that Gilbert refused on account of his unworthiness for, as Golding notes, the unwillingness to accept ecclesiastical office due on these grounds is a common *topos* in medieval hagiography.²³⁶ Yet in the end, Gilbert submitted, and as priest, "gave himself more urgently to the spiritual exercises which he had engaged in before."²³⁷

While Gilbert eventually bowed to Alexander's wishes regarding the priesthood, when the bishop attempted to raise him to the archdiaconate of Lincoln, he flatly refused. One might at first be tempted to dismiss this renouncement as simply another example of hagiographic convention. Yet this instance is worthy of closer examination. For one thing, while Gilbert eventually acquiesced to Alexander's request that he be ordained a priest, he obstinately refused to be swayed on the matter of the archdiaconate. Also interesting is the particular reason Ralph ascribes to Gilbert for making this decision.

²³⁴ This ambivalence can also be seen in some of Gilbert's contemporaries. Robert of Arbrissel, for example, first abandoned his canons at La Roë, and later his nuns and brethren at Fontevraud, always preferring a life of itinerant preaching. See Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, 14, 18.

²³⁵ Foreville and Keir, 25.

²³⁶ Golding, 15. For more on this *topos*, see Marylou Ruud, "Episcopal Reluctance: Lanfranc's Resignation Reconsidered," *Albion*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Summer, 1987): 163-175.

²³⁷ Foreville and Keir, 27.

Gilbert rejected the position, his biographer suggests, not because he felt himself unworthy, as he had done in rejecting Alexander's offer to be ordained to the priesthood. Rather, he refused to rise to the position of archdeacon because "he preferred to take good care of the few souls under his authority rather than fail to do what he should for great numbers entrusted to his charge."²³⁸ Again, it seems as if Gilbert was, in general, uninterested in the pursuit of high office.

A similar reluctance to take charge can be seen in Gilbert's reaction to the fallout following the so-called "nun of Watton" scandal that took place in the Yorkshire priory of Watton sometime between 1160 and 1165.²³⁹ Aelred's account of the events at Watton remains the single formal report of sexual impropriety within the Gilbertine houses to set against the order's otherwise spotless record.²⁴⁰ Nevertheless, this isolated incident may well have sparked the lay-brethren's rebellion which, in turn, nearly destroyed the order. However, the events at Watton not only suggest how necessity forced Gilbert to alter his religious communities, they are also indicative of Gilbert's ambivalence towards positions of power. Though he was Master of the order, Gilbert was much more reactive than proactive in dealing with the fallout of the scandal. And, as we shall see, it was Aelred of Rievaulx who played the dominant role at Watton in the wake of the controversy.

Aelred relates how, during the archbishopric of Henry Murdoc of York (r. 1147-1153), a girl of four years old was given, at the bishop's request, to the priory of Watton. From the very beginning, this nameless girl seems to have had no particular inclination to

²³⁸ Ibid, 29.

²³⁹ The exact date of the affair is unknown, but Sharon Elkins has made a strong case for the above timeframe. See Elkins, *Holy Women*, 201, n. 2.

²⁴⁰ Aelred's account exists in a single manuscript, which most likely dates from the late 1160s. See Constable, 209-10.

the religious life. Aelred tells us that “she had no love of religion, no concern for order, no sense of the fear of God.” Indeed, rather than showing a healthy respect for religion, she displayed “an impudent look, unseemly speech, [and] a wanton gait.” Her sisters did their best to correct her, with both words and with blows, but to no avail.²⁴¹

It so happened that on one particular day some brethren had entered the nuns’ complex “to do some kind of work.” The young sister and one of the brethren, “handsomer in appearance than the others and in age more appealing,” took notice of each other and “regarded each other caressingly.” “Soon,” Aelred relates, “the devious serpent, entering the breast of each, insinuated his pleasant poison throughout their vital parts.”²⁴² At first they communicated by signs, until at last they dared to speak to one another. Then “they inflamed one another,” sowing “in one another the seeds of delight, the kindling of desire.”

Desiring to continue their relationship in a more private setting, they agreed that the young girl should come out from the house at night when a certain sign had been given.²⁴³ Aelred tells us that:

A virgin of Christ goes out; in a little while an adulteress will return. She goes out, and soon, like a deluded dove, heartless, she is seized by the talons of a hawk. She is thrown down, her mouth is stopped lest she cry out, and, having been already debauched in mind, she is debauched in body. The wicked gratification, once experienced, compelled her to repeat it.²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Dutton, 111-112.

²⁴² Ibid, 112.

²⁴³ Ibid, 113.

²⁴⁴ Various scholars’ interpretations of this part of Aelred’s account are particularly interesting. The Latin, as printed in Migne reads “*Prosternitur, os ne clamaret obstruitur, et prius mente corrupta carne corrumpitur.*” Dutton’s translation, which seems faultless, is printed above. Dutton sees this as a clear case of rape. Other scholars, however, have tended to view the nun of Watton as a willing participant in a consensual relationship. Constable, for example, refers to the two as “lovers” and Golding recounts that “the two fell in love, and illicit meetings resulted in her pregnancy.” While the question of rape versus ravishment may not be central to our task here, I nevertheless find this disagreement fascinating. While it is easy to see where Dutton’s argument for rape originates, I wonder what might compel the nun to keep returning to her lover if their first meeting had indeed resulted in her rape. Aelred’s claims that “the wicked gratification, once experienced, compelled her to repeat it” and that “when it began happening so

It did not take her sisters long to become suspicious, and their suspicions were seemingly confirmed when the girl's lover fled the monastery, after she had revealed to him that she was pregnant.²⁴⁵

The young girl soon paid a harsh penalty, though it was to be only the beginning.

Aelred relates how her sisters:

looking at each other and striking their hands together, they rushed upon her, tearing the veil from her head. Some thought she ought to be given to the flames, others that she ought to be flayed alive, and others that she should be put on a stake to be burned over live coals. The older women restrained the fervor of the young. She was, however, stripped, stretched out, and whipped without mercy. A prison cell was prepared, where she was bound and enclosed...She was sustained on bread and water; she was fed with daily opprobrium.²⁴⁶

The nuns debated what to do with the girl and the proof of the sin growing within her belly. While the nuns' behavior was certainly reprehensible, and Aelred himself condemned their actions (if not their zeal), it must be remembered, as Sharon Elkins notes, that the discovery of one nun's sin would bring censure and punishment upon the entire community.²⁴⁷ Likewise, Golding suggests that "the fury of the nuns at the discovery may suggest that this was an exceptional case, and [that] there was in fact no general laxity of relations," but that nevertheless the nuns had reason to fear the discovery of the scandal.²⁴⁸

Unfortunately, things were soon to get worse for the young girl. Her sisters debated what ought to be done, and it was suggested that her lover should be saddled with the sinful girl and her unborn child. The nun, thankful that someone might yet care

frequently, the sisters wondered at the sound they often heard and suspected deceit," to me, suggest that the relationship was likely consensual. See Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina*, vol. 195 (1855) 792; Dutton 22, 114; Constable, 207; and Golding, 34-5.

²⁴⁵ Dutton, 114.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 115.

²⁴⁷ Elkins, *Holy Women*, 106-7.

²⁴⁸ Golding, 35, 36-7.

for her, confessed that she was to meet her paramour one last time, and told her sisters of the time and place. Gilbert was made aware of the matter, and “summoning some of the brothers [he] told them of the matter. He gave orders that that night, one of them, his head covered with a veil, should sit in the designated place, and others should be hidden nearby to take him as he came.” The fallen brother was captured and beaten severely.²⁴⁹

At this point, Gilbert seems to have lost control of the situation. Some of the sisters obtained the young man from the Gilbertine brothers by a ruse, claiming that they wanted “to learn some secret from him.” The following portion of Aelred’s account is the most horrific:

She, that cause of all evils, was brought in as if to a performance. They put an instrument into her hands and compelled her unwillingly to cut off his manhood with her own hands. Then one of those standing by seized those things of which he had been relieved and flung them as they were—foul and covered with blood—into the face of the sinful woman.

The terrible deed having been done, “the gelding was returned to the brothers; the distraught woman was thrust back into her cell.”²⁵⁰

Now we come to the purpose of Aelred’s story. For the abbot’s account of the events at Watton was not meant to draw attention to the sin itself; after all, Aelred was a friend of Gilbert’s and had previously showed a good deal of respect for the nuns of his order.²⁵¹ Instead, he related the story because “to know and yet hide the Lord’s miracles, the clear signs of his divine loving-kindness, is an aspect of sacrilege.”²⁵² Thus, the miracle that followed these distressing events was the centerpiece for Aelred. For, once the girl had confessed her sin to bishop Murdoc, whom she encountered in a vision, her

²⁴⁹ Dutton, 116.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 117.

²⁵¹ Golding, 37.

²⁵² Dutton, 109.

child was miraculously taken from her by “two women of lovely visage.”²⁵³ When her sisters came to her in the morning, they found no sign of a pregnancy. Indeed, “such slimness had succeeded the swelling that you would think her belly attached to her spine.” Furthermore, they “discovered no sign of a birth, no indication of a conception...everything was healthy, everything clean, everything lovely.” And, in the following days, they noticed that one of her fetters had fallen off, although it appeared brand-new and unbroken.²⁵⁴

The nuns, bewildered, summoned Gilbert to judge the matter for himself. Here we have further evidence of Gilbert’s ambivalence towards his position of power. Aelred relates that “as he was a man of wonderful humility, he thought he should consult my insignificant self about it all. Therefore the servant of Christ came to our monastery. When he had secretly revealed the miracle to me, he asked that I not deny my presence to the handmaids of Christ.”²⁵⁵ Golding suggests a different interpretation; Gilbert’s appeal to Aelred was nothing but an admission of his failure to maintain control of his own order.

Golding continues:

certainly it was the Cistercian who took the dominant role in proceedings after the miracle of the removal of the fetters. Gilbert traveled to Rievaulx for advice, rather than Aelred going to Watton. As we have seen in other contexts, and as was to be apparent later, Gilbert on occasions showed himself very little concerned with the *minutiae* of management, with potentially disastrous consequences: Aelred provided the necessary support, just as Aelred’s predecessor as abbot of Rievaulx, William, had advised on the early arrangements at Sempringham.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Ibid, 119.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 120.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 121.

