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Medieval Clothing and Textiles

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ROBIN NETHERTON

and

GALE R. OWEN-CROCKER

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A glimpse inside the sacristy of the church of Salle in 1368 makes immediately clear how much cloth a medieval parish of relatively modest size needed. Salle, in the archdeaconry of Norwich, had the full range of textiles, which are listed in an inventory compiled late in the reign of Edward III (ca. 1380). There were several sets of priestly vestments, one described as “decorated with gilded beasts,” as well as surplices and a choir cope. Items for the celebration of the Mass at the main altar included seven altar cloths, three towels, and six corporals for use with the consecrated elements. Other cloths present at the church in Salle included two altar frontals, a hanging for the lectern, two funeral palls, and three ceremonial banners. Other sets of vestments, including two copes of red silk, were listed according to the name of their donor, and an embroidered bench cover with two cushions was added later.¹ A cathedral, like Saint Paul’s, London, had many more clergy serving altars and chantries. These priests needed much more fabric, including vestments, altar cloths, frontals, and corporals for the proper celebration of the Mass. Some of these were made with expensive materials like samite, and they frequently were heavily decorated. In addition, the bishops of London had miters, gloves, and other items made of cloth.² All of this fits with an increased use of fine fabric in “a shared clerical culture,” including the assignment of differing vestments, blessed and sometimes given at ordination, to denote the hierarchy of minor and major orders among the clergy.³

¹ The complete entry appears in John Shinners and William J. Dohar, Pastors and the Care of Souls in Medieval England (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 226–27.
After a survey of the evidence regarding the regulation of altar cloths gleaned from medieval canon law, this essay will consider the challenges churches faced in acquiring and maintaining linens employed at the altar. A particular concern was the proximity of certain cloths to the Eucharistic elements, especially as the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament was given a stronger emphasis from the eleventh century onward. Proximity to the sacred required that these linens be of fine quality, kept clean, repaired well, and, if stained with the consecrated wine, burned or kept locked away, a practice contrary to the usual efforts made in the Middle Ages to retain and reuse cloth. A brief comparison of visitation records from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries offers further evidence of the problems with church linens encountered in practice, including the impact of the Protestant Reformation on the ecclesiastical use of cloth in England.

For our purposes four types of items will be given the most attention: corporals, altar cloths, frontals, and towels. Leaving aside the symbolic meanings medieval writers often assigned to them, each had a purpose, practical or decorative. Those nearest to the consecrated elements usually were made of linen, particularly the corporal, the name of which referred to the corpus, the body of Christ, placed upon it. At first, there was no real distinction between the palla, the cloth placed over the altar, and the corporal (palla corporalis). Even by the late thirteenth century, the term corporal still could mean either a large or a small cloth. However, these eventually became entirely separate, with “corporals” usually designating smaller linens used with host and chalice, while a larger cloth of linen (mappa) covered the altar. A further distinction was made in the fourteenth century, at least by the Dominicans, between the corporal under the chalice and the purificator, originally used to dry the priest’s hands when he washed them after communicating but later to clean the cup after the consecrated wine had been consumed (ablutions), but the term purificator does not appear in canon law. In addition, the long, narrow linen cover for the altar became separate from the hanging altar frontal, or antependium. The altar cloth of white linen served as the site of the Mass, while the frontal was largely decorative, even when color-coded to the liturgical season. Palla eventually came to mean the “chalice pall,” a square of starched linen placed over the cup to prevent anything from falling into it, but the term still could


6 J. Wickham Legg, ed., Tracts on the Mass (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1904), 83. Use of the purificator only became common in the sixteenth century; see Jungmann, Roman Rite, 2:38.

7 The 1557 instructions for the priests of the diocese of Coutance specified three layers of linen mappae on the altar; see Legg, Tracts, 55.

8 The instructions for Mass in the Tridentine missal call the frontal a pallium; see Missale Romanum ex Decreto Sacrosancti Concilii Tridentini Restitutum … (Dublin, 1777), xxx–xxxi. These instructions also distinguish a corporal from a purificator.
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mean a cloth under the corporal as late as the sixteenth century. In addition, towels (toalia, mappula, or manutergium) were provided both for the washing of the priest's hands after accepting the offerings, known as the lavabo, and to prevent any drips from the priest's nose or lips from contaminating the Eucharistic elements.9

Of these items, the corporal and altar linens were the most important. A sixteenth-century text said celebrating Mass without them was a mortal sin.10 The presence of these cloths was required by both universal canon law and local statutes, and they were discussed in guides to pastoral care.11

GRATIAN'S DECRETUM AND ITS COMMENTARIES

Medieval canon law was built up gradually on acts of councils, letters of popes, and writings of the Fathers of the Church, these last usually in the form of excerpts, not full texts.Canon law regulated clerical dress and the care of cloths used in church.12 An early example of concern for altar cloths is found in the Pseudo-Isidorean Decretals (ca. 852). Attributed to "Pope Clement," the text required burning any altar cover (palla)12 or curtain (velum) worn out in use. The same letter entrusted the care and cleaning of these objects to the deacon together with the lesser clergy.13 Another Isidorean text, attributed to "Pope Sylvester" or to popes "Eusebius and Sylvester," forbade celebrating the liturgy wearing silk or dyed cloth. The priest was to use "pure linen blessed by the bishop." These requirements were explained as based on the wrapping of Christ's corpse for entombment.14 A text of "Pope Stephen" said vestments were to be kept sacred and fitting (sacra et honesta). Nor were they to be turned over to other uses, private or lay. Only consecrated persons (sacratis hominibus) were permitted to wear ecclesiastical vestments. Anyone who misused these and other liturgical materials was threatened with the fate of King Belshazzar of Babylon, who was visited with divine wrath for abusing the sacred vessels plundered from the temple in Jerusalem (Dan. 5).15 All of these texts later entered Gratian's Decretum via intermediary collections

