
Consecrations

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.¹

The consecratory festival was a major celebratory occasion. Festivals for the inauguration of a newly built or newly renovated church brought together various members of society to a context in which scripted performances took place to honor patrons both celestial and earthly and to unveil the beauty of the new "house."² Founders and visitors, young and old, men and women, individuals from every social role and demographic attended consecratory festivals.³ It was customary for a bishop to invite fellow bishops to the consecration of his church,⁴ to the point that the occasion of a church's dedication could double as the occasion of a synodal gathering.⁵ For the consecration of the great church of a major city, it was necessary for the emperor not only to be invited but for him to grant his consent to the celebration of the festival as well.⁶ In addition to the presence of ecclesiastical and civil authorities at a consecratory festival, artisans, merchants, as well as local and trans-local visitors would attend.

These attendees participated in various modes—for example, as the audience of performers or the customers of merchants. Homilists, poets, and orators would perform publicly on the newly consecrated grounds. Merchants would sell their wares in tents located in the vicinity of the church.⁷ Evidence for consecratory festivals is limited to the perspective of the orators. There are no extant accounts composed by members of the audience. It is surely the case that material culture of the merchants' wares survives, but locating material culture at a specific festival of inauguration is impossible. However, such evidence does exist for anniversary celebrations of consecratory festivals, especially the anniversary for the consecration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.⁸

In the fourth and fifth centuries, festivities for the consecration of a church involved processions of dignitaries carrying donations into the church, the celebration of the eucharist, and oral performances of various types (homilies,

orations, and hymns). Evidence from the writings of Ephrem the Syrian and John II of Jerusalem suggests that in Syria the altar was anointed with oil as early as the second half of the fourth century.⁹ Sometimes the dedication would include the deposition of relics and therefore also a relic *adventus* ceremony (a formal welcome of the relic to its new abode).¹⁰ It is clear that late antiquity was a formative period for the composition, redaction, and transmission of rites of consecration. There are witnesses to the fifth-century lectionary readings assigned for the consecration of a church or altar in Jerusalem and in the East Syrian liturgical tradition.¹¹ However, prayer texts and rubrics for such rituals are transmitted in various liturgical traditions only from the eighth century onward. Those liturgical traditions are (listed here in alphabetical order) Armenian, Byzantine, Egyptian, Roman, East Syrian, West Syrian, among others.¹²

Performances offered praises and thanksgiving in celebration of the new church. The founding bishop's performances included his ritual consecration of the church, his delivery of a homily in praise of God and the saintly patrons of the church, and his hosting of the festival as its primary organizer (*ὁ ἔφορος*).¹³ Orators, in turn, would present encomia to the hosts (the founding bishop and any prominent civic cofounders), which could include descriptions of the church itself and comparisons of the festival to classical ones. Orators' praise of founders offered thanksgiving for the founder's beneficence and hailed founders as exemplars of contemporary virtue for posterity to emulate.¹⁴

In this chapter, I will show that such performances point to the sanctified space of the church building for two, interrelated reasons: (1) to present what I call a circle of sanctity (among God, patron saints, and founders both ecclesiastical and civic); and (2) to invite participants into this circle of sanctity. Most importantly, performers emphasize the insignificance of the highly ornate church by comparison with the temple that is the human soul. It is the human soul, they insist, that ought to be even more resplendent than the church building. The church building is not an end in itself. All the intense labor and pious supplication that brought the major project to completion merely resulted in a blueprint—a blueprint for what the soul should look like.

This devaluation of *res sacrae* furnished a key element in the conceptual framework of the ritual economy. Writers such as Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom, and the anonymous hagiographers who composed stories about Rabbula of Edessa and Caesarius of Arles argued that the human soul was of so much more value than *res sacrae* that even the holiest of church property could and should be used to save human souls. In other words, for these writers the church was a place protecting human souls above all else. The church's status as a protected thing could and should not prevent it from protecting human souls. In the ritual economy, churches were only protected because they were protecting, not the other way around.

REGIFTING

Though the word “exchange” is often taken to connote reciprocity, the type of exchange for which Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom, and the anonymous hagiographers (who composed stories about Rabbula of Edessa and Caesarius of Arles) advocated is not reciprocal. Reciprocity implies exchange between two agents, while three agents are always involved in ritual exchanges.

I use the term “regifting” to capture what the writers convey,¹⁵ even though the languages of Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Syriac do not have such a word.¹⁶ I argue (1) that there was a social taboo against regifting in late antiquity, yet (2) such writers advocated for the practice of regifting. In fact, the only method of exchange with celestial beings was that of regifting. One gives to God and the members of God’s celestial court by receiving God’s gifts and regifting them to others.¹⁷

Theoretically speaking, why not extend Kopytoff’s terminology of “singularization” and “commoditization” and refer to the “regifting of *res sacrae*” as the “recommoditization of singularized things”? The difference between “regifting” and “recommoditization” is that the latter implies a former state of singularity whereas the former does not. “Recommoditization” assumes that the consecration of ecclesial property singularizes it and, therefore, prioritizes the legal concept of *res sacrae*. In this chapter, I take the ritual discourse on its own terms. Since the ritual discourse does not singularize ecclesial property, it is more appropriate to speak of regifting than of recommoditization.¹⁸

My theoretical construct of “regifting” depends on what Lewis Hyde calls “circular giving.” Hyde distinguishes between “reciprocal giving” and “circular giving.” While the former denotes only two agents involved in the exchange, the latter requires a minimum of three. Hyde explains the purport of “circle” with the following words, “when the gift moves in a circle no one ever receives it from the same person he gives it to.”¹⁹ Though there are many advantages to using Hyde’s “circular giving” in lieu of “regifting,” I have chosen to adopt the latter for two reasons. The primary reason is that “regifting” highlights the key difference between the legal and ritual imaginations on *res sacrae*. The secondary reason is that I use the phrase “circle of sanctity” in a technical way. Though “circular giving” would resonate well with such a phrase, the similarity may also lead to undue confusion.

The Kula exchange between the Trobriand Islands in the Pacific is the most well-known and well-studied example of circular giving.²⁰ Bronislaw Malinowski recounted his observations of this practice in an article published in 1920 and in a book that followed it in 1922.²¹ Since then, anthropologists and sociologists have returned again and again to the topic.²² Items for exchange among the Kula consist of shells of various degrees of value, made into and worn as armshells or necklaces. Kula “players” exchange these shells for a higher political status. Players often have to travel long distances and from island to island in order to engage in the exchange. Annette Weiner describes the path as follows: “Each player has a

few partners situated geographically to the right and a few others to the left, giving each person access to necklaces coming in a clockwise direction and armshells coming from a counterclockwise direction.”²³ As the shells circulate among high-ranking individuals, they increase in value. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to supply a nuanced description of the Kula in all its complexity. I offer this example of circular giving by way of analogy. As I will show, what some writers advocated in terms of gift exchange is akin to the kind of circular giving anthropologists have observed in the western Pacific.

The ritual economy differs in significant ways from what Daniel Caner, following Vincent Déroche, calls the “the miraculous economy.”²⁴ Caner argues that late antique hagiographies show the development of a Christian idea of the pure, disinterested gift otherwise not observable in wider Greco-Roman culture. “Humans involved in charitable transactions were *mere* points of passage in a circle of gifts that emanated from God.”²⁵ However, according to evidence for an important liturgical event in late antiquity (festivals for the consecration of a newly built or renovated church), ecclesiastical leaders in late antiquity preached not a miraculous economy but a ritual economy; not the pure, disinterested gift but the interested practice of regifting; and not humans as “mere points of passage” but as critical ones. The ritual economy identifies humans as critical “points of passage in a circle of gifts that emanate from God,” because it is in the practice of regifting that humans become the church, the living temple(s) of God both individually and communally.