²⁵⁶ Golding, 37.

Indeed, Golding suggests, the incident at Watton revealed “a fundamental lack of control over his female disciples.”²⁵⁷ In the end, Aelred relates that the nun’s remaining fetters soon fell off, and that, after the master of Sempringham again sought his advice, he instructed Gilbert that “her whom [God] has loosed you must not bind.”²⁵⁸ Thus, we may see how Gilbert’s indecision and reluctance to handle the situation at Watton on his own further suggests his discomfort, or at least ambivalence, with his position of power.

Yet perhaps the best example of this discomfort is found in Gilbert’s attempt to divest himself of responsibility for his entire order. For, in 1147, Gilbert journeyed to the Cistercian General Chapter at Cîteaux, hoping that the Cistercians would take responsibility for his fledgling communities. Ralph relates that Gilbert:

considered himself unworthy of such great authority because he was conscious of his own weakness; he planned to divest his shoulders of what was at the same time an obligation and an honor, and to entrust it to the abilities of one or more of those whom he should yet find to be stronger and more capable.²⁵⁹

In his own account, Gilbert notes that:

Since therefore they were made increased in a saintly manner, and there were not learned religious for me, for the protection of them and for the direction of the possessions of the lay-sisters, I had gone to the chapter of the Cistercians and with Pope Eugenius present, that man of great intelligence and sanctity, so that I might transfer our houses and handmaidens of Christ and our brothers to their control.²⁶⁰

As Golding notes, if Gilbert was looking to get someone else to take responsibility for his order, the Cistercians were “a good choice for a local reformer who

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 134.

²⁵⁸ Dutton, 122.

²⁵⁹ Foreville and Keir, 41.

²⁶⁰ William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum: A History of the Abbies and other Monasteries, Hospitals, Friaries, and Cathedral and Collegiate Churches, with their Dependencies, in England and Wales...* A New Edition by John Caley, Henry Ellis, and Bulkeley Bandinel. vol. 6, pt. 2. (London: Printed for Joseph Harding; Harding and Lepard; and Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1830), xxx. *Cum ergo multiplicatae in sancto proposito proficerent, nec essent mihi religiosi literati, ad earum custodiam et laicarum regimini necessarii, capitulumque Cisterciense praesente Papa Eugenio, viro magni consilii et sanctitatis, adissem, ut domos nostras et ancillas Christi fratresque nostros eorum regimini manciparem.* The translation is my own.

wanted to leave the direct care of his communities to others.” Gilbert was already familiar with the white monks, as William of Rievaulx had assisted him in the early days of his order, and there were, by this time, two Cistercian abbeys in Lincolnshire.²⁶¹ Ralph adds that Gilbert “had often received hospitality from them” and that he “considered them more perfect in the religious life since they had entered it more recently and their rule was stricter.”²⁶² For all these reasons, the Cistercians were an ideal choice for Gilbert.

Yet he was to be entirely frustrated in his desire to free himself from the governance of his order. The *Vita* relates that:

the Lord Pope and the Cistercian abbots said that monks of their own Order were not permitted authority over the religious life of others, least of all that of nuns, and so he did not achieve what he desired, but, by the Pope’s command and the advice of the holy brethren, he was ordered to continue what he had begun in the Grace of Christ.²⁶³

This explanation, however, is not wholly satisfactory. Golding notes that, at the 1147 chapter, the white monks assumed responsibility for the orders of Savigny and Obazine, both of which included women. Golding argues that a more likely explanation for the Cistercians’ refusal was that Gilbert’s offer held little appeal. His houses were far removed from Cîteaux, had no powerful supporters, and no well-organized *regula*. Additionally, his communities were *primarily* for women, as opposed to the orders of Savigny and Obazine, that simply included female branches,²⁶⁴ and we have already noted the Cistercians’ particular discomfort with women.

²⁶¹ Golding, 26.

²⁶² Foreville and Keir, 41.

²⁶³ Ibid, 43.

²⁶⁴ Golding, 27, 28.

The specifics of the Cistercian refusal are not our focus here. What is key is the intent behind Gilbert's journey to Cîteaux in 1147. More than his refusal of the archdiaconate and even more than his actions at Watton, this incident displays Gilbert's significant discomfort with his own position of power. Not only did this character trait have a profound impact on the evolution of the Order of Sempringham, it is also interesting in another respect. For, although Gilbert often sought to divest himself of direct responsibility for certain developments in his order, Golding notes that he created an order in which, in contrast to the Cistercians, or the Fontevrists, for that matter, the power of the master "was virtually untrammelled." Indeed, the fact that the Gilbertine *magister* held unrivalled power within his own order, coupled with the fact that the Order of Sempringham was almost wholly exempt from episcopal interference, guaranteed that Gilbert's (and subsequent masters') power would be virtually absolute.²⁶⁵

Though Gilbert was entirely orthodox in his beliefs, he used his unrivalled position of power within the order to oversee its development as he saw fit. In many cases, Gilbert's actions were somewhat unusual in their implementation, if not unorthodox in their essence. Bruce Venarde's characterization of Robert of Arbrissel is equally applicable to Gilbert.²⁶⁶ Indeed, Gilbert himself was a bit of an oddity. Lawrence notes, for example, that "unlike most monastic innovators, Gilbert was neither

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 102.

²⁶⁶ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, xxi-xxii. Venarde notes that "Robert's activities were heavily influenced by [the Gregorian Reform] debates. At the same time, the demand for clerical celibacy implied strict separation of men and women, a vision of religious life and work Robert did not share. Robert roused both admiration and criticism by accepting some, but not all, of the reform program. He counseled obedience to church officials—including their new claims to supervision of marriage and divorce—but also criticized clerical morals. He championed clerical celibacy, but his pastoral mission to women and the mingling of the sexes in communities of his followers challenged the prevailing agenda of gender apartheid and the mistrust of women common to many Christian reformers of his day. Robert's religious vision, then, both conformed to and diverged from the program formulated in Rome. The accomplishment for which Robert is best remembered, however, was in the mainstream."

a hermit nor an ascetic in search of his own vocation,” and points out that Gilbert’s position as “a secular clerk directing a monastic congregation” was, in itself, highly unusual.²⁶⁷

Even Gilbert’s particular mission was somewhat ill-defined. While the Gilbertines were by no means the only example of male and female religious cooperation in the twelfth century, they were somewhat different from the others. At Fontevraud, for example, Robert of Arbrissel had largely forsaken his community to return to a life of itinerant preaching, leaving wealthy, aristocratic women in charge of the community.²⁶⁸ In addition, the Fontevrist communities likely did not use the same four-part division as did the Gilbertine communities.²⁶⁹ Meanwhile, St. Norbert’s successor, Hugh of Fosse, had decreed in 1137 that the Premonstratensian sisters be removed from the proximity of the brothers.²⁷⁰ By the end of the century, the general chapter decreed that no more women were to be admitted, a decision that “condemned the female branch of the Premonstratensians to a process of gradual extinction.”²⁷¹ The early Cistercians’ views on women have already been addressed. It seems fitting, then, to view Gilbert’s dedication *primarily* to women as something of an oddity, although his actions remained firmly within the realms of orthopraxy.

Gilbert’s adherence to religious orthodoxy is strongly suggested by the level of support he received throughout his career from important clerical and lay figures alike. The most prominent examples of this support come from the period of the lay-brethrens’

²⁶⁷ Lawrence, 224, 225.

²⁶⁸ Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, 18.

²⁶⁹ i.e. the Gilbertines had nuns, lay-sisters, lay-brethren, and canons, while those styled as *conversae* in the Fontevrist houses seem to have served in a different capacity. See above, pp 39-40.

²⁷⁰ Kirkfleet, 10.

²⁷¹ Lawrence, 224.

revolt, the particulars of which are discussed in some detail below, though there are others. Aelred of Rievaulx, for example, showed his support for Gilbert and his order on a number of occasions, including a sermon which praised the nuns of Sempringham.²⁷² Even in recounting the horrific events at Watton priory, Aelred treats the master of Sempringham with respect and even admiration.

One cannot help but be struck by the level and intensity of the support offered to Gilbert by both clerics and laymen in the wake of the lay-brethren's rebellion. Bishop William of Norwich (r. 1146-1174), for example, wrote to Pope Alexander in Gilbert's defense, noting the propriety observed by both nuns and canons in the Gilbertine houses and urging the pope "to strengthen [Gilbert] in his purpose, which derives from God."²⁷³

In a second letter to Alexander, William notes that:

Gilbert of Sempringham cannot be unknown to me both because we live in neighboring regions and because he is famous for exceptional holiness...He brought to God a great host of nuns, amongst whom there burns a love of the religious life and a most scrupulous regard for chastity...About the canons, whose purity I hear has been slandered before your clemency, as God is my witness I declare I do not recall hearing even a single word of evil rumors, and these I could not have missed because the place is close by and many people come to visit us.²⁷⁴

Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester, likewise wrote to Alexander, referring to Gilbert as "our dear brother," and "a man of proven faith and integrity."²⁷⁵ Roger, archbishop of York, and Hugh, bishop of Durham, wrote a similar letter, stressing the propriety of the Gilbertine houses in Yorkshire (of which Watton was one).²⁷⁶

²⁷² Constable, 210-211.

²⁷³ Foreville and Keir, 139.

²⁷⁴ Ibid, 141.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 145.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 151.

