

WITH PATERNAL CONCERN: "FATHERS" THEODULF AND ALCUIN AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF CAROLINGIAN WOMEN

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It is commonly accepted that the inestimable Charlemagne surrounded himself with a court of international scholars and churchmen, individuals who would become the intellectual mentors and administrative architects of the revitalized Christian *oikumene* he was attempting to establish. His strategy of organization was based upon a deliberate program of coherent standardization: the codification of religious practices, the systematization of doctrinal instruction, and the establishment of a imperial judiciary that would incorporate even the general swath of the empire's population.¹

Charlemagne's motives were several, but among the more principal intentions was his ambitious, and sincere, desire to sustain a unified, harmonious Christian kingdom. He relied upon the conscientious services of his select court circle of teachers, diplomats, and clerics to help realize this dream, and

¹ The literature about Charlemagne and the Carolingian "*renovatio*" is enormous. Sufficient introductions would include *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Pierre Riche, *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe*, trans. Michael Idomir Allen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); John J. Contreni, *Carolingian Learning, Masters and Manuscripts* (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 1992), and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*, vol. 3 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

numbering among those courtly luminaries were two quite significant individuals, the tenacious and indefatigable Alcuin of York, and his sometimes rival and younger colleague, the insightful and incisive Theodulf of Orleans.

Together, and with others like Paulinus of Aquileia, they assisted Charlemagne in his quest to refashion western European culture, as it had long since fallen into despair, into a civilized stronghold firmly grounded in doctrinally orthodox (Christian) belief. Alcuin was recognized as “the Master” or “the Master Teacher” of the Carolingian court, just as Theodulf was noted for his exceptional ecclesiastical and theological contributions. The Carolingian *renovatio*, then, was a decidedly male enterprise, civilizing renewal by men for men.

Yet, in their capacities as courtly masters of both a cultural and religious reformation, leaders like Theodulf and Alcuin also assumed the role of spiritual, somewhat paternal, mentors to eager, capable women, including noble religious, as well as sovereign queens and princesses, who were becoming increasingly prohibited by the throne from directing their own spiritual programmes.

While formal treatises of Carolingian theology and ecclesiology manifest the official declarations on matters pertaining to the Church as a whole, and articles of restriction to women in particular, it is in the catalogue of letters, or other personal documents, that more individual, and thereby, probably more sincere, commentaries on faith, belief, and faithful practice, can be discovered. In order to arrive at a more authentic understanding of women’s spirituality of the Carolingian world, this paper will turn to some examples of those individual, personal commentaries that were sent to Carolingian women as patrimonial guidance: the communication between Alcuin and his female correspondents, including Charlemagne’s sister Gisla and his daughter Eulalia, a noblewoman, and certain Anglo-Saxon princesses, all of whom sought from their Christian “father” Alcuin guidance and direction in their Christian training.

The examination of Alcuin's correspondence, moreover, will be prefaced by observation of a poem from Theodulf to a Gisla (probably the same "Gisla" as one of Alcuin's correspondents), a verse that seems to have been a very private correspondence between the two, and to have been attached to a gift he was sending her, as instruction as well as encouragement for her devotional life.²

The letters and the poem would seem to be of significance to any contemporary scholarship that hopes to retrieve some authentic insight into the religious and spiritual lives of Carolingian women, for unless there is a miraculous discovery of long hidden manuscripts by the women themselves, the correspondence between Alcuin and an admiring circle of women, as well as Theodulf's poem, offer some of the only and most direct evidence of the religious lives and concerns, and the spiritual complexities, of those silent women.

There is but a single letter extant from a female correspondent of Alcuin, the redoubtable Gisla herself, which does afford the contemporary reader a small window on the spiritual lives of Carolingian religious, written by one of their own. By examining that letter, then, as well as the letters from Alcuin to the women, something approximating an authentic portrait of the spiritual lives of ninth-century Carolingian women can be gleaned, a depiction of what they were being instructed to understand about their faith, about their own spiritual authority, and how they were to envision themselves as part of the eminently Christian but deliberately patriarchal *oikumene* established and sustained by their father, brother, emperor, Charlemagne.

Contemporary scholarship has noted that a decisive shift occurred in the lives and the experiences of religious women

² All translations of Alcuin's correspondence and Theodulf's poem are by this author who accepts full responsibility for them. To the best of this author's knowledge, none of these Latin texts have been publicly translated or examined before. See below for Latin sources.

from the Merovingian to the Carolingian civilizations. In her classic study, *Women in Frankish Society*, Suzanne Wemple persuasively argued that the codification and the standardization that were among the aspects of the chosen apparatus for Charlemagne's renovation of the culture of western Europe, affected women more severely than men.³

Publicly, the Carolingian ethos appeared more restrictive because more openly suspicious of women than had been the Merovingian, and less supportive of female autonomy and independent spiritual authority. Women, notably religious, found themselves increasingly discouraged and distanced from privileges and opportunities that had once been available to them. For example, officially, Carolingian religious were denied the authority to perform clerical functions that had been allowed to their Merovingian predecessors: they could not physically bless male members of the congregations, approach altars or touch sacred vessels, or instruct male students.⁴

Carolingian religious women were more strictly cloistered than had been the Merovingian religious, fewer monastic houses for women were being founded, and what houses were functioning were more closely supervised than before by local Carolingian bishops, wary prelates ready with an expectation of feminine misconduct and female sexual transgressions.⁵ The life of piety for the Carolingian religious had been transformed into something more austere and penitential, as she was now called to a life of self-effacing humility and charity, was lawfully restricted in movement and expression, and was vigilantly sequestered away from the seductive tumble of male society and the excited tumult of secular culture.

³ Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

⁴ Wemple, 143.

⁵ Wemple, 168-171; Lisa Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400-1100*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 126-127.

Yet, despite the accuracy of such historical realities, and in spite of Wemple's assertion that "... the strict cloistering of women religious and the separation of the sexes in the monastic schools of the ninth century were not conducive to the realization of the intellectual potential of women,"⁶ Theodulf's poem and Alcuin's letters seem to demonstrate that, at least in part, there was vibrancy in the lives of Carolingian women, notably the religious. Their lives that had been circumscribed, indeed, but they were lives that were perhaps not as exclusively burdened with fear and loathing as has been generally assumed, lives that were full enough to accept the spiritual teachings and religious admonitions offered by such palatial luminaries as Alcuin of York, and the Theodulf, bishop of Orleans.⁷

While it is true that in this case, with one exception, there are no available testimonies from the women themselves, it should be possible to discern some sense of their religious understanding and spiritual expectations by the intimate manner with which the court scholars addressed them, assumed the women's comprehension of Scriptural references and teachings and responded to exegetical questions from them, and maintained the poses of Christian "daughters" and "sisters," "fathers" and "brothers."⁸

Gleaning from the writings of Alcuin and Theodulf, what conjectures they made, and what they did or did not explicitly say, a modern reader may be able to reconfigure the lives of cloistered and lay Carolingian women with details of more subtle intellectual activity, and their sensibilities with more

⁶ Wemple, 188.

