

## The Rite of the Consecration of the Virgins at the Charterhouse of Gosnay

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The Carthusian nuns have been little known and little studied.' This is the opening line of a book by Dom Augustin Devaux of the Grande Chartreuse, entitled *The History and Documents of the Carthusians*, which appeared in 2003. It contains a chapter on the consecration of the virgins. In 2004 an article about the consecration of the virgins in the Carthusian order, by Professor Dr. Hansjakob Becker, of the University of Mainz, appeared in a Festschrift for Prof. Dr. Reiner Kaczynski. These works indicate the importance of the rite in the order and will be referred to in this article. The consecration of a virgin is one of the oldest rites in the Roman Catholic Church. Through the rite of consecration, the virgin, after renewing her promise of perpetual virginity to God, is set aside as a sacred person who belongs only to Christ. By this the Church manifested the importance it attached to the virginity. According to the website of the Carthusians the rite is performed by the bishop of the diocese and the ceremony takes place during Mass, after the Gradual is sung (accessed 22 May 2006). Since the beginning of their union with the order of the Carthusians, around 1145, the Carthusian nuns have received without interruption the consecration of the virgins (*Rituel cartusien* 9).

Much of the rite is from the liturgy of St Agnes. St Agnes (d. Rome c. 350) is one of the most famous and universal of the early Roman martyrs. According to her fifth-century *Acts*, wrongly attributed to St Ambrose, she was a girl of only thirteen who refused marriage because of her dedication to Christ. She preferred death to any violation of her consecrated virginity: for this reason she has been venerated by many generations and many nations. She was killed by a sword (Farmer 6).

The Pontifical contains the imposing ceremony. There are however, manuals in the Carthusian order which also contain the particulars of the rite and according

to which the rite differs from that in the Pontifical. This article is based mainly on four such manuals. These are sixteenth-century manuscripts containing only the ceremony, which were written for nuns in the Charterhouse of Mont-Sainte-Marie, at Gosnay, near Arras, France. A fifth manuscript, thought in the past to have Bruges as provenance, but actually written for the Monastery of the Virgin Mary of the Canons Regular of Korsendonck, near Turnhout, will also be referred to. The Gosnay manuscripts are small books, the longest consisting of fifty-three folios. The Korsendonck manuscript is a much larger book of 320 folios containing not only the consecration rite (as a small part), but also <a> miscellany of *Historiae*, *Vitae*, Catalogues and a list of charterhouses at that time. Another manuscript is Darmstadt Bibliothek, MS 710, which I have not seen. This is a collection of Carthusian documents, copied at St Barbara of Cologne, which also contains the ceremony. Becker mentions that it is possible that the ceremony was taken from Flanders to the Cologne charterhouse (265). It has to be noted that the Cologne manuscript is the earliest of the six, having been written in 1398, and that St Barbara was a charterhouse for monks. Dom Gaillard, of the charterhouse of Nonenque, pointed out in a personal communication that the rites reproduced in the Korsendonck and Cologne manuscripts are substantially identical. They give the rite as it was practised at Bruges (15 May 2004).

The existence of charterhouses for nuns reaches back to the twelfth century (when Dom Anthelm, 1139–1151, was the head of the Carthusian order). The rite of the consecration of the virgins seems to be as old as the order itself. There exists in fact a Carthusian manuscript containing the ritual of consecration, written between 1188 and 1222, which will be discussed later in this article (*Rituel cartusien* 11, note 2).

The ceremony prescribed in the Pontifical, and in the manuscripts from Gosnay and Bruges, is very solemn. The days fixed for its celebration were at first the Epiphany, Easter week and the feasts of the Apostles. The third council of the Lateran gave permission to consecrate virgins on all Sundays, and custom sometimes extended the permission (Vermeersch 459)

In the Carthusian order, if the consecration takes place on one of the Sundays of Easter, a day of the octave of Easter or a day of solemnity, the Mass is that of that day, with the formulas of the Eucharistic prayer and the final benediction proper to the consecration of the virgins. On other days, the ritual Mass of the consecration of the virgins is preferably chosen (*Rituel cartusien* 11).