In what follows, I first show how both material culture and textual sources make gifts the prominent feature of the consecratory occasion. I then analyze scripted performances to define the “circle of sanctity” and how festival participants were invited to enter that circle. The invitation to enter the circle devalued the significance of *res sacrae* in order to mark the greater importance of human souls. This devaluation led some writers to advocate for the practice of regifting. Though not a term familiar to the late antique figures discussed here, my theoretical construct of “regifting” brings into high relief the latent tension between legal and ritual perspectives on *res sacrae* that sometimes gave rise to conflict when ecclesiastical administrators prioritized the ritual perspective over the legal one.

GIFTS IN CONSECRATORY FESTIVITIES OF LATE ANTIQUITY

Three pieces of material culture and two texts offer guidance as to how one might draw a mental picture of what festivals for the consecration of churches in late antiquity looked like. They all in one way or another showcase gifts. The late antique mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy portray a fictive consecratory procession bearing the gifts of golden vessels. A medieval ivory relief also



FIGURE 19. Justinian in procession, San Vitale, Ravenna. Photo credit: HIP / Art Resource, NY.

depicts a consecratory procession bringing the gift of a reliquary to a church, though scholars are divided as to whether the procession is fictive or not. A type of medieval manuscript illumination illustrates the bishop's consecratory gestures at the altar, the place of gift giving and gift receiving. As for texts, two orations by Choricus of Gaza offer eulogistic descriptions of the festival ambience to laud the founders for their gifts to participants. My purpose for examining the aforementioned evidence is twofold: (1) to paint in broad strokes what a typical consecratory festival might look like; and (2) to demonstrate that each of the images and texts highlights the significance of gift receiving and gift giving at consecratory festivities.

The walls north and south of the eastern apse mosaic at San Vitale, inaugurated in the mid-sixth century, depict Justinian and Theodora in procession, donating golden vessels at the consecration. Justinian and Theodora never actually visited Ravenna, but the mosaicists memorialize their gift giving by imagining the imperial couple in procession, led by Maximianus, the bishop who consecrated the church (figs. 19 and 20).²⁶ The entourage not only walks in the direction of the newly completed church; it also directs and guides the viewers' gaze to the large-scale mosaic of the apse, portraying Ecclesius, the bishop under whose episcopacy the construction project began, who is in a circle of sanctity with Christ and Saint Vitalis, the patron saint of the church (fig. 4).



FIGURE 20. Theodora in procession, San Vitale, Ravenna. Photo credit: Album / Art Resource, NY.

The Trier Ivory imagines the consecration of a church (fig. 21).²⁷ The procession portrays relics making their way to the newly built church.²⁸ The procession has just entered the Chalke gate of the imperial palace.²⁹ An emperor leads the procession.³⁰ The founder of the church, the empress, stands at the door of the church with a gesture of hospitality to welcome the procession.³¹ The four workmen completing the rooftops convey that this is a brand-new church foundation.³² The procession passes a three-storied arcade, in which festival participants are portrayed. The nine men visible on the second story cense and sing acclamations.³³ As was mentioned above, according to literary sources, a wide spectrum of population demographics would participate in church consecrations. However, the Trier Ivory does not depict children, elderly, or women, with the exception of the female founder. What the ivory portrays prominently are the patron saint of the church, represented by his or her relics, the founder of the church, and festival participants. The gift, in this case, consists of the relics.

Liturgical homilies from the eleventh, twelfth, and fourteenth century include illuminations that depict a scene at the altar during a consecration. Gregory Nazianzen delivered a homily at one of the annual commemorations of the consecration of a Church of Saint Mamas near Nazianzen. Four illuminations in liturgical manuscripts that include this homily depict Gregory consecrating the



FIGURE 21. Trier Ivory. Photo credit: Hohe Domkirche Trier – Domschatz. Photographed by Ann Münchow.

church (e.g., fig. 22).³⁴ Gregory is portrayed prostrate before the altar base, probably anointing it with oil. As noted above, literary evidence from the second half of the fourth century in Syria suggests that consecrations at this time involved an anointing of the altar, but there is no evidence of this sort for other regions like Asia Minor. The central feature of the illuminations is the altar, the locus of gift giving and gift receiving.

These late antique and medieval images imagine crowded streets, doors, and windows, richly arrayed dignitaries, air fragrant with the scent of incense, and, most significantly, magnificent gifts at festivals for church consecrations. Golden bowls on the mosaics of San Vitale, relics on the Trier Ivory, and the table of offering (the altar) in the manuscript illuminations all evoke gift giving.

Like the material culture discussed briefly above, orations delivered at consecratory festivities can be mined for possible sociohistorical data, particularly the two orations of Choricus of Gaza (fl. ca. 527–50), master of the school of rhetoric in Gaza. Choricus's speeches at consecratory festivities fulfilled two rhetorical purposes: (1) to praise the founder for his accomplishment of building a church and receiving the divine favor that brought the construction to completion (through *encomia*), and (2) to take attendees on a vivid aural journey through the sacred space (through *ekphraseis*).³⁵ Choricus emphasizes that the spectacle of the consecratory festival consists of the gifts: the church building, especially its reliquaries (if any), artistic installations, and votive offerings.³⁶ In fact, Choricus says, projects that require such expenditure usually are not unveiled until the occasion of the festival for dramatic effect.³⁷ Choricus of Gaza's orations describe in vivid detail not only the central spectacle that is the church building but also features of the overall fair, the *πανήγυρις* or temporary market set up for the occasion.³⁸



FIGURE 22. Bibliothèque nationale de France Grec 543 fol. 51v, Paris, France. Photo credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Choricus offered orations at two consecratory festivals for churches founded by Bishop Marcianus of Gaza in the sixth century.³⁹ According to his oration for the consecration of the Church of Saint Sergius, participants included not only inhabitants of Gaza but visitors as well, because cities sent “the best of their citizens” to participate in the consecratory festival and view the church.⁴⁰ Prosperous citizens entertained them at the public expense.⁴¹ As part of the festivities, stories

of saints were told out loud about how “those who lived piously [. . .] exchanged piety for salvation.”⁴² Other orations included encomia about the founder and epideictic speeches about the church building.⁴³ Colorful tents lined each side of the road to the church, with every other tent decorated with laurel branches.⁴⁴ Wares were sold in the tents, and the marketplace was filled with “convivial gatherings” (τὰ συμπόσια).⁴⁵ An intricate display of lights was used to wish the benefactors “many years.”⁴⁶ The founder Marcianus provided a luxurious banquet.⁴⁷ Marcianus and other bishops were carried in litters in processions, as inhabitants and visitors walked alongside them.⁴⁸

Choricus’s oration for the consecration of the Church of Saint Stephanus is also a combination of an encomium to Bishop Marcianus and a panegyric on the church building.⁴⁹ Marcianus, Choricus informs us, delivered speeches about the life of Saint Stephanus.⁵⁰ As for the attendees, once again they are made up not only of inhabitants of Gaza but also of visiting citizens from other cities.⁵¹ Choricus praises the quality of food for sale at the festival, mentioning Sicilian cuisine specifically.⁵² The booths are decorated with laurel branches, colors, gold, and silver.⁵³ Colorful curtains and lights in glass vessels also add to the character of the festival.⁵⁴ As at the festival for the consecration of the Church of Saint Sergius, the lamp fires shine through letters cut into the glass, so that the lights together consist of acclamations to civil and ecclesiastical authorities.⁵⁵ As at the festival of Saint Sergius, women freely roam the grounds.⁵⁶ The two main characteristics of “sacred festivals,” according to Choricus, are pleasant sights and beautiful words.⁵⁷ After the festivities are over, stories are spread when the attendees are asked by others: “How was the festival of the Gazaeans? How did you enjoy the temple and the festivities?”⁵⁸ Choricus closes with reference to the votive offerings.⁵⁹

Choricus’s orations include details absent from the material culture described above: the attendance of women; the consumption of food; and, most importantly, the wider context of market exchanges marked by polychrome and luminous decor. As in the images cited above, Choricus’s orations place gifts on center stage—the generosity of the hosts—and highlight them as the primary spectacle of festivals.