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9  For Dominican texts using toalia and mappula, see Legg, Tracts, 73, 95. Manutergia will be mentioned below. Jungmann, Roman Rite, 2:76–82.
10  Legg, Tracts, 203.
11  Miller, Clothing the Clergy; Thomas M. Izbicki, "Forbidden Colors in the Regulation of Clerical Dress from the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) to the Time of Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464)," Medieval Clothing and Textiles 1 (2005): 105–14.
14  Ibid., 450: "ut sacrificium altaris non in serico panno aut intincto quisquem celebrare missam presumat, sed in puro lineo ab episcopo consecrato … sicut corpus Domini nostri iesu Christi in sindone linea munda sepultum fuit."
15  Ibid., 183: "Vestimenta vero ecclesiastica quibus domino ministratur, et sacra debent esse et honesta. Quibus aliis usibus nemo dedet frui quam aeccllesiasticis in de dignis officiis. Que nec ab
and influenced the development of the canon law of the sacraments. They are found in the third part of the collection, the Tractatus de consecratione ecclesiae ("Tract on the Consecration of a Church"), in the section on church buildings and their proper use. The “Clement” canon became c. Altaris palla (De cons. D. 1 c. 39), and the “Stephen” text became c. Vestimenta (De cons. D. 1 c. 42). The “Sylvester” text entered the Decretum as c. Consulto (De cons. D. 1 c. 46).

The early canonists, writing during the twelfth century, had little to add to these regulations, and most of it was exegetical with little applicability to Church life. Paucapalea only repeated the story of Belshazzar’s feast, in which sacred things were misused, bringing down divine retribution, when glossing c. Vestimenta. Rufinus, glossing c. Altaris palla, called pallae “vestments of the altar” (vestimenta altaris), specifying that they were “veils” (sindones) square-cut and often decorated with precious stones (affixis … gemmis). He also distinguished between a palla and an altar frontal. Commenting on c. Vasa, the canonist said that corporals, like liturgical vessels, were to be kept clean.

The commentary Fecit Moyses tabernaculum, printed with the summa by Stephen of Tournai, addressed the issue of who was to wash liturgical cloths. The author described the practice of having deacons do the washing as derogated by custom, but he found it acceptable to have pious women, like the verglonissae of Milan, do the washing. This text also said the prohibition of using silk extended to dyed cloth (fuscatum). Linen, to be used instead, represented what was “innocent and without stain,” especially the body of Christ, which suffered blows, just as flax was pounded into white cloth.

alii debent contigi aut ferri, nisi a sacratis hominibus, ne ultio que Balthasar percussit super haec transgressiones veniat divina et corruere eos fatiat ad ima.”

The Decretum was composed in at least two stages during the early twelfth century and became the textbook for canon law at the University of Bologna. The third section, the De consecratione ecclesiae ("On the Consecration of a Church"), is divided into five Distinctions with multiple chapters. It is cited as “De cons.” with the number of the Distinction (D.) and the chapter (c.). The Decretum is cited here from Emil Friedberg, ed., Corpus Iuris Canonici, vol. 1 (1881; repr., Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1959).

16 The “Clement” text known as c. Nemo (De cons. D. 1 c. 40) forbade wrapping corpses in altar cloths (vestimenta altaris). The Ordinary Gloss (see note 27) to c. Nemo v. In mensa Domini, another portion of the “Clement” text, added a prohibition of using cloths touched by the priest after the consecration and chalice veils (vel forte palla, cui inoluit calicem) thus.


18 Rufinus, Summa Decretorum, 546. In this context, the veil may be the cloth used in receiving the offerings; see Jungmann, Roman Rite, 2:61.

19 Ibid., 268.
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underlined the prohibition of giving sacred things to the laity, adding that this prohibition extended to clergy taking them for private uses. They had been “consecrated with a special blessing” (fuerunt speciali benedictione consecrate). Moreover, different liturgical cloths, when washed, were to be laundered in separate vessels. Huguccio said the linen of the corporals had been prepared, made white, with “much labor” (multo labore), just as Christ endured many tribulations. The corporal spread on the altar signified the shroud of Christ, in which Joseph of Arimathea wrapped him. The corporal was to be kept clean and white, like the body of Christ born of the Virgin.

These commentaries on the Decretum culminated in the thirteenth century in the Ordinary Gloss, which accompanied many manuscript copies of the collection. The Gloss on c. Altaris palla, building on Rufinus, called this type of cloth “vestments of the altar” (vestimenta altaris), specifying “veils” (sindones), which were square-cut. The altar veil was described as hanging upon the altar (pendet super altare) or hanging in front of it (cortina ante), as an altar frontal. The Gloss on c. Vestimenta also recounted, as earlier Decretists had, the story of Belshazzar’s feast and that king’s being punished by God for misuse of sacred vessels. The Gloss on c. Consulto said this meant corporals were not to be made of silk. Linen was given a moral interpretation as meaning innocent and without stain or taint (macula). The Gloss, following earlier opinion, said that linen was to be interpreted as signifying Christ, who endured many tribulations before reaching his glory, just as linen was made pure and white with many blows. The faithful too could rise to heaven through their difficulties.

PAPAL DECRETALS AND THEIR COMMENTATORS

Additional regulations were provided by the thirteenth-century popes. In the year 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council, convened by Pope Innocent III, issued the canon
Relinqui, one of several texts intended to improve pastoral care. This text appeared in the collected constitutions of the Lateran council, then in the collection known as Compilatio Quarta (ca. 1216), and finally in the Decretals of Gregory IX, or Liber Extra, under the title “On Custody of the Eucharist, Chrism and Other Sacraments” (De custodia eucharistiae, chrismatis et aliorum sacramentorum; X 3.44.2). The canon required that liturgical vessels, vestments, altar cloths, and corporals not be left in an unclean state, lest this cause “horror” in the faithful:

And there are others who not only leave their churches uncared for but also leave the service vessels and ministers’ vestments and altar cloths and even corporals so dirty that they at times horrify some people.

They were instead to be kept “clean and bright” (munda et nitida). The decretal Sane (X 3.41.10) of Honorius III, Innocent’s successor, gave new importance to these requirements about care of liturgical cloths. It appeared in Compilatio Quinta, compilation of which had been mandated by Pope Honorius, and then in the Liber Extra under the title “On the Celebration of Masses, the Sacrament of the Eucharist and Divine Offices” (De celebratione missarum et sacramento eucharistiae et divinis officiis; X 3.41.10). These canons would be crucial for later efforts to regulate the proper care of cloths for sacramental use.