The insignia conferred on the nuns according to the Pontifical are the marriage symbols, the veil, the ring and the crown. According to the manuscripts from

Gosnay and Bruges, three additional insignia are conferred: a maniple, a stole and a silver or gold cross. It would seem, therefore, that the Carthusian rite differed from that of the Roman Pontifical.

Dom Devaux in an exhaustive discussion asks the question whether the Carthusian nuns kept in their earlier monastic life the consecration rite with these particularities. He points out that there is no doubt about the consecration of the virgins itself. That was the rule. The essential part of the rite evolved in accordance with the Roman Pontifical (28).

He found that before 1689 the three special insignia were not conferred in any of the three charterhouses for nuns of the Alpine region: Prémol, Salettes and Mélan, because there was no record of it. Considering whether abuses of the time might have caused the manuscripts of the three houses to disappear, he admits that this was possible for Prémol and Salettes, both of which suffered much during the religious wars, but pointed out that Mélan never suffered a cataclysm capable of destroying its library. Devaux also said that it was unthinkable that these three large feminine communities would allow this very important tradition to disappear (31).

Dom Devaux comes to the conclusion that there was in the sixteenth century no official rite of consecration of virgins in the Carthusian order. He pointed out that all the manuscripts that contain the Carthusian ritual of the consecration of virgins come from Gosnay and one perhaps from Bruges. As has been shown, this is not correct. Also, there is a small manuscript, Grenoble, MS 324, which was copied before 1222 according to the calendar and after 1188, the date of the foundation of the feminine charterhouse of Bertaud in the diocese of Gap, which contains the rite, but contains nothing of the tradition of the three additional insignia. His statement that the inclusion in the rite of the stole, the maniple and the cross is 'a very precious heritage which was in use only in the two charterhouses of Gosnay and Bruges' is therefore correct (40).

It needs to be mentioned that Gosnay is unique in that many of their manuscripts were preserved, in contrast to almost none from the other charterhouses for nuns. For instance, five antiphonaries for Gosnay have been preserved. One of these antiphonaries, MS Grey 3c23, is in the Grey Collection of the National Library in Cape Town.

One has to come to the conclusion that in the sixteenth century two 'traditions' for the consecration of the virgins coexisted among the Carthusian nuns: during the course of the ceremony as practised at Mont-Sainte-Marie de Gosnay and Saint-Anne de Bruges, the bishop handed over to each nun, in a single collation,

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as one entity, three insignia, a maniple, a stole and a silver or gold cross, in addition to those insignia conferred according to the *Ordo* of the Roman Pontifical: the veil, the ring and the crown, while this was not the case in the other Carthusian nunneries. The origin of the usage of the houses of Flanders is not clear, and does not date from the origins of the order. The first written evidence of its existence appears in 1389 in the manuscript of the Charterhouse of Cologne and again in 1442 in an ordinance of the Chapter General when Dom Eustache Guisson, vicar of Gosnay, described a notable difference between the ceremonies of Gosnay and of Bruges and asked that Gosnay should follow Bruges. Dom Herman Steenen was vicar of Saint-Anne de Bruges and the houses were near enough to each other for them to have met (*Rituel cartusien* 9; Devaux 32; Marks 303; Gaillard communication; Gaillard 8).

According to the *Rituel Cartusien*, 1986, the existing documents which prove the conferring of the particular insignia are as follows:

- First, the rituals of the consecration of the charterhouses of Gosnay (middle of the fifteenth century, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS Latin 1437) and of Bruges (end of the fifteenth century, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, MS 8245). As I have pointed out, this manuscript is not from Bruges. There are also three more manuscripts from Gosnay, identical in this respect to MS Latin 1437: Bibliothèque nationale, MS Latin 1438; end of the fifteenth / beginning of the sixteenth century; Douai MS 569, middle sixteenth century; Valenciennes, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 140 (133), middle sixteenth century.
- Second, the report of the Cardinal of Norfolk (1678), intended to be presented to Rome to defend the Carthusian usage before the Congregation of Rites (meeting on 19 April 1687). (The Cardinal of Norfolk had been appointed to investigate the discrepancy in the ceremonies in the Carthusian order.)
- Third, after 1689, all the Carthusian rituals of the consecration of the virgins included the conferring of the stole (*Rituel cartusien* 12).

