

MARCIN BIDER

THE EVOLUTION OF THE FEMALE DIACONATE
IN THE LEGISLATION OF GALLIC SYNODS
IN LATE CHRISTIAN ANTIQUITY

1. *STATUS QUAESTIONIS*

The primary source material for our study will be the canons promulgated by Gallic synods convened in the period between the 4th and 6th centuries, during which attempts were made, among others, to regulate the canon-law status of deaconesses in the Church.¹ The content of the discussed synodal canons along with the accompanying scholarly apparatus has been published in critical editions.² The

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¹ The article is a continuation of the Author's discussion of the idea of women deacons, the subjects which was first invoked in an article entitled *Początki instytucji diakonis w Kościele łacińskim w ujęciu historyczno-kanonicznym* [*Beginnings of the institution of deaconesses in the Latin Church. A historical-canonical perspective*], published in *Roczniki Nauk Prawnych* 26, no. 4 (2016): 137–61. The Author wishes to express his thanks to Rev. Prof. Dr. Hab. Marek Starowieyski for his remarks and valuable notes shared with the Author during the writing of the text and for allowing the latter to use the bibliographical resources gathered in the Patrology Department of the Metropolitan Seminary of the Archdiocese of Warsaw.

² Notably, among the older sources we find the following works: Ch.J. HEFELE, *HISTOIRE DES Conciles d'après les documents originaux*, vol. 2, bk. 1–2. Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1908. The classic sources include: *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, ed. C. Munier, vol. 148 (Tvrnholti: Brepols, 1963), and *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, edited by C. de Clercq, vol. 148A (Tvrnholti: Brepols, 1963). Among the more recent publications

chronological dating of the synods will be consistent with the findings of two Polish researchers, A. Baron and H. Pietras. Scholars in general also have at their disposal the results of comprehensive research in the history and course of Spanish and Gallic synods in the respective period;³ among the many issues addressed by the synods of that era are also those concerning directly matters related to deaconesses.⁴ The

we find *Monumenta Germaniae Historica inde ab anno Christi quingentesimo usque ad annvm millesimum et quingentesimum edidit societas aperiendis fontibus rervm germanicarum medii aevi legum, Legum Sectio III, Concilia*, vol. 1, *Concilia Aevi Merovingici* (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1893), covering the canons of the synods convened during the Merovingian era, in the years 511–695. Also, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, as part of the collection *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianaum* (vol. 119), published a multi-volume work entitled *I canoni dei conicili della Chiesa antica*, and within its volume 2 entitled *I Concili latini*, part 1 entitled *I Concili Gallici*; and in 2011 (vol. 122 of the collection) *I canoni dei conicili della Chiesa antica*, within its volume 2, part 2 entitled *Concili latini*, edited by P. Pellegrini. The Author also has access to four volumes published in Polish along with the original versions of synodal resolutions: *Acta Synodalia. Od 50 do 381, Synody i kolekcje praw*, ed. A. Baron and H. Pietras, vol. 1 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2006); *Acta Synodalia. Od 381 do 431 roku. Synody i kolekcje praw*, ed. A. Baron and H. Pietras, vol. 4 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2010); *Acta Synodalia. Od 431 do 504 roku, Synody i kolekcje praw*, ed. A. Baron and H. Pietras, vol. 6 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2011); *Acta Synodalia. Od 506 do 553 roku. Synody i kolekcje praw*, ed. A. Baron and H. Pietras, vol. 8 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2014). As regards the Spanish synods in the period under review, the valuable sources are: *Concilios Visigóticos e Hispano-Romanos*, ed. J. Vives (Barcelona–Madrid: Instituto Enrique Flórez, 1963); *Concilios galos. Concilios hispanos: Concilios galos. Concilios hispanos: primera parte*, ed. F.R. Barbero and G.M. Díez (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto Enrique Flórez, 1984); and within the series *I canoni dei concili della Chiesa antica*, volume 2 entitled *I Concili latini*, part 3 entitled *I Concili Spagnoli*, ed. F. Gori and J. Vilella (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2013). Interesting contributions concerning the Gallic synods can be found in *Dizionario dei Consili*, ed. P. Palazzini and G. Morelli, vols. 1–4 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1963–1967); and in J.M. LABOA, *Atlante dei concili e dei sinodi nella storia della Chiesa* (Milan: Jaca Book, Rome: Città Nuova, 2008), 48–51, which include a description of the synods convened in Gaul in the 4th century, among others.

³ O. PONTAL analysed the legislation of the Merovingian synods convened between 511 and 714 in her *Die Synoden im Merowingerreich* (Paderborn–Munich–Vienna–Zurich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1986). Another good source of information concerning the history of legislation contained in the Spanish synods is the work by J. ORLANDIS and D. RAMOS-LISSON *Die Synoden auf der Iberischen Halbinsel bis zum Einbruch des Islam (711)* (Paderborn–Munich–Vienna–Zurich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1981). Also, the Author has access to W. WÓJCIK, “Początki instytucji prawa kanonicznego na Zachodzie w uchwałach synodów Państwa Merowingów,” *Prawo Kanoniczne* 32, nos. 1–2 (1989): 157–71; J. LIMMER, *Konzilien und Synoden im spätantiken Gallien von 314 bis 696 nach Christi Geburt*, vols. 1–2 (Frankfurt am Main–Berlin–Bern–Brussels–New York–Oxford–Vienna: Peter Lang, 2004); K. BURCZAK, *Prawo azylu w ustawodawstwie synodów galijskich V–VII wieku* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2005); M.E. MOORE, “The Spirit of the Gallican Councils, A.D. 314–506,” *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum* 39 (2007): 1–52; G.I. HALFOND, *The Archaeology of Frankish Church Councils, AD 511–768* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2010), 159–84.

⁴ R. GRAYSON, *Il ministero della donna nella chiesa antica* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1974), 187–99; A.G. MARTIMORT, *Deaconesses. A Historical Study* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 190–201;

presented article will use a historical-legal method in an attempt to present the evolution of the female diaconate in synodal legislation. Our considerations will focus on the synods convened in the period from the fourth to the sixth centuries since this period was formative for the institution of female diaconate, and ecclesiastical legislation in the centuries to come would make reference to them. The chronological dating of Christian antiquity in ecclesiastical historiography is captured in various ways. For church historians, and to some extent canonists, the determination when the era of antiquity ended and when the ecclesiastical Middle Ages began presents the greatest difficulty. According to some scholars, the breakthrough moment arrived with the death of Pope Saint Gregory the Great († 604). Others believed that the landmark date was the convocation of the Second Council in Trullo in 692 or the establishment of the Papal State in 754. Following M. Banaszak's idea,⁵ the Author adopts the year of Pope Gregory's death as the landmark date.

2. THE HISTORICAL SETTING

The synodal sessions of Spanish and Gallic bishops, convened from the 4th to 6th centuries, addressed typically issues of discipline through the promulgated canons. The historical events taking place in the fifth century, in many respects connected with the movement of various peoples, ultimately lead to the settlement of three ethnic groups in the territory of Gaul: Visigoths, Burgundians, and Franks. The breakthrough moment in this historical period was undoubtedly the baptism of Clovis († 511), king of the Franks. The dating of this momentous event in the history of Gaul is far from uniform as scholars are still debating the precise chronology (the proposed period extending from 486 to 507/508). As a result of long-term social and political changes, there emerged a division into the Frankish-Catholic north and

S.F. WEMPLE, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 136–41; J. YSEBAERT, "The Deaconess in the Western Church," in *Eulogia. Instrumenta patristica*, edited by G. J. M. Bartelink, A. Hilhorst, and C.H. Kneepkens, vol. 24 (In abbatia S. Petri, 1991), 421–36; R. BARCELLONA, "Lo spazio declinato al femminile nei concili gallici fra IV e VI secolo," in *Munera amicitiae. Studi di storia e cultura sulla tarda antichità offerti a Salvatore Pricoco*, edited by R. Barcellona and T. Sardella (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2003), 25–49; C. URSO, "La donna e la Chiesa nel medioevo storia di un rapporto ambiguo," *Annali della facoltà di Scienze della formazione Università degli studi di Catania* 4 (2005): 79–82; R. SALEJDAK, "Diaconato femminile nella Chiesa antica," *Teologia i Człowiek. Kwartalnik Wydziału Teologicznego UMK* 25, no. 1 (2014): 37–40.

⁵ M. BANASZAK, *Starożytność*, vol. 1 of *Historia Kościoła katolickiego*. (Warsaw: Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, 1986), 9–10.

the Arian-Visigothic south.⁶ Synodal canons promulgated in this era in Spain and Gaul do not provide substantial evidence of the ministry of deaconesses or women in general in the Church of that day. The span of time between the Synod of Nîmes (394–396) and the Second Synod of Tours in 567 is nearly 200 years. From that period, only six canons promulgated by six synods have survived, which addressed the issue of deaconesses in different degrees. The list of terms used by the fathers of individual synods with respect to our research is not too long as we find merely several designations in the synodal acts such as: *ministerium leviticum*, *diakona*, *diaconissa*, *benedictio diaconatus*, *benedictio diaconalis*.⁷ The preliminary dossier on deaconesses is complemented by the synodal mentions of widows and consecrated widows, without whom the intellectual panorama of views presented by the church elites of the time with regard to women's role in ecclesial circles would not be complete.