Henry II of England was even more direct in defending Gilbert against his detractors during the crisis. Writing to Alexander, Henry speaks of Gilbert as that “venerable man of God.”²⁷⁷ Furthermore, the king urges the pope not to make the various constitutional changes urged by the lay-brethren, because the current arrangements have allowed “the state of the entire Order [to flourish] up till now in a most remarkable way” and he notes that if the basis of Gilbert’s order was changed, “it would result in the downfall of the entire Order.”²⁷⁸ Golding notes that Henry and Eleanor were both known for their respect of Gilbert and that the king himself founded the Gilbertine priory at Newstead.²⁷⁹ The *Vita* supports this conclusion, suggesting that:

The renowned King Henry II also honored him so highly that he would not allow Father Gilbert, when he came to court on church business, to wait upon him; rather he was not ashamed to go himself with his magnates to hear him in his lodgings...Queen Eleanor also rejoiced that her sons and future kings were blessed by him. They attributed the kingdom’s well-being and their success in worldly affairs to the influence of his presence and the protection of his prayers. For this reason, when King Henry later heard the report of his death, while he was under attack from his sons, he groaned loudly and said: ‘Truly I realize now that he has departed this life, for these misfortunes have befallen me just because he no longer lives.’²⁸⁰

Thus, we see that both leading churchmen and the king of England supported Gilbert in his efforts, even in times of trouble.

Yet some of Gilbert’s most ardent supporters also had some words of reproach for master of Sempringham. Aelred of Rievaulx, for example, was one of Gilbert’s biggest supporters. Yet, in his account of the scandal at Watton, although he refers to Gilbert as

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 143.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 145.

²⁷⁹ Golding, 53.

²⁸⁰ Foreville and Keir, 93.

“a man venerable and beloved of God,” Aelred has some harsh words for the master of Sempringham.²⁸¹ In addressing the situation at Watton, he demands:

Where then, Father Gilbert, was your vigilant concern for the keeping of discipline? Where were your many delicate devices for excluding occasions of sin? Where then was your concern—so prudent, so cautious, and so acute—your watch so faithful over each door, window, and corner, that even evil spirits seemed to be denied access? One girl mocked all your diligence, Father, for if the Lord does not guard the city, in vain do the sentries keep watch. Blessed man, you did everything a mortal could do, because it was necessary to do so. But as no one can correct someone whom God has condemned, so no one can save someone whom God has not saved.²⁸²

Even in judgment, however, Aelred seems to be critical, not so much of Gilbert himself, but unsure of the viability of the dual communities. This interpretation is supported by Golding’s argument that Aelred may have had some personal misgivings about the wisdom of associating religious men and women (revealed, for example, in his *De Institutione Inclusarum*).²⁸³

Thomas Becket was another leading churchman who, although largely supportive of the Gilbertines, at times criticized their master. Thomas had, after all, a particularly good reason for his familiarity with the Order of Sempringham. Graham relates how, in 1164, the Gilbertines were instrumental in helping Becket to escape the clutches of Henry II. After escorting the archbishop through the countryside and hiding him at several of their own houses, Gilbertine brethren accompanied him until he reached the coast and was able to sail from England.²⁸⁴

Thomas was among those who wrote to Gilbert during the lay-brethren’s rebellion. Though he suggests that “God knows how much we have always loved you, brother

²⁸¹ Dutton, 109.

²⁸² Ibid, 113.

²⁸³ Golding, 37.

²⁸⁴ Graham, 16-18.

Gilbert, and in you the whole Order of Sempringham,” and claims to have “loved, protected, and maintained that Order above all others,” the archbishop also provides Gilbert with some words of warning.²⁸⁵ Indeed, it seems that Becket had become aware of the rigors that Gilbert demanded of his spiritual wards. The archbishop subsequently demands that Gilbert moderate the strictness of his rule, “that the fruit of your labors may remain, lest the pain and application of so much labor should perish after your days.”²⁸⁶ In much the same way as Aelred, Becket thus approved of Gilbert’s life and actions as a whole, but saw areas that needed to be amended.

Despite Gilbert’s orthodox nature and the fact that he enjoyed the support of a large number of prominent clerics and laymen, there were, as we have seen in the letters of Aelred and Thomas, some concerns as to the implementation of some of the master’s plans. Aelred, for example, seems to have cautiously approved Gilbert’s formation of a double-order, but worried that something like the Watton scandal might eventually occur. Thomas seems to have befriended Gilbert and his order; indeed, they were the first ones he ran to when fleeing the country. Yet he also admonishes the master for his harsh and unbending spiritual rigor. And then there is the story told by Gerald of Wales, which suggests that sometimes Gilbert’s methods (such as disrobing in mixed company to prove a point) could border on the bizarre.²⁸⁷

While some may have questioned his methods, it is impossible to doubt Gilbert’s commitment to those under his care. Whether as *magister* of his school, parish priest, or master of the Order of Sempringham, Gilbert never failed to place the interests of those under his care above all others. Throughout his career, Gilbert displayed a strong

²⁸⁵ Duggan, 181.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 361.

²⁸⁷ See above, 46.

pastoral commitment to the local people of Lincolnshire and, in particular, demonstrated a substantial commitment to the female sex. The origin of this dedication to female concerns will be addressed in the next chapter; here it is sufficient to note that once he had taken up the cause of women religious, he seems never to have looked back.

Gilbert's dedication to the local people of Sempringham is visible immediately upon his return from France. As Golding notes, a man in Gilbert's position would have been expected to either proceed to major orders and join the priesthood or begin teaching in a cathedral or urban school.²⁸⁸ However, as we have seen, Gilbert did neither. Instead he chose to teach local children the rudiments of education, blending their scholastic endeavors with a quasi-monastic observance. Ralph notes that, upon his return, Gilbert sought "to gain souls for God and to help whomsoever he could by word, by deed, and by example."²⁸⁹ Thus, we may view Gilbert's foundation of his school as a response to local necessity which simultaneously satisfied his pastoral inclinations. In addition, this particular arrangement did not necessitate that he join major orders or take part in any significant way in the religious establishment, with which he was somewhat uncomfortable. Thus, while Golding suggests that Gilbert would have been expected to take a different path upon his return from France, knowing what we do about Gilbert, his chosen course makes perfect sense.

Gilbert's pastoral dedication is also visible during his time as rector of his father's churches at Sempringham and West Torrington. Ralph asserts that Gilbert at first wanted nothing to do with these churches, as he was not yet a priest, but that he "reluctantly

²⁸⁸ Golding, 13.

²⁸⁹ Foreville and Keir, 17.

agreed in order to ensure that his father's rights in these churches were preserved."²⁹⁰ Golding notes that Gilbert's possession of these churches would not have been, strictly speaking, canonical, and that he was made to suffer through several lawsuits before these possessions accepted.²⁹¹ Yet, once he had made good upon his claims, Gilbert "fully discharged his obligations, giving proper service to the church both in its spiritual and its material sphere." For example, as he was not yet in major orders, he hired Geoffrey, "a chaplain of proven virtue," to conduct the sacraments, and with him lived "a solitary and commendable existence" in the churchyard of St. Andrew's at Sempringham.²⁹² And, as previously noted, Gilbert immediately seems to have gone about reforming his parishioners in their conduct, so that they were easily distinguished by their piety from the other lay-Christians in the neighborhood.²⁹³

Gilbert's pastoral dedication continued throughout his time in the bishop's house and his tenure as parish priest at Sempringham. Indeed, Ralph claims, this was "his primary and particular concern." While in Lincoln, Gilbert "received and retained God as a guest in [the bishop's] house, in the shape of orphans and widows, the elderly, the sick, and the feeble, whom he fed and clothed from his own farms and from the income of his churches." He "gave to relieve the poor all that he could draw on from the rents owed to him, from yearly payments, and other lawful sources of income, apart from the payment of his living expenses, which he obtained, however, from the church of

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Golding, 13.

²⁹² Foreville and Keir, 17.

²⁹³ Ibid, 19.

Sempringham, spending none of the revenue from the church of Torrington upon himself.²⁹⁴

When raised to the status of priest, Gilbert only increased his spiritual devotion.²⁹⁵

We have already noted that when Alexander offered him an archdiaconate Gilbert promptly refused. Gilbert seems to have refused to accept this post for two reasons. First, the saint's lifelong ambivalence towards high positions of power is well-attested. Yet, I believe that the words attributed to Gilbert by Ralph are quite telling in another respect. Ralph's claim that Gilbert "preferred to take good care of the few souls under his authority rather than fail to do what he should for great numbers entrusted to his charge" seems indicative of Gilbert's very real dedication to those in his immediate vicinity.²⁹⁶

Though Gilbert was firmly dedicated to all of his spiritual wards, his first foundation at Sempringham displays a particular concern for the spirituality of local women. Sometime before 1131, Gilbert seems to have desired to leave his post at Lincoln and to return to Sempringham. Part of this ambition may be linked to his increasing tendency towards voluntary poverty,²⁹⁷ which Golding notes places Gilbert well within the monastic mainstream of the twelfth century.²⁹⁸ Seeking a more perfect life as described in the Gospel According to Matthew,²⁹⁹ Gilbert determined to give all his possessions to the Church. Ralph notes that there were, at this time, in the village of Sempringham "some girls living a secular life...wishing to overcome the temptations of

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 21.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 27.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 29.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 31. Gilbert's spurning of wealth and substantial charity has already been noted. The *Vita* goes on to say, however, that he now arranged "to distribute his own possessions to the needy."

²⁹⁸ Golding, 16.

²⁹⁹ Blue Letter Bible. "Gospel of Matthew 19:21 - (VUL - Latin Vulgate)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2010. 26 May 2010. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Mat&c=19&t=VUL>> *Ait illi Iesus si vis perfectus esse vade vende quae habes et da pauperibus et habebis thesaurum in caelo et veni sequere me.*

their sex and of the world.” And, “when he found no men willing to lead such strict lives for God’s sake, Gilbert thought it right to make over everything he owned to the use of such girls as, being truly poor in spirit, could obtain the kingdom of heaven for themselves and for others.”³⁰⁰

There has been much debate over Gilbert’s original dedication to women. This issue is addressed in greater detail in the following chapter, but we may also say a few words about it here. Where his concern for female spirituality originated is uncertain. Graham suggests that Gilbert’s particular empathy towards women most likely originated from his mother. “No doubt his mother’s early training,” she claims, “made him the good, pure, gentle man, who all his life revered women and had so wonderful an influence over them.”³⁰¹ While this seems a perfectly logical (if somewhat sentimental) conclusion, there is no extant evidence which explicitly supports it. Ralph suggests a different motive. For Gilbert’s hagiographer, it was the saint’s early triumph over earthly lusts that made him particularly suited to the care of nuns. In speaking of Gilbert’s time in France, Ralph notes that:

He was, indeed, at the age when, because the body, which perishes, oppresses the soul, the growing heat of sensual desire consumes mortal hearts to their increasing danger. But...this man sanctified his vessel unto the Lord so completely that...he neither yielded to the desires implanted in his flesh nor tasted the delights proffered by the world outside. For no one has ever heard that he touched a woman, from his youth to the end of his life. And so it happened that because he kept himself clean, he...was later deservedly raised to the firm direction of the weaker sex.³⁰²

Ralph’s argument is certainly logical and is supported by William of Newburgh, whose praise of Gilbert is quoted by Giles Constable. Gilbert was, William suggests, “a clearly

³⁰⁰ Foreville and Keir, 31.