Both texts and images corroborate the fact that festivals for the consecration of churches were extraordinarily special occasions when enormous sums were expended to host participants of every social demographic. Performers had as their captive audience the widest array of individuals. As I will demonstrate below, performers used such unique opportunities to convey two messages: (1) that the consecration of the church generated a circle of sanctity between the earthly founders, the celestial patrons, and God; and (2) that participants could join this circle of sanctity by reading the church building as a blueprint for the construction of their soul as a temple of God.

THE CIRCLE OF SANCTITY: GOD, CELESTIAL PATRON,
AND EARTHLY FOUNDER

Performers at the inauguration or consecration of church buildings in late antiquity told participants at the inauguration what to see in the church and how to respond to the church. What participants had to see was a circle of sanctity. How participants had to respond was by becoming part of that circle of sanctity. The circle of sanctity consisted of (1) Christ; (2) the celestial patron to whom the church was dedicated (i.e., an angel, saint, martyr, etc.); and (3) the founders of the church. It is the exchange of gifts that generated the circle of sanctity. In other words, gift exchange constituted the key mechanism of relationship building, building a relationship between Christ, the celestial patron, and the founders. The founders offered the church building as a gift and, as a result, became relationally close to God and the celestial patron(s).⁶⁰ As for festival participants, they could join the circle of sanctity by reading in the walls of the church a blueprint for how to edify their souls. To advance this argument, I will first analyze the way in which hymns composed for the consecration of churches create a circle of sanctity consisting of God, the celestial patron, and the founders. Then, I will analyze homilies delivered at the consecration of churches to explain how the homilists invited participants to enter this circle of sanctity.

Hymnic texts name the members of the “circle of sanctity” in the context of celebrating a gift exchange within the circle of sanctity. God and the celestial patron grant the founder divine favor to build a house for them. The church founder builds the house, offers it up to God and the celestial patron, but also receives the consecrated church as a crown of piety.⁶¹ Analysis of hymnic texts illustrates these imagined dynamics within the circle of sanctity.

One such hymnic text was written into the walls of Hagios Polyeuktos in Constantinople. Sometime between 524 and 527, Anicia Juliana founded and dedicated Hagios Polyeuktos, by far the most magnificent church in late antiquity, surpassed only by Justinian’s Hagia Sophia.⁶² Fragments of a monumental inscription survive. The full text of the epigram along with scholia noting where the lines were readable in the church have been transmitted in the *Greek Anthology*, a tenth-century collection of Greek epigrams composed between about 700 BC and AD 600.⁶³ According to the archeological reports and the manuscript scholia, the metered inscription literally wrapped around the nave entablature of the church, the atrium, and part of the outer entrance of the church.⁶⁴ Carolyn Connor estimates that if the letters of the inscription were consistently carved in the size one measures on the extant fragments, then the total length of the inscription would amount to 250 meters or one-eighth of a mile.

This inscription most likely preserves the words of a scripted performance at the consecration of Hagios Polyeuktos.⁶⁵ The epigram was composed in dactylic hexameter and consists of two parts: (1) the encomium on the church founder

Anicia Juliana, which lines the walls of the nave (lines 1–41); and (2) an ekphrasis about her pious work, the church of Hagios Polyeuktos, which could be read on five plaques at the entrance to the church and in the atrium (lines 42–76).⁶⁶ The encomium in the nave names the circle of sanctity. They are the “heavenly king,” the “athletes” or “servants” of the heavenly king like the martyr Polyeuktos, and Anicia Juliana. One of the plaques at the entrance to the church characterizes Anicia Juliana herself as an “athlete” for the feat of her “divine work.”⁶⁷ Anicia Juliana’s “mind is full of piety” (25–26) and in return for her “blameless gifts” (18) to celestial beings, she and her family receive “protection” (39).⁶⁸

The inscription not only declares Anicia Juliana’s piety for every reader to acknowledge with his or her own voice. The inscription actually conflates Anicia Juliana’s piety with the beauty and holiness of the church. What is more: the church herself speaks in praise of her maker, Anicia Juliana. The personified church asks her founder, Anicia Juliana, “What place was there that did not learn that your purpose is full of piety?” (25–26).⁶⁹ Viewers echo the voice of the church herself with each reading of these lines on the north side of the nave. The sanctity of the church—that is to say, the founder’s gift—and the sanctity of the founder are literally one. The gift reflects, even gives voice to, the piety of the giver. The epigram renders the church’s sacred character indistinguishable from Anicia Juliana’s piety.

A Syriac hymn composed one century earlier expresses the relationship between gift and giver succinctly. Balai composed a *madrasha* to be sung at the consecration of a newly built church in Qenneshrin, Syria.⁷⁰ Balai was a *chorepiscopos* in early fifth-century Syria and served in the jurisdiction of the bishop of Beroea. Several strophes of the *madrasha* describe the relationship between the founder of the church and the church itself (the house). For example, one strophe (no. 26) reads:

This visible house makes an announcement
about the mind of its builder:
Since splendid and comely is the heart within,
its love has been given distinction by this visible [house].⁷¹

For Balai, the beauty of a church building depends on the beauty of the founder’s heart. The invisible adornment of the founder’s heart contributes to the visible glory of the building.

The epigram for Hagios Polyeuktos and Balai’s *madrasha* celebrate a relationship of sanctity between a church and its founder, a sanctity accorded by the favor of God and the celestial patron. According to Balai’s *madrasha* and the epigram about Anicia Juliana, because the souls of the founders are beautifully adorned with piety, the work of their soul’s labor, the newly constructed churches, is likewise beautiful. Anicia Juliana’s athletic crown is not a wreath but the church building. The church building is the founder’s crown of piety. The church building

reflects the mind of the founder and reveals the beauty of that pious mind to the faithful.

In strophes preceding the one quoted above, Balai expresses some of the theological principles that homilists and other hymnographers emphasized, as we will see below. Balai explicitly names the importance of adorning the human heart as one expects to find the church and also stresses the hierarchy of importance: that the adornment of the human heart is more valuable than that of the church.⁷² Not only does Balai succinctly name what homilists expressed in many more words; he also describes a relationship between the heart of the founder of the church and the church itself (the house). It is worth citing the relevant strophes in full (nos. 21–25):

Three [gathered] in Your name are the Church.
Protect the thousands in Your house.
*For they have worked the church of the heart and they have brought it
to the holy temple built in Your name.*

*May the church within be [as] comely
as the church without is splendid.
May you dwell in the one within and protect the one without,
for sealed with Your name [are] heart and house.*

Priests who have become the temple of Your Spirit
succeeded in the building of Your house.
Bless them since *heart and house*
with labor and love they have adorned for Your name.

The priest who built—may his tenure in office endure!
For years may he be priest in the dwelling he adorned.
*And may his soul surpass in hidden beauty
the visible adornment the house bears.*

For his heart bears the temple of His Lord.
May the pure one enter the house of saints.
And while You rest upon the understanding
may You pay a wage for the building of walls.⁷³

Though the church building does not surpass the founder's heart in splendor, the building's glory redounds to the greater glory of the founder. Of course, it was commonplace on such festive occasions to praise the founders through various

kinds of encomia (hymn, homily, oration, etc.), but the theological principles thereby communicated cannot be underestimated. Praise of the founder underscored the significance of peering beyond the walls of the church to the invisible walls of the interior, human temples and of encouraging a spiritual athletic contest, the goal of which is to have the soul surpass the church walls in glory.

Paulinus of Nola's hymnic homily at the consecration of the newly renovated Church of Saint Felix in January 403 expresses the hierarchy of importance between the soul-temple and the stone temple by acknowledging that the stone temple cannot contain the uncontainable God yet by asking that God dwell in the soul-temple. This acknowledgment takes the form of a concluding prayer to the poetic homily. Paulinus asks the visiting bishop Nicetas and all those present to pray with him:

Christ God, we build these things for you from our slight and fragile store. Yet things built with hands cannot confine (*capiunt*) You, highest Creator, for the universe with its entire frame cannot confine You. For You, heaven is small and the earth is a pinpoint. But by paying devoted service to Your perennial saints, with paltry homage we revere those great men. We hope that by their intercession You will perfect our completed works, and that as Lodger You will dwell here in the edifice of our hearts (*extractis habitator mentibus adsis*).⁷⁴

Paulinus, like the homilists described below, invites all festival participants to request Christ's presence in their soul-temples by doing what Paulinus as patron did to enter the circle of sanctity of Christ and his saints: paying homage to the saints and receiving divine largesse.