The four Gosnay manuscripts containing the consecration rite can be described as follows:

- Valenciennes, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 140 (133). The manuscript is not notated, but provides all the texts for the chants sung during the rite. According to the first paragraph, it had been translated from Latin into French. Titles of prayers and chants are given in Latin, but for the rest it is completely in French. The rubrics are much more complete than in the other manuscripts. According to a colophon at the end, in a later script, it had belonged to Sister Antoinette de Pronville, who lived in 1544. (This is probably the same person as Sister Catherine de Pronville, who died in 1578 According to Sélignac MS 45, which contains the archives of Mont-St-Marie de Gosnay.) It consists of thirty-five folios written in a Gothic script, plus two more folios in a different script at the end, containing a further description of the ceremony.
- Bibliothèque nationale, MS Latin 1437 is not dated, but also belonged to ‘Sister Antoinette de Pronville, nun of Gosnay’, according to the (later) colophon at the end. The manuscript is notated. It consists of forty-six folios. The rubrics are in French, but the texts of prayers and chants are in Latin.
- Bibliothèque nationale, MS Latin 1438 is also not dated, but according to the end colophon had belonged to Sister Jeanne Capette, who died in 1525. After her death it was given to Sister Lambarde du Bois, nun of Gosnay, who died in 1583. It is notated. It is written in a gothic script similar to Bibliothèque nationale, MS Latin 1437, but not the same. It contains the complete prayers and chants in Latin, although the rubrics are in French. It consists of forty-seven folios of original text, plus nine in a later, illegible handwriting. It contains an ex-libris of the seventeenth century on fol. 48v: ‘This book belongs to M. Antione Heron, tradesman of Senlis, and his wife tradeswoman of Paris who live at the little landing-stage of the red hat in Paris 1690.’
- Douai MS 569, which is notated, was written according to the end colophon in the same script as the rest of the manuscript, ‘pour dame franchoise de la haye’. The handwriting is not gothic, like the others, but *bâtarde*. It gives the prayers and chants in Latin, and the rubrics in French. It is a very small book, consisting of fifty-three folios.

According to Sélignac Ms 45 Sister Françoise de la Haye, entered Mont-Sainte-Marie de Gosnay towards 1531, appears in 1544 in a list of nuns in the register of revenues of the house, and died on 21 October 1571 after a long illness (377). She had also had in her possession an antiphonary, now Pleterje MS 4. Le Vasseur mentions that she was the daughter of the 'noble jehan de la haye, exuier', who promised to pay for his daughter an annual sum of forty livres. Sister Françoise died on 21 October 1571 after a long illness (22).

- The Brussels manuscript, MS 8245, is not notated. The rubrics are in Latin. The rite agrees in all respects with that of the Gosnay manuscripts. It is written in a small, almost illegible *bâtarde* in two columns. At the beginning of an index on fol. 1v of the manuscript, one finds 'Liber canonicorum regularium monasterii beatissimae virginis mariae in Korsendonck prope Turnhout. Hoc volumen scriptum est per fratrem Anthonium de Bergis.' It is a collection written by Antonius from Bergen-op-Zoom, in the Netherlands. The Canons Regular of St Augustine had much in common with the Carthusians, which explains their interest in a Carthusian rite. The rite of the consecration of the virgins appear on folios 285v–288v. Dom Devaux observes that apart from the addition of the three particular insignia, the rest of the ceremony conforms to the Pontificals then in use. I compared the rite as found in the Gosnay and Korsendonck manuscripts with that in the 1572 Roman Pontifical, published by Iuntas in Venice, because it was printed near to the period when these manuscripts were in use and because it was available to me in my university library. It is based on the edition of 1485 (66v–68r).

As is to be expected, the conferring of the additional insignia amplifies the ceremony. This can be seen when comparing the Gosnay manuscripts with the 1572 Pontifical: the antiphons *Transite ad me* and *Dexteram* are added. The text of the invitatory of the bishop, *Transite ad me* can be found in none of the manuscripts of Hesbert nor in the sources of the *Paléographie Musicale* of Solesmes.