3. THE SYNOD OF NÎMES (394–396)

The first mention of women deacons in the Gallic life of the Church is found in the canons of the synod in Nîmes (394–396). The synod was convened in the city of Nîmes, located in the province *Galia Narbonensis*. About 20 bishops came to attend, and on October 1, 396 their joint effort resulted in the promulgation of seven canons, of which the prescript of canon 2 was *expressis verbis* directed against the custom permitting women to fulfil the office of deaconess. The bishops, gathered “ad tollenda ecclesiarum scandala discessionemque sedandam, pacis studio,” probably under the influence of hearsay information derived from not very reliable sources (“a quibusdam suggestum est”), determined that in some locations (“nescio quo loco”) women were appointed female deacons (“in ministerium feminae leviticum videantur adsumptae”), which in the fathers' opinion was indecent (“indicens est”) and against the common practice (“contra rationem”). Also, the synodal fathers concluded that such practices were against the apostolic tradition (“contra apostolicam disciplinam”).⁸ The issuance of the ban must have been slightly earlier, perhaps in the course of a previous synod, whose acts have not survived until our time because the synod in Nîmes was of the opinion that the practices were still

⁶ See BURCZAK, *Prawo azylu*, 12–17.

⁷ See BARCELLONA, “Lo spazio declinato,” 29n8; LIMMER, *Konzilien*, 85; MOORE, “The Spirit,” 21–22.

⁸ See CONCILIUM NEMAUSENSE [396], *can. 2*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 4:69; *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, 50; cf. YSEBAERT, *The Deaconess*, 428–9.

observed in secrecy in certain places.⁹ A. Baron, on the basis of the synodal canon in question, concluded that for the synodal fathers the sheer thought of a woman being ordained deaconess was so indecent that it naturally undermined the very idea of ordination.¹⁰ The meaning of the term *ministerium leviticum* was never precisely expounded, but it is likely to directly relate to the female diaconate. It also appears that the term *ministerium leviticum* became so synonymous with the institution of the female diaconate for the synodal fathers that they decided not to include the very word “deaconess” in the commented canon. To fulfil the requirements of academic honesty, we should note that scholars are not unanimous about the meaning of this term. One group advocates the opinion that the term *ministerium leviticum*¹¹ should be viewed against the background of the presbyterate of women,¹² which the Montanists held in high esteem.¹³ The other group of researchers claim that the

⁹ A. BARON, “Kobieta w świadectwach Kościoła starożytnego,” in *Kobieta w Kościele: materiały z sesji ekumenicznej zorganizowanej przez Międzywydziałowy Instytut Ekumenii i Dialogu Uniwersytetu Papieskiego Jana Pawła II w Krakowie oraz Oddział Krakowski Polskiej Rady Ekumenicznej, 18 listopada 2008 roku*, ed. Ł. Kamykowski, Z.J. Kijas, and A. Napiórkowski (Kraków: Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II. Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2011), 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹ From this period originates a synodal condemnation of women who aspire to participate in the broadly conceived service at the altar: „the nomination of the so-called presbyters from among women should not be done in the Church,” see CONCILIUM LAODICENUM IN FRYGIA, *can. 11, Acta Synodalia* 4:112. Likewise, this same synod forbade women to be ordained to the presbyterate in c. 44 (see *ibid.*, 117). These condemnations were later echoed in an opinion formulated by Master Gratian: „Mulieres quae apud Grecos presbiterae appellantur, apud nos autem viduae, seniores, univirae et matricuriae appellantur, in ecclesia tamquam ordinatas constitui non debere” (c. 19, D. XXXII).

¹² BARCELONA, “Lo spazio declinato,” 29.

¹³ Women in branches of the Montanist movement were likely to fulfil even priestly or episcopal roles, they were allowed to consecrate the Eucharistic gifts and baptise. An interesting case was noted by Bishop Firmilian of Cappadocian Caesarea, in his letter written in 256 CE and addressed to Saint Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage. In it he mentions the activity of a woman who lived locally over 20 years before. She purported to be a prophetess, she would sink into ecstasy, and she endeavoured to consecrate bread and wine or celebrate baptism. She gained enormous recognition among the local people, including certain members of the local clergy, who manifested trust in her work, see CYPRIANUS, *Epistula 75, 10: Opera omnia*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, ed. W. Hartel, vol. 3, bk. 2 (Vindobonae: Apud C. Geroldi Filivm Bibliopolam Academiae, 1871), 816–18; Polish translation in: *Cyprian bp Kartaginy, Listy* (Warsaw: Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, 1969), 288. The representatives of the Great Church, unlike their adversaries, who originated from circles containing Montanists and other heterodox movements, demonstrated an outlook which denied women any rights whatsoever to proclaim the Word of God, administer baptism, „celebrate” the Eucharist, therefore the right to pursue ministerial priesthood. It seems that the most restrictive theology in this regard was the one taught by ecclesiastical writers of the 4th century AD. Their doctrine was founded mainly upon the prohibitions formulated by Saint Paul, who denied women the right to speak and teach at gatherings, TERTULLIANUS, “De praescriptione haereticorum” (41, 5) in *Qvinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani opera I:*

term *ministerium leviticum* should be interpreted as women's liturgical ministry at the altar but only as part of female diaconate.¹⁴

Before we move on to present the lexicographic sources, which will serve as the intellectual background for the above-mentioned views, it seems perfectly justified to emphasise that the diaconate of women, especially in the West as opposed to the East, had hardly any liturgical implications.¹⁵ The extant sources as well as R. Salejda's findings permit a generalisation that the roles of deaconesses in the West were limited to the care of unwell women, accompanying them during baptism, instructing neophytes, ensuring that women were well received in the church community during liturgical celebrations, serving as links between women and the male members of the church hierarchy, informing the latter of women's spiritual and material needs. In contrast, deaconesses would assist neither presbyters nor bishops while these conducted liturgical rituals. Neither did they support presbyters in the administration of the Eucharist.¹⁶ Deaconesses, who in some measure carried out the liturgical functions in the antiquity, were now to be seen only in the sectarian circles of the Montanists.¹⁷ The inclusion of the passage about *ministerium leviticum* was a sort of exception to this principle, not only throughout Gaul. We come across a similar case in southern Italy, though, in a letter written in 494 and addressed "ad

Opera catholica. Adversus Marcionem, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, ed. E. Dekkers, J.G.P. Borleffs, R. Willems, R.F. Refoulé, G.F. Diercks, and A. Kroymann, vol. 1 (Turnholt: Typographi Brepols, 1954), 221. That may have been influenced by other factors, such as the legal status of women and their exclusion from public offices, C. MAZZUCCO, "Kobieta a chrześcijaństwo w pierwszych trzech wiekach," *Salvatoris Mater* 11, no. 2 (2009): 37. Prophecies delivered by these women strengthened their role in Montanistic communities, see J. SŁOMKA, *Nowe prorocтво. Historia i doktryna montanizmu*, *Studia Antiquitatis Christianae. Series Nova* 4 (Katowice: Księgarnia św. Jacka, 2007), 72–74.

¹⁴ Among the works which today are regarded as classics and which address the canonical conditions for the availability of the ordination of women, we should mention the following works: P.H. LAFONTAINE, "Le sexe masculin, condition de l'accession aux ordres aux IV^e et V^e siècles," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 31 (1961), 37–182; H. van der MEER, *Sacerdozio della donna? Saggio di storia della teologia* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1971), 119–22; J. GALOT, *La donna e i ministeri nella Chiesa* (Assisi: Cittadella, 1973), 24–46; and R. GRAYSON, *Il ministero*, 201–2. Scholars uniformly emphasise that women in the ancient Church never took part in priestly ministry. An exception to this was the diaconate of women. However, there are cases in ancient history attested only by fragmentary sources which indicate that women would attempt to enter the domain reserved only to presbyters.

¹⁵ W. MYSZOR, "Rola kobiety w chrześcijaństwie II i III wieku. Wdowy, dziewice i diakonisy," in *Kobieta w starożytności chrześcijańskiej. Materiały Sympozjum patrystycznego 22.10.1998*, *Studia Antiquitatis Christianae, Series Nova*, ed. I. Salamowicz-Górska, T. Skibiński, and S. Strękowski, vol. 14 (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kardynała Wyszyńskiego, 1999), 18.

¹⁶ SALEJDAK, "Diaconato femminile," 40–41.

¹⁷ M.G. BIANCO, "Diaconesse," in *Nuovo dizionario patristico e di antichità cristiane*, ed. A. di Bernardino, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (A–E) (Geneva–Milan: Marietti, 2006), col. 1385.

universos episcopos per Lucaniam, Brutios et Siciliam constitutos” by Pope Saint Gelasius I († 496). He used the phrase “sacris altaribus ministrare” in the context of women’s liturgical service at the altar. He writes: “nihilominus impatienter audivimus, tantum divinarum rerum subiisse despectum, ut feminae sacris altaribus ministrare firmentur, cunctaque non nisi virorum famulatu deputata sexum cui non competunt, exhibere.”¹⁸ The limited scope of this study does not permit this case to be analysed with more depth, which *nota bene* will hopefully be give more academic scrutiny in Polish. At this stage, we will content ourselves only by saying that G. Otranto, a discerning explorer of Gelasius’ writings, believed that what the Pope had on mind was the female presbyterate while addressing his stern admonitions to his disobedient bishops.¹⁹

The following questions arise then: were the male and female diaconates regarded in antiquity as two varieties of the same church rank? Did deaconesses participate in ministerial priesthood? In the Author’s opinion, the female diaconate, which had a distinct theological-canonical structure, was not involved in sacramental priesthood. Leaving aside the years-long debate among biblical scholars, we must stress that Levites counted as priests in the Old Testament era (Dt. 18:1; Jsh. 3:3 and 8:33). Only later, in Book of Ezekiel, do we come across a distinction between Levites and priests (Ezk. 44:6–9, 13–14; 1 Ch. 6:33–34). It seems that the inferior status of Levites originated in the times of king Josiah’s reform, when the places of worship which were located out of Jerusalem and where, supposedly, Levites conducted worship and wherefrom they derived income were demolished. In the wake of this reform, Levites were deprived of their influence and suffered privation. As the Bible recounts, they never attained the fullness of priesthood and carried out auxiliary tasks in the temple.²⁰ Due to the limited chronological scope of this study, it omits the deliberations of ancient Christian authors who were active in the first three centuries, concerning the theological-canonical influence of Levites.²¹ We shall move on to the period starting at the turn of the fifth century, in which the synodal fathers of Nîmes were active.