Other homilists and hymnographers detail the method by which festival participants may enter the circle of sanctity and secure themselves welcome in the house of God. The method in question is that of contemplating the church edifice. To my knowledge, only Paulinus of Nola asks, "How, then, can this structure furnish for me a pattern by which I can cultivate, build, and renew myself inwardly, and make myself a lodging for Christ?";⁷⁵ but the performers described below were all engaged in answering this question. However, it is important to call attention briefly to the wider religiophilosophical context of festivals, from the time of Plato to the Christian *panēgyreis*, since Christian consecratory festivals of late antiquity belong to a long history of contemplation at religious festivals for soul-edifying ends.

FESTIVALS, *THEŌRIA*, AND THE JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

The Christian homilies and hymns selected for analysis below are not the first pieces of literature to use the spectacle of festivals for a pedagogical purpose: to model the ascent of the soul. Andrea Nightingale has shown how Plato in the fourth century BC defined "philosophy" as not simply the "search for wisdom"

but more specifically as the practice of *theōria* that leads the soul up to the divine realm.⁷⁶ At the time, *theōria* was the word to describe the practice of spectating in which an individual engaged when he or she traveled to a festival, viewing and gazing on the special spectacles set up for the occasion. The individual would return home with a report about what he or she saw.⁷⁷ Plato bookends the *Republic* with the setting of a religious festival. The *Republic* begins with Socrates departing from a religious festival at which he “theorized the spectacle” (θεωρήσαντες) and begins to report what he saw.⁷⁸ The *Republic* ends with another religious festival. A certain Er goes on a pilgrimage to attend a religious festival (πανήγυρις), as it were, with the souls of the dead in the underworld. Plato employs the experience of a religious festival to model what the philosopher does.⁷⁹ “Plato identifies the philosopher as a new kind of *theōros*, an intellectual ambassador who makes a journey to a divine world to see the spectacle of truth and then brings a report of his vision to the people at home.”⁸⁰ Vision of the glory of the divine realm trains the eye of the soul to recognize the light of truth and relate that truth to others.⁸¹

Christian homilists also used religious festivals as a pedagogical context in which to model the practice of *theōria*.⁸² The significance of the philosophical *Sitz im Leben* for these homilies delivered at consecratory festivals does not end with Plato. Jeremy Schott compares Eusebius of Caesarea’s understanding of the pedagogical purpose of beauty in the homily examined below to aesthetic theories developed by Philo of Alexandria, Plotinus, and Porphyry of Tyre, showing how all these writers identified vision of beauty as the first step in the practice of *theōria*, the practice of the soul’s ascent to and unity with God.⁸³ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to catalogue all the late antique sources that assume *theōria* as the purpose of ecclesial material culture, but it is worth noting two.

First, the contemplative function of pious viewing is named in an epigram composed to accompany a painting of the archangel Michael, attributed to the sixth-century historian Agathias:

Oh, greatly daring was the wax that molded the invisible chief of the angels, incorporeal in the appearance of his form. And yet it is not without grace, *for a mortal looking on the image directs his heart to a higher contemplation* (ἐπεὶ βροτὸς εἰκόνα λεύσσων θυμὸν ἀπιθύνει κρέσσονι φαντασίῃ); he no longer has a wavering respect, but, engraving the image in himself, he reveres him as though he were present. The eyes coax the intellect out of its depths; by colors can skill transport the mind’s apprehension.⁸⁴

The eyes’ perception of a corporeal image of an incorporeal being leads the eyes of the soul to perceive spiritual truths.

Second, the *Miracles of Saint Demetrios* attribute a similar function to a silver cross on the dome of a ciborium: “At the very summit flashes forth the trophy that is victorious over death: by its silver composition it amazes our corporeal eyes, while by bringing Christ to mind, it illuminates with heavenly gifts *the eyes of the*

intellect—I mean the life-giving and venerable cross of God our Saviour” (87).⁸⁵ This description of the process of viewing a cross explicitly names the causative effect corporeal visual perception has on the soul’s incorporeal eyes.

Christian homilists speaking *in* a newly consecrated church *about* a newly consecrated church engage in the practice of *theōria*. Four homilists (Eusebius of Caesarea, Shenoute of Atripe, Augustine of Hippo, and Caesarius of Arles) and two anonymous hymnographers took the visual context of the surroundings, i.e., the newly constructed and highly ornate church building, as a starting point for leading the audience to contemplate higher and higher forms of beauty.⁸⁶ Performers used the spectacle of the church at a consecratory festival to sketch a pedagogical map for Christian souls to follow. The enjoyment of the glorious beauty of a newly built church was not an end in itself, they would argue, but rather a means of leading the Christian soul to see the kind of beauty with which it ought to be adorned.

INVITING FESTIVAL PARTICIPANTS INTO THE CIRCLE OF SANCTITY

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, festivals attracted large numbers of attendees from a great variety of demographics: old and young; rich and poor; local inhabitant and visitor. How were these participants invited into the established and celebrated circle of sanctity? Homilies and other scripted performances on these occasions offer an answer. Extant homilies delivered at the consecration of churches urge the gathered faithful to imitate and surpass the beauty of the church building. In other words, participants are invited to compete in a contest with the founders of the church, to strive in mimetic rivalry to outdo the piety of the church founders, the piety expressed on the visible walls. However, the pious responses to which participants are urged are different from the founder’s piety of establishing a magnificent church. Participants are not encouraged to found more churches. Instead, participants’ pious responses consist of the practice of virtues, such as the giving of alms.

At festivals that celebrated specific celestial patrons of church buildings and shrines, such as saints and martyrs, homilies often took the form of a panegyric on the individual’s life and deeds. Homilists glorify the deeds of the saint or martyr as worthy of imitation.⁸⁷ When the relics of the celestial patron were present at a consecratory festival, homilists, such as Ambrose of Milan and Gaudentius of Brescia, would construct their orations focusing on the presence of the celestial patron(s) and how the patron conducted his or her life in a praiseworthy manner.⁸⁸

If a newly constructed church, however, were not dedicated to a saint or martyr or if there were no relics, then homilists, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, Augustine of Hippo, Shenoute of Atripe, and Caesarius of Arles, and hymnographers, like the anonymous composers of the *sogitha* on the Church of Edessa and the *kontakion*

on Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, employed a different rhetorical strategy for exhorting listeners to imitate certain behaviors and states of being. These performers used the double meaning of “ecclesia” as “church building” and “church community” to urge the audience to respond to the model example of what it means to be “church” that the newly consecrated building furnishes. Performers urged their audience to peer beyond the church as a “body” to perceive the church as a “soul,” a role model for the spiritual edification of the audience.