The thirteenth-century canonists usually said little on this topic. When they did, they summarized the same two early-thirteenth-century canons or repeated similar sentiments, referring back to the Decretum to support their expositions. Thus the Casus Fuldenses on the Lateran decrees simply said all things related to the ministry were to be kept clean and bright. Vincent of Spain, glossing the Lateran decree Relinqui, cited c. Nemo to prove corporals and vestments were to be washed inside the church (intra ecclesiam). The Ordinary Gloss of Bernard of Parma on the Gregorian

34 Emil Friedberg, ed., Quinque Compilationes Antiquae nec non Collectio Canonum Lipsiensis (1882; repr., Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1956), 144, Comp. IV 3.17.1: “De immunitate ecclesiarum et eius ornamentu et reverentia reliquiarum.”
35 All texts of papal decretal letters in the Liber Extra or Decretals of Gregory IX (1234) are cited by X for Extra with number of book, subject title, and chapter, thus X 1.1.1. This collection appears in volume 2 of Friedberg, Corpus Iuris Canonici.
37 Friedberg, Quinque Compilationes Antiquae, 178, Comp. V 3.24.1: “De celebracione missarum.”
40 Ibid., 313–14.
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*Decretals* focused on the issues of clean cloths when interpreting c. *Relinqui*. Bernard summarized the text in the *casus* preceding his gloss before saying the cloths were to be kept clean to avoid horrifying the faithful (*quod aliquibus interdum sunt horrori*).[^41] The Gloss repeated what the text said about vestments being kept fitting and clean, a point reinforced with a reference to c. *Vestimenta* in the *De consecratione*.[^42]

Geoffrey of Trani, commenting on the title “On the Celebration of Masses” in his *summa* on the titles of the *Extra*, repeated much of what had been said by the canons in that collection. The canonistic injunctions about the necessity of keeping vestments fitting and clean were summarized.[^43] This *summa* restated past measures about the cleaning of soiled vestments, saying the deacon and humbler clerics were to wash these garments “in the sanctuary” (possibly the sacristy). The provision of the “Clement” text for burning altar cloths and vestments used up in liturgical celebrations was reiterated too.[^44]

Pope Innocent IV ignored these issues in his commentary on the *Extra*, but Henricus de Segusio, Cardinal of Ostia, known as Hostiensis, gave issues of sacrament and ritual more attention. The cardinal wrote an extensive *summa* on the titles of the *Gregorian Decretals* and an even more lengthy commentary on that collection. The *summa* said clerics should use good vestments, not profane clothing.[^45] No one except the clergy, and especially not women, were to touch sacred objects, including cloths, once they had been blessed.[^46] Hostiensis repeated the provision of the Gloss about the washing of cloths by the deacon and lesser ministers before repeating the provision of the “Clement” text about burning worn-out items. The ashes were to be buried, he said, in the baptistery or in a hole in the church floor over which people could not walk.[^47] Hostiensis’ commentary added details. Discussing *pallae*, he extended this term not

[^41]: Ordinary Gloss at X 3.44.2 *Casus*.
[^42]: Ordinary Gloss at X 3.44.2 v. *Vestimenta*: “[*Vestimenta*] Vestimenta ecclesiae honesta & munda debent esse. de conse. dist. i. vestimenta.” At v. *In profanis*, the Gloss says that clergy were forbidden to wear “profane” garments even if they were donated by the laity.
[^44]: Ibid., fol. 166ra: “Item pallas altarium et vestimenta clericorum cum sordida fuerint dyaconi cum humilibus ministris intra sanctuarium lauent. vt de conse. dist. i. nemo. et si fuerint vetustate consumpta incendio dentur. vt de cons. di. i. altaris.” Geoffrey also summarized the provision against wearing profane garments.
[^46]: Ibid., fol. 187va: “nec vestimenta seu ornamenta vel vasa altaris seu ecclesie servitio deputata aliquid aliud tangere debent nec aliiis vsibus deputari nec ad nuptiarum ornamenta prestari. de conse. di. i. nemo per ignorantiam. et. c. vestimenta. et. c. nuptiarum. quod videtur intelligendum ex quo sunt per pontifices benedicta: vt. supra. de re. do. c. iii.”
[^47]: Ibid., fol. 187va: “Cum vero talia sordida fuerint diaconi cum humilibus ministris infra sacrarium ipsa lauent. de conse. dist. i. nemo. et si fuerint vetustate consumpta incendio comburantur et cinere in baptisterio vel sub fossa ita quod non pedibus hominum conteri recondantur. de conse. dist. i.”
just to corporals but to their containers.\(^{48}\) He added that c. \textit{Relinqui} only prohibited use of dirty cloths and did not prohibit use of ornamented ones for sacred purposes.\(^{49}\)

**WRITINGS ON LITURGY**

Symbolism was important in medieval liturgical texts, some of which were written by prelates or canonists. Pope Innocent III, while still a cardinal and before he became a legislator as Roman pontiff, built his discussion of the Mass in part on the “Sylvest-er” canon. He said the linen corporals on the altar were based on the winding cloth used for Jesus’ burial.\(^{50}\) Innocent said the unfolded corporal under chalice and paten signified faith, while the folded corporal signified intellect, which was more limited in its grasp of mysteries.\(^{51}\)

Sicard of Cremona, a canonist who wrote on liturgy, interpreted the corporal spread on the altar as signifying Christ’s body, born of the Virgin, which endured many tribulations before the Resurrection, just as pure linen was made with great labor. The unfolding of a corporal on the altar represented Jesus’ nailing to the cross. The fact that there were two corporals on the altar reflected the preparation by Joseph of Arimathea of the dead Christ for burial.\(^{52}\)

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48 Henricus de Segusio (Hostiensis), \textit{Henrici de Segusio Cardinalis Hostiensis Decretalium Commentaria}, 5 vols. (1581; repr., Frankfurt: Vico Verlag, 2009), vol. 3, fol. 172ra: “[Ac pallas.] non solum corporales, sed etiam alias, quae ponuntur in subtractorio altaris. i. mappas, quae ponuntur sub corporalibus ad ipsam ornandam. de con. di. i. nemo per ignorantiam.” The cardinal added that the term did not extend to chrism cloths.