¹⁸ A. THIEL, *Epistolae romanorum pontificum genuinae et quae ad eos scriptae sunt a s. Hilario usque ad Pelagium II. Ex schedis clar. Petri Coustantii aliisque editis, adhibitis praestantissimis codicibus Italiae et Germania* (Hildesheim–Zurich–New York: Georg Olms, 1974), 376–7.

¹⁹ G. OTRANTO, “Note sul sacerdozio femminile nell’antichità in margine a una testimonianza di Gelasio I,” *Vetera Christianorum* 19 (1982): 345.

²⁰ M. HAUKE, “Il diaconato femminile: osservazioni sul recente dibattito,” *NOTITIAE. Commentarii ad nuntia et studia de re liturgica* 37, no. 5 (2001): 207.

²¹ J.A. SOGGIN, “Lewici,” in *Słownik wiedzy biblijnej*, ed. B.M. Metzger and M.D. Coogan (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Vocatio, 1997), 435.

A. Blaise²² presented a view that the adjective *levitalis*,²³ appearing in the form *levitaris*, *leviticalis*²⁴ or *leviticus*, comes from the noun *levita* (Ex. 6:25; Dt. 17:9) and is translated into Polish as *minister kultu* [minister of cult] or simply as *duchowny* [cleric]. For this reason, the adjective *leviticus* became a proper name assigned in a biblical book in the translation of the Bible by Saint Hieronymus of Stridon († 419). Moreover, Blais was of the opinion that the term *leviticus* was used as an adjectival attribute denoting affiliation with the Old Testament generation of Levi, the diaconate²⁵ or priesthood.²⁶

The term *leviticae dignitas*, used in the context of the diaconal ministry of Saint Lawrence, appears in Homily 24 of *In natalis S. Laurentii levitae et martyris I*, ascribed to Saint Maximus of Turin (4/5 century),²⁷ published by J.P. Migne.²⁸ The term *leviticus*, featured in the writings of Sidonius,²⁹ appeared later in the liturgical texts, and in the subsequent centuries found its way into canonical terminology, thanks to *Concordia* by Master Gratian (12th century).³⁰

²² A. BLAISE, *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens* (Turnhout: Éditions Brepols S.A., 1954), 492–3.

²³ See C. du Fresne du CANGE, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, ed. L. Favre, vol. 5 (Graz: Akademische Druck, 1954), 77. The adjectival form *levitalis* occurs in the writings of Johannes Diaconus Neapolitanus (9/10th centuries) (see A. BLAIS, *Lexicon Latinitatis Medii Aevi: praesertim ad res ecclesiasticas investigandas pertinens* (Turnhout: Typographi Brepols, 1975), 533.

²⁴ J.F. NIERMEYER and C. van de KIEFT, *Mediae latinitatis lexicon minus*, vol. 1 (A–L) (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 786.

²⁵ E. PÉREZ RODRÍGUEZ, «Leuiticus, -a, -um,» in *Lexicon latinitatis medii aevi Regni Legionis (s. VIII-1230) imperfectum*, ed. M. Pérez (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 422; NIERMEYER, *Mediae latinitatis lexicon*, 786; *Novum Glossarium mediae latinitatis ab anno DCCC usque ad annum MCC edendum curavit consilium academiarum consociatarum huic fasciculo conficiendo praefuit*, ed. F. Blatt (Hafniae: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1957), col. 105–6.

²⁶ See E. FORCELLINI, *Lexicon Totius Latinitatis*, ed. I. Furlanetto, vol. 3 (Patavii: Typis Seminarii, 1940), 67; BLAISE, *Lexicon Latinitatis*, 533; J. Sondel, *Słownik łacińsko-polski dla prawników i historyków* (Kraków: Universitas, 1997), 596. A similar view was presented by F. Arnaldi, who believed that the noun *levita* in the broad sense meant a priest, F. ARNALDI and P. SMIRAGLIA, *Latinitatis italicae medii aevi lexicon [saec. V ex.-saec. XI in.]*, 2nd ed. (Tavarnuzze: SISMEL, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2001), 275.

²⁷ J. MACHIELSEN, *Opera Homiletica, Pars. A et Pars B*, vol. 1B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1990), 865–66, no. 5806.

²⁸ *Sancti Maximi Episcopi Taurinensis opera omnia*. Patrologiae cursus completus. Series latina, ed. J.P. Migne, vol. 57 (Parisii: Apud J.P. Migne Editorem, 1862), col. 409.

²⁹ “Vindicium necessarium meum, virum religiosum et leviticae dignitati, quam nuper indeptus est, accommodatissimum,” see *Gai Sollii Apollinaris Sidonii epistulae et carmina recensvit et emendavit Christianvs Lvetjohann*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores Antiquissimi, ed. C. Lütjohann, vol. 9 (München: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1985), 78, 2; [Let me recommend Vindicium, my relative, to you as a religious man, extremely fit for the priestly dignity which he was conferred recently]; for Polish translation, see SYDONIUSZ Apollinary, *Listy i wiersze*, trans. and ed. M. Brożek, introduction by M. Brożek (Kraków: Nakładem Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności, 2014), 86.

³⁰ Cf. for example: c. 6, D. LXXVII; c. 4, D. LXXXV; c. 20, C. XXIII, q. 8; c. 3, D. LXVIII; c. 29, D. L; c. 13, D. XXIII; c. 14, D. XXIII; c. 1, D. XXXII (after *Wortkonkordanz zum Decretum Gratiani*, ed. T. Reuter and G. Silagi, vol. 3 (H–N), Munich: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1990), 25–57.

According to Pope Saint Leo the Great († 460), bishops, presbyters and deacons constituted *ordo sacerdotalis*, although in his letters he drew a distinction between *sacerdotes* (bishops and presbyters), *levitae*³¹ (deacons and subdeacons) and *clerici* (the remaining servants).³² When writing about deacons, Hieronymus of Stridon († 419) used the term *sacerdotium*.³³ Saint Benedict († 547) and Saint Gregory the Great († 604) wrote about *ordo sacerdotalis*, which encompassed probably the three orders, including the diaconate.³⁴ Pope Gregory himself used the term *levita* as a synonym for *diaconus*.³⁵ In the legislation of the ancient synods, a tendency is visible to make terminological distinctions between *levita* and *presbyter*.³⁶

Ancient literature offers two perspectives regarding diaconate. Some authors advocated the view that the diaconate formed part of priesthood, while others represented a different perspective. Both of the theological and legal trends, in a sense, were confirmed by the tradition of the Old Testament. For that reason, a presbyter in the general sense and a deacon in the strict sense would be called a Levite, without a major distinction between the two, and the offices they held were referred to as *levitica dignitas* or *leviticum ministerium*; additionally, a deaconess enjoyed the honourable title of *levitissa*.³⁷

The terminology of the scholastic school, whose eminent representative was above all Saint Thomas Aquinas († 1274), made a significant contribution to the treasury of theological literature, narrowing down its terminology. The scholastic authors no longer called the deacon a priest because he was not involved in *ordo sacerdotalis* but in *ordo ministrantium*.³⁸

However, it would be legitimate in this research context to view the term *ministerium leviticum* from a liturgical perspective. A. Blais believed that a minister is both a presbyter (priest) and a deacon (Eph. 4:12; 2 Cor. 6:4; Rom. 11:13), although

³¹ The term *levita* was identified in the medieval Latin literature with the terms “Levite”, “deacon” or “priest” (*Novum Glossarium*, col. 104–5).

³² LEONIS MAGNI, Letters 12:5 and 14:3–4 in *Sancti Leonis Magni Romani Pontificis opera omnia*, Patrologiae cursus completus. Series latina, ed. J.P. Migne, vol. 54 (Parisii: Apud J.P. Migne Editorem, 1846), col. 652 and 672–3. However, he distinguished *sacerdos* in Letter 9,1 from *levita* as follows: „sacerdotali vel levitica ordinatio celebretur” (see idem, col. 625).

³³ See HAUKE, *Il diaconato femminile*, 209–210n55.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, 209n56, and 210n57.

³⁵ P. PELLEGRINI, “L’«ordo clericorum» in Gregorio Magno: identità, rappresentazione, storia,” *Annali di studi religiosi. Centro per le scienze religiose in Trento* 4 (2003), 529n127.

³⁶ CONCILIIUM ROMANUM [385], *can. 7*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 4:39; CONCILIIUM CARTHAGINENSE [16 Iunii 390], *can. 2*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 4:48.

³⁷ BLAISE, *Lexicon Latinitatis*, 533.

