The visual construction of the Christian altar in the Western Late Middle Ages

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1. Introduction

The altar is the most important fixed or movable element in the Christian church, as it serves, on the one hand, as the table for the Eucharistic sacrifice and, on the other, represents Christ himself as the sacrificial victim. Already present in the temples of ancient religions, it takes on a new dimension in Christian liturgy when associated with the table of the Eucharistic banquet. The morphology of the Christian altar, its topographical location within the church, its liturgical function, its orientation in relation to the congregation, its number, and the presence of visual objects associated with the altar have been among the key areas of interest for specialists over the last two centuries. It is one of the liturgical elements that has attracted the most attention: various academic disciplines have studied Christian altars to advance our understanding of the past, always in relation to the customs and concrete forms these pieces of furniture take.

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On the one hand, sacred archaeology has sought to reconstruct the external forms of altars on the basis of evidence preserved in the material culture, examining their structural typologies, their various formats and sizes, as well as their links with the sacrificial tables of ancient cults, with which Christian altars certainly share many common features. The history of religious architecture has also studied the evolution of altars, always in relation to the morphology of temples and churches, seeking their obvious functionality, which has sometimes been abandoned by the fashions and aesthetic trends of each era and place. On the other hand, liturgical theology has focused on studying the altar as the table of the Eucharistic banquet, the new setting for the Last Supper table where the Mass is instituted as a sacrament. Liturgical history has also taken an interest in the Christian altar in its role as the focal point for the direction of liturgical actions, illustrating the passionate debates that continue to this day. Legal history has likewise studied the altar as a space for the celebration of oaths and a privileged place where the most important courtly agreements of the past were signed. Ritual anthropology has seen in Christian altars evidence of continuity in the symbols and materials of religious ceremonies, and has studied the behaviour of liturgical participants in relation to altars, as well as the textual forms associated with them.

Art history, too, has analysed Christian altars in relation to the architecture of churches and the arrangement of images. However, as with knowledge in other disciplines, when art history has turned its attention to the study of Christian altars, it has always drawn upon liturgical sources and archaeological evidence to make sense of sacred spaces and the images placed in association with altars. We shall now reconstruct the morphology of the medieval Christian altar based on iconographic sources as a dimension of medieval art history itself. In other words, we shall analyse the visual evidence from the period that allows us to identify common patterns and changes in the elements associated with the rites celebrated at the altar and their relationship with the immediate surroundings. It should be noted that we shall first examine a large number of Christian altars depicted in paintings, manuscripts and works of art from the late Western Middle Ages, between the 13th and 15th centuries, paying particular attention to images within complex figurative programmes in which the altar occupies a prominent position and, consequently, the information they provide is much richer in detail. We shall therefore address the codification of the altar in the Roman rite, for in the 13th century, almost the whole of Western Christendom was united in prayer through the reformed forms resulting from the Gregorian Reform, and although there was local diversity

resulting from the absence of standard editions of liturgical books, the functioning of the altars and their arrangement were not affected by the specific ritual particularities of regional practices.

The following details provide a visual overview of the western altar in the 13th, 14th and 16th centuries. We will therefore be unable to provide many answers to those interested in the history of Christian liturgy following the Council of Trent, as the relative liturgical diversity of the late Middle Ages – far less than that of the early Middle Ages – suggests a greater number of ritual customs that did not continue beyond the 16th century. Furthermore, those familiar with medieval liturgical sources will readily recognise the value of local traditions and the topographical influences on ritual, which is imbued with customs specific to certain places that are imprinted on the images, leaving their mark for posterity.

The selection of illustrations we shall discuss may seem random, and the iconographic paths traced by medieval images allow us to chart other equally interesting paths with a diverse range of examples. However, we have chosen to support this lecture with a few images, visual scenes and iconographic themes that we have previously studied in depth, even though we are certain that this visual journey could be enriched by a wealth of equally significant examples. Before delving into the pages of richly illustrated liturgical and devotional books, we must also, with due caution, bear in mind a fundamental point: the illuminated manuscripts that have survived to the present day, preserved in libraries and museums, constitute only a tiny fraction of the total book production of the Middle Ages. This is why the conclusions that can be drawn from analysing the images they contain must be treated with great caution, without generalisation.