⁷ An excellent article that this author had not read until nearly finished with this paper, but an article which deserves full praise for its scholarship in exploring the possibility of a more "learned" life for the Carolingian noblewoman, is Steven A. Stofferahn, "Changing Views of Carolingian Women's Literary Culture: the Evidence from Essen," *Early Medieval Europe* 8 (1999) 69-97, especially 70-71 and *passim*.

⁸ Such salutations of endearment are not common in the corpus of Carolingian documents.

nanced spiritual depth, than has been heretofore assumed. The courtly writers were, of course, the intellectual issues of their culture, and so they assented to some degree to the traditional constructs of woman, and accepted, even by implication, some notions about traditionally feminine tasks, such as their working at weaving, and familiar womanly obligations, such as tending to a household. Still, the “fatherly” works do offer more subtle and carefully discrete appreciation for the richly complex and layered lives and capacities of women.

Carmen XLIII: Ad Gislam

Theodulf of Orleans, bishop of Orleans and intimate confidant to Charlemagne, has more often than not been associated with dense documents of ecclesial import, like the *Libri Carolini*, or with stylized poetry of satiric humor, like *Carmen XXVIII*, his skillful verbal assault on, among other things, the judicial process in Charlemagne’s kingdom. However, there is available among his extant works a gentle little poem, *Carmen XLIII, Ad Gislam*.⁹ As a poem, *Ad Gislam* is rather pedestrian in structure and composition, but it is a worthy read as a departure from the volume of expository Christian poetry churning out of Charlemagne’s court. The amiable poem is addressed to a “Gisla” about whom little is known, except that she was a woman for whom Theodulf possessed such affectionate feelings as to refer to himself as her “father” and present her with a special gift. The poem begins:

Gisla, with God’s favor, accept this respectful gift,

Which Theodulf, your father, behold! gives to you.

For I have ordered that this very Psalter be written for
you,

⁹ MGH *Poetae Aevi Carolini*, 341-342.

(a Psalter) that you see gleams with silver and gold...¹⁰

The most obvious assumption is that Theodulf is referring to himself as Gisla's spiritual father, which is most likely the case; however, there has been scholarly speculation that the Gisla in question was, in fact, the natural daughter of the bishop of Orleans.¹¹ More than likely, the poem is addressed to one of two known "Gislas:" either Charlemagne's sister Gisla, the abbess of Chelles, who was admired for her devotion and erudition, and for her persistent dedication in maintaining a convent noted for its exceptional literary and manuscript production, or Gisla, the daughter of Charlemagne by his third wife Hildegard.¹²

¹⁰ Theodulf, Carmen XLIII, l. 1-4, p. 541. The Latin reads: *Gisla, favente deo venerabile suscipe donum./ Quod tibi Theudulfus dat pater ecce tuus./ Nam tibi psalterium parecepi scribier istud./ Argento atque auro quod radiare vides.* Please make note of the medieval Latin spelling and syntax throughout the poem.

¹¹ See Dummler, n. 1, p. 541. Dummler suggests that "without a doubt" (*nimirum*), Theodulf fathered the Gisla in question, prior to his installation by Charlemagne as bishop of Orleans; however, there has never been a reference to Theodulf marital status, or any of his personal relationships, except as confidant to his esteemed emperor.

¹² For Gisla, abbess or daughter, see Wemple, 182-183; for Hildegard, 78. Einhard reports that Hildegard was a noblewoman from Swabia (73), and Notker the Stammerer gossips that Hildegard was so appealing to one bishop that "he became over-excited by his close relationship with the Queen, and he became impudent as a result..." (109-110). For both Einhard and Notker, see *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, Two Lives of Charlemagne*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Penguin Books, 1969). In the body of the poem, there is a suggestion that Gisla might be quite another woman: l. 27-28 read: *Casta vige coniux longum cum coniuge casto./ Et vos effectus laetificet sobolis*, which verse translates as: "Flourish for a long time as a chaste wife with a chaste spouse./ and may the result of offspring delight you (both)." Thus, the psalter may have been intended for a Gisla as a wedding present, or as a token of paternal affection for one about to marry. None of Charlemagne's daughters were known to have married. Wemple (79) suggests that Charlemagne, for reasons both obvious and speculative, preferred his daughters to conduct their private relationships as *quasi coniugium*, or the ancient Germanic custom of *Friedelehe*, love affairs that were sanctioned by the emperor and seemd to have

Nevertheless, the actual identification of the poem's recipient matters less than the dynamics of the implied relationship, and, based upon the poetic evidence, the relationship between Bishop Theodulf and Gisla seems to have been one of paternal affection and filial familiarity. Theodulf insists that their bond is blessed: he states that God is showing His favor (*favente deo*) in Theodulf's presentation of the gift, an offering of authentic respect and tender regard (*venerabile donum*), as the nature of the gift demonstrates the intimacy of their relationship.

Theodulf announces that he presenting his Gisla with a charming psalter created expressly for her (*praecepi scribier istud*), adorned with inlays of shimmering gold and silver (*argento atque auro radiare*). It is an exquisite gesture of endearment and respect. However, the gift is more than a simple act of loving fidelity, it is also the consequence of pastoral care. The psalter was an integral part of private and communal devotional practice in the Middle Ages as "the chosen book of Christian spiritual life."¹³

The Benedictine monastic order took up the ancient tradition of meditating upon the psalter as a contemplative exercise, as monks were enjoined when still novices to study the psalter in order to gain fluency in the word of God and so become prepared for the daily round of spiritual offices.¹⁴ By the high Middle Ages, it was not uncommon for lay devotees, especially women, to engage in the daily reading of the Psalms as a preface or supplement to private prayer and even celebration of the Mass. However, Theodulf was a bishop of the late eighth/early ninth centuries, living at a time when the religious privileges and cultural freedoms of women were being severely

offered the princesses love, children, and freedom. Louis the Pious deemed his sisters' relationships scandalous and immoral, and so he exiled them from court when he ascended the throne in 814. See Wemple, 79-80.

¹³ Raby, 241.