³⁸ *Divi Thomae Aquinatis ordinis praedicatorum Doctoris Angelici a Leone XIII P.M. gloriose regnante scholarum omnium catholicarum patroni coelestis renunciati «Summa contra Gentiles» libri quatuor* IV, 75 (Rome: Ex Typographia Forzani et socii, 1888), 681.

in liturgical texts this term did not appear as a technical word denoting consecration but rather as a kind of literary expression with a biblical connotation.³⁹ A. Baron believes that the term *ministerium leviticum* literarily stood for both Levitic and priestly ministry, that is the ministry of the altar.⁴⁰

Under analysis, the content of canon 2 of the Nîmes synod implies that the synodal fathers took a different route than the practice of the Eastern Church, where the institution of deaconess was known. Although it remains debatable whether in the fourth century communication between the individual regions of the ancient Church was efficient enough to permit intense exchange of theological thought between the eastern and western provinces. Since the determination of the degree of theological dependency of the Western Church on the Eastern Church goes beyond the scope of this study, at this stage of our considerations it will suffice to say that this relationship was probably rather limited.

The synod, convoked in order to make peace in the Gallic episcopacy which was being ripped by Priscillianist arguments, in canon 1 identified strangers from the East who purported to be presbyters and deacons (“presbyteros et diaconos se esse fingunt”) as representatives of this sect.⁴¹ Priscillianists encouraged their supporters to practice individual reading and allegorical interpretation of the Holy Bible. In their teaching, the followers of this path used also apocryphas and they held women in the Church in high regard, being supporters of prophetism. Problems associated with the followers of the Priscillian heresy were not only limited to the territory of Gaul but must have been also discernible in Spain if it was decided to hold a synod in Saragossa in 380 with the participation of twelve bishops, during which this heresy was condemned.⁴² On October 4, 380, the Synod of Saragossa promulgated

³⁹ A. BLAISE, *Le vocabulaire latin des principaux thèmes liturgiques* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1966), 503.

⁴⁰ BARON, “Kobieta w świadectwach,” 50.

⁴¹ After a trial in Trier, Priscilian († 385) was sentenced to death, and the execution took place in 385. He had started teaching in about 370 in the vicinity of Córdoba. Sulpitius Severus, who was regarded as the main source of information about Priscillianism, wrote that Priscillian had become a cause of general confusion in the Spanish Church, see SULPICJUSZ SEWER, “Aneks 1 (Dialog III, 12–13): Powstanie i rozwój pryseclianizmu,” in *Pisma o św. Marcinie z Tours* (Tyniec–Kraków: Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów, 1995), 191–8; cf. CONCILIIUM NEMAUSENSE [396], in *Acta Synodalia*, 4:69nA.

⁴² J. de CALAZANS, L.R. da SILVA, “O priscilianismo nas atas do Concílio de Zaragoza de 380: reflexões sobre a construção do campo religioso,” *Brathair* 12, not. 1 (2012): 45–52; R. SILVA, “Priscilianismo,” in *Diccionario de historia eclesiastica de España*, ed. Q. Aledea Vaquero, T. Martin Martinez, and J. Vives Gatell, vol. 1 (Madrid: Instituto Enrique Florez, 1973), 2027–2028; M. SOTOMAYOR Y MURO, “La Iglesia en la España Romana,” in *La Iglesia en la España Romana y visigoda (siglos I–VIII)*, vol. 1 of *Historia de la Iglesia en España*, ed. R. Garcia-Villoslada (Madrid: Biblioteca de Auctores Cristianos, de la Editorial Catolica, S.A., 1979), 238–41; G. MARTÍNEZ, “Zaragoza, 380 (Concilios nacionales y provinciales),” in *Diccionario de historia eclesiastica de España*, ed. Q. Aledea Vaquero, T. Martin Martinez, and J. Vives Gatell, vol. 1 (Madrid: Instituto Enrique Florez, 1973), 575–6.

eight canons.⁴³ Following the idea of Saint Paul (see 1 Cor 14:34–35; 1 Tim 2:12; Tit 2:3–4), the synodal fathers condemned in canon 1 the custom of admitting women to public meetings where they would teach in all probability.⁴⁴ Canon 1 forbade women to meet other men, either to read or hear readings. Women were to be banned from common lessons and the company of strange men. The synodal fathers prescribed that lessons conducted by women be attended preferably by women so that they would teach or learn. It should be recalled that in Trier Priscillian admitted to taking part in indecent meetings with women. In this context, the treatment of Priscillianists manifested by the canon of Zaragoza is absolutely legitimate.⁴⁵

However, the canons laid down at the Zaragoza Council, or perhaps also in other Spanish synods of the time, lack any references to women's aspirations to be included in *ordo diaconarum*, which also implies the absence of the term 'deaconess' from the doctrine index presented by Vives.⁴⁶ At any rate, the synod forbade all women to take part in lessons in Christianity should they be run in the presence of strange men. A. Baron claims that what the synodal fathers probably intended to ban practices involving visiting strange men under the pretext of or with the real intention of having theological discussions. The synod of Zaragoza prescribed women to invite only other women for that purpose.⁴⁷

⁴³ The principal reason for convening the episcopal synod in Zaragoza was a specific case involving a Lusitanian-Gallic sect, against which the majority of the canons were directed. The eight surviving canons have an ascetic character. Did the fathers manifest their condemnation, at least in the verbal form? Even if such condemnation or a judgement had not been announced, the eight preserved canons had enough binding power with respect to the new sect because in the purely ascetic aspect they pointed out moral perversions which went beyond the custom or church guidelines, *Concilios Visigóticos*, 16–18; cf. K. SORDYL, *Pryscyljanizm. Teologia i historia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, Księżyca Jezuitów, 2015), 67–70.

⁴⁴ "Ut mulieres omnes ecclesiae catholicae fideles a virorum alienorum lectione et coetibus separantur, vel ad ipsas legentes aliae studio vel docendi vel discendi convenient, quoniam hoc et apostolus iubet. Ab universis episcopis dictum est: Anathema futuros qui hanc concilii sententiam non observaverint", see „Concilio de Zaragoza I: a. 380,” in *Concilios Visigóticos*, 16; CONCILIIUM CAESARUGUSTANUM [380], *can. 1*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 1:293; cf. CALAZANS and SILVA, „O priscilianismo,” 47–48; D. RAMOS-LISSON, „Los Concilios Hispánicos antes de Recaredo,” in *Historia de los Concilios de la España Romana e Visigoda*, ed. J. Orlandis and D. Ramos-Lissón, 23–159 (Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra, 1986), 73; J. de CALAZANS, *As dissidências cristãs e os «campos» político e religioso: um estudo comparativo do combate ao priscilianismo na península ibérica nos séculos IV e VI* (Rio de Janeiro: Universidade Estácio de Sá, 2014), 50–51; J.M. Fernández CANTÓN, *Manifestaciones Ascéticas en la Iglesia Hispano-Romana del Siglo IV* (León: Archivo Histórico Diocesano, 1962), 82.

⁴⁵ SORDYL, *Pryscyljanizm*, 67.

⁴⁶ *Concilios Visigóticos*, 543. Similarly, there is no mention of deaconesses in the index prepared by F. Gori and J. Vilella in *I canoni dei concili della Chiesa antica*, vol. 2, *I Concili latini*, bk. 3, *I Concili Spagnoli* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2013), 143.

⁴⁷ BARON, „Kobieta w świadectwach,” 37.

It is likely that the synodal fathers who were gathered at Nîmes, despite noticing the causal link between the widespread influences of Priscillianism and the practice of ordaining deaconesses, did not equate these two theological phenomena.

4. THE FIRST SYNOD OF ORANGE (441)

Evidently, the promulgation of the Synod of Nîmes did not bring lasting peace in church communities scattered around the lands of *Gallia Narborensis* since only fifty years later (AD 441) another synod was convened, this time in Orange, to gather 16 bishops. The synod addressed mainly disciplinary matters,⁴⁸ but the agenda included the institution of deaconesses, which the synod pronounced to be *omnimondis non ordinandae* without providing any legal or theological argumentation.⁴⁹ While issuing a ban on the ordination of deaconesses, the synod did not espouse the invalidity of their ordination. The bishops, apparently being reconciled with the Eastern practice of instituting deaconesses, resolved as follows to regulate the canonical status of those women: “si quae iam sunt, benedictioni quae populo impediuntur capita submittant.” The prescript of canon 25 (26) implies that deaconesses, during liturgical gatherings, must have imitated conduct which was proper to the clergy, who were likely to receive a blessing separately from the rest of the congregation or would not bow their heads for that ritual. At any rate, the synod ordered deaconesses to follow the routine of the faithful during liturgical gatherings; however, this conclusion does not help us at all to precisely determine the canonical status of deaconesses.⁵⁰

R. Gryson maintains that the synod of Orange must have meant widows⁵¹ who on the day of their profession would receive a solemn blessing, which was likely to be mistaken for the Eastern rite of ordaining deaconesses given the low liturgical and canonical awareness of the faithful.⁵² This seems all the more probable since

⁴⁸ CONCILIUM ARAUSICANUM [441], *can. 28 (29)*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 6:20; *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, 85–6; cf. LIMMER, *Konzilien*, 105; MOORE, *The Spirit*, 28–30.

⁴⁹ CONCILIUM ARAUSICANUM [441], *can. 25 (26)*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 6:20; *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, 84.

⁵⁰ BARCELLONA, “Lo spazio declinato,” 33n20.

⁵¹ R. METZ, “Vedova. Vedove,” in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, ed. G. Pelliccia and G. Rocca, vol. 9 (*Spir-Vez*) (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1997), col. 1781–1784.