Eusebius of Caesarea on the Cathedral of Tyre

At the Cathedral of Tyre in 315, Eusebius draws a one-to-one correspondence between the cathedral’s architectural features and the types of souls out of which God constructs God’s living temple. “Everywhere and from every place [God] has selected the living and firmly set and solid stones of souls. In this manner he builds the great and royal house of all, bright and full of light, both the inner and the outer parts.”⁸⁹ This living temple shares the same architectural features as the cathedral. Just as the cathedral is divided into parts, so too are the souls divided according to their “powers.”⁹⁰ Most souls constitute the outer enclosure because they are “incapable of bearing a greater structure.”⁹¹ Those who guide others to enter the church form the vestibules. In the rectangular hall beyond the vestibules, the pillars or columns are also guides. These columns bear up the weight of the souls above who are being initiated into the four gospels of the four walls in the rectangular hall. The catechumens are the stones of the walls flanking the basilica along the north and south, looking inward toward the divine things. Some of the catechumens become illumined by receiving light from the windows and are supported by the pillars within the basilica, the “innermost mystical doctrines of the Scriptures.”⁹² The thrones, seats, and benches represent the souls on which the Holy Spirit sits as a tongue of fire and to whom the Holy Spirit imparts gifts.⁹³ As for the altar, Eusebius asks, “of what nature would the consecrated and great and unique altar be than the pure and holy of holies of the common Priest of all?”⁹⁴ The altar, in other words, represents the soul of Jesus.⁹⁵

Visual perception of the cathedral should lead the Christian soul to contemplate its place in God’s eternal house. Visual perception of each inanimate stone should result in meditation on the more important animate stone, the soul. Eusebius explicitly names this hierarchy: the human soul is more important than the inanimate stones that signify it. Eusebius employs superlatives when describing the temple visible to God alone, the invisible temple constructed of souls. Eusebius asks,

This living temple, then, of a living God, formed out of yourselves—I speak of the greatest and truly holy sanctuary whose innermost shrine is not to be seen by the many and verily is holy and holy of holies—who, if he should see it, would dare describe? Who is able even to look within the sacred enclosures save only the

great High Priest of the universe, for whom alone it is right to search through the mysteries of every rational soul?"⁹⁶

Later in the homily Eusebius says, the church building is "a very great wonder, indeed," but there is another temple "more wonderful" than "wonderful things."⁹⁷ What is this more wonderful temple? "The renovation of the divine and rational building in our souls."⁹⁸

Eusebius turns the church building into a mirror for his listeners. When viewing the church, the Christian soul ought to see a reflection of itself. If anything falls short of beauty, it should be the inanimate church building, not the soul. The newly consecrated church is a wonder, but more wonderful than the wonder should be the soul of every Christian, building up the eternal house of God.

Anonymous on the Church of Edessa

A Syriac *sogitha* composed for the consecration of the Church of Edessa around AD 543–54 models the practice of *theōria*, the sight of the visible religious festival leading to contemplation of invisible, edifying realities.⁹⁹ The anonymous composer does not delineate relationships between the church edifice and the contemporary souls of the founders and the faithful in the way Eusebius does. Instead, the composer draws one-to-one correspondences between architectural features of the church and significant beings and places of what the hymn calls "the Savior's dispensation," relying primarily on numbers to reveal the meaning of the architectural allegory. The three open windows of the sanctuary reveal the Trinity (13). The many lights call to mind the many apostles, prophets, martyrs, and confessors (14); the eleven columns supporting the bema, the eleven apostles in the upper room (15); the columns behind the bema, Golgotha (16); the five doors, the five virgins (17); the ten columns, the ten apostles that fled from Golgotha (18); the nine steps to the altar, the nine ranks of angels (19).¹⁰⁰ Throughout, the hymn underscores a concept of the temple as a place that reveals divine mysteries. In fact, the third strophe captures the result of practicing *theōria*: "Clearly portrayed in [the temple] are the mysteries / of both Your Essence and Your Dispensation. / He who looks closely / will be filled at length with wonder."¹⁰¹ Those who contemplate the temple learn from the temple edifice about who God is and what God has done.

Shenoute of Atripe on the Great Church of the White Monastery

According to a twelfth- or thirteenth-century inscription in the north apse, the White Monastery Church was consecrated in the 106th year of Shenoute's long life.¹⁰² In Shenoute's homily on this occasion, he capitalizes on building imagery to comment on the need for purity of soul and, by the same token, avoidance of what pollutes the soul.¹⁰³ Shenoute produces out of the architecture of the church a piety of moral living, carrying out one's life in a way that is worthy of God's household.

The soul in which the Lord resides is impact resilient. Like the well-built edifice of the church, pure souls cannot be shaken. Shenoute cites Psalm 45:6: “The Lord is in its midst and she [the soul] will not be shaken.”¹⁰⁴ He interprets the notion of stability in the psalm to indicate the soul’s refusal to be drawn toward ungodliness and unnatural acts. By contrast, souls that ally themselves with what God hates will have no part in such stability. Instead, they share the same fate as the plastered wall in Ezekiel 13. While such souls claim that their “wall will stand firm,” God himself promises in Ezekiel 13:11 that their wall shall fall.¹⁰⁵ In Shenoute’s exegesis, the plastered wall refers to a soul that commits evil yet receives honor and commendation in return. The soul corresponds to the wall and the plaster corresponds to the undue praise. Shenoute assures such souls that they will surely tumble down like an unstable wall. With sarcasm, he responds to the praise accorded to such unworthy souls: “where now is your plaster, O wall, and where is the benefit of those who plastered you?”¹⁰⁶ The soul tumbles down like a wall, and the plaster, the undue praise, offers no shield from ruin.

The newly consecrated church offers a visual example of the resistance to ruin that should characterize the soul-temple. The attendees are to see that the walls of the church before their eyes are well constructed and, through the help of Shenoute’s exegetically informed commentary on the church, learn that the soul-temple must be a place of God’s habitation to have comparable sturdy walls. The beauty of the church building can supply a helpful blueprint, but it is the spiritual temple of the soul and its beauty that matters more.¹⁰⁷

Augustine of Hippo on Unknown Churches

Shenoute’s contemporary Augustine of Hippo also uses the occasion of a church’s dedication to characterize the community as the temple of God. The visible building supplies the metaphors, the image of what the community ought to look like. In Augustine’s words, “the building which we ourselves are is being constructed for God to live in spiritually.”¹⁰⁸

The construction materials for the spiritual edifice are good works. Faith, hope, and love fashion, make firm, and cement the good works. Humility creates an even floor. Prayers, sermons, and teaching build up the walls. So long as Christ remains the cornerstone, the house will be structurally sound. It cannot “collaps[e] when the rain pours down, nor b[e] swept away when the river floods, nor overthrown when the winds blow.”¹⁰⁹

The most distinctive aspect of Augustine’s sermon is the way in which he speaks of God as the head of the household. Augustine turns the eschaton into the day of dedication performed by the head of the household. It is then that God will take possession of the ecclesial body and dwell in it. Augustine exhorts his audience to let themselves be built a spiritual house, “so that the Lord our God may [. . .] *take possession of you* forever as his perfected and dedicated dwelling.”¹¹⁰ More

important than the consecration of the earthly basilica taking place in the moment is the future dedication of souls on the last day.

Caesarius of Arles on Unknown Churches

Caesarius of Arles's homilies offer some specific examples of how the soul can advance in athletic training. Caesarius became bishop in 502.¹¹¹ During his episcopacy, he delivered three sermons for the consecration of unknown churches.¹¹² Within the first two sentences of each sermon, Caesarius urges his audience to recognize that the consecration of a church visualizes what ought to be occurring in the "true temple," the Christian heart. Each Christian heart is a house. Gift giving invites God into the house of the heart. In particular, practices of mercy, like generous almsgiving, are the types of gifts that invite God's presence.¹¹³ Caesarius explains that failure to practice mercy damages the house of the heart, evicts Christ, and instead invites the devil. By contrast, almsgiving does to the heart what windows and glittery, reflective, shining surfaces do to the church building. Almsgiving brightly illumines the temple of the heart.¹¹⁴ Through gifts of mercy, the soul engages in the etiquette proper for hosting Christ as a guest. In Caesarius's words, the soul "invite[s] Christ our Lord in faith, feed[s] Him with hope, and give[s] Him to drink with charity."¹¹⁵ The Christian who offers him or herself as a "vessel of mercy" (*vasa misericordiae*) receives Christ as he ought to be received and offers him the gifts that are his.¹¹⁶ The value of these gifts, Caesarius says, exceed the value of the gifts of church buildings. Churches, yes, are "holy," but "much more precious in the sight of God," is the temple of the heart.¹¹⁷

Eusebius and Augustine's emphasis on the community together as the temple of God, making one-to-one correspondences between architectural features and individual Christian souls, might appear to contrast with Shenoute's and Caesarius's focus on individual Christian souls as temples. Caesarius, however, shows that the two are not mutually exclusive. Caesarius makes the point that all the individual temples come together to make one temple: "Notice, brethren how beautiful is the temple which is constructed from temples; just as many members form one body, so many temples form one temple."¹¹⁸ In fact, like Augustine, Caesarius points to the eschaton as the true day of consecration, the day when the many individual temples will be consecrated as one temple.