51 Ibid., PL 217.832B: “Duplex est enim palla, quae dicitur corporale: una quam diaconus super altare totam extendit, altera quam super calicem plicatam imponit. Pars extensa, signat fidem, pars plicata signat intellectum. Hic enim mysterium credi debet, sed comprehendi non valet, ut fides habeat meritum, cui humana ratio non praebet experimentum.”

William Durantis the Elder, another canon lawyer who wrote on liturgy, did a detailed exposition of the Mass, including the altar, its ornaments, and the vestments used by priests and bishops. His interpretations of all these things run to the symbolic, focusing more on their significance than on their handling. Durantis expounded on the meanings of the cloths used in church. Among those that were hung up as festal decorations, he made particular mention of having a set of Easter frontals in three colors: black, white, and red. Each was removed during the readings at the Vigil, black representing the time before the Law, white the time under the Law, and red the “time of grace” ushered in by Christ. The canonist drew on Gratian’s *Decretum* for his brief discussion of the discipline of liturgical cloths. The texts of “Stephen” and “Clement” about not using sacred materials for secular purposes were repeated, along with requirements that the deacon “with more humble ministers” (*cum humilibus ministris*) wash soiled linens in the sacristy. The church was to have a special basin for hangings and another for washing the sacred corporals. Durantis also cited the *Decretum* (De cons. D. 4 c. 106) as saying nothing else should be washed in the vessel (*uasa*) in which corporals were laundered. The “Clement” canon about burning used-up cloths was cited, with an added provision that the ashes be buried in the baptistery, in the walls (*in parietate*), or into holes in the pavement (*in fossis pauimentorum*), where no one could walk on them. All altar cloths and vestments were to be blessed by a priest, setting them aside for liturgical use. Durantis’s text cited the dedication by Moses of the furnishings of the tabernacle (Gen. 26:1–16) as one of the authorities supporting this practice.

Durantis gave particular attention to the corporal unfolded on the altar. The placing of it on the altar signified the cleanliness of the faithful people, especially the ministers, free from the stain of carnality. This cleansing resembled the preparation of linen that “has been cleansed of all natural coloration and moisture.”

duo corporalia ponit, duo signifcat linteamina, quibus Ioseph corpus Domini aromatibus conditum inuoluit; uel per unum multiplicatum, multiplicem Christi humanitatem, per alterum multiplicem laborem eiusdem.”


55 Durantis, *Rationale*, 1:52; Thibodeau, *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum of William Durand*, 48, citing a Council of Lérida as saying “that there be proper vessels for no other use than washing the corporal and the altar coverings, in which nothing else ought to be washed.” He also said there should be a third vessel for washing festal hangings. A similar instruction is found in the *Ordo ad sacros ordines benedicendos*; see Patrologia Latina Database, PL 78.220B (accessed Jan. 8, 2015).


exposition of the corporal was based on the *Decretum*, saying it was not to be made from silk but from pure linen, consecrated by a bishop. Linen came from the earth and was related to the winding cloth in which the body of Jesus was buried. Nor was the linen to be dyed.\(^59\) Durantis gave an extended interpretation of the corporal, like the *Fecit Moyses* commentary and Sicard of Cremona. Durantis said that the linen was “beaten and cleansed with many blows.” Among the multiple meanings he assigned to the corporal was that it represented the Church as the body of Christ. Moreover, the corporal unfolded on the altar represented the shroud in which the dead Christ was wrapped. However, a corporal resting atop the chalice signified faith, more capable of grasping things divine than was human reason.\(^60\)

Durantis’s discussion of vestments, from both the Old Testament and the New, has a few significant references to linen. The white linen of the alb represented, he said, both new life in baptism and “Christ’s garments,” which “were always clean and white” because of His sinlessness. Both cotton and linen acquired their whiteness “by thrashing and handling by artisans,” as human flesh was softened by chastisements for coming of grace. Following Sicard, Durantis said the linen cloth was “beaten and cleansed with many blows,” indicating the wiping away of earthly affections.\(^61\) The same, he said, was true of one of the two tunics of the High Priest, which signified chastity.\(^62\)

On a slightly more practical note, Durantis discussed the *sudarium*, the linen cloth an attendant was to keep ready if the bishop needed to wipe off sweat, saying it signified “wiping off the human defilements of this life.”\(^63\)

**LOCAL REGULATIONS**

Problems arose occasionally about providing a parish with liturgical cloths, costs for which seem to have been split, like many other expenses, between priest(s) and people. The early-thirteenth-century record of the customs of the diocese of Salisbury attempted to specify who would pay which costs. The parson was to provide corporals “made of fine linen cloth.” The chaplain (assisting priest) was to see that the altar cloth and all other linens were “clean and suitable.” The parishioners were to provide a silk chasuble and “all other types of vestments belonging to the altar.”\(^64\) A parish chaplain might be required to see the vestments and fittings were kept clean, but in the case of


\(^{64}\) Shinners and Dohar, *Pastors*, 224–25, from the “parish law” of the diocese of Salisbury. For a Moravian attempt to define whether priest or people should pay for vestments and bells “from their
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theft, the negligent party had to replace stolen items.\textsuperscript{65} Parish accounts can include payments for new vestments or the repair of old ones. In addition, a parson was paid for blessing them, setting them apart from the materials used by the laity.\textsuperscript{66}

Although a parish was supposed to pay for vestments, priests frequently owned their own, as shown in their wills. A poor priest might leave only one set, but a wealthier one, like John de Ufford, a son of the Earl of Suffolk (d. 1375), left three, together with two curtains and two altar towels.\textsuperscript{67} Bishops might bequeath a wider variety of liturgical cloths. The testamentary records of the English episcopate from 1200 to 1413 include, together with chasubles and other vestments, linen corporals, burses to contain them, altar cloths, and frontals. Even lectern hangings were included in these bequests. These materials might be elaborately decorated. One of two corporals belonging to Cardinal Simon Langham, archbishop of Canterbury 1366–68, was described as having images of the Lamb of God (\textit{agnus Dei}) and four angels. Simon Mepham, another fourteenth-century archbishop of Canterbury, bequeathed corporals embroidered with the Crucifixion and the Coronation of the Virgin.\textsuperscript{68}