2. The altar from the perspective of the *Cantigas de Santa María*

One of the earliest examples illustrating some of the visual criteria for the depiction of altars in the late Middle Ages can be found in the **Cantigas de Santa María**, a manuscript produced in the Hispanic *scriptorium* of Alfonso X the Wise. This is a collection of poems recounting miraculous stories in which Mary intercedes for those who implore her intervention, written in Galician-Portuguese and accompanied by music and illustrations. Of the four illustrated and musical manuscripts we possess today, one

of the most interesting is the *Códice Rico*, preserved in the library of the Royal Monastery of *El Escorial*[2] , composed around 1280–1284.

Each of these poems or 'cantigas' is accompanied by several images arranged in panels of six vignettes per page, with a brief summary sentence summarising the image. This layout, which some have regarded as a precursor to the contemporary comic strip, is one of the characteristic features of these manuscripts. Each scene conceptually captures a part of the story told in the *cantiga* accompanying the image. These are visual compositions of great interest, as they organise the consecutive episodes through a highly distinctive treatment of architectural space, in which the elements are depicted in such a way that they can be viewed by the observer as if from a side perspective, presenting the interior view of the spaces and reflecting the characters' actions from this vantage point.

Two types of altar can be identified in the iconographic depictions of *the Cantigas*: the first, and most common, appears in almost all the compositions; it is richly decorated and features a seated statue of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus, before which the faithful implore her intercession; the second type is the liturgical altar, upon which the Eucharist is celebrated, a scene that appears in a smaller proportion of the Cantigas (around a quarter of them). In both cases, the altar has a similar form: a two- or three-tiered base, richly decorated with inlaid precious stones – which appear as coloured ornaments in the manuscript – with side folds that might evoke the tablecloths or sheets that covered it at that time. The duality between the two altars – possibly the main altar and a secondary altar dedicated to the Virgin – is visually explained in *Cantiga* 162, which recounts the relocation of the statue of the Virgin to a secondary altar on the bishop's orders, with the image of Mary returning to its place by divine grace. In certain scenes of this story, it is necessary to show both altars; this is why the illustrator uses the cross and the candles to indicate which of the two is the main altar of the church.

2 RBME T-I-1.

Figure 1. *Cantigas de Santa María* (*Códice Rico*), Library of *the Real Monasterio del Escorial*, ms. RBME T-I-1, f. 82r. Photograph: *Patrimonio Nacional*.

In the remaining illustrations, the figures on the altar of the Virgin always display a distinctive feature: whilst all the elements of the image are depicted in a side view, the seated sculpture of the Virgin Mary – situated on the altar – is always shown in a frontal view, so that the reader of the manuscript can properly perceive the Marian image as a key element of the iconographic programme. Thus, not only the sculpture, but also the altar itself, which supports the image of the Virgin, appear in a frontal position, almost always shifted to one side of the vignette in order to provide sufficient space to depict the kneeling faithful imploring Marian intercession, a feature characteristic of these compositions.

For their part, illustrations depicting a liturgical altar, upon which the Eucharist is celebrated, are characterised by the presence of candlesticks, a reliquary, the altar cross and sacred vessels. It is very interesting to examine these images closely, as in some of them one can make out the linens used on the altar, such as the purificator placed over the chalice. The arrangement of these altars is depicted both from a frontal perspective, when no clergy are interacting with the sacred space, and from a side perspective, where one sees priests or bishops celebrating the Eucharist or one of the sacraments within this space. In cases where the image shows the altar from the side, it is common to see only one of the altar candlesticks, as an element that helps us to perceive the orientation of the altar.

In some cases, the two types of altar we have mentioned – featuring the seated statue of the Virgin and the liturgical furnishings – are combined into a single visual type, integrating within the same element both the Marian devotional reality and the

sacramental reality of the Eucharist, just as paraliturgical and liturgical celebrations were intertwined in the Middle Ages. This is the case in the illustrations of *Cantiga* 179, which depicts the altar of the church of *Santa María de Sanas* de Molina (Aragon). In this instance, the carved seated image of the Virgin has been replaced by a panel above the altar, in the manner of an altarpiece, which also features the Marian image.