⁵² GRYSO, *Il ministero*, 190; Barcellona presents an opposing view (“Lo spazio declinato,” 33n20). Detailed information on the liturgical ritual for the blessing of widows in Gaul is presented by G. RAMIS in “La benedición de las viudas en las liturgias occidentales” (*Ephemerides Liturgicae* 104 (1990), 162–72).

the next canon, 26 (27), addresses the question of widows.⁵³ The subsequent canons use the terms such as *diaconae* and *viduae*, which on no account means that the legislator intended to join the two subsequent canons with a logical link.⁵⁴ However, it seems hard to resist the temptation to claim that the institutions of the deaconess and widow became somewhat similar to each other.⁵⁵

While professing her faith, a widow did so in the privacy of a sacristy before a bishop. She would receive a widow's robe from him, a fact mentioned probably for the first time in the synodal legislation of Orange. A widow who broke her vows, or the one who disrespected her, would be justly condemned.⁵⁶ The private nature of the ritual of profession conducted in a sacristy by widows would exclude them from being ceremonially blessed during liturgical meetings later on, but scholars have not yet reached agreement upon that due to the scarcity of the surviving source materials. It is also possible that some of the professed widows demonstrated some aspirations towards becoming deaconesses, which would make enjoy greater prestige. This, of course, is not to say that only widows desired to achieve the dignity of deaconess due to their overweening ambitions. Overall, it seems that the two institutions, both widows and deaconesses, developed in parallel and interpenetrated in some Gallic dioceses. The competences of widows in the Gallic Church, due to the lack of deaconesses in the strict sense of the Eastern Church, encompassed also competences which were similar to those proper to the diaconate. Their special tasks included assisting women who were being baptised or during their anointing.⁵⁷ Apparently, the reasons which formed the institution of deaconess in the East, were non-existent in Gaul.⁵⁸

The synod which took place in the second half of the 5th century and yielded 56 promulgated canons, devoted only one to the profession of widows. In canon 46, the synodal fathers decided that professed widows who undertook sexual intercourse would be liable to condemnation along with their seducers.⁵⁹

⁵³ BARCELLONA, "Lo spazio declinato," 33n20.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 33n20.

⁵⁶ CONCILIIUM ARAUSICANUM [441], *can. 26 (27)*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 6:20; *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, 85.

⁵⁷ BARCELLONA, „Lo spazio declinato,” 34.

⁵⁸ MARTIMORT, *Diaconesses*, 193–4.

⁵⁹ "Professas viduas, si conniventiam praestiterint, cum raptoribus esse damnandas," see CONCILIIUM ARELATENSE II [442–506], *can. 46*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 6:31.

5. THE SYNOD OF VANNES (465)

In 465, the Synod of Vannes (Gwened in Brittany, France)⁶⁰ was held, in the period when the metropolitan Perpetuus, archbishop of Tours, consecrated Paternus as bishop of Vannes. The synod was attended by six bishops (Perpetuus of Tours, Paternus of Vannes, Albinus, Athenius of Rennes, Nunechius of Nantes, and Liberalis), who signed the synodal letter containing 16 canons and addressed to the two absent bishops, Victorius and Talasius.⁶¹ For the most part, the substance of the promulgated canons was drawn upon the findings of earlier synods. Canon 4 addressed deaconesses: “*eas etiam, quae virginitatem professae et benedictionem fuerint per manus impositionem sub contestatione huius propositi consecutae, si fuerint in adulterio deprehensae, cum adulteris ipsarum arcendas a communione censemus.*” It mentioned two sorts of women: the first group included those who vowed chastity in a public act, while women in the other group received a blessing by laying on of hands. Both groups were regarded as specially dedicated to God; should they commit the crime *contra sextum*, they would be liable to the deprivation of the Holy Communion. More precisely, an act of infidelity was understood as proved adultery, which was best proved by catching a woman in the act and obtain statements from the eyewitnesses. Also the partner in the crime against the Sixth Commandment was liable to the same penalty. The commented text of the canon implies that a blessing by laying on of hands bound women to observe celibacy.⁶²

6. *STATUTA ECCLESIAE ANTIQUA*

Statuta ecclesiae antiqua was probably written by Gennadius of Massilia, as suggested by C. Munier,⁶³ whose most productive period was in about AD 470. *Statuta*

⁶⁰ Vannes is both a town and a diocese in north-western France, now the suffragan diocese of Rennes. It was founded by the Veneti about 56 BC, later conquered by Romans and renamed as Darioritum in the 2nd century. The beginnings of Christianity here were linked with the activity of Clarus (Saint Clair), the bishop of Nantes. The bishopric in Vannes, mentioned in the acts of the synod of Angers (AD 453), was established in the 5th century, and the first historically attested bishop was Saint Paternus, who was simultaneously the patron of the diocese of Vannes. Apart from the synod in 465, other two are mentioned: in 818 and 846; P. MAKOSA, “Vannes,” in *Encyklopedia Katolicka*, vol. 20 (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2014), col. 24.

⁶¹ MOORE, “The Spirit,” 39–40.

⁶² CONCILIUM VENETICUM [461–491], *can. 4*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 6:237; *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, 152; cf. HEFELE, *Histoire des conciles*, 2/2:904–5.

⁶³ See C. MUNIER, “Gennade, prêtre de Marseille,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité. Ascétique et mystique. Doctrine et histoire*, ed. M. Viller et al., vol. 6 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1967), col. 205–8.

is a legislative text, written in southern Gaul, most probably in a monastic setting, whereby the ideas of the Eastern theologians found their way into the Church of Gaul.⁶⁴ Analysing this private collection of laws concerning the organisation of the Church in Gaul in the 5th century, we must not treat this source on a par with the promulgated canons brought forth by the synodal sessions of Gallic bishops. Only one canon, that is 99 (11) was devoted exclusively to virgins who were presented to a bishop for consecration, in vestments which they were to wear afterwards, according to their vows and sanctity of their lives.⁶⁵ Moreover, the editor of the collection in canon 37 (99) reminded of the ban on women teaching to a gathering of men, even if they be scholars or saints.⁶⁶ In contrast, canon 41 (100) reminded of the ban on women baptising.⁶⁷ The last two canons did not specify the kind of women, however. In canon 100 (12), the author espoused the possibility of admitting widows or nuns to hold the office of catechists to run prebaptismal training for women.⁶⁸ In his passage about widows and consecrated virgins, the author did not classify them as the clergy, in contrast to deaconesses in the Eastern tradition. At the same time, he passes over in silence the questions related to the disappearing institution of deaconess in Gallia Narbonensis.⁶⁹

7. THE SYNOD OF ÉPAON (517)

The decrees of the synod of Orange (AD 441), banning the ordination of deaconesses, were reiterated in the canons of the subsequent synod, this time organised in

⁶⁴ See MOORE, "The Spirit," 49–50.

⁶⁵ "Sanctaemonialis virgo cum ad consecrationem sui episcopo offertur in talibus vestibus applicetur qualibus semper usura est, professioni et sanctimoniae aptis," see MUNIER, Charles, ed. *Les Statuta Ecclesiae antiqua* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1960), 99; CONCILIIUM CARTHAGINENSE IV SECUNDUM COLLECTIO HISPANA [ca. 475–85]. *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua, can. 99 [11]*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 6:271; *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, 184.

⁶⁶ "Mulier quamvis docta et sancta, viros in conventu docere non presumat", see *Les Statuta Ecclesiae*, 99; CONCILIIUM CARTHAGINENSE IV SECUNDUM COLLECTIO HISPANA [ca. 475–85]. *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua, can. 100 [12]*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 6:265; *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, 184.

⁶⁷ "Mulier baptizare non praesumat," see CONCILIIUM CARTHAGINENSE IV SECUNDUM COLLECTIO HISPANA [ca. 475–85]. *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua, can. 41 [100]*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 6:266; *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, 173.

⁶⁸ "Viduae vel sanctimoniales, quae ad ministerium baptizandarum mulierum eliguntur, tam instructae sint ad id officium, ut possint aperto et sano sermone docere imperitas et rusticanas mulieres tempore quo baptizandae sunt, qualiter baptizatoris ad interrogata respondeant et qualiter accepto baptismo vivant," see CONCILIIUM CARTHAGINENSE IV SECUNDUM COLLECTIO HISPANA [ca. 475–85]. *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua, can. 100 [12]*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 6:271; *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, 184.

⁶⁹ BARCELONA, „Lo spazio declinato,” 35–36; cf. YSEBAERT, *The Deaconess*, 431.