³⁰¹ Graham, 3.

³⁰² Foreville and Keir, 15.

extraordinary man, and of singular grace in the care of women,” a fact owed to “the consciousness of his own chastity and confidence in divine grace.”³⁰³ Yet, I cannot help but think that another potential motive may have been the simple fact that, abandoned and belittled for years in his father’s household, Gilbert naturally empathized with those whose spiritual ambitions were intrinsically less valued by society.

An alternate explanation has been offered by A. G. Dyson, who suggests that Alexander of Lincoln’s influence significantly encouraged Gilbert’s dedication to women’s spirituality. If this is true, it would lend credence to Golding’s claim that women may have been central to Gilbert’s plan from the beginning. That Alexander should have been a significant influence in Gilbert’s life should come as no surprise. After all, Gilbert had served in the bishop’s household, and had there been ordained to the priesthood. Alexander also proved to be integral in the early history of the new order. It was, for example, “with the aid and counsel of the venerable bishop Alexander [that Gilbert] enclosed the handmaidens of Christ to live a solitary life under the wall on the northern side of the church of St. Andrew the Apostle in the village of Sempringham.”³⁰⁴ Dyson suggests that Alexander’s dedication to women was at least related to, and perhaps significantly influenced, Gilbert’s commitment to his nuns, noting that:

If, moreover, Alexander was not the formal founder of the Gilbertine house of Sempringham some years earlier, it is at least clear that he played a decisive role there, as, indeed, there is good reason for supposing that he made a more positive and critical contribution to the early development of this, the only indigenous English monastic order, than has previously been allowed.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Constable, 221.

³⁰⁴ Foreville and Keir, 33.

³⁰⁵ A. G. Dyson, “The Monastic Patronage of Bishop Alexander of Lincoln,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. xxvi, no. 1 (1975), 1.

This hypothesis seems reasonable in light of Alexander's actions towards other female religious.

Alexander's concern with female spirituality may clearly be seen, for example, in his relationship with Christina of Markyate. Dyson notes that "At almost the same time as Gilbert's departure from his household, the bishop received the monastic profession of Christina of Markyate, finally and formally granting recognition to a woman who had long struggled against the prevailing indifference towards female cenobites."³⁰⁶ Dyson continues, arguing that while "there is certainly no reason to doubt that the bishop's interest in female religious was inspired by Gilbert's ideas...the traffic of ideas may well have been less one-way than [Ralph de Insula's] remark conveys," and suggests that the support of the Gilbertines was a major tenet of Alexander's monastic policy.³⁰⁷ Dyson also suggests that such a policy was indeed logical, particularly in light of the Gilbertines' similarities to the Order of Arrouaise, another one of "Alexander's specialties."³⁰⁸

Though some scholars have questioned Gilbert's early dedication to women's spiritual lives, I think that a reasonable argument for his early interest can be made from his decision to include female pupils in his school at Sempringham. For, while Frank Barlow notes that "by the twelfth century it was not unusual for girls to go to school," he seems to base this argument primarily upon the existence of Gilbert's school. The only other supporting evidence cited for this claim is the record of a certain Elviva, daughter of a Norwich priest, who seems to have given her son some limited education before his

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 18.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 19, 23.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 20. Golding has since questioned Dyson's conclusions, and instead suggests that Aelred of Rievaulx might well have exercised a profound influence on Gilbert early in his career. See Golding, 83-85.

death in 1144.³⁰⁹ Barlow also suggests that the Church was unlikely to have supported the education of female pupils at this time, since the instruction of women put the *magister's* soul at risk by introducing him to temptation. Since Barlow's claim that "girls could easily obtain at least elementary education if their parents were willing" turns largely upon the existence of Gilbert's school,³¹⁰ I think Golding may be nearer the truth in suggesting that Gilbert's willingness to educate female pupils may be seen as a harbinger of his later concern with female religious vocation.³¹¹

Certainly, Gilbert's later dedication to female spirituality is beyond question. While some other twelfth-century monastic orders accepted women, at least initially, most did not show the level of concern for female spiritual as did the orders of Sempringham and Fontevraud. These were, as Venarde claims, organizations which "chiefly addressed women's needs."³¹² And, while nuns also occupied the place of prime importance in Robert of Arbrissel's foundations, Gilbert opened his order to a much wider class of women. Golding notes that, in creating a sub-order of lay-sisters to serve his nuns, the master of Sempringham extended the spiritual benefits of regular religion to "local women of humble means," who were most likely living in dire straits indeed before being co-opted by Gilbert.³¹³ Though the observance of the lay-sisters was extremely strict, their life seems to have been no harsher than what they had been

³⁰⁹ Frank Barlow, *The English Church: 1066-1154* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1979), 219. Here Barlow seems to be suggesting that Elviva, the daughter of a local priest, must have had something of an education in order to pass down "some literary, or at least religious, education" to her young son. Whether Barlow's evidence is sufficient to support his claim that "girls could easily obtain at least elementary education if their parents were willing" is questionable, however.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Golding, 13.

³¹² Venarde, *Women's Monasticism*, 14.

³¹³ Golding, 119, 120-121.

accustomed to in the lay world.³¹⁴ Thus, Elkins' suggestion that Gilbert might simply have been "taking advantage of the financial needs of these women" seems hard to defend.³¹⁵

Gilbert's particular dedication to female spirituality, in combination with a wider pastoral vocation, is also visible in his actions outside his own order. It seems that Gilbert's dedication to female religious extended to women of other orders, of both the traditional Benedictine and the reformed sort. Golding relates that Gilbert's peregrinations were not limited to the visitation of his own houses and notes that "he was also a spiritual adviser to members of other orders and to the laity." Gilbert seems to have had close ties with the Benedictine nunnery of Elstow and the 'Cistercian' house of Nun Appleton, at the very least. Indeed, Golding suggests, Gilbert "was sufficiently closely involved with Nun Appleton to be regarded as its patron."³¹⁶ A similar dedication to male religious outside of his own order is not indicated in the sources.³¹⁷

Thus far, we have seen that Gilbert harbored a lifelong ambivalence towards positions of power and how, though staunchly orthodox, he was sometimes controversial in the way he practiced his faith. He was a man with a strong pastoral vocation and a particular interest in the spiritual ambitions of women. We have already addressed some of Gilbert's most prominent character traits, including his discomfort with traditional positions of power and his dedication to feminine spirituality that, in combination with local circumstance and necessity, had a decisive impact on the history of the Order of Sempringham. Yet there is one more aspect of Gilbert's personality that we must

³¹⁴ See Golding, 119-126.

³¹⁵ See Elkins, *Holy Women*, 80.

³¹⁶ Golding, 52.

³¹⁷ *Ibid*, 53.

examine, for it had a crucial impact on his order, indeed, perhaps more than those previously discussed. For Gilbert was utterly unwilling to compromise on spiritual matters and demanded the most rigorous observance first from his students, later from his parishioners, and finally from the members of his order. Indeed, his demands were so severe that they nearly destroyed the order. Gilbert could, at times, be merciful and kind, but on occasion he could display a spiritual rigor that bordered on cruelty.

This uncompromising zeal becomes apparent early on in Gilbert's years as schoolmaster. Gilbert was not content to instruct his pupils in scholarly and moral matters. Rather, "he taught them as seculars not merely the rudiments of learning but also moral and monastic discipline."³¹⁸ Though neither priest nor monk himself, Gilbert seemed intent upon reforming his spiritual wards, that they might uphold the highest religious observance. This desire can also be seen in his reform of his parishioners, to whom he was a "doctor of souls."³¹⁹

Yet Gilbert's lofty standards and his unwillingness to depart from them at times revealed a darker side of the man whom Ralph refers to as "mild in encouragement to the righteous, gentle, and submissive." For example, Ralph tells of an incident when a certain parishioner:

cheated him of his tithes of produce as they were being collected, and the amount which he should have put aside for the Church he carried home with the rest of the corn and put in his barn for his own use. When the rector of the church discovered this he immediately forced the peasant to throw all of his corn out of the store and measure it out before him handful by handful. A whole tenth of this, which clearly belonged to himself and his church, he caused to be heaped in one pile in the middle of the village street, set alight, and burnt, to show his utter hatred of such a crime and to inspire fear within others.³²⁰

³¹⁸ Foreville and Keir, 15.

³¹⁹ Ibid, 19.

³²⁰ Ibid, 19, 21.

Gilbert displayed the same sort of obstinacy in dealing with sinful or lapsed Christians. Ralph tells us that in receiving a penitent, Gilbert first “opposed him, appearing almost relentlessly severe in his determination to test the penitent’s contrition, to purge his fault completely, and to inspire fear in everyone else.”³²¹ This is the second time that Ralph explicitly refers to Gilbert’s desire to instill fear within sinful sinners or would-be sinners. Such references are indicative not only of Gilbert’s personality, but also of his preferred methods for ensuring proper religious piety.