It is a melody of the fourth mode on A, which is classified as 'Theme 29' by Gevaert in his catalogue of antiphon types (322). It appears for instance as 'Apud Dominum' in the *Liber Usualis* for Second Vespers at Christmas (412) and 'Confundantur' for Matins on Good Friday (699–700). The text of *Dexteram*, on

the contrary, can be found in the six manuscripts of the 'Cursus monastique' for the feast of St Agnes and it appears again in Hartker and Rheinau in the Common of Virgins. In the 'Cursus romain' it is ignored only by Compiègne and Monza. Bamberg, Ivrée and Vérone have it for St Agnes and Liège has it for the Common of Virgins. It appears for Matins in the Roman Breviary and in the Monastic Breviary for St Agnes until now. It can also be found in the Pontifical of Cambrai and Senlis for the consecration of the virgins, after the taking of the veil.

*Dexteram* is sung to the same melody as three other antiphons which have formed part of the ceremony since the twelfth century: *Ipsi sum desponsata*, *Induit me* and *Annulo suo*.

An important difference is that whereas the rite in the Roman Pontifical and in other Charterhouses for women consisted of a simple collation of insignia, immediately withdrawn, and never worn again, at Gosnay and Bruges the insignia conferred certain liturgical functions. According to a late correction to the Valenciennes manuscript, only the cross is taken back by the bishop but the nun kept the maniple and the stole (fol. 30r). At present the consecrated nuns carry the stole: to read the Gospel at Matins in the absence of a priest and to read the Gospel when washing the feet on Maundy Thursday; the Prioress assumes the stole when she accompanies the novices to the cell at the beginning of their noviciate, and for certain other similar ceremonies (*Rituel cartusien* 11).

The four Gosnay manuscripts are identical in their ordering of chants for the ceremony. The order is as follows: *Prudentes* is begun by the deacon, followed by the bishop, at the beginning of the rite. The bishop then calls the virgins by chanting the antiphon *Venite*, after lighting candles, which the virgins have in their hands. The virgins answer with *Et nunc sequimur*. This is repeated three times. The antiphon *Ancilla Christi* is sung by all the virgins together, followed by the responsory *Amo Christum*, with the verse, *Mel et lac*, sung by everybody together. Then follows the antiphon *Induit me Dominus*, sung by all together. After the preface the responsory *Veni electa mea*, is begun by the bishop and the choir then joins in. The antiphon, *Posuit signum*, is sung by the virgins on taking the veil. Then the antiphon, *Veni sponsa*, is sung by the bishop alone. The antiphon, *Ipsi sum desponsata*, is sung by one virgin when she accepts the crown. All the other crowned virgins then sing the antiphon, *Desponsari*. After the ring is put on her finger, the virgin sings the antiphon, *Anulo suo*, followed by the antiphon, *Transite ad me*, sung by the bishop alone. *Dextera meam*, antiphon, is sung by the virgin after receiving the maniple, the stole and the cross. The ceremony is concluded by all the virgins singing the responsory, *Regnum mundi*.

In comparing the Gosnay and Korsendonck manuscripts with the 1572 Pontifical, one finds that in the Pontifical *Prudentes* is used as at Gosnay, as antiphon of introduction, followed by the *Venite* which is sung to three different melodies, only one of which agrees with the Gosnay manuscripts. This is followed by *Et nunc sequimur*, as at Gosnay, but sung to a different melody. *Regnum mundi* is sung instead of *Ancilla Christi*, and the responsory *Veni electa me*, with verse *Audi filia*, instead of the responsory *Amo Christum*, with verse *Mel et lac* at Gosnay. *Ancilla Christi* is sung instead of the Gosnay *Induit me*. After the preface *Posuit signum* is sung. According to the Pontifical *Desponsari* is sung by the virgins on taking the crown, then they sing *Ipsi sum desponsata* to a completely different melody from the one in Gosnay. *Anulo suo* is sung by the virgin on accepting the ring, then the other virgins sing *Veni sponsa*. After being crowned the virgin sings *Induit me Dominus*. The virgins sing the antiphon *Ecce quod concupivi*, and later the antiphon *Mel et lac*. (The antiphon *Ecce quod concupivi* appears in only one of the Gosnay manuscripts, Latin MS 1437, at the end and in a later and very ugly script.)