¹⁴ On the psalter, see Riche, *Education and Culture*, 115-116; Laistner, 68-69.

diminished because of spurious presumptions conjured up by male lay and religious authorities of female incapacity, and yet he was encouraging a woman – granted, possibly a woman from the imperial family! – to accept as a token of genuine admiration an elegant psalter fashioned expertly for her, for her personal use. Theodulf continues with a gentle admonishment:

Run repeatedly through this, now by singing, now by
studying,

That from this your love of God may increase more,

If you pray faithfully, if your reading is frequent,

You yourself will speak to God, and God himself will
speak to you...¹⁵

Theodulf assures Gisla his “daughter” that with the intoning of holy song and with sincere contemplation of the sacred songs in the psalter, she will achieve not merely an intellectual appreciation for the word of God, but she will also realize that which is most vital to the sustenance of the soul, an abundance of *divinus amor* (16), both a “love of God” as well as “God’s love.” Faithful prayer and diligent study together will offer her the beneficial experience of a mutually desired dialogue with God, with Whom, the bishop insinuates, she will enjoy a relationship that is not merely familial, but covenantal. If Gisla prays faithfully and reads (*lectio*, 17) frequently, she will be in conversation with God Who will be willingly beholden to speak with her. Theodulf bides her to acknowledge that she herself possesses both the capacity and the authority to encounter God personally, and it is in fact her obligation, given those capacities, to initiate and nourish thereafter that encounter. There is no need for her to wait upon anyone, any male spiritual director.

¹⁵ Carmen XLIII, 15-18; p. 541. The Latin reads: *Hoc modo cantando, modo pertractando recurre./ Quo mage divinus hinc tibi crescat amor./ Adsidue si ores, tibi sit si lectio crebra./ Ipsa deo loqueris, et deus ipsi tibi.*

Moreover, Theodulf expects a degree of scholarship in Gisla's vocation. After his remark about the sumptuous material of the volume, he advises her that beneath the ornate cover lies even more resplendent beauty. He notes that the psalter he is giving her is an example of St. Jerome's own scholarship on editions of the psalter, blending aspects of a former one (*prior*) based on the Hebrew Bible (*Hebraeo vero*), and an "old fashioned" (*prisca*) version based on the text of the Septuagint. Of these renditions Theodulf affirms that:

... Jerome translates well the latter, corrects the former,
 Each one, believe me, gleams with extraordinary
 meanings...¹⁶

The psalter given to Gisla, then, is a result of the excellence in textual emendation to which St. Jerome had been devoted, battling an intellectual and moral war against false sources, faulty translations, and inaccurate imprints of sacred texts.¹⁷ Theodulf exults that the psalter gleams, not only from the bright rays of its earthly elements, but with the incandescent glow of divine wisdom, of inscribed layers of spiritual signification. In so describing the volume he created manifestly for her,

Theodulf clearly anticipates a certain response from Gisla, presuming an intellectual curiosity (as well as assuming a spiritual fervor) in accord with his own high regard for cerebral delights. It does not seem overly optimistic to suggest that Theodulf expected Gisla to be impressed with the composition of the psalter, with the exact nature of its artful accomplishment, and with the careful editing of its scriptural content, and he

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-8.

¹⁷ Jerome was especially honored by the Carolingians for his work on sacred texts, for he was the primary force behind editing the psalter based on strict linguistic as well as philological standards. Eventually, he created three recensions of the Psalter. See Kaczynski, "Edition, Translation, and Exegesis," in *Gentle Voices of Teachers*, 177-181.

obviously envisioned Gisla to be somewhat conversant with Jerome and his philological work. Otherwise, why mention the Church Father and his scholarship at all?

Thus, the expansive conception of her spiritual life that Theodulf invokes is one in which Gisla cherishes the scholarship of faith, as well as the faithfulness that led to such scholarship. As if to underscore the point that the ability to read and to understand Holy Writ are devotional tools for all believers and not idle activities for languid dispositions, Theodulf encourages Gisla to regard her gift as akin to a finely-wrought, precious instrument. The psalter is not only holy song, but it is in fact a sacred instrument to be played:

Hold this instrument in your heart, (hold) the melodies
in your mind,

Let your hand be full with this plectrum, with these
rattles.

Let this sweet melody revive you, beat the drums,

Let your harp resound, let the lyre make noise...¹⁸

A player, in fact, perhaps "the" Player, holds the miraculous "instrument" before Gisla and exhorts her to play: hold this instrument of the holy word in your heart and mind, nurture the precious words of God in your soul. Yet, Gisla is being asked to do more than meekly clasp a valuable instrument to her bosom. Like the musician King David, whose songs fill the holy tome that she must know and she must sing, Gisla must be busy with the reed plectrum that plucks the wondrous strings, and rattle the sistris to entice out the glorious message of her holy instrument. There can be no sweet sound unless she first plays the divine instrument that contains all sound: thus, Gisla must

¹⁸ Carmen XLIII, 11-14. The Latin reads: *Organum hoc in gremio, modulamina mente teneto./ Hoc plectro, his sistris sit tua plena manus./ Hoc te dulce melos recreet, haec tympana plecte./ Haec sonet harpa tibi, perstrepat ista lyra.*

have some skill with “playing” the instrument, that is, with understanding its components, the intent of each component, their uses, and their essential designs.

The metaphor is an obvious one, and it does seem to demonstrate the degree to which Theodulf was comfortable in his assumption that Gisla would mature in her own spirituality, in her experience of the transcendent, and that she would be able to engage herself actively on behalf of her own devotional cultivation. Theodulf suggests that Gisla and, by extension, to some degree, all faithful women, must be a participant in her own spiritual growth, which will take time and practice and rehearsal, before the “piece” of Sacred Scripture and its layers of meanings are fully realized and understood by the student. Only then can it be “played” as an exquisite composition of melodious guidance to salvation.

Theodulf’s poem to Gisla, then, offers spiritual guidance in the form of a gift that in no way intimates that her gender or her personal status prohibits her experience of religious enlightenment and spiritual growth. Regardless of her social status (assuming she is of the royal house), she was nonetheless also a woman, and yet Theodulf’s poem makes very clear that spiritual enrichment for any believer, male or female, requires patient diligence in order to appreciate fully the complexities of the profound teachings of the faith, as well as a personal commitment to study and contemplation apart from the instructive efforts of any spiritual director. Indeed, Theodulf goes so far as to intimate a subtle correlation between the divinely-inspired David of the Psalms and Gisla herself. As the psalmist David took up his harp to play the songs of faith and salvation, she is being urged to receive her “instrument” and do likewise. Her ability to learn and to understand and her capacity for spiritual evolution are assured, woman though she be: Gisla, Woman, has the potential for realizing her own conversation with God.

The Epistles of Alcuin

In comparison to Theodulf, Alcuin wrote to his female correspondents in a slightly more personal tone, in correspondence laden with protective, clearly paternal, concern. The letters to his Gisla are likely letters to the imperial princess Gisla, sister to the emperor Charlemagne and abbess of Chelles, although, again, there is little evidence to support that claim incontrovertibly.¹⁹ Some of the other letters are addressed informally, "to a sister and a daughter," or, more intimately, "to a mother on the death of her son," and therefore it is also likely that Alcuin corresponded with lay noble women as well, affording the reader a glimpse into the spiritual concerns of Carolingian women.