Other passages in the *Vita* also suggest Gilbert’s sometimes irascible nature, and his unwillingness to compromise on issues of religious observance. Although Ralph makes numerous remarks about Gilbert’s generosity to the poor and downtrodden, he also notes that Gilbert gave only to “those whose poverty was made honorable by their fear and love of God, that as he sowed in blessings he might reap of them too.”³²² As Golding notes, this discrimination in almsgiving was quite atypical of Gilbert’s contemporaries.³²³

Gilbert’s uncompromising nature is suggested throughout the *Vita*. In one passage, he physically assaults one of his brethren who sought to leave his monastery, changing him “in a trice into the gentlest of men with a light tap of his staff.”³²⁴ In another passage, Gilbert actually cursed one of his own nuns. Ralph tells of a nun who accidentally caused a fire within the kitchen quarters at Sempringham. When Gilbert arrived and demanded to know who was responsible for the fire, no one spoke up. Frustrated by the nuns’ silence, Gilbert “swore an oath that, before she died, such a

³²¹ Ibid, 67.

³²² Ibid, 31.

³²³ Golding, 17.

³²⁴ Foreville and Keir, 61. Foreville seems to suggest that this brother may have been one of the rebellious lay-brethren seeking to leave the order for another. See Foreville, 60, n.1.

punishment would be inflicted upon the obstinate person who had committed this deed and concealed it as would make her confess her guilt.” Likewise, Gilbert prayed that Christ punish a particular nun who “suffered from the vice of a shameless tongue and a restless, suspicious nature.”³²⁵

Finally, the *Liber Sancti Gilberti* includes in the collection of informal miracles an account of the vision of a nun of Catley. This passage suggests that, even in death, Gilbert was unmovable in his demands. This nun, enraged by a fellow sister, called out the Devil’s name. Instantly, she fell to the ground, like one dead. After two days in this condition, the saints Clement, Gilbert, and Andrew appeared to her in a vision. Saint Clement begged Gilbert to forgive her, but Gilbert replied, “in somewhat indignant tones,” that “she is nothing at all to do with me; she is not one of mine, because she has entrusted herself to the one she named, and having scorned me and spurned my rules, just as many other women do, she has deserted the discipline of her Order.” Only after the gentle prodding of Saints Clement and Andrew, and the nun’s thorough confession, did Gilbert give her absolution.³²⁶

Perhaps the best example of the potential results of Gilbert’s stringent spiritual demands, however, is to be seen in the rigorous observance he assigned to the lay-brethren. The severity of these demands was, in large part, responsible for their revolt, which nearly destroyed the Order of Sempringham. Though the chronology is a bit uncertain, it is likely that the crisis arose in the early months of 1165.³²⁷ The central events of the rebellion, however, are fairly straightforward and we are fortunate to have

³²⁵ Ibid, 103.

³²⁶ Ibid, 311, 313.

³²⁷ Golding, 42. The lay-brethren’s revolt, then, may have followed quite closely upon the heels of the scandal at Watton. See above, pg. 63.

not only several letters relating to the incident, but Gilbert's own testimony, preserved in chapter twenty-five of the *Vita*.

Gilbert notes that the disruption was caused by “two lay brethren to whom I had entrusted the care of all our houses [along with] two other men...one of whom I received when he was scarcely more than a beggar endeavoring to make a living from his skill at weaving.” One of these men, Ogger, by name, Gilbert “took in when he was a boy, along with his three brothers, who were unskilled in any craft, his destitute, almost moribund father, his aged mother, and his two sisters, who were living in beggary and were weak from long illness.” Gilbert suggests that these four men, after he had raised them from their beggary and taught them a trade, “turn[ed] away from their profession and the religious life.” Adding to their sin, they even resorted to thievery.³²⁸

Gilbert simply notes that the schismatic lay-brethren “slandered my canons and myself.” Ralph says little more, though he acknowledges that the lay-brethren wished Gilbert to “moderate a little the strictness of their regime.”³²⁹ Fortunately, some of the letters contained in the *Liber Sancti Gilberti* provide a bit more detail. William of Norwich, for example, relates that the schismatic brothers accused Gilbert of forcing them to take a second oath, in addition and contrary to their original vows.³³⁰ The brothers desired either to join a different order or, if that was not possible, to amend the fundamental organization of the Order of Sempringham. As William relates, “This is what they proposed: from the four classes which they said existed in their houses—

³²⁸ Foreville and Keir, 79.

³²⁹ Ibid, 81.

³³⁰ Foreville and Keir, 135.

namely canons, nuns, lay brethren, and lay sisters—one ought to be given charge over all and should be jointly and equally obeyed by all.”³³¹

The schismatic lay-brethren put forth more disturbing accusations as well. Perhaps the most distressing were those alluded to by Robert de Chesney, bishop of Lincoln, in his letter to the pope on behalf of Gilbert. Robert claims that, despite what the pope may have heard, namely that the “canons, lay brethren, and nuns all dwell together,” nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, “they live apart, they eat apart, and they are kept so completely separate from one another that entry to the nuns is not permitted to any canon or lay brother.” Roger, archbishop of York, and Hugh, bishop of Durham, wrote to Alexander as well, claiming that the nuns and canons “live apart with propriety.”³³²

As David Knowles suggests, although the lay-brethren were probably motivated primarily by their jealousy of the canons, their complaint about the harshness of their rule was at least “comprehensible, if not excusable.”³³³ This is suggested by the fact that Thomas Becket wrote to Gilbert during the fallout of the revolt, commanding him to moderate his religious zeal. Gilbert would do well to remember, Thomas suggests, that “he who rubs too hard draws blood” and that “excess is the enemy of salvation.”³³⁴ Thus, while Golding is likely correct in his assertion that the revolt’s primary cause was the anger of the lay-brethren over their loss of power following Gilbert’s addition of the regular canons sometime after 1147, this was certainly not the only reason.³³⁵ Although

³³¹ Ibid, 137. In so doing, the lay-brethren were attempting to reverse the canons’ ascendancy and return to conditions as they had been when they (the lay-brethren) had enjoyed more power within the order.

³³² Ibid, 151.

³³³ Knowles, “Revolt,” 470.

³³⁴ Duggan, 361.

³³⁵ See Golding, 115-116.

Graham remarks that “the difficulty of controlling these rude ignorant peasants” caused Gilbert no end of grief,³³⁶ it does seem that, at least in regards to the severity of their rule, the lay-brethren might have had some cause to be unhappy. This issue remained unresolved until close to Gilbert’s death, when he “settled the dispute over their food which the lay brethren had earlier raised, judging with quite reasonable moderation the style and quantity they should observe in their rations, clothing, and other customs.”³³⁷

Thus, we see that, in many ways, the unique personality of Gilbert of Sempringham proved to be a driving force behind both the creation of his order and its development during his lifetime. Gilbert was always something of an outsider and, as such, chose to exercise his pastoral vocation in particular ways. Rather than joining major orders or teaching at a cathedral school, he opened a school for local boys and girls. There, although neither monk nor priest, he required his students to live by a quasi-monastic code of behavior. Invested with the churches of Sempringham and West Torrington, he proceeded to reform his parishioners. After being summoned to Lincoln, he began to incorporate tenets of monastic observance into his own life and, while he acquiesced to Alexander’s desire to make him priest, he rejected the offer of an archdiaconate. Returning to Sempringham, he created a religious community which had, as its *raison d’être*, women’s spiritual ambitions. This community eventually evolved into the Order of Sempringham, from which Gilbert demanded the same sort of stringent morality he had earlier required of his previous spiritual wards. At times he displayed a spiritual rigor that bordered on cruelty, and this rigor was at least partially responsible for the revolt of the lay-brethren, an event which nearly destroyed the order within its

³³⁶ Graham, 12.

³³⁷ Ibid, 119.

founder's lifetime. Now that we have examined some of the ways in which Gilbert's personality affected the development of his order, we must address the other primary influence on the order's early history: the necessity of local circumstance.

Chapter III: Local Circumstance and Necessity in Early Gilbertine History

Thus far, we have examined how Gilbert's distinctive personality proved to have had a decisive impact on the Order of Sempringham's early years. Now we must turn to what I have characterized as another of the most significant factors which affected the development of the Gilbertine communities during these years: local circumstance and necessity. For Gilbert never had any overarching plan for his order, nor did he develop one along the way. Instead, each significant development of the order resulted largely from the particular needs of current circumstance. This trend is visible from the beginning of the order right up to the time of Gilbert's death, and beyond. As Elkins has argued, "circumstances and presuppositions dictated the creation of the order."³³⁸ It is to that creation that we now turn.

Although it may seem logical to begin by examining how necessity and local circumstance played an important role in the foundation of the first Gilbertine community at Sempringham, I think it prudent to begin a bit earlier. In this way, we may see how the forces of circumstance and necessity were already at work in Gilbert's life long before he enclosed the seven original Gilbertine women at Sempringham in 1131. In examining Gilbert's childhood, we observe that these forces were, at an early date, guiding the future master of Sempringham in a direction which would definitively shape the rest of his life.

Long before Gilbert laid the cornerstone of his order at Sempringham, the necessity of circumstance was already at work in his life. This trend may be seen in his

³³⁸ Elkins, "Emergence," 175.

early childhood. Gilbert's "repulsive physical deformity" ensured that he could not follow his father in a military career.³³⁹ Though the *Vita* suggests that Gilbert was "destined for study whilst still very young,"³⁴⁰ Graham's somewhat less optimistic assessment that he had no choice but to pursue an academic career is probably nearer the truth. Gilbert seems to have shown no particular ability in his studies; indeed, Graham suggests that his instructor found him to be thoroughly lacking in talent.³⁴¹ Unable to bear the chastisement of those around him, Gilbert fled in shame to France. While on the Continent, Gilbert underwent a momentous change of character that affected the rest of his life.³⁴² For it was in France that Gilbert dedicated himself firmly to scholarly ambitions. In Gilbert's entrance into a life of study, we see the first example of how the necessity of circumstance affected the saint's life and later the spiritual lives of those in his parish and his order. Golding illustrates the point nicely in suggesting that Gilbert, who was most likely his father's eldest son, had no realistic career choice other than study or the Church on account of his deformity.³⁴³

A second significant instance of necessity dictating the course of Gilbert's life may be seen in the foundation of his school for local boys and girls. Gilbert's decision to found a local school upon his return from France and, in particular, the way in which he governed it, had much to do with the saint's distinctive personality. For example, it allowed him to pursue his emerging pastoral vocation by helping those in the immediate environs of Sempringham. As *magister*, he could practice a quasi-monastic lifestyle and

³³⁹ Graham, 3.