Épaon (Burgundy, France) in AD 517. The synod was led by Avitus, the metropolitan bishop of Vienne, and attended by 24 bishops from the territories occupied by the tribe of Burgundians. The synod was convoked by King Sigismund, who after the death of his father Gundobald converted to Catholicism and gave up Arianism. The idea which inspired him to convene the synod was that this first synod of the Burgundians would organise matters connected with the discipline and morality of the clergy. Of the 40 promulgated canons, only one addressed issues concerning widows who were known as deaconesses. In canon 21, the legislator provided that the practice of widow consecration must be discontinued: “viduarum consecrationem, quas diaconas vocitant, ab omni regione nostra paenitus abrogamus, sola eis paenitentiae benedictione, si converti ambiunt, inponenda.”⁷⁰ In order to downgrade the position of deaconesses in the Church, the synod did not use the technical term “ordination” but “consecration”. The first part of canon 21 had a peremptory character, while the other was hypothetical because it made reference to the possibility of granting a blessing to widows should they request that. A widow, according to the disposition of canon 21, could have hands laid on only, not for consecration (*viduarum consecratione*) but to receive penitence (*sola eis paenitentiae benedictione*).⁷¹ It seems that this blessing was accorded high importance since it was conferred also in Constantinople, the capital of the Empire. In this place we cannot but mention Saint Olympias († ca. 410), who, as a widow, was ordained to the diaconate by John Chrysostom himself († 407). A.G. Martimort⁷² observed that the synod, using the term *consecrare* in the canon in question, treated that analogically as *ordinare*, used in canon 25 (26) by the synod of Orange in 441. The visible semantic connections bring the connotations of *consecratio virginis* or *velation virginis*, which were not used in relation to widows, though.⁷³ In this way, the institution of widows in Gaul gained a new, monastic dimension. This was reflected in the call to convert, so characteristic for later monasticism. Yet, not all widows met this new monastic-penitential dimension with appreciation since it was likely to evoke images of austere rituals associated with public penance of the ancient times. Perhaps, this is where the origins of the penitential dimension of monastic profession should be traced.⁷⁴

Although widows vowed in public to lead a Christian life, the Latin synodal

⁷⁰ CONCILIIUM EPAONENSE [517], *can. 21*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 8:49; *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, 29.

⁷¹ YSEBAERT, “The Deaconess,” 430; see J. GAUDEMET, “Épaone (concile d’),” in *Dictionnaire d’histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, ed. R. Aubert and É. van Cauwenbergh, vol. 15 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1963), col. 530.

⁷² MARTIMORT, *Diaconesses*, 198.

⁷³ BARCELLONA, “Lo spazio declinato,” 36–37.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

legislation did not approve of that custom, which ultimately led to the rejection of the institution of widow consecration.⁷⁵

The fate of the liturgical ritual of consecration followed an entirely different route with respect to the above-mentioned virgins (*velatio virginis*), a ritual which by the middle of the fourth century had become well established in the Latin liturgical practice.⁷⁶ The negative attitude towards consecrated widows and deaconesses exhibited by the synodal fathers was rooted in the conviction that due to the frailty of female nature young widows should not be given access to blessing too easily because in the event of their breaking their public vows they would have to undertake public penance to reconcile with the Church.⁷⁷ Saint Cyprian of Carthage († 258 CE) had already condemned fallen virgins (*lapsae*) who had committed adultery. At the same time, leaving aside the question of the partner to that crime, Cyprian set his argumentation in the context of Christ, the Only Bridegroom, to whom the virgin was betrothed by making a proposal to Him (*votum monasticum*).⁷⁸ The synod in

⁷⁵ B. NADOLSKI, *Leksykon liturgii* (Poznań: Pallotinum, 2006), 679.

⁷⁶ In Rome in the second half of the fourth century, the text of the ritual for the consecration of virgins was drafted, which was subsequently transposed to Gaul and Germania. When it reappeared in Rome in the 11th century, the text was subjected to review. In its historical journey, the ritual for the consecration of virgins was yet again transferred from Italy to the north, beyond the Alps in the 13th century, where theologians and canonists substantially extended its text and formula. 9th-century authors used diverse terminology to refer to the ritual for the consecration of virgins, calling it *consecratio virginum* or *benedictio virginum*. 13th-century authors commonly adopted the term *consecration virginum*. The dressing of a virgin's head in a veil was the most distinctive gesture of this ritual, which became a symbol of promises made in public (*sacro velamine tecta*). Saint Ambrosius' sister, Marcelina took vows of chastity in St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican, in the presence of Pope Liberius, see AMBROSIVS, *De virginibus, Über die Jungfrauen*, 3, 1–3, Fontes Christiani 81, ed. P. Dücker (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 272–81; A. RIMOLDI, "Marcellina," in *Bibliotheca sanctorum*, ed. F. Caraffa, vol. 8 (*Liadani – Marzi*) (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1967), col. 646; NADOLSKI, *Leksykon liturgii*, 679; K. KONECKI, *Konsekracja dziewic w odnowie liturgicznej Soboru Watykańskiego II. Studium liturgiczno-teologiczne* (Włocławek: no publisher indicated, 1997), 37–89.

⁷⁷ "Poenitentes, tempore quo poenitentiam petunt impositionem manuum et cilicium super capita a sacerdote sicut ubique constitutum est, consequantur, et si autem comas non deposuerint aut vestimenta non mutaverint abiciantur et nisi digne poenituerint, non recipiantur: iuvenibus etiam poenitentia non facile committenda est propter aetatis fragilitatem, viaticum tamen omnibus in morte positus non negandum," see CONCILIVM AGATHENSE [506], *can. 15*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 8:7; *Concilia Galliae a. 314–506*, 201.

⁷⁸ In antiquity, before teaching on religious vows became crystallised, the term *propositum* was conceived as a serious, permanent yet merely implicit form of the profession, that is a commitment made in public before the Church. Soon, the assumption of this commitment became explicit and public, was manifested by the laying on of hands, and even more explicitly by the donning of a veil, which in the course of time became characteristic for the consecration of virgins. The profession now involved a commitment to a life of utter devotion to God. At the beginning of the 4th century, the irrevocable *propositum* encompassed a declaration of commitment to chastity, poverty, and communal life.

Ancyra held in AD 314 provided in canon 19 that those who professed virginity and subsequently broke those vows were to undergo penance as those who contracted a second marriage.⁷⁹ Pope Siricius († 399) resolved that if monks and nuns were married *abiecto proposito sanctitatis*, they should be “*a monasteriorum coetu ecclesiarumque conventibus eliminandas esse*”, and then “*retrusae in suis ergastulis*” so as to atone for their trespasses. *A consecrated virgin would be reconciled with the Church shortly before her death because the unfaithful bride was not subject to stoning, as it had been before under the law of Moses, therefore from then onwards she would be liable to such strict canonical sanctions.*⁸⁰

8. THE SECOND SYNOD OF ORLEANS (533)

Legislation with similar outcomes was issued during the Second Synod of Orleans, convened in AD 533. Canon 17 addressed issues related to the canonical status of women who received the blessing of the diaconate (*benedictio diaconatus*). The synod, convened “*ex praeceptione gloriosissimorum regum*” (that is the sons of King Clovis I: Childebert, Theodoric, and Chlothar), presided over by Honoratus, the metropolitan of Burges, was conceived as a synodal gathering intended to regulate disciplinary matters in the dioceses scattered throughout the lands occupied by the Franks.

Under such circumstances, the Second Synod of Orleans of 533 undertook to apply legal norms which had their underpinnings in the views of Pope Gelasius, who wrote that “*viduas autem velare pontificum nullus attentet, quoniam quod nec auctoritas divina delegat, nec canonum forma praestituit, non est penitus usurpandum;*

Subsequently, it was replaced with the term *promissio* in Benedictine monasticism, see A. de VOGÜÉ, “Promessa. I. Nel primo monachesimo in Occidente,” in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, ed. G. Pelliccia and G. Rocca, vol. 7 (*Pio-Pza*) (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1983), col. 994.

⁷⁹ CONCILIUM ANCHIRITANUM [314], *can. 19*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 1:67. “In ecclesia primitiva verbum «*δῖγαμος*» non utabatur in senso «matrimonium simultaneum», sed «matrimonium successivum». [...] *In Asia Minore matrimonia successiva punienda sunt,*” see CONCILIUM ANCHIRITANUM [314], *can. 19*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 1:67n4.

⁸⁰ SIRICIUS, “[Letter no. 1] *Siricii papae ad Himerium Episcopum Tarraconensem*, c. 6: Qui plectendi monachi aut moniales castitatis propositum temerantes,” in *Sanctorum Damasi papae et Paciani necnon Luciferi episcopi calaritanorum opera omnia*. Patrologiae cursus completus. Series latina, ed. J.P. Migne, vol. 13 (Parisiis: Apud J.P. Migne Editorem, 1845), col. 1137A–1137; see A. BONI, “Consecrazione delle vergini. I. Evoluzione dottrinale. II. Disciplina attuale,” in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, ed. G. Pelliccia and G. Rocca, vol. 2 (*Cambiaggio-Conventualesimo*) (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 1975), col. 1615.

eiusque sic ecclesiastica sunt ferenda praesidia, ut nihil committatur illicitum.”⁸¹ *Certainly, the Gallic bishops shared the traditional view that widows were allowed to make public commitments to lead an ascetic life on their way to perfection.* Widows, and probably deaconesses too, were likely to be entrusted with certain tasks to carry out in parochial communities, where deaconesses lived on their own or in groups. From the moment of the blessing, a widow was referred to as *conversa*, enjoying a new canonical status. Widows, *conversae* (“si converti ambiunt”), were ritually introduced to penance (“paenitentiae benedictione imponenda”).⁸²

In some dioceses of Gaul, apparently under the influence of the Byzantine practice, an attempt was made to introduce a ritual which would somewhat imitate the rituals of the Eastern Church. Gallic women felt a desire for a canonical sanctioning of their status within the Church. Through blessing they would gain access to the female diaconate, which would confirm their high canonical rank.