In select passages, the letters are quite conversational, even mundane. Alcuin feels no compunction about complaining to Gisla about his health ("I am a wreck, brought low by a winter fever," 128), about neglectful correspondents ("Why do you never write?," 139), about his fears of travel ("I do not wish to make such a journey over storm-tossed seas," 199), and he readily implores (admittedly, in a rather formulaic manner) kind prayers of intercession and blessing. There is extant one letter from Gisla *ipsa* (the abbess) in this collection of correspondence, which offers a small window onto the religious sentiment of Carolingian women. Otherwise, any discussion of the spirituality of Carolingian women must be developed from what Alcuin, like Theodulf, says (and does not say) in his letters, either in response to their solicitation, or in his attempts to offer them spiritual guidance and direction. In the interests of coherence, the letters will be approached thematically, in an effort to organize a kind of spiritual canon for Carolingian women, at least, a spiritual canon according to Alcuin of York.

¹⁹ The source for Alcuin's correspondence is *PL C* (100), *passim* 139C-511A.

The Spirituality of Carolingian Women: Modeling Martha

Perhaps what is most evident to the reader of the Alcuin letters upon an initial inspection of the letters is the gratifying lack of references to his correspondents' "frail femininity" or their baleful inheritance as "daughters of Eve," or any such familiar yet regrettable tropes about the lamentable condition of womanhood. Indeed, if there is a single, prominent voice in the letters Alcuin writes to his various female correspondents, it is a voice of discreet dignity, an attitude of sincere regard that might be perhaps unexpected from an elder statesman of an ostensibly misogynistic culture.²⁰

There is no mention made in the letters that Gisla or Rictruda or any other woman should properly seek out a male mentor or a spiritual director (excepting his own sometimes unsolicited services of course) before embarking upon their programs of spiritual discovery, or in order to sustain the vibrancy of their faith lives. Clearly, there might have been a tacit assumption that the women would quite naturally appeal to the spiritual authority of their male confessors or pedagogues; however, even in that regard, Alcuin makes no mention of such a stipulation. Like Theodulf, Alcuin seems assured that the women are inherently capable of finding within themselves the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual resources to engage in their own religious evolution. Faith, to remain vibrant, must also be experiential, and the women to whom Alcuin writes are expected to be active participants in the narrative of their own faith lives and in the maturation of their own spirituality.

It is not surprising, then, that Alcuin suggests to the women that works, the active life of faith, should hold a significant place in their spiritual lives.²¹ Alcuin complains in a

²⁰ See especially Bitel, 125-128, who records that "feminine weakness" was a particularly prevalent topic in religious writings about and to women in the early Middle Ages.

²¹ Medieval Christianity was keen on the distinctions between the two types of faith expression, the *via activa*, represented by Martha, and the *via*

letter to Gisla (possibly the abbess) that far too many “faithful” attempt to “build” their eternal homes in heaven with many words, but no deeds: “Truly work,” Alcuin urges, “during the days, the hours, the moments, so you may achieve in abundance what you dearly cherish.”²²

In another letter to her, Alcuin admonishes her to “remember to adorn the dignity of her person with honest works of mercy, the holiness of life,” alluding to the fact that cloistered or merely sequestered, the women must extend their faith beyond the confines and comforts of personal piety, and express such faith richly in the dignified acts of compassion and benevolence: “let the probity of your monastic witness garner more praise than the appearance of shining gold...”²³

In a letter to his “spiritual daughter” Eugenia, Alcuin compares “works of mercy” to the living branches of a growing tree, and describes those branches as the natural outgrowth of a healthy and well-nourished base (its roots, or, individual belief), as well as the visible evidence of the invisible force that, although unseen, remains eternally vibrant in its animating influence. The spiritual dimension to “works” is well understood, Alcuin explains to Eugenia, for they exist as countervailing forces to avarice and sloth, the prevalent vices of the age. Alcuin counsels her that if she continuously exercises herself – that is, if she exerts her own righteous character in her daily activities – on behalf of the spiritual health of others, her spiritual vigor will be

contemplativa, typified by Mary, especially with reference to the Lucan account of the sisters and the response of the Christ to their ministrations. For an excellent introduction to this Christian motif in ancient and early medieval Christianity, see Giles Constable, “The Interpretation of Mary and Martha,” ch. 1 in *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 1-31.

²² The Latin reads: *Tu verolabora diebus, horis ac momentis, ut abundanter habeas quod feliciter diligas.* PL C, 363B.

²³ Letter 128 reads: *Tu vero, filia charissima, honestis misericordiae operibus, vitae sanctitate ornare memento dignitatem tuam, ut magis probitas laudet conversionis quam species auri fulgentis (364A).*

strengthened enough that she will be able to direct her path "into the citadel of the heavenly Jerusalem."²⁴

This predilection for asserting a dynamic dimension to spiritual life, thus combining the active with the contemplative paths of piety, while prevalent in the teachings of spiritual direction throughout the Middle Ages, was of particular significance to the Carolingian culture, the archetype of the "mixed" life, an ideal for both religious and lay believers.²⁵ The "active" life of service was considered a necessary aspect of earthly existence for the faithful because it was believed to nurture in the individual a love of neighbor through interaction and incorporation. Such nurturing prepared the individual soul for the contemplative life, the life centered upon and directed only towards love of God, a life that may be experienced in the domain of temporal existence but will truly be fulfilled only in the life to come.

To validate the idea that the active life is most suited to this realm, preparing the soul for the intensity of the contemplative life, Alcuin assures his "*sororem charissimam*" correspondent that "... now is the time of working, (and) truly the time of reward will come..."²⁶ Salvation will not be realized exclusive of the active life, for a life of complete contemplation and removal from the daily affairs of humanity is not, in effect, an entire and integrated Christian life. In a letter to Gisla and Richturda, "sister and daughter from your humble brother and father," Alcuin identifies to them the necessary value of the integrated life, one that combines the working goodness of the active life with the devotional maturation of the contemplative life. He instructs them that:

²⁴ The passage from letter 197 reads: ... *cupiditati non succumbat, sed sibi misericordiae operibus, quasi ramis virentibus, in arcem coelestis Hierusalem viam sternat* (470A).

²⁵ Constable, 24-31.

²⁶ From Letter 126: *Nunc tempus est operandi: veniet vero tempus remunerandi* (362C).

... two virtues of the human soul have been proposed, the one active, the other contemplative; the former [way] the means by which we proceed, the latter [way] the means by which we arrive; the former [way] which labors so that the heart may be cleansed to see God, the latter [way] by which God is called and seen. The former [way] must be exercised in the instructions of this temporal life, the latter in the teaching of eternal life.²⁷

Those “virtues” or strengths of the human soul synthesize together, coupling this life with the life to come by revealing paths of spiritual purgation and soul awakening that lead along the mystical journey to the vision of God.