Local councils and synods funneled canon law and the acts of general councils to the local level.\textsuperscript{69} These regional meetings occasionally looked at vestments and altar cloths, telling priests and people not just how to care for them but what to do if they were damaged or stained. They might even go in for prevention, like requiring provision of a towel at the altar to prevent dripping from lips or nostrils onto holy things. This requirement can be found in the influential statutes of Paris, which said the towel was to be attached to the missal.\textsuperscript{70} The same statutes required frequent washing of "the altar linens and garments" out of reverence and because Christ would be present during the Mass with his celestial court.\textsuperscript{71} If consecrated wine was spilled on a corporal, an altar cloth, a small part of a vestment like a fringe, or an alb, the Paris statutes required cutting out the affected material and placing it with the church’s relics. If a vestment (probably a colored chasuble) was stained, that part was to be burned and the ashes

\textsuperscript{66} Shinners and Dohar, Pastors, 231–32.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 245, 249, 250.
\textsuperscript{68} C. M. Woolgar, ed., Testamentary Records of the English and Welsh Episcopate 1200–1413; Wills, Executors’ Accounts and Inventories, and the Probate Process (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2011), 143: “Item unum corporale cum ymaginibus cum sacro agno et iiiii\textsuperscript{ii} angelis ii fr. Item unum corporale I”; ibid., 164: "Item corporalia brudata cum crucifixio et coronacione beate Marie.”
\textsuperscript{69} C. R. Cheney, English Synodalia of the Thirteenth Century (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).
\textsuperscript{70} Odette Pontal, Les Statuts Synodaux Français du XIIIe Siècle (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1975), 1:82: "[79.] Districte praecipitur, ut quilibet sacerdos habeat in celebratione misse, propter munditiam vestimentorum servanda, circa altare unum manutergium, pendens circa missale ad tergendum os et nares si fuerit necesse.”
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 1:58: "[16] Linteamina altaria et indumenta sepe abluantur, ad reverentiam et presentiam Salvatoris nostri et totius curie celestis, que cum eo presens adest quotiens missa celebratur.”
retained in the sacristy. This disposition of sacred cloths is very different from the frequent efforts to reuse materials typical of the laity.

English synodal enactments had several things to say about liturgical cloths. An early-thirteenth-century canon from Canterbury required the priest to have a clean cloth to wipe fingers and lips after receiving communion. The same council decree mandated having a clean white cloth of sufficient size plus fitting linens and ornaments to use at the altar. The influential Salisbury statutes required placing a clean linen cloth over the viaticum carried to the sick. Archbishop Stephen Langton held a Council of Oxford in 1222, responding to the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council. The council, like its Canterbury predecessor, commanded use of a clean white altar cloth. Another Oxford canon said corporals no longer useful for the Mass were to be placed with the relics or burned in the presence of the archdeacon. It was the archdeacon, according to Langton and his suffragans, who was to see that a parish had proper linens and ornaments for the altar. Eventually the requirement that a towel be kept at the altar was added in England. The second statutes of Worcester (1229) required a parish to have two sets of vestments and two corporals of sufficient size (one festal and one for everyday, with which a priest might be buried), two altar frontals, three linens (at least one of them blessed), and a rochet or choir vestment. The third statutes of Worcester (1240) added a longer list of vestments, as well as corporals and other blessed linens. The second statutes of Salisbury (1234–44) said a priest was not to celebrate in dirty vestments or those worn out by age.

72 Ibid., 1:80: “[75] Si quid de sanguine Domini ceciderit super corporale, rescindendum est ipsum corporale et in loco reliquiarum servandum. Si palla altaris inde intincta fuerit, rescindenda est pars illa et pro reliquis servanda. Si super casulam id est infultam vel super albam deguttat similiter fiat. Si super quodlibet vestimentum, comburenda est pars illa et puvis in sacrario reponendus.” The statutes of Soissons repeated this text; see ibid., 1:194.


74 Ibid., 25: “sindonem mundam et candidam amplitudinis congruentis, lintheamina et alia ornamenta que ad altaris officium spectant honesta.”

75 Ibid., 81.

76 Ibid., 111: “sindonem mundam et candidam et amplitudinis congruentis … Vetera vero corporalia que non fuerint ydonea in altaribus quando consecrantur loco reliquiarum vel in presentia archidiaconi comburantur. Providant etiam archidiaconi ut lintheamina et ornamenta altaris sint sicut decet honesta.” These decrees were repeated for the diocese of Winchester two years later; see ibid., 126. Likewise, an Exeter statute and a London enactment from the mid-thirteenth century said the archdeacon was to see that these materials were provided; see ibid., 232, 649.

77 Ibid., 185.

78 Ibid., 171: “In qualibet ecclesia hec subscripta ad minus haberi debent: in ornatu altaris duo paria vestimentorum cum duobus paribus corporalium amplitudinis congruentis cum una rocheta, unum festivale et aliud feriale in quo sacerdos altaris mortuus tumuletur, si nescesse fuerit; due palle altaris, una festivale et alia ferialis; tria lintheamina, unum benedictum ad minus ….”

79 Ibid., 296: “in qualibet ecclesia in ornatu altaris sint tres albe cum amitibus et stolis et manipulis; duo suppellecia et duo rochete; duo casule; duo paria corporalium; quattuor lintheamina benedicta; duo palle altaris ….”