The synodal fathers discussed the question what penal sanctions should be used regarding a deaconess who committed adultery. Deaconesses, who were bound by the disciplinary norms to practice chastity, and who chose to be married would be treated as adulteresses and obliged to do public penance: “foeminae, quae benedictionem diaconatus actenus contra interdicta canonum acceperunt, si ad coniugium probantur iterum devolutae, a communione pellantur. Quod si huiusmodi contubernium admonitae ab episcopo cognito errore dissolverint, in communionis gratia acta penitentia revertantur.”⁸³ The use of the term *iterum* by the synodal fathers in the substance of the canon in question suggests that the canonical norm applied to widows. Therefore, it was a recurring argument raised not only against widows themselves but also against the very presence of deaconesses in the life of the Gallic Church if the fathers concluded in the canon that “lacuit etiam, ut nulli postmodum foeminae diaconalis benedictio pro conditionis huius fragilitate credatur.”⁸⁴ *This illustrates the great reserve with which the Church in Gaul approached women who aspired to the diaconate. It was a crime to remarry, not to receive the blessing.* It is also interesting to see that the synod consistently avoided the term *ordinatio* with

⁸¹ See THIEL, *Epistolae romanorum pontificum* 14, 13, pp. 369–70.

⁸² The synodal legislation provides that it is necessary to “mutare vestem” in the case of nuns, widows and virgins, cf. CONCILIIUM AURELIANENSE V [549], *can. 19*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 8:321; *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, 155; cf. CONCILIIUM TURONENSE [567], *can. 21 (20)*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, 128–31; *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, 186; CONCILIIUM PARIENSE [556–573], *can. 5*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, 144; *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, 207.

⁸³ See CONCILIIUM AURELIANENSE II [533], *can. 17*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 8:152; *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, 101; cf. PONTAL, *Die Synoden*, 75.

⁸⁴ See CONCILIIUM AURELIANENSE II [533], *can. 18*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 8:152; *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, 101; cf. YSEBAERT, *The Deaconess*, 429–30.

reference to deaconesses, preferring to use the liturgical term “consecratio viduarum or “benedictio diaconatus.” It seems justified to propose tentatively that the phrase “consecratio viduarum” has a liturgical connotation and is connected with the term “consecratio virginum,” which certainly implies the existence of a group of widows in the Gallic Church in the 6th century, a similar situation occurring in Africa in the time of Tertullian († ca. 220). Simultaneously, it seems interesting to ask the question that A. Mortimort has already rightly asked: why did some of the bishops and Gallic presbyters think it necessary to pursue the custom of granting “benedictio diaconatus” to widows? *Then, the position of some of the bishops and presbyters found its reflection in the precepts of the Gallic synods.*⁸⁵ *An answer to the question formulated in this way is to be sought in a juxtaposition of the disciplines of the Latin and Eastern Christianity with respect to deaconesses.* Starting in the latter half of the fourth century, the Church of Rome celebrated the ritual of “velatio virginis” rather lavishly, making it similar to the marriage ritual. The celebration was led by a bishop who would receive the public vows of a virgin. In his 14th letter, Pope Gelasius († 496) resolved that the ritual for the consecration of virgins was to be performed only on major feast days.⁸⁶ It appears that the ritual for the consecration of virgins was in use at that time since it had not been incorporated into any Eastern euchology.

Following Martimort, two points can be made. Firstly, the ritual for the blessing of deaconesses acquired a new dimension because now it was administered in the context of a perpetual profession to embrace a life of greater perfection, which was made by women of an aristocratic background. Secondly, we may venture a proposition that with a view to curbing the practice of blessing deaconesses, which was opposed by the Gallic synodal legislation (4th – 6th centuries), a wider application of the ritual for the blessing of widows was promoted. At first, the institution of the blessing of widows was not accepted in Gaul, but as time went on, under the influence of the Byzantine tradition, it was ultimately approved, and the ritual for the blessing of widows, in a sense, became competitive to the blessing of deaconesses. It should be noted that the latter argument is corroborated by the results of comparative studies of such liturgical texts as *Missale Gallicanum Vetus*, *Missale Francorum*, or *Galasianum*, into which the text of the *Consecratio viduae que fuerit castitatem professa* ritual was incorporated.

⁸⁵ MARTIMORT, *Deaconesses*, 198.

⁸⁶ “Devotis quoque Deo virginibus, nisi aut in Epiphaniarum die aut in albis paschalibus, aut in apostolorum natalitiis sacrum minime velamen imponant, nisi forsitan, sicut de baptisate dictum est, gravi languore correptis, ne sine hoc munere de saeculo transeant, implorantibus non negetur,” see THIEL, *Epistolae romanorum pontificum* 14, 13, page 369.

The text *Testamentum Domini nostri Iesu Christi*, originating in the fifth century, which is a Syrian collection of liturgical-canonical prescripts based on the earlier *Traditio Apostolica*, contains prescripts addressing also widows. Along with the other members of the clergy, widows formed part of the hierarchical structure of the Church since they ranked directly below subdeacons.⁸⁷ During an Eucharistic celebration, widows were present in the presbyterium, occupying places on the bishop's left, directly behind presbyters, with deacons standing on his right, directly behind presbyters.⁸⁸ The high rank of widows in the church was also reflected by the fact that they received the Holy Communion directly after deacons.⁸⁹ The special dignity that widows possessed in the ecclesiastical community was also emphasised by the fact that they were publicly designated, similarly to bishops, presbyters or deacons. Unlike the author of *Traditio Apostolica*, who writes merely about the introduction of widows to *ordo viduarum*,⁹⁰ the author of *Testamentum* begins his passage devoted to widows by saying that "ordinatio viduae fiat hoc modo." A bishop conducted the consecration of widows, uttering a prayer formula over the candidate, in which he would plead for her strength to fulfil tasks resulting from her new canonical status in the Church.⁹¹

Unquestionably, the existence of deaconesses in Gaul was also attested by Saint Remigius († 533), bishop of Reims, who was noted for baptising Clovis I († 511), king of the Franks, mentioned his daughter Hilaria in his testament, whom he endowed with the title of deacon ("benedictae filiae meae Helariae diaconae").⁹² Accord-

⁸⁷ "In ecclesia noti sint duodecim presbiteri, septem diaconi, quatuor hypodiaconi (legendum quatuor lectores) et tres viduae habentes praecedentiam sessionis," see *Testamentum Domini nostri Iesu Christi. Nunc primum edidit, latine reddidit et illustravit Ignatius Ephraem II Rahmani* 1, 34, ed. I.E. Rahmani. Hildesheim: Georg Olim, 1968), 83.

⁸⁸ "Primus in medio consistat episcopus, et post ipsum immediate sistant presbiteri hinc et inde, et post presbyteros, qui sunt in parte sinistra, sequantur proxime viduae, post presbyteros, qui sunt in parte dextera, stent diaconi, et post hos lectores, et post lectores hypodiaconi, et post hypodiaconos diaconissae," see *Testamentum Domini* 1, 23, pages 35–37.

⁸⁹ "[Episcopus] offerat intra velum una cum presbyteris, diaconis, viduis canonicis, hypodiaconis, diaconissis, lectoribus et habentibus charismata," see *Testamentum Domini* 1, 23, pages 35–37.

⁹⁰ HIPPOLYTE DE ROMA, *La tradition apostolique d'après les anciennes versions* 10, Sources Chrétiennes ed. B. Botte, 2nd ed., vol. 11 bis (Paris: Du Cerf, 1968), 67.

⁹¹ *Testamentum Domini* 1, 41, page 99; cf. D. ZALEWSKI, „Znaczenie instytucji wdów w odniesieniu do stanu dziewic w pierwszych wiekach Kościoła,” *Vox Patrum* 64 (2015), 602–3.

⁹² E. DEKKERS, *Clavis Patrum Latinorum. Series Latina* (Steenbrvgis: In Abbatia Sancti Petri, 1995), 346, no. 1072; „Testamentum Remigi Remensis episcopi,” in *Liber scintillarum; Epistulae; Vita sancti Desiderii episcopi Cadurcensis; Epistolae Austrasicae; Versus. Testamentum; Epistulae aevi Merovingici; Testamentum; Vita et passio sancti Leudegardii; Vita vel passio sancti Leudegardii*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, ed. H. Rochais et al., vol. 117 (Tvrnholti: Brepols, 1957), 447.

ding to M. Scimmi, who makes reference to R. Gryson and A. Martimort, this fact confirms the claim that despite the renewed bans issued by synods, the institution of a deaconess persisted in Gaul.⁹³ Nevertheless, it was Saint Radegund who became the most famous Gallic deaconess († 587), a daughter of Beretarius, the ruler of Thuringia. Saint Ventantius Fortunatus wrote that Radegund decided to abandon her royal spouse, when Chlothar I, who turned out to be a not so much royal as bloodthirsty man and had her own brother killed. She visited the bishop of Noyon, Medard († before 561), begging him for the possibility of taking vows before him. Bishop Medard would refrain from doing so since canon 19, promulgated by the synod of Agde in 506, banned the dressing of a candidate's head with a veil before her completing 46 years.⁹⁴ Saint Radegunda, however, entered the sacristy to change her robe for a nun's habit. While leaving the sacristy, she was wearing a nun's habit. Then she spoke to Bishop Medard with the words quoted by Venantius Fortunatus as follows: "si me consecrare distuleris et plus hominem quam Deum timueris, de manu tua, pastor, ovis anima requiratur."⁹⁵ Under those circumstances, the bishop could nothing but lay his hands on her, yielding to her insistence, and receive her profession. This was accompanied by the laying on of a veil.