³⁴⁰ Foreville and Keir, 13.

³⁴¹ Graham, 3.

³⁴² Foreville and Keir, 13.

³⁴³ Golding, 11.

reform the spiritual lives of others, while remaining outside of the official Church hierarchy.

Yet in Gilbert's decision to found a school for local children, we may see the necessity of local circumstance playing a role as well. In establishing his school, Gilbert seems to have been addressing a very real local need. Foreville and Keir suggest that there were likely few educational opportunities available to local children at this time.³⁴⁴ This conclusion is echoed by Graham, who notes that the nearest cathedral school (Lincoln) was nearly thirty miles distant and that there were no religious houses nearby where local children might be educated. This dearth of schools was exacerbated, Graham suggests, by the fact that many common parish clergy had an insufficient level of education themselves at this time, and were thus often unable to instruct the local children.³⁴⁵ Thus, we see how Gilbert's decision to found his parish school was likely the result not only of his particular personality and disposition, but also that it was, at the same time, suggested by the necessity of local circumstance.

We have thus far examined how Gilbert was led by the necessity of circumstance to enter into the community of scholars rather than into the military company of his father's household. Furthermore, he became a student of good repute in France and subsequently addressed pressing local needs by founding a secular school in Sempringham, upon which he stamped his particular brand of religious piety. We must now turn to the stage of his life for which Gilbert is best known: his tenure as master of the Order of Sempringham.

³⁴⁴ Foreville and Keir, xviii.

³⁴⁵ Graham, 4, 5.

Sometime before 1131, Gilbert seems to have desired to return to Sempringham. Golding suggests that this desire may have resulted from Gilbert's growing wish to live a life of voluntary poverty.³⁴⁶ Ralph writes that "there were in the village of Sempringham some girls living a secular life," who, "wishing to overcome the temptations of their sex and of the world...longed to cling without hindrance to a heavenly bridegroom." Meanwhile, Gilbert desired to "devote to His service the churches of Sempringham and [West] Torrington...and to distribute his own possessions to the needy." Ralph then makes a curious statement:

When he found no men willing to lead such strict lives for God's sake, Gilbert thought it right to make over everything he owned to the use of such girls as, being truly poor in spirit, could obtain the kingdom of heaven for themselves and others. Thus, he made for himself friends of the mammon of unrighteousness that they might receive him into everlasting habitations.³⁴⁷

While this passage seems at first to be fairly straightforward, it has proven to be quite problematic for scholars of the Gilbertine Order.

In his own words, Gilbert relates an account similar to that found in the *Vita*. He recalls that "when I was not able to find men, who for the sake of my vow of a life set apart were willing to submit their necks for the love of God, I found young women."³⁴⁸ It seems certain that Gilbert's initial enclosure of the original seven sisters at Sempringham was not part of any well-developed plan; rather it was the result of the necessity of circumstance. Elkins, for example, states that in this, as in many other situations, "repeatedly [Gilbert's] preferences were altered by events."³⁴⁹ Furthermore, Elkins

³⁴⁶ See above, pg. 69.

³⁴⁷ Foreville and Keir, 31.

³⁴⁸ Dugdale, *Monasticon*, v. vi, pt. 2, xxix. *cum non invenirem viros, qui pro voto meo districtae vitae vellent pro Dei amore colla submittere, inveni virgines*. The translation is my own.

³⁴⁹ Elkins, "Emergence," 170.

suggests, “no master plan dominated his actions; no vision directed his steps.”³⁵⁰ Up to this point, scholars tend to agree.

Yet, Elkins interprets Gilbert’s statement to suggest that women were never central to his vision.³⁵¹ Golding, however, questions this interpretation, noting that William of Newburgh had suggested that Gilbert was one of the exemplary twelfth-century men to have taken on the *cura mulierum*.³⁵² Furthermore, Golding cites early charters that refer to Gilbert’s early postulants as *puellae* or *ancillae Domini*, rather than *moniales*, and concludes that, as Thompson had suggested, young women of this sort were often “supported by and dependent (in more than one sense) upon local communities of men.” Thus, as the north of England suffered from a lack of monasteries, Gilbert may have been unable to find men, not so much to *become* monks as he was unable to find previously-existing religious to serve his community. Golding also suggests that since the early charters of Sempringham and Haverholme (the second Gilbertine house) referred explicitly to the “handmaidens of Christ,” they “demonstrate that the care of religious women was central to his design.” Finally, Golding notes that both Gilbert and Ralph were apologists, and that both men had written their accounts after the order’s two major scandals. This being the case, both authors may have tended to downplay Gilbert’s original dedication to the female sex “at a time when the role of women in the monastic commonwealth as a whole was increasingly coming into question.”³⁵³

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 172.

³⁵¹ Elkins, *Holy Women*, 79.

³⁵² Golding, 17.

³⁵³ Ibid, 18.

Whether Gilbert's initial installation of women at Sempringham rather than men was a result of his inability to find would-be monks, or his difficulty in finding suitable male religious to care for his community, it is undeniable that local circumstances and necessity were central to his decision. Whether he sought postulants, canons, or monks, there appear to have been none in the area. While we may never be certain of Gilbert's original intentions, it is undeniable that, for the rest of his life, Gilbert seems to have been particularly devoted to the religious needs of women. Indeed, as Venarde suggests, the orders of Sempringham and Fontevraud owed their existence to a concern with female spirituality.³⁵⁴ While local necessity may well have provided the impetus for Gilbert's original foundation, it does not sufficiently explain Gilbert's continuing dedication to the female sex.

For our purposes, whether Gilbert originally intended to found a house for women or whether his hand was forced is beside the point. What is significant is that the necessity of local circumstance (i.e. the lack of pious men in one capacity or another) played a significant role in the particular early character of the Order of Sempringham and that, having found no men willing to undertake a monastic life, Gilbert enclosed seven young women "aflame with desire for heaven." To these, he gave the command to "preserve chastity, humility, obedience, charity, and the other rules of life."³⁵⁵ The enclosure of the original seven sisters was absolute. Gilbert himself kept the only key, and he appointed "poor girls, who served them dressed in secular attire," to provide for the physical needs of the nuns.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Venarde, *Women's Monasticism*, 14.

³⁵⁵ Foreville and Keir, 33.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 35.

Soon, however, circumstance necessitated further development of the Order. Gilbert himself notes that he originally had no plans to add to this community, claiming that “I was not thinking to add more to those residing [there].”³⁵⁷ Yet these fully-enclosed women needed the assistance of outsiders to procure the necessities of life. Towards this end, Gilbert had originally hired village girls to pass goods through the single window into the nuns’ enclosure.³⁵⁸ Yet this arrangement soon proved worrisome.³⁵⁹ Ralph relates that Gilbert soon “learnt from wise religious that it is not safe for young girls in secular life who wander about everywhere to serve those in religious orders.”³⁶⁰ Fearing that the serving-girls might “report or perform [some] worldly deed which might offend the nuns’ minds,” Gilbert encouraged that they take a habit as well, and lead a “poor but honorable existence.”³⁶¹

After a year’s probationary period, the former poor village girls became the first lay-sisters of Sempringham.³⁶² In Gilbert’s creation of a lay-sisterhood, we again witness the agency of local necessity at work in early Gilbertine history. For Gilbert seems to have had no intention to add more women to his original group of seven. Yet, the strict claustration of these women, combined with the lack of local male religious, necessitated that some form of support system be implemented. Gilbert’s use of poor local girls soon proved to be unsatisfactory, and he was thus forced to improvise yet again. Yet, while

³⁵⁷ Dugdale, *Monasticon*, vol. 6, pt. 2, xxix. *nam plures illis viventibus superaddere non arbitrabar*. The translation is my own.

³⁵⁸ Foreville and Keir, 35.

³⁵⁹ Golding notes that female religious’ reliance upon secular servants had long troubled churchmen, from Benedict of Aniane in his treatment of canonesses to Aelred of Rievaulx in his instructions for recluses. See Golding, 22.

³⁶⁰ Foreville and Kier, 35. Though Ralph fails to identify just who these “wise religious” were, Gilbert suggests in his own account that it was *consilio abbatis primi Rievallis*. See Dugdale, *Monasticon*, vol. 6, pt. 2, xxix. Golding notes that this was Abbot William of Rievaulx (r. 1132-1145) and that this suggestion was thus probably based upon the *conversi* system of the Cistercians. See Golding, 23.

³⁶¹ Foreville and Keir, 35.

³⁶² *Ibid*, 37.

the creation of the lay-sisters was a product of local necessity, Gilbert's personality can be seen in the way in which they were organized. His religious zeal is readily apparent in the observance he gave to the lay-sisters, which Graham characterizes as "a life of poverty and perpetual labor."³⁶³ Gilbert, in his own account stipulates that their bread be plain and common, and that the pleasures of life be abandoned in favor of prayer and hard work.³⁶⁴

Soon, circumstances intervened to alter the community at Sempringham yet again. As in the case of Gilbert's initial choice of women over men, the exact impetus for the creation of the Gilbertine lay-brethren remains something of a mystery. According to Gilbert's own account:

Similarly, since I did not have [any] except laymen who were overseeing the wealth and agriculture of my house: in a similar way of life and rank through all things in much labor, and in the poorest way of life, as I mentioned before, about the lay-sisters; I took to myself laborers, giving to them the garment of the religious, the sort of which the Cistercian brothers have.³⁶⁵

Ralph supports this claim in the *Vita*, suggesting that Gilbert "put those he kept as servants about his house and on his land in charge of the nuns' external and more arduous tasks." Yet Ralph reveals another motive as well, suggesting that Gilbert did so "because women's efforts achieve little without help from men."³⁶⁶ Golding acknowledges a third possible motive. Citing the Gilbertine *Institutes*, he suggests that a visiting party of

³⁶³ Graham, 11.

³⁶⁴ Dugdale, *Monasticon*, vol. 6, pt. 2, xxx. *Panem etiam dixi eis vilem et rusticatum. Vestimenta abjecta, et lectisternia similiter. Vigiliis et labores multos, et quietam rarissimam.* The translation is my own.