80 Ibid., 378. Similarly see the first statutes of Chichester (1245–52) in ibid., 454.
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VISITATIONS AND ENFORCEMENT OF REGULATIONS

A turn toward enforcement can be found early on in the collection compiled by Abbot Regino of Prüm (d. 915) for the archbishop of Trier in the Rhineland. He required that synodal reviews of pastoral care include an inquiry about the state of the corporal on which chalice and paten were placed at Mass:

Whether the corporal is of cleanest and whitest linen, and where it is put away.81

Likewise, early medieval Penitentials prescribed penances for priests who spilled the chalice on the linens, and one required him to replace the cloth at his own expense.82

By the end of the thirteenth century, the enforcement of discipline at the parish level usually fell to the archdeacon, not the bishop.83 The archdeacon conducted visitations in his assigned territory to examine the conduct of priests and people, as well as the state of the church, the manse, and the cemetery. (He was supposed to visit each parish once in a three year cycle.) Within the church, a visiting archdeacon was to look at the liturgical furnishings, including bells, vessels, vestments, and cloths. The most detailed visitation records provide insight into parish life, including defects in care of liturgical fabric.84 The archdeacon was able to impose penalties on priest and people, usually fines, and concern must have been felt when such a review was imminent.85 Thus a synod of Exeter (1287) complained about parishes possibly borrowing ornaments from each other to show the archdeacon.86 (Similar measures were adopted at Brno in Moravia, saying fines could be imposed payable to the archdeacon for allowing liturgical cloths, vestments, and vessels to fall into a state that would not be acceptable in “profane” cloths.87)

82 These penitentials offer few theological reasons for their assigned penances; see John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, eds., Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal “libri poenitentiales” and Selections from Related Documents (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 278–79, 309. On the costs of replacement, see ibid., 356.
83 However, for an example of a bishop intervening to require use of clean linens, see Adam J. Davis, The Holy Bureaucrat: Eudes Rigaud and Religious Reform in Thirteenth-Century Normandy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 88.
84 Not just the corporals but their container might be reviewed by a visitor; see G. G. Coulton, “A Visititation of the Archdeaconry of Totnes in 1342,” English Historical Review 26 (1911): 108–24, at 122 (unum par corporalium cum repositorio). See also Shinners and Dohar, Pastors, 301.
86 Powicke and Cheney, Councils and Synods 2, pt. 2, 1006. The same synod also required that clergy, not the laity of the parish, have custody of church ornaments. A later statute of Exeter listed all possible cloths and vestments; see ibid., 1005–6.
87 Krafl, Synody a Statuta Olomoucké, 223: “[16.] Item precipimus et mandamus, ut palle altarium, vasa, corporalia et vestimenta consecrata, munda et nitida conserventur sub pena infligenda pro archidiacono, nimirum videtur ab sordum in sacris sordes admittere, que non decet in profanis.” The same statutes attempted to limit, among other things, the wearing of silk and precious furs by clergy to cathedral canons, prelates, and university graduates; see ibid, 226–27.

53
Two sets of visitations will be employed to illustrate how these records give insights into parish life. Most parishes have yet to find a full study like that done for Morebath in Devon. However, English examples can be drawn from visitations of the parishes dependent on St. Paul’s Cathedral, London. These were held more than 150 years apart, in 1297 and 1458. The other set derives from the archdeaconry of Josas in the diocese of Paris, a region that included Versailles and Montlhéry, in the mid-fifteenth century. These visitation records include very detailed reports on such issues as reception of communion at Easter, the choice of licensed midwives, the custody of the sacraments, and the care of the corporals used at Mass.

The 1297 visitation of Navestock in Essex offers a good example of church possessions inventoried on site by visitors. They expected to find the fittings listed by recent archbishops of Canterbury, and they often found at least most of them. Among the cloth items listed was a funeral pall of red samite, indicating good finances or wealthy donors. The entire list included a lectern hanging, a Lenten veil, a towel, a purificator, two frontals for the main altar (one of red cendal, a lightweight silk fabric), two frontals for chapels (one of red and white striped cloth decorated with shields), and two linen altar cloths. Some were described as sufficient and some as not. The parish had several vestments, including some described as made of silk or cendal. Other cloths were used for special rites, including a veil to be held over a wedding couple. The 1458 visitation of Navestock noted some defects, including the lack of the outer part of a red velvet chasuble, as well as the absence of a corporal, a chasuble of cloth of gold in a green shade, and an alb of red samite. The vestments listed as present were made with velvet, silk, or cloth of gold. The visitors also listed two corporals, a Lenten veil, and two towels. Considering the time between visitation records, these probably were not the same items listed many years before. The older ones, if not worn out, may have been stolen.

In 1297, Aldbury had festal vestments including the apparels of the amice (parura amicti) decorated in pure gold (de auro puro). A second set of decorated vestments was for Sunday use. A third, for daily use, was decorated but more modestly. Corporals and a Lenten veil, rochets, and a towel were present. So were altar cloths, one decorated with roses. A Sunday frontal was ornamented with flowers, while the daily frontal was of linen. An offertory cloth was missing (deficit). In 1458, the same church had a silk vestment, probably a chasuble, decorated with moon and stars. Another vestment

92 Simpson, Visitations, 1–6.
93 Ibid., 65–72.
94 The amice was worn round the neck of the celebrant.
95 Simpson, Visitations, 46–47.
was blue with orphreys in green. Other vestments and copes were equally elaborate. One had an image of St. Helena. Another had writing on it, *Orate pro anima Johannis Shadworth* (“Pray for the soul of John Shadworth”). Aldbury had corporals and two silk altar frontals (*ii vestes de serico pro altare*).96

Chiswick in 1297 lacked a lectern frontal, and two towels had been stolen. It did have a Lenten veil. Among other cloths present were a rochet, altar frontals (one of cut linen and one of cloth of gold), four *pallae* (two blessed), a festal vestment set including a maniple of “Saracen work,” and a samite chasuble. There were other vestments for Sunday and weekdays, the latter in bad shape. Also present were a choir cope and two corporals with their cloth containers. A dalmatic was missing, as were the offertory and wedding cloths.97 In 1458, Chiswick had a set of blue silk vestments with lions and gold knots and orphreys of red silk with gold suns. Another set of vestments was of green silk with golden flowers. A third was of green satin with silver lozenges.98 A red set had been given by one Walter Dolman; another set was of red silk with golden lions. There were other vestments, copes, *pallae*, corporals, and white altar frontals.99

Even when the English Reformation was well under way, in the sixth year of King Edward VI (1543–44), the parishes dependent on St. Paul’s still listed some liturgical cloths, like a green damask chasuble owned by Aldbury. Several vestments still owned by Chiswick were made of satin, damask, or silk, but only some copes, albs, and “old towells” were listed for Heybridge. Allowing for the possibility that some parishes might have hidden vestments and altar linens from Edward’s commissioners, we almost certainly are seeing the effects of liturgical change at the local level.100