Alcuin offers more specific guidance in his letter to Aedilthyda, possibly the daughter of King Offa of Mercia, and former wife of Ethelwald, king of Northumbria.²⁸ In his missive to her, Alcuin accentuates the fraternal admonition that every Christian must acknowledge and accept stewardship of every other Christian, of every neighbor. Every person possesses a grace-given capacity to enrich morally, spiritually, intellectually, and, yes, materially, the lives of others, and thus every person, including Aedilthyda, is obligated to act on that capacity, for “through charity to (love of) neighbor, the love of God is discovered.”²⁹ The love of God, love properly understood, has

²⁷ The Latin reads: ... *duae virtutes porpositae sint animae humanae, una activa, altera contemplativa: illa qua itur, ista qua pervenitur; illa qua laboratur ut cor mundetur as videndum Deum, ista qua vocatur et videtur Deus; illa est in praeceptis exercendae vitae huius temporalis, ista in doctrina vitae illius sempiternae* (742C).

²⁸ Epistle 199, *PL C*, 471B-473C. See n. d, 471-472D in *PL C* for a brief review of the historical possibilities of identifying this Aedilthyda. The fact that in the salutation of the letter, Alcuin greets Aedilthyda as (*d*)*ilectissimae in Christo sorori Aedilthydae matri* (471B: emphasis mine) suggests that as “Mother” Aedilthyda, it is unlikely the correspondence is to a young woman.

²⁹ The Latin reads: *Per charitatem proximi ad Dei dilectionem pervenitur* (471C).

been given freely to every human being at creation, and willful neglect of that love, of that capacity to transcend the self and to affirm the dignity of another, is not just negligent, it is perilous to the soul.

Alcuin uses the analogy of someone receiving, for example, a sum of money, but remaining indifferent to the sum, or misusing the money. In such a circumstance, Alcuin muses, the recipient of the gift of money deserves to “suffer punishment equal to its negligence” or misuse, for such a splendid gift has gone to waste, is useless in its abandonment.³⁰ Money unused is a futile commodity, meaningless without application. So also love, Alcuin suggests, for the person who has received such a sum of money, and not only increases the sum, but does so in service to others, will justly reap “a great reward,” spiritually, from the Lord God. “Sanctity consists in the works of justice, and justice truly is fulfilled in two ways: whatever is prohibited by God, let us not do, and what is commanded by Him, let us do,” Alcuin reminds Gisla, stipulating that a life of holiness is a life not devoid of but committed to choices of action.³¹

Aedilthyda, then, must work in service to, and out of a love of, others: Alcuin admonishes her that she must “... not be silent out of fear of man, but speak because of love of God ... honor old women and men as mothers and father; cherish those younger like brothers and sisters; mentor children like sons and daughters...”³² The worthiness of her person is demonstrated by

³⁰ The Latin reads: ... *Qui negligenter talentum servat acceptum, poenam patietur suae negligentiae condignam; qui vero multiplicat diligenter pecuniam Dominicam, magnam accepturus erit mercedem a Domino Deo suo* (471D).

³¹ Letter 232. The Latin reads: ... *sanctitas vero in iustitiae operibus constat, iustitia vero duobus modis impletur, hoc est, ut quae prohibita sunt a Deo, non faciamus, et quae iussa sunt ab eo, faciamus* (510B).

³² The Latin reads: ... *(n)oli propter hominis terrorem tacere, sed propter Dei amorem loquere ... anus et senes quasi matres et patres honora; juvenes quasi fratres et sorores dilige; minores aetate quasi filios filiasque erudi* (472A-B).

the righteousness of her actions, not merely her suitable words, for by her actions she will become an exemplar for others, and by her actions, God will be praised with the knowing of His grace.

This encouragement to a demonstrative spirituality, however, was not merely a compulsion to practice as a manifest confirmation of traditional faithfulness, for Alcuin has urged the queen to think upon the active life as *imitatio Christi*: "... how noble in custom, how modest in speech, how chaste in heart, how merciful to all must be the son of God ... let us imitate to the degree we are able His goodness..."³³ Alcuin espouses the humanity of Jesus as a moral paradigm for the earthly demeanor of every Christian. The active life is expected of the faithful both because it is preparation for salvation, and, as Alcuin advises Aedilthyda, simply because "... he (Christ) spoke not only to the apostles, but also to us..."³⁴ The apostolate is continuous, an unbroken skein of Christian devotion from the time of the first disciples to the present day, and gender, at least for Alcuin, has no consequence.³⁵

He urges Aedilthyda to recognize that both Christian men and Christian women are competent, and so are expected to fashion their lives according to the contours of the human behaviors, the moral choices, of Jesus. Her life should be an imitation of Christ in his humanity, a model of human activity that articulates the parameters of ethical conduct and the responsibilities of human interaction as the Christian proceeds on her earthly passage to God.

³³ The Latin reads: ... *Quam nobilis in moribus, quam modestus in verbis, quam castus in corde, quam misericors omnibus debet esse filius Dei... imitemur quantum poterimus illius bonitatem* (475A).

³⁴ The Latin: ... *ait enim non solum apostolis sed etiam et nobis ...* (ibid.).

³⁵ Alcuin's "gender-blind" invitation to *imitatio Christi*, while not unique in the Carolingian era, was certainly exceptional: see Constable, 177-178.

*The Spirituality of Carolingian Women:
Modeling Mary in Love and Contemplation*

Perhaps no other dynamic so epitomizes a spiritual life lived in adherence to *imitatio Christi* than a spiritual life defined by clement beneficence to others (and to the Other) and one grounded in *caritas*, Christian love. It should come as no surprise that Alcuin argues that the deeds of active devotion of a Carolingian woman are spiritually justified only if they have been done in love (*caritas*), the essence of the spiritual dimension of the life of faith. All action, whether service to others, or private devotion such as offering prayers, joining in the chants of the hours, engaging in *lectio divina*, must have as intention and purpose, and must be animated by the spiritual gift of *caritas*; otherwise, the work will have no merit for salvation.

In the aforementioned letter to Aedilthyda, Alcuin explains that "... nothing makes men so close to God as love" and that such love that draws humanity closer to the Divine can indeed be realized on earth.³⁶ While that is a fairly familiar teaching of Christian spirituality, some scholarship has posited that the monastic scribes and ecclesial leaders of the Carolingian era extolled humility, not necessarily love, as the most vital modality for a Christian.³⁷

Alcuin indeed alludes in his letters to humility, which is understood to be a characteristic foundation of Christian devotion, but insists as well that the dynamic of love (*caritas*) be for his correspondents (both male and female) a constant in their faithfulness. To an unnamed "sister and daughter," Alcuin offers counsel that their lives should be suffused with "the sweetness of love" which:

³⁶ Letter 199. The Latin reads: ... *Nil homines ita Deo appropinquare facit, sicut charitas* (471B).