Except where indicated above, the same chants have the same melodies in the sources. The melodies in the three notated Gosnay manuscripts agree in all respects, but the Pontifical shows many changes, none of importance, however. Some of the chants are notated in transposition.

In 1608 a commission of six members presided over by Cardinal del Monte was appointed to revise the Gregorian repertory (Turco 33). That resulted in the edition of the Gradual of 1614–15. The Pontifical was also revised. According to Metz this was the rite of the consecration of the virgins which Dom le Masson (Prior of the Grande Chartreuse, 1675–1703) adapted for all the Carthusian nuns (188). A difference between the houses appeared to him inadmissible and he decided to establish uniformity. He was of the opinion that the disappearance of the usage of the three insignia in the three houses neighbouring the Chartreuse was due solely to their negligence. Since 1689 therefore, the maniple, the stole and the silver or gold cross was conferred in the whole order in addition to the insignia conferred according to the Roman Pontifical.

The order partly kept its proper custom. The bond between the three insignia was later lost, and the maniple and cross were abandoned. The conferring of the stole remained, however.



There was therefore no official rite of the Consecration of the Virgins in the Carthusian order in the sixteenth century. The rite as practised at the houses of Flanders, Mont-Sainte-Marie de Gosnay and Saint-Anne de Bruges, differed considerably from the rite as practised elsewhere, not only in the addition of the stole, the maniple and the cross, but also in the addition of two chants and the order and melody of the chants. In the seventeenth century Dom le Masson made this the rule for the entire order. Although the rite has changed today, the essence of it remains.

## **NOTES**

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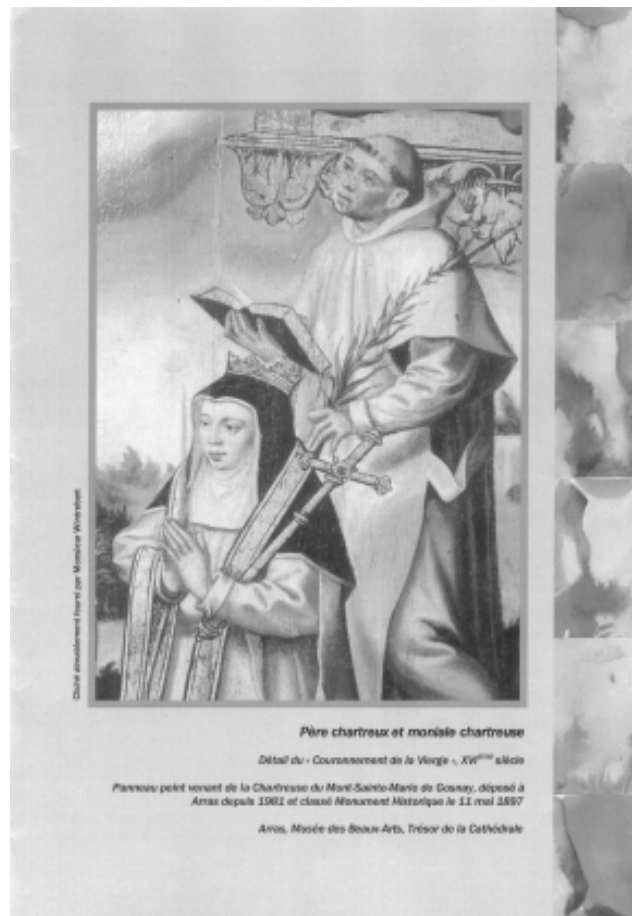


Figure 1: Detail from a unsigned 16th century painting called 'The Coronation of the Virgin' in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, section *Trésor de la Cathédrale*, in Arras, France. It shows the nun with all her insignia: the black veil (typical of the Carthusians), the ring and the crown, as well as the maniple (on her right arm) the stole and the large cross. A Carthusian priest is standing behind her. It is part of a panel which had originally been in the Charterhouse of Mont-Sainte-Marie de Gosnay. Carthusians generally did not sign their art work. (From the programme of the '1er Congrès International d'Archeologie Cartusienne' held by the Université d'Artois at the Chartreuse du Val-Saint-Esprit in Gosnay from 22–25 2006)



Figure 2: Two pages from the Douai manuscript, showing the antiphon 'Dexteram meam' which is sung by the virgin after receiving the maniple, the stole and the cross.