The French visitation records go into more depth on the availability and condition of corporals, the linens most closely associated with the Mass. The visitors noted several examples of corporals in poor condition. In 1459 the visitors said of the chaplain at Issy-les-Moulineaux that he had not washed the corporals “as is found in the synodal constitutions.”101 This is but one example of priests ignoring the statutes in matters of liturgical cloth. Thus visitors to Chatillon-sous-Bagneux in 1458, finding the corporals dirty, required that the priest should have them cleaned by Martinmas. He had to

96 Ibid., 107.
99 Ibid., 111. For an English translation, see Phillimore, *Historical Collections*, 108–11.
“emend,” probably in cash, for the uncleanness of those corporals.102 Another priest, at Clamart, had to emend for the corporals being both unclean and torn. He also was criticized for not telling his parishioners about this. It is unclear if he simply wanted to hide his slipshod conduct from the laity, but that is plausible.103 A prior of St. Saturnin at Chevreuse, Guillaume du Val, was threatened with a fine because the altar itself was unclean, as well as the corporals and altar cloth. The prior blamed this on his poverty, because the people did not sustain both parish and priory.104 At Bourg-la-Reine in 1461, the visitation led to the church wardens being required to have “good, useful and sufficient” corporals in place by the Feast of All Saints. The curate was fined for celebrating Mass with insufficient corporals.105 The chaplain of Louveciennes may have achieved the all-time record for negligence in this matter. In 1460 he admitted not just to failing to keep the corporals clean but to not having washed them for three years.106 After dealing with such problems, the visitors must have been relieved to find a church like that of Bruyères-le-Chalet, which had the reserved Eucharist and the corporals “well and fittingly disposed.”107 Something less usual had occurred at Viry-Châtillon in 1468. The church wardens complained that the chaplain had dropped a lighted candle on the altar, burning the altar cloths and ornaments.108

THE WASHING OF LINENS

One reason for dirty corporals may be found in the statutes themselves. For example, a statute from Tarragona (1329), based on the universal canons, required priests to wash the church’s dirty linens.109 A Bamberg statute (1491) forbade women to touch vestments and corporals. That left them, under local law, unable to provide the parish

102  Ibid., 35, no. 107: “et ut, infra festum hyemale beati Martini, mundet sua corporalia, et emendavit de immundicia.”
103  Ibid., 37, no. 114: “emendavit etiam, eo quod corporalia fuerunt reperta immunda et laxerata, quod non significavit parrochiani.”
104  Ibid., 46–47, no. 142: “Qui prior emendavit, eo quod altare erat valde immundum, et etiam corporalia, et mape dicti altaris; quare fuit iniunctum eideri priori, quod predicta ablurentur, infra mensem, sub pena emende.”
105  Ibid., 114, no. 359: “dominus injuxit matriculariis, ut, infra festum Omnium Sanctorum, habeant corporalia bona, utilia et sufficientia. Item emendavit curatus, eo quod celebravit in corporalibus minus honestis et decentibus.”
106  Ibid., 75, no. 233 Louveciennes: “Dictus capellanus, scilicet frater Guillelmuus Rigault, prior dicti loci de Marlaco burgo, emendavit non tenuisse sua corporalia munda, nec abluisse a tribus annis.”
107  Ibid., 89, no. 268: “et invenimus sacramenta Eucharistiae et corporalia bene et honeste disposita.”
108  Ibid., 318–19, no. 999: “Matricularii conquesti sunt, quod cappellanus ejusdem ecclesie, per ejus negligentiam, dimisit candellam ardentem cadere super nappas ejusdem altaris, et combussit ignis nappas et ornamenta altaris.” Similarly, an altar veil was burned at Calonge in the archdiocese of Tarragona in 1314 when a candle fell during Mass; see Christian Guillere, “Les Visites Pastorales en Tarraconaise à la Fin du Moyen-Âge (XIVe–XVe s.),” Mélanges de la Casa Velázquez 19, no. 1 (1983): 125–67, at 158. The fire was blamed on the server.
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with laundry service. Instead, the priest was expected, under the Bamberg regulations, to wash dirty corporals and other cloths in the sacristy. A synodal decree from Cyprus, imposing Western practices in the East, said the cloths covering the altar were to be washed four times in a year, on “Christmas, Easter, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, and on the feast of All Saints.” The same decree said to wash the corporals monthly.

Priests may have resented having to wash linens, regarding that work as beneath them. There was a great deal of washing to be done, and laundering was a humble calling. Daily masses, with wine poured and candles liable to drip or smoke, could result in soiling of both vestments and linens. Moreover, worse things could happen, especially when processions were held outside on certain feasts, like Corpus Christi. There were complaints from Hereford in the fourteenth century about silk vestments being dragged through cow manure, alongside linens that were “a disgrace.” Even the nave and sanctuary of a church could be filthy, requiring separate storage of most precious vestments. Despite such dirt, women were only grudgingly permitted to wash these cloths, and only after a cleric had handed them over, keeping the laundress away from the altar. Among those who might wash and mend liturgical cloths, according to the research of Katherine French on English parishes, could be the wives of church wardens or sextons. The former might have been showing their piety, and the latter might have thought this an extension of their husbands’ work maintaining the fabric and furnishings of the church. However, humble laundresses and launderers might be hired instead. Whatever their motives, women found themselves removing soot, candle wax, and even the droppings of bats.

110 The statute added, much like what the “Clement” text had said, that worn-out vestments and corporals were to be burned, not handed over to secular uses. Johann Friedrich Schannat and Joseph Hartzheim, eds., Concilia Germaniae (Cologne, Germany: 1763), 5:619A: “Ordinamus insuper, ut mulieres sacra vasa contingere, & ad altare Sacerdotibus ministrare non praesumant. Statuimus, ut vasa ministerii, & sacra vestimenta, nec non locus Sacramenti, ac Reliquiarum, ac corporalia munda teneantur; cum autem corporalia sordida fuerint, non nisi per Sacerdotes intra Sacrarium abluantur. Itaque vestimenta & corporalia vetustate consumpta, ad humanos usus nullatenus redigantur, sed incendo tribuantur, & cineres, ut moris est, conserventur.”