³⁷ Wemple, "Female Spirituality and Mysticism in Frankish Monasteries," in *Peace Weavers: Medieval Religious Women*, volume II, ed. Jon A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987) 48.

... shines above good and evil, in which mortal man can be perfected ... the Son of Love is therefore the Son of God ... whose light completely irradiates your hearts, whose sweetness will abundantly refresh your souls. This (Love) is the highest good of all, the best part, that may never be removed, but will burn more and more in the heart of one loving.³⁸

Love, then, is the exemplary form Christ assumes in the realm of temporal existence, the interior illumination that nourishes each individual soul. It is in the loving soul that the Christ reveals himself as the vital and the irreducible essence of being, for the one who loves is simply responding to the natural inclination to love that abides within every human being as the divine Presence, as the unalterable locus of communion with God. The inclination, and the ability, to love, and so to recognize that divine Presence, are capacities that constitute the extraordinary potential of humanity. The difficulty, as Alcuin worries, is that not every human strives to realize that potential.

Alcuin suggests why that might be so in another letter to another (or perhaps the same?) "sister and daughter" in which he also offers a more reflective meditation on the robust spirituality that is the "way" of love. He admits to the women that he is proffering "paternal advice" out of fatherly love and fraternal concern for his scribal confidants, for he clearly wishes them to understand the spiritual efficacy of *caritas*.³⁹ Love is understood to be the instrument as well as the disposition of the contemplative way. The adversities of life, the cruel treacheries of the temporal world, the occasions of grief brought on by daily

³⁸ Letter 139. The Latin reads: ... *charitatis dulcedinem ... quae super bonos et malos splendescere debet, ut sit homo terrenus in ea perfectus ... ergo Filius charitatis, filius est Dei ... cuius lux corda vestra sufficienter irradiet; cuius dulcedo pectora vestra abundanter reficiat. Haec est summa omnium bonorum; haec est optima pars, quae nunquam auferetur, sed magis atque magis in pectore habentis ardescit* (379 A).

³⁹ Letter 140, 379D-381B.

living, all such circumstances could lead, and have led, a frail or doubting mind away from God. It is, Alcuin insists, the clear mind and the pious soul, guided by love in its movement to God, that will withstand, even defy, the troubling circumstances of life by understanding them as the natural occurrences of a transitory and impermanent world: day turns to night; the delicacy of youth fades away into the encroachments of old age, and the tranquility of summer yields to the storms of winter.⁴⁰

With such awareness, the loving soul in patience will continue to focus upon God along the path to salvation. The contemplative way invigorates spiritual fortitude with that loving awareness, the vitality of *caritas*, such that the soul buffeted by external distress will not be deterred from its journey to God: "... nothing of these (adversities) ought to fatigue the devout soul, but always (it ought) to remain unmoved, its solidity made firm, as hope has been aroused in a fixed movement toward God."⁴¹

Such spiritual direction may perhaps seem somewhat facile, since the women seem to be instructed simply to direct their compassionate gazes of love toward God in the midst of the brutalities of life and somehow persevere. Yet Alcuin reveals to his correspondents a more tenacious and more potent dimension to their contemplative spirituality: he encourages them to realize that God is, in fact, a constant presence with humanity, that no one who recognizes the loving God will endure alone the complications of daily life. The women, Alcuin admonishes, should reflect on Jesus' assurance to his disciples that whenever two or more are gathered in his name's sake, he himself is present, not in a corporeal sense, but rather as Holy Charity,

⁴⁰ Letter 140, 380A. The Latin reads: ... *dies nocte mutatur ... flos iuventutis senectute superveniente marescit ... aetatis tranquillitas hibernalibus atteritur tempestatibus.*

⁴¹ Letter 140. The Latin reads: ... *nihil horum religiosam mentem fatigare debet, sed semper stabili tenore erecta spe ad Deum firma soliditate immobilis permanere* (380A).

Holy Love.⁴² It is with the spiritual clear-sightedness gained in contemplation that each woman will be able to discern the fluent presence of the Christ within the temporal realm as (L)love, love that is ever-present amid the bonds of the community of the faithful (Charlemagne's *oikumene*), during the performance and completion of compassionate works and prayerful worship, and in the illuminated awareness of the individual soul in reflection upon the grace of God. Alcuin continues in the letter to explain that:

... having the treasury of true Love in our hearts, thereupon each one may help another according to the measure of the gift of Christ, (help) either in consolation of secular want, or in the communion of spiritual doctrine. When these things are done, it is most certain that Christ is in their midst, Christ who diffuses the sweetness of love from one pious heart into another, so that there may be one agreement of all worshipping God, and a single piety of those helping themselves mutually.⁴³

Alcuin thus testifies to the real presence of Love (*caritas*) within each person through the authority of divine grace. The in-dwelling of such Love, the "gift of Christ," at the core of every devout soul is demonstrable by the salutary ministration in all matters, from daily needs to religious enlightenment, that the women, that all truly faithful, are able to render to each other instinctively, selflessly. It is, moreover, such selfless mercy that links the individual members of the

⁴² Letter 140, 381D- 381A.

⁴³ The Latin reads: ... *Habentes thesaurum verae dilectionis in pectoribus nostris, inde unusquisque alium adjuvet secundum mensuran donationis Christi, sive in solatio secularis necessitatis, sive in communiione spiritualis doctrinae: Et ubi haec fiant, ibi certissimum est Christum esse in medio, qui de corde religioso in cor alterius charitatis suavitatem diffundit, ut sit una concordia omnium Deum diligentium, et una pietas invicem se adjuvantium* (381A).

community, of the greater *oikumene*, together. Alcuin's intention, it seems, is to guide his correspondents toward a more authentic spirituality, in their perception of their works, and of their quotidian existence generally, so that they may come to recognize that good works and daily service are not merely exemplars of static beneficence, significant unto themselves, but are at best visible signs of a suffusion in their souls of invisible grace.

*The Spirituality of Carolingian Women:
Conversing with God in the Text*

Within his correspondence to all orders of women, Alcuin frequently invites them to realize that, while the works of daily compassion and contemplation are worthy manifestations of God's loving grace, a grace that is inherently the ground of all human existence, they must also take heed of the essential role of learning in the life of faith, and thereupon act to enrich their spiritual lives with religious scholarship. Like Theodulf, Alcuin appears to perceive no inherent obstacle that would prevent women, qua women, from embarking on a measure of intellectual exploration in service to faith by reading, meditating on, and reciting the Sacred Scriptures, and by studying and deliberating the writings of the Church Fathers.