Anonymous on Hagia Sophia in Constantinople

Eusebius of Caesarea and Caesarius of Arles both noted the effects of luminosity in churches. Eusebius saw the stones of the Cathedral of Tyre on which the light of the windows shines as representative of illuminated baptismal candidates. Caesarius called almsgiving the windows of the soul, since it is via almsgiving that one's soul may be illumined. A *kontakion* composed for the rededication of the Great Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in AD 562 emphasizes how the church

building supplies the visual environment for mystical visions to occur through special attention to the performance of light.¹¹⁹

Since the festival for the reconsecration of Hagia Sophia began on Christmas Eve, the primary theme of the hymn is that of the incarnation.¹²⁰ However, the portions of the poem in which the composer describes the luminosity of the church building capture the principles of interest here. Although the composer does not draw an explicit connection between the human soul as a temple and the reconsecrated building, the theme of luminosity makes the link apparent.

The composer draws a triple analogy between the “ceiling” of the soul, the ceiling of the church, and the “ceiling” of the cosmos (the firmament). The Christian, as a habitation (*οἰκητήριον*) for the Word, should be covered or “thatched with *luminous* virtues.”¹²¹ In other words, virtues do to the ceilings of the soul-temple what gold and jewels do to the ceilings of the stone temple: they create a performance of light.¹²² Vision of the church’s ceiling leads to “spiritual thoughts” about the cosmic firmament, which in turn result in “a mystic vision of holy waters” (8).¹²³ The church ceiling spiritually interprets the stars of the cosmic firmament as “spiritual luminaries,” such as prophets, apostles, and teachers, who can be seen “flashing with the lightning of their doctrines” (9); it is these spiritual luminaries who “enlighten in the night of life those drifting about on the ocean of sin” (9).¹²⁴ The *kontakion* evokes the moisture of the heavenly firmament (7) in naming the “ocean” and “clouds” of the mind (8–9).¹²⁵ The “firmament” of the mind, though it contains “clouds of human failings,” becomes luminous like the ecclesial ceiling and cosmic firmament when “prayers of fervent repentance” and “tears [. . .] as reinforcements” clear the soul’s sky (8).¹²⁶ The firmament of the soul rains tears and itself becomes a luminous, starry sky when the mind receives the church ceiling’s spiritual teaching on the cosmic firmament: the stars of the cosmic firmament interpreted as the luminous teachings of spiritual luminaries flashing in the ceiling of the church.¹²⁷ The anonymous hymnographer used the luminosity of the church building (itself analogous to cosmic light) to create a concrete image of how a soul can become virtuous. Like the homilists named above, the hymnographer treats the completed church building as a blueprint for the construction of the soul-temple.

These homilies and hymns model the practice of *theōria* for festival participants. The performers offer a contemplation of the church building that allows the inner eye of the soul to see invisible, divine truths through the perceiving eyes’ vision of a church building. What do these invisible divine truths mean for the ritual economy? To answer this question, I will first argue that regifting was taboo in late antiquity. Then I will explain how the homilists’ emphasis not just on the soul’s contemplation of the church but on the soul’s pursuit of surpassing the church building in beauty contributed to a larger conceptual framework. This broader conceptual framework allowed certain writers to advocate for

regifting as a ritual practice, even though regifting was otherwise taboo in late antique culture.

REGIFTING AS TABOO IN LATE ANTIQUITY

A story recorded in Caesarius of Arles's *Vita* demonstrates how countercultural it was to repurpose gifts. According to the story,

When Caesarius had taken a room at an inn, the king [Theodoric] sent him a silver dish (*discum*) as a gift for use at his table. It weighed about 60 pounds [. . .]. [With the gift] he made a request: "Take this, holy bishop. Your son, the king, asks that your blessedness worthily accept this vessel (*uasculum*) as a gift and use it in his memory." But Caesarius, who never used any silver at his table except spoons, had the dish (*discum*) appraised by his attendants and on the third day sold in public. With its proceeds he started to free many captives. Soon, they say, the king's retainers announced to him, "Behold, we saw your lord's gift put up for sale in the marketplace. With its price the holy Caesarius is ransoming crowds of captives. Indeed, so many poor people were crowded into his lodgings, and the entrance hall of his house was so congested, that it was hardly possible to approach him to say hello because of the sheer number of poor men making their requests to him. We also saw countless groups of unfortunate people running about the streets and going to him repeatedly." When he learned of this action, Theodoric admired and praised it so much that all the senators and leading men in attendance at his palace competed in wishing for the blessed man to distribute the price of their gifts with his right hand.¹²⁸

Theodoric gave Caesarius a silver dish of sixty pounds as a gift, asking him to "use" it in his memory.¹²⁹ The story plays on the word "use" (*in usum*) to explain why Caesarius repurposed the vessel: Caesarius never "used" silver dishware for his meals. The word that refers to the dish (*discus*) implies that it was a piece of flatware. A *discus* of sixty pounds was more likely a decorative piece—literally memorabilia, as Theodoric's request suggests. The famous Missorium of Theodosius, for example, was recorded with a weight of fifty pounds.¹³⁰ According to the story, Caesarius has the plate sold publicly and uses the proceeds to ransom captives. The ensuing narrative suggests that Caesarius's act of regifting was unexpected, countercultural, and would probably have incurred the ill will of the gift giver, Theodoric. Contrary to expectation, Theodoric expressed pleasure in Caesarius's work, which alone was enough to encourage senators and "other leading men" to "compete" with one another "in wishing for the blessed man [Caesarius] to distribute the price of their gifts with his right hand."¹³¹

Theodoric gives the gift to Caesarius. Caesarius receives the gift. Caesarius then regifts the dish. The twist of the story is that Caesarius repurposes the king's gift yet does not incur the wrath of the king for doing so. On the contrary, the king praises him. In fact, Caesarius's act of regifting successfully persuades other wealthy

individuals to value regifting as a practice in an economy that regards regifting as taboo. The point of this story is to celebrate Caesarius's enculturation of a counter-cultural value: regifting.

Another hagiographical story, set more than a century later in Northumbria, describes how Bishop Aidan regifted a horse that King Oswine had given him. According to Bede's story,

[King Oswine] had given Bishop Aidan an excellent horse so that, though he was normally accustomed to walk, he could ride if he had to cross a river or if any other urgent necessity compelled him. A short time afterwards Aidan was met by a beggar who asked him for alms. He at once alighted and offered the horse with all its royal trappings to the beggar; for he was extremely compassionate, a friend of the poor and a real father to the wretched. The king was told of this and, happening to meet the bishop as they were going to dinner, he said, "My lord bishop, why did you want to give a beggar the royal horse intended for you? Have we not many less valuable horses or other things which would have been good enough to give to the poor, without letting the beggar have the horse which I had specially chosen for your own use?" The bishop at once replied, "O King, what are you saying? Surely this son of a mare is not dearer to you than that son of God?"¹³²

As in the account related of Caesarius, Aidan receives a kingly gift and almost immediately regifts it. In this story, the king directly broaches the subject with the bishop, asking why, of all the many horses available, Aidan regifted the one that Oswine gifted to him. Aidan responds with words reminiscent of those used by Ambrose. Recall that Ambrose had argued that the souls of captives were more valuable than the gold of sacred vessels.¹³³ Similarly, Aidan defends his counter-cultural action by calling attention to the fact that a "son of God" has greater value than a "son of a mare." Like the story concerning Caesarius, the surprise lies in the performance of a taboo: regifting. In each case, kings (and other high officials in Caesarius's story) learn the unexpected lesson that God values regifting.