The existence of deaconess Theodora in Gaul is attested by epigraphical sources.⁹⁶

9. THE SECOND SYNOD OF TOURS (567)

The Synod of Tours II took place in AD 567. It reiterated the ban on the institution of subdeaconesses and deaconesses by means of canon 20 (19), in which it demonstrated that the provisions of synodal law were still disregarded in Gaul since bishops in particular dioceses tolerated and quite probably supported those: "nam si inventus fuerit presbiter cum sua presbiteria aut diaconus cum sua diaconissa aut subdiaconus cum sua subdiaconissa, annum integrum excommunis habeatur et depositus ab omni officio clericali inter laicos se observare cognoscat."⁹⁷ The commented canon

⁹³ M. SCIMMI, *Le antiche diaconesse nella storiografia del XX secolo* (Milano: Glossa, 2004), 340.

⁹⁴ "Sanctimoniales, quamlibet vita earum et mores probati sint, ante annum setatis suae quadragessimum non velentur," see CONCILIIUM AGATHENSE [506], *can. 19*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 8:7. Then, this canonical norm was included by Gratian in his collection (c. 13, C. XX, q. 1).

⁹⁵ See Ventantius FORTUNATUS, "Vita S. Radegundis XII," in *Venanti Honori Clementiani presbyteri italici Opera Pedestria*, ed. B. Krusch (Berolini: Apud Weidmannos, 1885), 41; Polish translation in: T. Gacia, *Radegunda z Turynгии. Teksty źródłowe od VI do XII wieku* (Włoszczowa: ks. TADEUSZ GACIA, 2015), 31.

⁹⁶ See SCIMMI, *Le antiche diaconesse*, 342.

⁹⁷ See CONCILIIUM TURONENSE [567], *can. 20 (19)*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, 128; *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, 184.

addresses wives of subdeacons or deacons, who were called deaconesses, although nearly 150 years earlier the First Synod of Toledo (ca. 400) referred to them as “sacerdotalis vidua vel levitae” in canon 18, forbidding widows of presbyters and deacons to marry.⁹⁸

On the other hand, a presbyter or deacon, in accordance with the Latin Church, who entered into marriage having received higher Holy Orders would be obliged to maintain chastity.⁹⁹

The fathers of the Second Synod of Tours (567) deemed it legitimate to include the following clause in canon 21 (20): “omnes sciunt, quod numquam in canonicis libris legitur benedictio vidualis, quia solus propositus illi sufficere debet [...]”.¹⁰⁰ Certainly, the synodal fathers had access to liturgical books which did not contain the ritual for the blessing of widows. Ultimately, widows were permitted to receive a veil from the hands of a presbyter, not a bishop. A widow would take the veil in her hands and put it on her head.¹⁰¹

The synodal prohibitions had to be renewed in view of the fact that no reception of the earlier synodal resolutions had been observed. In 511, three Gallic bishops, Licinius of Tours, Saint Melanius of Rennes¹⁰² and Eustochius of Angers addressed a letter to Breton priests, reminding them of the ban on the administration of the Holy Communion by women:¹⁰³ “Dominis beatissimis in Christo fratribus Lovocato et Catiherno presbyteris Licinius, Melanius et Eustochius episcopi. Viri venerabilis Sperati presbyteri relatione cognovimus, quod gestantes quasdam tabulas per diversorum civium capanas circumferre non desinatis, et missas ibidem adhibitis mulieribus in sacrificio divino, quas conhospitalis nominastis, facere praesumatis;

⁹⁸ CONCILIUM TOLETANUM I [ca. 400], *can. 18*, in *Acta Synodalia*, 4:124.

⁹⁹ More on celibacy of the clergy in S. LONGOSZ, “Patrystyczna motywacja celibatu kapłańskiego,” *Vox Patrum* 24–29 (1993–1995), 285–311; D. KASPRZAK, “Rozwój i motywacja kościelnej doktryny o celibacie duchownych (IV–VII w.),” in *Stosowność celibatu w relacji do kapłaństwa*, ed. H. Sławiński, 105–123 (Kraków: Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II. Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2012, 105–23; J. LEWANDOWICZ, “O brzmieniu i tłumaczeniu kanonu 33. synodu w Elwirze – najstarszego oficjalnego tekstu Kościoła o celibacie duchowieństwa,” *Vox Patrum* 60 (2013): 209–19.

¹⁰⁰ See CONCILIUM TURONENSE [567], *can. 21 (20)*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, 130; *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, 187.

¹⁰¹ “Vidua autem quia soluta est a lege viri, se ipsam si vult Deo dare, debet et a presbitero velari, vel etiam consecratum ab episcopo velamen de altari accipere et ipsa sibi, non episcopus, illud debet imponere,” see *Pontifical romano-germanique du dixième siècle XXV*, 2; ed. C. Vogel and R. Elze, vol. 1 (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1963), 59; cf. MARTIMORT, *Deaconesses*, 200.

¹⁰² See G. MATHON, “Melanio,” in *Bibliotheca sanctorum*, ed. F. Caraffa et al., vol. 9 (*Masab – Ozana*) (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1967), col. 328; cf. *Acta SS. Ianuarii*, vol. 1 (Antwerp: Apud Joannem Meursium, 1743), 327–34.

¹⁰³ MATHON, “Melanio,” col. 286.

sic ut erogantibus vobis eucharistias illae vobis positis calices teneant et sanguinem Christi populo administrare praesumant.”¹⁰⁴ The text above conveys the idea that the authors of the letter had been informed by the priest Speratus of two Breton presbyters, Lovocatus and Catihernus, who had committed abuses of church discipline. The bishops reproached the recipients that they celebrated the Eucharist on ordinary tables in private homes and let certain women (*conhospitae*) hold the chalice and administer the Holy Communion to the faithful. In the letter, the bishops wrote about those practices as an outrage, which was believed to originate in an Eastern sect, the members of which they called Pepodians after the founder Pepodius.

To complete the historical background we need to mention the Synod of Mâcon (581–583), which in canon 12 mentioned “puellis vero quae se Deo voverint, et praeclarae decore aetatis,” that is those women who decided to conclude “terrenas nuptias.”¹⁰⁵ In the canon under discussion, there was a clear distinction between women who made a profession and those who had not yet received such a blessing. Both groups were obliged to maintain perpetual celibacy. If such women entered into marriage, they would be forever denied the right to receive the Holy Communion along with their husbands. If they expressed contrition for that act, they might still be denied the right to receive the Holy Communion, which was left to the discretion of the local bishop; they were not to be denied the right to receive Viaticum.

CONCLUSION

Seeing similarities between deaconesses and widows or consecrated virgins, some synods treated these canonical institutions on similar terms. Even if, as some scholars will claim, these women were not consecrated deaconesses but only blessed ones, or – as others will claim – these were wives of deacons, undeniably the institution of deaconess was known in the Gallic legislation. Most certainly, the quoted

¹⁰⁴ P. de LABRIOLLE, *Les sources de l'histoire du montanisme. Textes grecs, latins, syriaques, pub. avec une introduction critique, une traduction française, des notes et des «indices»*. (Fribourg (Suisse): Librairie de l'Université (O. Gschwend), 1913, 226–30.

¹⁰⁵ “Id custodiendum esse decrevimus, ut si quae puella voluntarie, aut parentibus suis rogantibus, religionem professa, vel benedictionem fuerit consecuta, et postea ad conjugium, aut illecebras saeculi quod potius stuprum est quam conjugium iudicandum, transgredi praesumpserit, usque ad exitum, cum ipso qui se huiusmodi consortio miscuerit, communionis gratia suspendantur ita tamen ut propter infirmitatem, aut subitaneum transitum viaticum illis miserationis intuitu non negetur.” See CONCILIUM MATISCONENSE [581–583], *can. 12*, in *I canoni dei conicili della Chiesa antica*, vol. 2, *I Concili latini*, bk. 2, *I Concili Gallici*, 258; *Concilia Galliae a. 511–695*, 226.

sources do not enable us to establish the canon-law nature of Gallic deaconesses. Conclusions that can be drawn on the basis of our analysis of individual canons of the Gallic synods with respect to deaconesses and also women in church communities seen against a broader background make it possible merely to characterise the relationship holding between *ordo clericorum* and the institutional forms of female ascetism, which in Gaul included deaconesses. This happened because, to a certain extent, the diaconate of women, conceived as the fulfilment of certain roles, was identified with widowhood, which exemplified ascetic life, as well as with the state of virginity, which had become a separate class. Candidates for deaconesses were selected from among only some women, namely widows and virgins, not all women, as was still practised in the East in the third century. At any rate, female diaconate survived only in the East because it had been rejected by the West. Despite renewed banning as late as in the sixth century, deaconesses were still present in Gaul to emerge subsequently in Italy.

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE FEMALE DIACONATE
IN THE LEGISLATION OF GALLIC SYNODS IN LATE CHRISTIAN ANTIQUITY

S u m m a r y

The reconstruction of the canonical structure of the female diaconate in Gaul in the period between the fourth and sixth centuries runs into serious difficulties due to the scarcity of extant legal sources. The legislation of the six Gallic synods, which thoroughly dealt with the question of deaconesses, has survived until today. The synodal agenda also included issues related to the determination of the canonical status of widows and consecrated virgins, from amongst whom candidates for Gallic deaconesses were recruited. The crystallisation of the legal norms governing the female diaconate took place in the context of the ongoing Priscillian disputes and the emergence of the monastic movement. Despite the continued opposition towards the phenomenon of ordination of deaconesses expressed by the synods to come, such women certainly were still present in Gaul in the 6th century, as evidenced by the preserved literary and epigraphic materials. Due to the evolution of the term “diaconal” in the 6th century, the term acquired an additional meaning, namely “wife of a deacon.”

Key words: deaconesses; ordination; widows; consecration of virgins; monasticism; Saint Radegund, synod.

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