Such activities are instruments, mechanisms of their journey to a more authentic, more robust encounter with God and to a more informed understanding of the incarnational nature of human existence. Not to do so, or to be denied the opportunity, Alcuin suggests, would diminish the spiritual life of the Carolingian woman by resigning her faith life to exist as either a vacuous experience of subjective impressions or a vain display of vacant piety. Thus, Alcuin impresses on his correspondents the necessity of the frequent and prudent examination of sacred texts in an effort to broaden and deepen their religious fervor: "Seek (love) in Holy Scripture, closely

examine it, that you may know God speaks to you in Scriptures," Alcuin instructs his Christian daughters.⁴⁴

Women are invited to the sacred conversation with God: the holy W(w)ord of the Bible will animate the love that resides within every soul, if the Scriptures are read properly to reveal the holiest L(l)ove that illuminates the very fabric of the cherished text. It is significant that Alcuin presents Scripture not as a proscribed (to women) corpus of static teachings, or a cryptic book of coded doctrine, but as a relevant, dynamic locus of communion between the reader and God, her personal interlocutor. Each woman, then, has the capacity to encounter the Divine in a immediate exchange with God, and in that encounter, each women will come to appreciate that such communion must be based not only on merciful works and contemplative devotion, but also on a consistently engaged examination of His most holy teaching. Alcuin extols his correspondents:

... What is sweeter than to enjoy the conversation of the omnipotent God? Anyone who reads the most sacred words of the Lord, handed down to us through his holy disciples, will hear God speaking; and whosoever prays, speaks to God... indeed, most esteemed and cherished maidens, exercise your souls in all holiness and devotion and in the zeal of reading, so that the Holy Spirit, which is known to inhabit hearts full of love, ... may more often deem worthy to visit your devoted hearts from heaven...⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Letter 139, again addressed to the anonymous "sister and daughter." The Latin reads: ... *Vos eam in Scripturis quaerite sanctis, intentissime scrutantes eas, ut cognoscatis Dominum vobis loquentem in eis* (379A).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* The Latin reads: ... *Quid dulcius est quam Dei omnipotentis frui confabulatione? Quai qui legit sacratissimos sermones Domini, per sanctos suos nobis traditos, Deum loquentem audiet; et qui orat, Deo loquitur ... ideo, dilectissimae et nobilissimae virgines, animas vestras in omni sanctitate et religione lectionisque studio exercete, ut Spiritus sanctus de coelo vestrae*

In this eager passage, Alcuin expresses a somewhat familiar hermeneutic of sacred Scripture as the quintessence of divine locution, and thus the central focus of pious contemplation; yet he seems to express something more. It is his contention that the revelatory encounter in the reading and in the examination of the most holy text, and the "sweetness" of such an exchange, are dimensions of a spiritual dialogue available to "anyone" as long as the text is approached with the fullness of piety and sincerity of faith and love. Alcuin then offers the rare perspective on women's spirituality, which he validates by asserting that through the careful study of the sacred texts, notably Scripture, long assumed to be an exclusively male prerogative, women may also experience the presence of the Holy Spirit as Wisdom, the ineffable illumining of the human soul.

Alcuin, however, probably had little reason to worry about the effectiveness of such counsel, for, judging by how easily he makes frequent references to religious texts and selections from Scripture in his letters, it is likely that his correspondents already enjoyed a comfortable familiarity with such texts. For example, in a letter to "a sister and a daughter," Alcuin worries that they will retain for too long the reading materials he sent them for study, especially his beloved Master Bede. However, he concedes that he sent them the texts in the first place because they so greatly (*maxime*) desired the works of the English scholar.⁴⁶

Many of his letters to both male and female correspondents, moreover, are laced with Scriptural allusions, including references to selections from Corinthians, Job, the Gospels, Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, and 1 Timothy, and he reminds

devotionis corda saepius vistare dignetur, qui pectora inhabitare dignoscitur charitate plena (379B).

⁴⁶ Letter 138: 378A. For further discussion on Bede and Carolingian culture, see M.L. W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe AD 500 to 900* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976) 255- 267, *passim*.

Aedilthyda, "servant of God" and former queen, to continue to nourish her soul "with holy doctrine," so that, when teaching, her words of guidance, having been grounded in thoughtful attention to sacred Scripture, will aid in the salvation of others.⁴⁷

The *sine qua non* of their spiritual lives, Alcuin advised strongly and surely presupposed, was a more than cursory recognition of Holy Scripture. Still, he writes to another spiritual "sister and daughter" to:

... strengthen yourselves with the lives of the holy ones, reading by turns the cherished examples of their lives, and the necessary encouragement of their holy words: may their lives may be a mirror for you ... hold now in your hands the Lives of the Fathers, or the miracles of the saints, whose many writings of quite brilliant eloquence are found in the Dialogues of the blessed Gregory, our teacher, and always affirmed by the meanings of Holy Scripture. You will begin to discuss these among yourselves, and so directly to have the habit of eating at other banquets, ... just as a fastidiousness in eating is removed with a diversity of foods, so with a variety of reading, the mind of the reader is revived.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Letter 199. The Latin in part reads: ... *anima sacris doctrinis alitur ...* (471C) and ... *tibi subjectos instrue, verbis admone, exemplis erudi: quia illorum salus tua est remuneratio* (472A).

⁴⁸ Letter 140. The Latin reads: *Roborate vosmetipsas exemplis sanctorum, legentes per vices illorum vitae dulcissima exempla, et sanctorum verborum hortamenta necessaria: sit illorum vitae vobis in speculum ... tenete nunc in manus vel Vitas Patrum, vel miracula sanctorum, quorum in dialogis beati Gregorii, doctoris nostri, multa inveniuntur lucidissima exarata eloquentia, et sententiis sanctae Scripturae semper confirmata. Haec et inter vos conferre, et in conviviis aliis edere iam sic consuetudinem incipietis habere ... sicut diversitate ciborum fastidium manducanti tollitur, ita varietate lectionis mens reficitur legentis* (380 C-D).

Alcuin proposes to his female correspondents a deliberate approach to their spiritual cultivation, a proposal that encourages not only depth but also breadth in devotional reading and study. The women already realized their responsibility to read Scripture as a primary locus of discourse with God, and as a means of grounding the Holy Spirit in their daily existence. Yet, in a telling gender-blind comment, Alcuin urges them to make use as well of the life narratives of “holy ones” (who must have been predominantly if not exclusively male) as prototypes for their own spiritual lives, as sainted standards against which they can assess their own spiritual growth. He assures the women that the lives of holy men can function for women as well as for men like mirrors into which they may gaze and discern the ideal reflections of their spiritual selves.

That Alcuin suggests to the women that they may illustrate the exemplary images of holy men, and so themselves participate in validated holiness, might strike a modern reader as problematic, perhaps even disingenuous, as an implication of feminine spirituality, since, while there seems a deletion of gender specificity in Alcuin’s presentation of prescribed piety, the male “image” is still retained as the archetype. To some degree, indeed, that is problematic.