111 Christopher David Schabel, ed., The Synodicum Nicosiense and Other Documents of the Latin Church of Cyprus, 1196–1373 (Nicosia, Cyprus: Cyprus Research Center, 2001), 194–95.


113 Shinners and Dohar, Pastors, 298, 300.


115 Exceptions for laundering can be found beginning in the Carolingian period; see Fiona J. Griffiths, “‘Like the Sister of Aaron’: Medieval Religious Women as Makers and Donors of Liturgical Textiles,” in Female Vita Religiosa Between Late Antiquity and the High Middle Ages: Structures, Developments and Spatial Contexts, ed. Gert Melville and Anne Müller (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011), 343–374, at 347.


It may be because of these realities that Walter of Eynsham, archbishop of Canterbury, made a very traditional provision for the keeping of liturgical cloths. His statute said corporals and other liturgical cloths were to be kept whole and clean. It then added:

and they are to be washed often by persons deputed to this in the canon.

This was to be done out of reverence for the Eucharist. William Lyndwood, compiling the local canons of the province of Canterbury, quoted the Decretum as saying that corporals could not be made from silk, only pure linen blessed by the bishop. Nothing more or less precious was to be added to the linen. The corporal was to be kept spotless and clean because it represented the shroud in which Christ was wrapped for burial. Here too no concession was made to lay persons, especially laundresses, in the cleaning of corporals and other cloths. According to Lyndwood, drawing on the universal canons, this work was assigned to deacons and other “humble ministers.” The English canonist, glossing a statute of Edmund of Abingdon, archbishop of Canterbury, which said a vessel used in an emergency baptism at home might be given to the parish church out of reverence, suggested that it might be used in the washing of vestments.

Despite their exclusion from the sanctuary, even when the linens and vestments needed cleaning, women could gain access less directly. They might give or bequeath cloth to the parish for liturgical uses. A bedsheet might, if made of linen, be given for use as an altar cloth or a houselling cloth to be used at communion, held under the chins of communicants. A kerchief might be turned into a corporal. These and other cloths might be embroidered by the women who gave them to the church. This gave them personal access, if indirect, to the sanctuary. Moreover, a woman might be remembered among the church’s benefactors and be seen as a virtuous woman who

laundering as burdensome but valuable, while bequests were made by the laity to support the hiring of laundresses; 29–30.

118 William Lyndwood, Provinciale (seu Constitutiones Angliæ) ... Cui Adjiciuntur Constitutiones Legatinae D. Othonis et D. Othoboni ... (Oxford, 1679; repr., Farnborough, UK: Gregg International, 1968), 235: “Linteamina Corporalia, Pallae, & alia indumenta Altaris integra sint, & mundissima, & saepe abluantur per personas ad hoc in Canone deputatas, ob reverentiam & praesentiam Salvatoris nostri, & totius caelestis Curiae, qua Sacramento Altaris conficiendo & confecto non est dubium inteesse.” The statute is based loosely on one from Paris; see Powicke and Cheney, Councils and Synods 2, pt. 1, 142, compared with Pontal, Statuts Synodaux, 1:58. Translation mine.

119 Ibid., 235 z: “Corporalia. Quae sc. Non debent fieri ex Serico, sed solum ex Pano lineo puto terreno ab Episcopo Consecrat, de conse. di. i. c. ex consulto. Nec debet confici neque beneficii Corporale de Panno misso in confectionem Farinae, vel alterius rei ad hoc quod stet rigidum siuper Calicem; sed erit de Lino puro absque mixtione alterius rei, sive praetiosioris, sive vilioris. Et erit candidum atque mundum, quia significat Sindicem, in qua Corpus Christi futi involutum; & debet fieri de puro Lino, quia sicut Linum tonsionibus deducitur ad Candorem … .”

120 Ibid., 235 z: “In Canone deputatos. sc. per Diaconum, alios Ecclesiae humiles Ministros, de consec. dist. i. nemo.”

121 Ibid., 242 e: “Usus ecclesiae. Sc. Ut in illo laventur Vestimenta Ecclesie … .”
worked cloth, as had Mary, who, according to the Apocrypha, made the curtain of the temple in Jerusalem.122

CONCLUSION

A few general observations are in order. As the belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist became more literal, the items closest to the sacrament became the object of more detailed regulation. Honor for the Savior, who became present in host and chalice, was combined with a sense of ritual purity, removing these things not just from secular hands but potentially even from cleaning by pious women. Corporals and altar linens were particular concerns because of their closeness to the sacrament and the possibility that consecrated wine might be spilled on them. This staining with the blood of Christ made unclean linen objects too sacred to be reused for private or secular purposes. They were to be disposed of fittingly. Whether intact cloths, excised fragments of vestments, or ashes, they were to be saved among a church's relics, alongside the ashes and the bones of saints.123

Corporals themselves could become relics in the truest sense. The well-known example is the corporal involved in the Miracle at Bolsena. The usual story about this relic, dated traditionally to 1263, is that a Bohemian priest on his way to Rome doubted the Real Presence in the Eucharist while celebrating Mass. The host bled onto the corporal, illustrating Christ's presence to the doubting priest. The corporal was moved to the cathedral at Orvieto, where it now resides in the Chapel of the Corporal, which was constructed in the mid-fifteenth century.124 This story is represented in the Stanze, a suite of reception rooms in the Vatican Palace, decorated by Raphael for Pope Julius II in 1512, which place the pope, four cardinals, and Julius' daughter Felice among the witnesses to the miracle.125 Another corporal, housed at Daroca in the lands of the crown of Aragon, was supposed to show bleeding onto linens when a priest hid six consecrated hosts during an attack by Muslims on an army of Christians in 1239. A bloodstained corporal is reported to have become the banner of the Christian army. There, as at Bolsena, the preservation of linens stained with the blood of Christ became even more literal than in the regulations about spills of

the consecrated wine. Nonetheless, the miracle of Christ’s presence did not have to be so spectacular to be believed to occur. Even a spill from a chalice onto a corporal could create a relic of Christ’s Real Presence out of the linens that commentators on liturgy compared to the white flesh of Jesus.