Gift giving in late antique societies, like in many societies today, singularizes a former commodity. This is a one-way process in theory, but in practice a singularized commodity may become recommoditized, sliding in the wrong direction of the implied hierarchy on the scale.¹³⁴ Recommoditization was taboo and, in the case of *res sacrae*, was expressly forbidden by law. Legally, the ritual of consecration singularized ecclesial property, making *res sacrae* as singular as singular could get, since consecrated ecclesial property was not subject to ownership at all. Ritually, however, the consecration was merely one of many ways that humans regave God's gifts.

REGIFTING IN THE RITUAL ECONOMY

The homilies analyzed above noted the greater value of soul-temples over stone temples. The combination of this point with King David's declaration on his endowment of the first temple gave theologians the conceptual framework to

justify regifting as a valued practice in the ritual economy. Of course, this conceptual framework (drawn here on the basis solely of consecratory practices) relates to the shift from classical euergetism to Christian care for the needy.¹³⁵ The point here, however, is that the ritual discourse clashes not only with classical euergetism but also with the legal notion of *res sacrae*. I will sketch the conceptual framework by enumerating three interrelated claims.

First, God is the giver of all things. According to 1 Chronicles 29:14, King David acknowledged God as the giver par excellence when he offered an endowment for the building of the first temple: “For all things are yours and we have given you of your things” (LXX: ὅτι σὰ τὰ πάντα, καὶ ἐκ τῶν σῶν δεδώκαμέν σοι).¹³⁶ Chapter 4 demonstrated how this message was conveyed via epigraphy and imagery. The second and third claims are made in the scripted performances analyzed above.

Second, humans’ return gifts to God benefit humans. The church building—a gift given to God from God’s own things—is a site for humans to learn divine truths. The giver of the church building or of votive offerings is the one who benefits from the gift. Eusebius, Shenoute, Augustine, Caesarius, and the anonymous hymnographers each in their own way emphasize that the Christian soul should mirror all that is laudable about the church building—God’s house.

Third, there is an explicit hierarchy of value. The gift of a church building is valuable, but more valuable still is the gift of the human temple. The church building visibly represents what the invisible human temple ought to look like. Eusebius, Shenoute, Augustine, and Caesarius each in their own way urge their audiences to let the human temple surpass the inanimate temple in laudable qualities. The human temple is more wonderful and precious than the church building and ought to be treated that way. In short, humans’ gifts to God instruct humans on how to give even more valuable gifts to God.

When it came to church property, regifting was illegal.¹³⁷ It was illegal to take consecrated church property and repurpose that property. Moreover, the cultural context generally did not value regifting as a practice. The stories about Caesarius and Theodoric’s sixty-pound silver dish, as well as Aidan and Oswine’s royal horse, have only been recorded and transmitted because of their surprising outcome. The ritual economy, by contrast, did value regifting as a practice. In fact, because God is the giver of all things, the entire ritual economy is based on regifting. The legal regulations on *res sacrae* and the ritual economy could nevertheless coexist, so long as consecrated church property was never repurposed to perform an act of mercy.

Homilists at church consecrations preached the basic principles that underwrite the ritual economy, an economy that makes the repurposing of church property for the sake of performing mercy an acceptable, even virtuous, practice. Eusebius, Shenoute, Augustine, and Caesarius do not explicitly argue this point, but they, among others, set forth the theological framework on which the ritual economy is based. To find voices that explicitly argue that sacred things should

be repurposed to practice mercy, it is necessary to look beyond festivals for church consecrations.

Rabbula was the bishop of Edessa in the fifth century. The writer of Rabbula's hagiography tells the following story about him:

[Rabbula] straightaway ordered that many silver vessels, which had been fashioned with care for the serving of ten tables of clerics, be sold. He distributed equitably the price they fetched for the use of the needy. He gently persuaded the clerics to use clay vessels. He also determined to sell the liturgical vessels of silver and gold which the churches had and to give the prices they fetched to the poor, as he said, "It is clear to those who know that adorned liturgical vessels of gold and silver are not especially necessary for the glory of God, but that the spirit of God rests in pure hearts." Yet his order was neglected because of their contempt. At the request of many, he was restrained from doing this because the vessels were the offering of their earlier, now deceased, fathers, who had offered them to God for the redemption of their spirit.¹³⁸

The character in this story, Rabbula of Edessa, did not himself dine with silver dishes (recall the same custom mentioned in connection with Caesarius above).¹³⁹ Rabbula preferred the use of less expensive, ceramic vessels because he did not believe that gold and silver were necessary for expressing or communicating the glory of God.¹⁴⁰ In fact, Rabbula is said not to have engaged in any ecclesial building projects except to repair a damaged nave.¹⁴¹ Rabbula advocated for the alienation of gold and silver liturgical vessels in order to raise funds for the support of the needy. Rabbula argued that God does not need silver or gold dishes either because, as scripted performances at consecrations emphasized, the more valuable temple and place of God's dwelling is that of pure hearts. So Rabbula tried to repurpose consecrated silver and gold vessels to support the poor, but his effort was thwarted. According to the hagiographer, Rabbula's opponents thought the act of regifting liturgical vessels in the service of the poor would interfere with the deceased donors' exchange with God. The deceased donors gave the vessels "to God for the redemption of their spirit." Regifting the vessels, the opponents imagined, would interfere with this ritual exchange. So Rabbula was not permitted to repurpose the sacred things.

John Chrysostom's homilies on 2 Corinthians and the Gospel of Matthew show how this fourth-century priest of Antioch and later bishop of Constantinople would have responded to Rabbula's opponents. John Chrysostom would have asked, "What does it mean for the deceased donors to have given the golden vessels for the redemption of their souls?" John Chrysostom says in a homily on the Gospel of Matthew: "Let us not consider offering golden vessels only, but [let us also offer] righteous labors. [. . .] It is necessary for us to offer souls, since God in fact accepts [vessels] for the sake of souls."¹⁴² For John Chrysostom, the fact that precious things are offered for souls only underscores the value of souls. Therefore, using precious liturgical vessels to help other souls makes the original donor's

offering even more valuable to God. Regifting does not interfere with the exchange process; on the contrary, it enhances the exchange; it brings the exchange to whole new level of value. To use an analogy from today's system of banking, imagine the deceased donor had opened up a certificate of deposit and placed \$1,000 in a bank to accrue a fixed amount of interest. Rabbula's opponents claim that taking that certificate of deposit and using it to support the poor interferes with the deceased donor's interests. John Chrysostom would respond that, far from interfering with the deceased donor's interests, using the money to support the poor is like depositing \$100,000 in place of the original \$1,000. In general, John Chrysostom advocated so much for the prioritization of mercy toward the needy over the adornment of churches that one can speak of a "liturgy of the poor" preached in his works.¹⁴³

In a homily on 2 Corinthians, John Chrysostom captures with one image what homilists and hymnographers expressed in many words. John Chrysostom says the priest stands at the altar in church and invokes the Spirit. Likewise, Christians ought to stand at the altar of others' souls and invoke the Spirit by doing good deeds toward others. "Whenever you see a poor believer," John Chrysostom says, "think that you are looking at an altar."¹⁴⁴ In the ritual economy, there are altars everywhere, visible altars of churches and invisible altars of souls. Gifts at both types of altars are valuable, but the gifts of higher value in the ritual economy are the ones offered on the altars of souls.

In the second century AD, an orator named Lucian spoke in a beautiful hall.¹⁴⁵ The topic of his speech was whether the hall was a help or a hindrance to the speaker.¹⁴⁶ For the first half of the speech, Lucian makes the case that the hall helps the speaker make a good speech. For the second half of the speech, Lucian makes the opposite case—namely, that the hall hinders the speaker from making a good speech.