³⁶⁵ Dugdale, *Monasticon*, vol 6, pt. 2, xxx. *Similiter, cum non haberem nisi seculares qui praeesent substantiae domus meae et agriculturae: simili modo et ordine per omnia in labore multo, et victu pauperrimo, ut praedixi, de laicis sororibus; assumpsi mihi mercenarios, dans eis habitum religionis, qualem habent fratres Cistercienses.* The translation is my own.

³⁶⁶ Foreville and Keir, 37.

Cistercian lay-brethren so impressed certain secular laborers at Sempringham that they immediately begged Gilbert to give them a similar rule.³⁶⁷

Regardless of precisely why Gilbert made the addition of lay-brothers, this event had a profound impact on the Order of Sempringham. Like that of the lay-sisters, the implementation of Gilbertine lay-brethren resulted from the necessity of circumstance rather than a well-defined plan. And, like the lay-sisters, they lived a difficult life. Ralph relates that Gilbert “imposed on them many heavy tasks and a few light ones.”³⁶⁸ Like their female counterparts, the lay-brothers were drawn from the lower ranks of society. In speaking of certain of the schismatic lay-brethren responsible for the mid-century revolt, Gilbert (as quoted by Ralph in the *Vita*) details the pitiable conditions from which some of these men emerged.³⁶⁹

For nearly a decade, the Order of Sempringham continued on in this way: a small group of holy women was ruled by Gilbert and served by groups of lay-brothers and lay-sisters. According to Ralph, the new order quickly attracted a good deal of attention. He relates that soon “many wealthy and nobly born Englishmen, earls as well as barons...offered lands and estates and a great number of possessions to the holy father.”³⁷⁰ Golding calls this account into question, however, noting that only two communities can be proven to have existed before 1150.³⁷¹ The original community of nuns, lay-sisters, and lay-brothers at Sempringham had been established in some form circa 1131, but it was not raised to the status of a priory until at least 1139, and possibly

³⁶⁷ Golding, 23.

³⁶⁸ Foreville and Keir, 39.

³⁶⁹ See above, pg. 87.

³⁷⁰ Foreville and Kier, 39.

³⁷¹ Golding, 24.

not until after the failed mission to Cîteaux in 1147.³⁷² Haverholme is the only other Gilbertine community that can be proven to have existed before 1150.³⁷³

If Ralph was exaggerating about the immediate success of the order, he also seems to have been mistaken about its original benefactors. The *Vita* claims that from its early days the order enjoyed the patronage of great men, “earls as well as barons.”³⁷⁴ It was long believed that Sempringham was raised to the status of priory by a gift from Gilbert de Gant, Earl of Lincoln. Golding has shown, however, that this assumption is almost certainly false.³⁷⁵ Rather, it was to various local lords, men closer in rank to his father, to whom Gilbert owed thanks for the survival of the early communities of Sempringham and Haverholme.³⁷⁶

Though the order may not have expanded as quickly nor as dramatically as Ralph suggests, there was growth nonetheless. The foundation of a second house and the subsequent multiplication of Gilbertine religious posed an acute problem for Gilbert, who could not effectively look after the two communities by himself. It is important to keep in mind that the two Gilbertine communities did not, at this time, represent an order in the strict sense of the word. Up to this point Gilbert had merely assembled a small group of religious women and associated with them groups of lay-brethren and lay-sisters. Gilbert oversaw the communities personally, and it is unlikely that the community of Sempringham had a complicated or well-developed rule at this point. With the formation of a second house and continued growth, however, Gilbert was forced to confront the

³⁷² Ibid, 198.

³⁷³ The site at Haverholme had originally been gifted by Alexander of Lincoln to the Cistercians in 1137, but when they found it unsuitable, Alexander granted Haverholme to the Gilbertines in 1139. See Golding, 202, 203.

³⁷⁴ Foreville and Keir, 39.

³⁷⁵ Golding, 198.

³⁷⁶ Ibid, 199, 203. Indeed, Golding argues that it may in fact have been Gilbert’s brother Roger who was primarily responsible for the earliest grants at Sempringham. See Golding, 201.

question of how to organize an order of women which also included a male component.”³⁷⁷

In the end, Gilbert fled. This is perfectly in keeping with what we know of Gilbert’s personality. Up to this point, he had been able to oversee the community at Sempringham with a minimum of difficulty. As the number of Gilbertine religious grew, however, a more systematic approach was needed. Thus, Gilbert “planned to divest his shoulders of what was at the same time an obligation and an honor, and to entrust it to the abilities of one or more of those whom he should yet find to be stronger and more capable.”³⁷⁸

In this case, those ‘stronger and more capable’ happened to be the Cistercians. Thus, in 1147, Gilbert traveled to the Cistercian General Chapter at Cîteaux, intending to transfer his order to the care of the white monks.³⁷⁹ In Gilbert’s own words, he went to the chapter in order that he might transfer “our houses and the handmaids of Christ and our brothers to their rule.”³⁸⁰ Ralph relates that Gilbert’s choice of the Cistercians resulted from his previous dealings with them and their reputation for holiness.³⁸¹ This seems a perfectly logical explanation, as Gilbert had been advised by William of Rievaulx in the past, and the Cistercians indeed enjoyed an excellent reputation as a reformed order.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, 25.

³⁷⁸ Foreville and Keir, 41.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Dugdale, *Monasticon*, vol. 6 pt. 2, xxx. *ut domos nostras et ancillas Christi fratresque nostros eorum regimini manciparem*. The translation is my own.

³⁸¹ Foreville and Keir, 41.

Nevertheless, Gilbert was to be thoroughly disappointed in this goal.³⁸² We have already identified several possible motives for the Cistercian refusal.³⁸³ What is important is that, in the end, Pope Eugenius III (r. 1145-1153) and the Cistercian abbots present at the council decreed that Gilbert “continue what he had begun in the grace of Christ.”³⁸⁴ It seems that Gilbert also became friendly with Malachy of Armagh, archbishop of Ireland, and Bernard of Clairvaux on his journey.³⁸⁵ For some time, scholarly opinion held that Gilbert had so impressed Bernard that Bernard invited him back to Clairvaux and actually helped him to formulate a rule for the Order of Sempringham.³⁸⁶ Elkins has argued, however, that this never happened, and proposes that the mistaken belief resulted from Dugdale’s faulty punctuation in his *Monasticon*. Instead of identifying Bernard as a co-founder of the order, the papal bull cited by Dugdale simply relates that he approved a certain part of the rule.³⁸⁷ For Elkins, the author of the *Vita* most likely invented the connection with Bernard to give additional support to the Gilbertines in the early thirteenth century, a conclusion which fits with Golding’s argument about the defensive nature of the *Vita*.³⁸⁸ While acknowledging the possibility of this interpretation, Golding suggests that the extent of Bernard’s influence lies somewhere between the account relayed by Ralph and Elkins’ portrayal. While Bernard and Gilbert likely met, it was most likely not for an extended period of time. Yet it is plain that the Cistercians (and quite possibly Bernard as well) had a significant

³⁸² In his own words, he was “rebuffed entirely.” *omnino repulsam*. See Dugdale, *Monasticon*, vol. vi, pt. 2, xxx. The translation is my own.

³⁸³ See above, pg. 61.

³⁸⁴ Foreville and Keir, 43.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 45.

³⁸⁶ Graham, 13.

³⁸⁷ Elkins, “Emergence,” 177.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 178.

impact on the evolution of the Gilbertine Order, even if the abbot of Clairvaux was not a co-founder of the order itself.³⁸⁹

In the end, Gilbert's failure at Cîteaux represents yet another instance of necessity dictating the path to be taken by the order. With the expansion of the order and in the wake of the Cistercian refusal, Gilbert was forced to devise a new plan. Faced with no other workable option, he chose to incorporate a group of canons into his order, to share the responsibility of leadership and to care for the spiritual needs of the nuns. Ralph relates that

He chose men for their ability, scholars for their skill in ruling others, clerks in order to exercise authority over the church in accordance with law; men to look after women, scholars to open the way of salvation to both men and women, and clerks to supply the pastoral office to all.³⁹⁰

Why did Gilbert choose Augustinian canons? Golding suggests two primary reasons. First of all, he was familiar with their lifestyle as there were, by 1147, both Arrouaisian and Premonstratensian houses in the area.³⁹¹ And, more importantly, he was left with no choice. As Golding notes, Gilbert sought a reformed rule, and the Cistercians had denied him. In the end, Gilbert really had nowhere else to turn.³⁹²

This then, represents the Order of Sempringham in its mature form. A group of nuns was served by sub-orders of lay-sisters and lay-brethren, and ministered to by a group of regular canons. To the nuns he gave the Rule of St. Benedict; to the canons he gave the Rule of St. Augustine, and "to all he preached the examples of Christ and his

³⁸⁹ Golding, 30-31. For example, the *regulae* for the lay-brothers and lay-sisters were clearly based on Cistercian customs.

³⁹⁰ Foreville and Keir, 45, 47.

³⁹¹ Golding, 87.

³⁹² *Ibid*, 90.

saints.”³⁹³ The observance given to the lay-members of the order were closely based upon Cistercian practice. As there were other twelfth-century orders which made use of double monasteries, Gilbert’s creation was not exactly unique. Yet, Sally Thompson notes that “the deliberate organization of both men and women, lay and clerical, into an order” was in fact something novel.³⁹⁴ Gilbert’s contribution to twelfth-century monasticism was thus that “albeit unwillingly, he founded an Order with a clear constitutional framework which provided men—canons and lay brothers—to care for the needs of nuns, and an organization which linked the houses and provided for their mutual support.”³⁹⁵

We have already sketched the details of the order’s two significant crises which, in tandem, nearly destroyed the order. What we must yet address is how the scandal at Watton and the subsequent revolt of the lay-brethren forced Gilbert to change the constitution of his order and what this change meant for the future of the Gilbertines. Golding remarks that “by 1300 the Gilbertine experiment was largely dead.” Though the order continued on until Henry’s dissolution of the monasteries, it was a shadow of its former self. As Golding notes, “what had begun as an unusual, though not quite unique, creation of an organizational structure in which men and women could live in harmony and discipline ended as an order in which the men, the canons, were everywhere dominant while the nuns were sidelined and almost irrelevant.”³⁹⁶ This transformation was, like so many other developments in the Order of Sempringham, necessitated by

³⁹³ Foreville and Keir, 49.