However, it should be noted that Alcuin depicts an opportunity for sanctity that intimates to be as available to women as to men, an opportunity to study and so to emulate ideals of Christian saintliness. It is an opportunity which Alcuin offers and from which women are not to be barred because of their gender, which was all too often a rationale for excluding women from certain possibilities of spirituality, or for precluding their participation in certain devotional activities or events.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ The Christian corpus of faulting woman as inherently incapable of spiritual endeavor or devotional fortitude is extensive: critical resources for the traditional attitude include Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum* (I&II, passim); Jerome, *Ad Eustochium* (passim, notably VII, XII-XXI), and John Chrysostom, *Homily IX on Paul’s Epistle to Timothy*.

Alcuin, at least in this instance, seems to posit readily that spiritual lives, lives of devotion, exemplified indeed by holy men, in effect transcend the specifics of earthly existence, and so present to all believers exemplars of religious piety and of “faith-filled” insight that defy ordinary categories of gender. The living circumstances of the “holy ones” affirm and confirm the fundamental teachings of Scripture, and so are able to transpose the reader out of the condition of simple existence within the temporal realm of creation and into the abiding mystery of the presence of God.

Alcuin also emphasizes the advantageous depth within the breadth of the reading of texts. Heartfelt, he celebrates bounty in the context of spiritual study by earnestly extolling the value of diversity in contemplative texts and discourse, of lavish plenty in the supply of spiritual nourishment, all of which in order to enliven a nascent or stale spirituality. He advises his “sisters and daughters” to dine at many “banquets” of devotional dishes and spiritual sweets. Otherwise, he cautions, a lethargic fastidiousness, a staleness caused by the rote consumption of the spiritual food, will enervate the soul, dull the mind, and wither the energy of the spirit.

The women are urged not to read simply for the purposes of ritualized recitation of the divine words of Holy Writ, or of the saintly lives. They are in fact encouraged to engage in a kind of sumptuous *lectio divina*, the close examination of and subsequent deliberation about the exemplary narratives from Scripture, and from the compositions of the learned Holy Fathers. Thus, in another letter to “Gisla,” Alcuin urges his “daughter” to:

... (r)eflect and consider with what sort of respect we must appraise that mission. What if from the king a mission and letter come to you, do you not promptly, with other responsibilities placed aside, and with complete devotion, receive and soon read his letters, and do you not try to fulfill (his demands)? Behold, from

heaven the king of kings ... through the prophets, apostles, and teachers, deemed worthy to direct his own letters to you, o maiden, not in order to demand any requirement of service for himself, but to make known what he knew to be necessary for your salvation and glory. May a close reading of these texts restore you, because in those God is known, in those the glory of eternal life is announced, and in those what we ought to believe, what to hope for, what to love, and what to avoid, is revealed.⁵⁰

Gisla and other women are encouraged to nurture a sincere spirituality in their lives with a steady infusion of pious instruction, and with attentive contemplation of the worthiest of texts. Yet, in their study, the women are also urged not just to recognize dogmatic injunctions or doctrinal admonitions, but to realize as well an authentic spiritual fulfillment of their lives, by attending closely to the deeper signification of the texts and by living out those holy writings, going forth in love, in hope, and in trust, and being gracious in the presence of God.

Alcuin is not merely offering beneficial advice or prudent direction to the women. Rather, he reminds them that God himself sent to them the sacred texts, and that their responsibility before all other responsibilities is to heed the divine implorations within those teachings. God, Alcuin avers, has spoken to the women directly ("he deemed it worthy to send

⁵⁰ Letter 232. The Latin reads: ... *Recognosce et cogita quali honore nobis illius legatio sit aestimanda; quid si a rege legatio et indiculus ad te veniet, nunquid non mox aliis curis postpositis prompta et cum omni devotione eius litteras accipis et legis, et implere satages? Ecce de coelo rex regum ... per prophetas, apostolos, doctores, tibi, o virgo, dignatus est dirigere litteras suas, non ut aliquod servitium sibi necessarium demandasset, quae as salutem et gloriam tibi necessaria sciebat esse, innotuisset. Harum te litterarum sedula reficiat lectio, quia in illis agnoscitur Deus, in illis vitae aeternae gloriis adnuntiatur, in illis quid credere, quid sperare, quid amare, vel quid fugere debeamus, ostenditur* (510 C-D).

his own letters to you”), not to command servile obedience, but to offer them, in compassion and love, guidance along the welcoming path that leads to salvation.

Therein, in fact, lies the necessary factor that qualifies the pietistic dimension of their lives. The women must nourish their spirituality in deliberation and in full good will, not under the stress of compulsion. They must regard afresh their relationship with God, that it not be consigned to the discipline of fear and humiliation, but rather to the certitude of joy and respect. Each woman must manifest her own spirituality by entering into a deeply loving accord with God, as personal understanding (effected by the reflective reading of sacred texts, especially Holy Scripture) and individual will (shaped by contemplation of the reading of the sacred texts) are reconciled to and made harmonious with His Will. Alcuin commends Gisla and her sisters to foster spiritual lives that adjust a traditional perspective. He advocates a life of devotion that faithfully embraces the ever-living God, that freely receives (because it freely perceives) the eternal will of God, and that confidently accepts the divine promise of redemption.

There is one final suggestion about the spirituality of Carolingian women that is offered for personal consideration. It is understood that the women addressed in either the poem or in the letters were, by any measure, most likely aristocrats, whether secular or religious, and thus perhaps one might argue that the “paternal” advice herein examined would not be relevant to the greater, wider, less advantaged community of women. That is possibly a valid argument, and yet Lisa Bitel has made the insightful point that “... to segregate the elite women who practiced religion as professionals from the rest of women, and to imply that professionals felt or thought religion differently

from other women, is ... mere scholarly device. It is a post-Enlightenment anachronism."⁵¹

There is no reason, Dr. Bitel implies, to assume that a few noble abbesses or ever fewer royal princesses alone were concerned about and therefore schooled in the delicacies of Scriptural study and moral theology. How can it be proven that the many abbesses themselves did not instruct their communities in reading and writing, regardless of what the male authorities demanded, and regardless of what extant documents might or might not reveal, especially since the religious had no reason to expose themselves to censure by admitting such activities?⁵²

Whether or not the abbesses and devoted nobles passed on knowledge, or created private cultures in which women were engaged in their own devotional study and reflection, as well as in evident deeds of charity, it is quite apparent that for Alcuin, as for Theodulf, both among the most trusted by and therefore vital to Charlemagne of his imperial circle of confidants and counselors, the concept of a female spirituality that included loving works and prayerful contemplation, but also passionate study and reflection of sacred texts, did not seem such extraordinary tutelage after all.

⁵¹ Bitel, 94.

⁵² Stofferahm of course addresses this very issue. See above n. 7.