Christians in late antiquity struggled with a similar question. Are lavishly bedecked church buildings a help or a hindrance to Christians' spiritual edification? The answer that orators provide on the very occasion of church consecrations and on other occasions, too, is that the church buildings are a help. Other writers, like Ambrose and John Chrysostom, would add the following qualification: so long as Christians are enculturated to value regifting as a practice in the ritual economy. Responding rightly to the beauty of a church building means learning the values of the ritual economy—that is, learning that God is the only one who gives, that all Christians do is regift, that all Christian regifting is actually for Christians' own benefit, and therefore that intangible gifts of mercy are more valuable than the tangible offerings made in church buildings. Homilists at church consecrations use the church building as a help in their efforts to guide the audience to recognize the glory and protection of God that surpasses that of the hall and to urge the audience to build themselves up as spiritual matches to the building's

material display. The edification process, though spiritual in its *telos*, consists of building a relationship with the celestial realm through the exchange of gifts.

Conversely, the church building could be a hindrance because it could prevent the faithful from ascending to the spiritual meaning of the place and because it could prevent funds from being used for showing mercy to the needy. In addition to the story of Rabbula recounted above, a story told of Pachomius and Ambrose's response to charges illustrate how the beauty of the church may be a hindrance to the faithful.

As we saw, Balai's wonder at the beauty of the church of Qenneshrin led him to even greater wonder at the heart and soul of the founder. By contrast, we are told that Pachomius, the fourth-century Egyptian monastic leader, had the opposite reaction to a church. The *Paralipomena* records the following story:

The blessed Pachomius built [a chapel] and he made porticos for it and set up pillars of bricks, and he furnished it very well. He was pleased with the work, because he had built it well. Then he thought that it was through a diabolic activity that he was marveling at the beauty of the house. Therefore he took ropes and tied them to the pillars; then he made a prayer in his heart, ordered the brothers to pull and bend all the pillars so they remained crooked. And he said to the brothers, "I pray you, brothers, do not make great efforts to adorn the work of your hands. But whatever may enter into the work of each one of you by the grace of Christ *and from his gift*, take great care that your mind may not stumble through the praise given to the art, and become a prey to the devil."¹⁴⁷

Pachomius received the gift of building a chapel from Christ. He performed the task in such a fine manner that he began to admire his own work. Because he lost sight of Christ and Christ's gift, he taught himself a lesson by defacing his fine work.

This story captures the idea that the gift of God (the chapel) that humans (Pachomius) give to others (the brothers) ought to lead humans to God and not away from God. Because Pachomius's soul was not in fact worthy of the beauty of the chapel, Pachomius had the place defaced. Pachomius went so far as to damage the newly erected chapel, in order to prevent its beauty from distracting liturgical participants.

Ambrose of Milan's justifications for alienating ecclesial property reiterate the same theological principles named above. Ambrose cites the hierarchy of importance of the soul-temple over the stone temple to celebrate the alienation of ecclesial property as the morally appropriate course of action for a Christian leader.¹⁴⁸ In his treatise *On Duties*, Ambrose both identifies the primary responsibilities of church leaders and offers a defense for melting down consecrated golden chalices to amass funds for the redemption of captives, to build more churches, and to buy land for cemeteries. Ambrose says the following about the duties of ecclesiastical administrators:

Here is what is appropriate for a priest (*sacerdos*) in particular: to deck out the temple of God with a splendor that is suitable, making the courts of the Lord resplendent

by giving them a particular finery; to make sure that money is always being spent in accordance with the obligations that mercy imposes; to give strangers what they genuinely require, not sums that are unnecessary but amounts that are suited to their actual needs, so that things do not go beyond what humanity demands but are in keeping with its constraints.¹⁴⁹

Although Ambrose names the beautification of churches before acts of mercy in his summary of the obligations of church leaders, he nevertheless justifies his own choice to prioritize an act of mercy over the sacrality of church property. In the same book, Ambrose later defends his own decision to melt down golden vessels for charitable purposes and explains to his intended clerical readers that they may do the same “without doing anything irreverent.”¹⁵⁰ Ambrose argues that the “real treasure of the Lord,” “the gold of Christ,” lies not in golden vessels but in Christian souls.¹⁵¹ He prioritizes acts of mercy over the glory of temples. Like John Chrysostom’s fiftieth homily on Matthew, Ambrose claims that ecclesial gold only has value because it is for Christian souls. With a play on the words *redemptor* and *redimo*, Ambrose says, “This was the very function for which the gold of the Redeemer deserved to be of value—ransoming those in danger.”¹⁵²

As the writings of Ambrose and others show, Eusebius, Shenoute, Augustine, and Caesarius were not the only ecclesiastical leaders to prioritize the consecration of the temple of the soul over that of newly built or renovated ecclesial structures.¹⁵³ However, the significance of their words lies less in what they said than in the occasion on which they chose to say it—at the very event that, legally, constituted the moment when the church became a *res sacra*, a gift offered in perpetuity to God that in principle could not be regifted under any circumstances. It is at this moment that the homilists Eusebius, Shenoute, Augustine, and Caesarius devalue *res sacrae* as mere *res*, focusing instead on the importance of making human souls holy.

Festivals for the consecration of churches celebrated relationships within the circle of sanctity: God, the celestial patron, and the church founder. Participants could join the circle of sanctity through the following steps. First, by entering the newly built house of God, participants would be surrounded by the example of the church founder’s piety visually expressed in the beauty of the church building. Second, by responding piously to the church building (in other words by responding piously to the church founder’s piety expressed on the walls), participants could be welcomed into the circle of sanctity. Responding piously to the church building meant offering the gift of oneself as a vessel of mercy—either by imitating the soul of Christ, as Eusebius would say, or by giving alms generously, as Caesarius would say. Exchanges within the circle of sanctity operated according to the rules of the ritual economy, an economy that valued regifting or what Hyde calls “circular giving.” The operation and effect of regifting in the ritual economy can be schematized by the diagram below. As gifts circulate from one person or group to another and the circle of sanctity enlarges, the glory that redounds to previous givers multiplies.

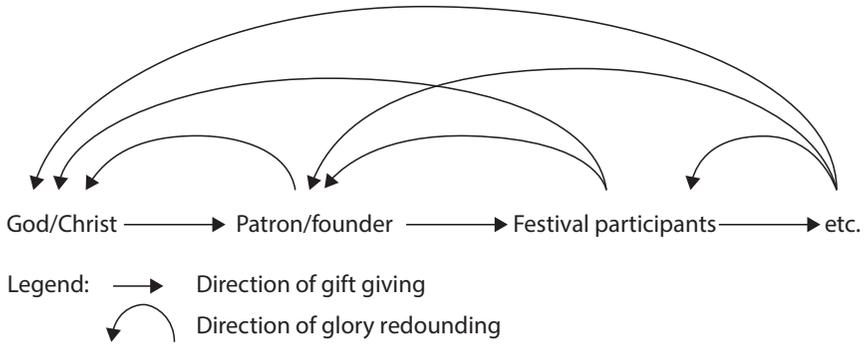


CHART 1. Regifting in the ritual economy of consecratory festivals.

An altar cloth described by Paul the Silentiary vividly captures the core message of the ritual economy. Paul the Silentiary delivered an ekphrastic poem on the renovated Hagia Sophia during the festivities for the rededication of the church between December 24, 562 and January 6, 563.¹⁵⁴ The altar cloth, he says, depicts Christ flanked by Peter and Paul within a temple enclosure in the main register.¹⁵⁵ The lower register, the hem, portrays pious foundations, such as churches and hospitals, alongside illustrations of the miracles of Christ.¹⁵⁶ The Silentiary does not offer further commentary on the altar cloth, but in the context of the ritual economy described above, the textile speaks volumes. The historical merciful acts of Christ are placed side by side with the places where Christ's mercy can presently be found—at churches and at hospitals (legally, “pious foundations” since the time of Justinian). The altar cloth itself, a consecrated textile, depicts merciful acts as the greatest offerings or return gifts or regifts one can lift up to Christ and his saints. The textile juxtaposes Christ's acts of mercy with the places in which his mercy may continue to be sought, and that juxtaposition happens on the altar itself, the place of gift giving and gift receiving.¹⁵⁷ What is a church for? According to the implied ritual economy of performers at festivals for church consecrations: gifts of mercy for human souls.