³⁹⁴ Thompson, *Women Religious*, 78.

³⁹⁵ Sally Thompson, “Why English Nunneries Had No History: A Study of the Problems of the English Nunneries Founded after the Conquest,” in *Distant Echoes: Medieval Religious Women, vol. 1*, eds. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1984), 136.

³⁹⁶ Golding, 4.

circumstance: in this case, the crises which rocked the order in the second half of the twelfth century.

We have already noted the unsavory nature of the scandal at Watton. Yet, once one overcomes the initial shock of these events, several questions come readily to mind. Foremost among these is how this scandal could occur in an organized community where monks and nuns were separated by Gilbert's "many delicate devices for excluding occasions of sin."³⁹⁷ In lamenting the failures of such 'devices,' Aelred is almost certainly referring to the multitude of "institutional and architectural arrangements," elaborated in the Gilbertine *Institutes*,³⁹⁸ which were designed to keep Gilbertine men and women firmly segregated.³⁹⁹

Rose Graham details many of these arrangements in the third chapter of her foundational work on the Gilbertines.⁴⁰⁰ She examines in particular the various architectural arrangements detailed in the documents included in Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum*, which were designed in such a way that contact between Gilbertine men and women was to be strictly limited. This description is of particular interest to us as the priory used as an example in Dugdale's work happens to be Watton priory. Graham notes that a partition wall stretched the entire length of the nuns' church.⁴⁰¹ At Watton, this wall was almost five feet thick and tall enough to hide the monks and nuns from each other's sight, yet low enough to allow the nuns to hear the High Mass, which was said on the canons' side of the church. A turn-table in this wall allowed the nuns to receive the

³⁹⁷ Dutton, 113.

³⁹⁸ In this I am referring to the Gilbertine *Institutes*, which are printed in Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum*, vol. 6, pt. 2, pp. xxix-xcvii. For this information, I have relied heavily upon Rose Graham's foundational work.

³⁹⁹ Golding, 37.

⁴⁰⁰ See Graham, 48-77.

⁴⁰¹ Graham, 54.

chalice during communion and the window through which the nuns made their confession was but “the length of a finger, and hardly of a thumb in breadth,” and was guarded by an iron plate.⁴⁰²

Similarly stringent restrictions governed the monks in their administration of the extreme unction, and the use of the communal parlor by all Gilbertine religious was highly restricted as well.⁴⁰³ Turn-tables were present between the men’s fraters and the nun’s quarters and doors and windows were kept firmly locked and guarded. In addition, the entire compound was enclosed with a substantial wall and moat to protect the religious from the outside world.⁴⁰⁴ When travel was unavoidable, to the yearly General Chapter, for example, nuns and brothers were kept apart through strict codes of conduct.⁴⁰⁵

With these numerous buffers in place, we might well wonder how the nun of Watton and her lover became romantically involved in the first place. Golding provides the answer: the Gilbertine *Institutes* printed in the *Monasticon* and subsequently summarized in Graham’s work is a compilation of earlier works.⁴⁰⁶ These works include Gilbert’s original prescriptions for his order, amendments made after his failed mission to Cîteaux in 1147, and other additions that were still being added as late as 1238.⁴⁰⁷ Thus, the relevant documents date from the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, decades after the scandal took place. This fact suggests that many of the minute regulations and restrictions detailed in the *Institutes* were probably not in place at the time of the Watton

⁴⁰² Ibid, 55.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, 57.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, 50.

⁴⁰⁶ Golding, 37.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, 455.

scandal. That being the case, Aelred's letter represents the earliest authentic portrait of Gilbertine life in the order's nascent years.⁴⁰⁸

Aelred's account suggests a monastic observance that was "much less ordered" than it would become in later times.⁴⁰⁹ Rose Graham notes, for example, that the Gilbertine *Institutes* forbade the acceptance of girls under the age of twelve. At the age of fifteen, girls could receive the novice habit, and at eighteen they were allowed to make a full profession.⁴¹⁰ Like many of the reformed orders, the Gilbertines rejected the practice of oblation.⁴¹¹ How then are we to account for the presence of such a young girl at Watton? Aelred notes that the girl was only four years old when she entered Watton at the request of Henry Murdac, archbishop of York.⁴¹² Thus, according to the *Institutes*, the so-called "nun of Watton" should never have been accepted in the first place. Her age, in combination with her seeming ineptitude for the monastic life, suggests that she was an oblate. This, in turn, indicates that at the time of the scandal the order's refusal to accept oblates had either not yet been established or that it was at least open to compromise.

A similar explanation is likely regarding the apparent ease with which the lay-brother and nun were able to arrange their clandestine meetings. We have examined Rose Graham's account of the many implementations at Watton that were meant to assure the separation of monks and nuns. Yet Aelred's letter suggests a very different reality; men move freely within the nun's compound, and there is ample opportunity for

⁴⁰⁸ Constable, 218.

⁴⁰⁹ Golding, 37.

⁴¹⁰ Graham, 72.

⁴¹¹ Golding, 37.

⁴¹² Dutton, 112.

repeated sexual encounters.⁴¹³ At first glance, these accounts seem irreconcilable. Upon a closer examination of the chronology, however, this seeming discrepancy is readily resolved. Considering the substantially later date of many of the Gilbertine *Institutes* as related in the *Monasticon* and subsequently summarized by Graham, it seems quite likely that many of Gilbert's 'delicate devices' had not yet been implemented at the time of the Watton crisis. We may thus see the scandal not so much as a consequence of a priory's failure to observe a well-established rule as the result of a nascent order's early experimentation with dual-sex living arrangements.

Thus, we see how the events at Watton effectively necessitated the transformation of the Order of Sempringham. Elkins notes that, in the wake of the crisis, those in charge of the priory would have been forced to reevaluate both the existing statutes and how they were currently being observed. And, in the end, Gilbert was unable to characterize the incident as a "unique occurrence, unlikely to happen again."⁴¹⁴ While Constable suggests that "it is impossible to estimate the influence of the episode on the history of the Gilbertine order," he also notes that one of the grievances noted by the lay-brothers was a supposed moral laxity in the houses, which almost certainly was a reference to the incident at Watton, if for no other reason than the fact that there is no other evidence of sexual impropriety within the Gilbertine Order.⁴¹⁵ Indeed, it seems highly likely that it was the incident at Watton, in combination with the subsequent lay-brethren's revolt, which necessitated the "elaborate institutional and architectural arrangements" detailed in the *Institutes*.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹³ Ibid, 112, 114.

⁴¹⁴ Elkins, *Holy Women*, 111.

⁴¹⁵ Constable, 222.

⁴¹⁶ Golding, 37.

Thus, the nun of Watton scandal provides another example of how the necessity of circumstance dictated the evolution of the Order of Sempringham. The scandal at Watton “brought about the effective end of that free association between Gilbert and his nuns that had begun in 1131 and which had been under increasing restriction ever since.”⁴¹⁷ The lay-brethren’s revolt was significant in that it brought claims of sexual immorality before the wider public, indeed, before the pope himself. What might have been more easily swept under the rug was now being spoken aloud, or at least alluded to, by those who sought a thorough restructuring of the order.

In the end, these two events, the scandal at Watton and the revolt of the lay-brethren proved to be catalysts for thorough changes within the Order of Sempringham. And not only this. Elkins notes that the expansion of female monasticism, which had exploded in the north of England from the 1130s, ground to a halt around 1165.⁴¹⁸ The Gilbertines themselves only founded one other dual house. This was the priory of Shouldham, and at least one contemporary remarked snidely upon the wisdom of creating a house for both monks and nuns. For the remainder of their history, the Gilbertines preferred to found houses for men alone.⁴¹⁹ The damage had been done. Elkins laments that although Gilbert had won the battle against the schismatic lay-brethren, he had lost the war. Indeed, in the wake of these two crises, “the trend in favor of close relationships between female and male religious had been reversed.”⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, 38.

⁴¹⁸ Elkins, *Holy Women*, 117.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, 122.

⁴²⁰ Ibid, 124.

Conclusion

The Order of Sempringham was a product of the religious dynamism of the twelfth century. Both in England and on the Continent, this period witnessed a remarkable growth, not only in the sheer number of religious, but also in the avenues available to those wishing to express their spirituality in new ways. Never quite unique, but distinctive and in many ways innovative, the Order of Sempringham was not, however, the result of any clearly-formulated vision. As Elkins has suggested, “concrete situation had encouraged [Gilbert] repeatedly to modify his plans until finally his unique institution was devised.”⁴²¹

While Elkins’ argument is supported by a wealth of evidence, much of which is cited above, it only tells half of the story. I have argued that it was the necessity of circumstance, in combination with the distinctive and at times contradictory personality of Gilbert, that not only led to the foundation of the Order of Sempringham, but also determined its evolution over the next sixty years of the master’s life. Gilbert was forced into a life of study on account of his deformed body, but his personal character provided the religious zeal which changed a lazy, sullen youth into a religious reformer. It was likely the absence of local educational centers that inspired Gilbert to found his school, yet the decision to impose a quasi-monastic observance upon his students stemmed from his own beliefs. When no men were available who were willing to submit to the sort of life Gilbert demanded, he chose women instead, though his increasing dedication to the female sex surely cannot have originated solely from this necessity. While the evolution of the order had everything to do with circumstantial necessity, Gilbert’s rigid spiritual

⁴²¹ Elkins, *Emergence*, 180.

demands and ambivalence towards command gave the order its specific character. And, while the crises at Watton and with the lay-brothers were largely a result of the way the order had necessarily evolved, certain of Gilbert's character traits were at least as much to blame for these failures. In short, the Gilbertine Order emerged in the twelfth century largely as a response to local circumstance. Gilbert himself certainly had no master-plan for his order. Yet, without a doubt, his distinctive personality was stamped upon the Order of Sempringham from its humble beginnings up through and past its master's death in 1189.

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