In the *Cantigas*, the altar acts as a defining feature of the church, allowing it to be recognised as a sacred space through its visual representation alone. Thus, when disasters occur in sacred places, such as fires or acts of desecration, illustrators choose to depict the altar as the main part of the church, thereby preventing the space from being mistaken for another type of place. The same applies when one wishes to indicate that a particular ceremony is taking place in the church, but in another part of the building: the altar may be depicted as a contextual element in the background of the scene or moved to the side.

Cantiga 55 tells the story of a nun who becomes pregnant by an abbot and who, before giving birth, repents of her sin and implores the Virgin Mary's intercession. In the illustrations for this poem, the altar of the convent to which the nun belongs stands out: covered by an opulent canopy, it departs from the formal models found in the other illuminations of the manuscript. No element of the textual composition supports this new depiction, so it must be regarded as a simple iconographic development that complements the variety of architectural spaces depicted in the *cantigas* and which is also found in other images of the manuscript.

Figure 2. *Cantigas de Santa María* (*Códice Rico*), Library of *the Real Monasterio del Escorial*, ms. RBME T-I-1, f. 82r. Photograph: *Patrimonio Nacional*.

Meanwhile, in *Cantiga* 115, a child who has set out in search of salvation to avoid falling into the clutches of the devil is sent to a hermit living in isolation. After imploring divine intercession and praying the hours, the hermit celebrates the Eucharist whilst the demons carry the child away. To depict these two events in the same scene, the illuminator depicts the clergyman celebrating the Eucharist, for the first time, with his back to the composition, so that the demons can be seen carrying the young boy away.

Figure 3. *Cantigas de Santa María (Códice Rico)*, Library of *the Real Monasterio del Escorial*, ms. RBME T-I-1, f. 165r. Photograph: *Patrimonio Nacional.*

We could considerably expand the selection of altars featured in the *Cantigas de Santa María*, but having examined the main types and considered the orientation and arrangement of these altars, it is now appropriate to present the scene of the offering of the soul in prayer as an iconographic theme in which altars play a prominent role.

3. From the altar to heaven: *Ad te levavi animam meam*

The Introit chant for the first Sunday of Advent begins with the words *Ad te levavi animam meam* from Psalm 24. To adorn this liturgical opening, manuscript illustrators developed a highly significant iconographic theme during the late Middle Ages: that of the offering of the praying soul, which retained two closely related visual variations, depending on whether the image of God the Father appeared above it or not. From a theological perspective, these images are imbued with symbolic meaning that links the contemplation evoked by the psalmist to the season of waiting represented by Advent, the prelude to Christmas. It is with this same significance that this Introit appears, conceived as an anticipation of the Incarnation that is repeated throughout this liturgical season.

The visual motif is always the same: a clergyman celebrates the Eucharist before the altar, and from his clasped hands emerges a figure representing his soul, depicted as a homunculus—that is, a small, naked child, a symbol of purity. The homunculus stands up and looks for God when God is present in the image. This is why the soul depicted shows a pious expression similar to that of the clergyman who addresses a prayer of trust to the Lord. One of the finest examples of this visual motif is found in a missal from Tours, now held in the municipal library.[3] The tonsured clergyman, dressed in the violet chasuble of Advent, joins his hands and closes his eyes in prayer before the start of Mass. His soul is projected from his hands in an attitude of elevation, as evoked by the introit chant. In front of the clergyman stands the altar towards which his soul is projected: a table, probably made of wood, decorated with two layers of altar cloths, one red and the other green, over which a white tablecloth is draped. On this tablecloth, one can see the corporal and part of a sacred vessel. The wooden altarpiece, with its central motif of the Crucifixion, is one of the typical themes that adorned altars in the 15th century. In the background, the same scene reveals a niche in the wall, in the manner of a credence table, upon which rest some cruets.

Figure 4. Missal used in Tours, 15th century, Municipal Library of Tours, ms. 190, f. 7r.
Photograph: Institute for Research and History of Texts, National Centre for Scientific Research (France).

3 Tours Municipal Library, ms. 190.

The same scene is depicted in a Lyon missal, but in a different arrangement.[4] Here, the altar is set into a wall featuring an opening through which God the Father appears, in place of the altarpiece. The altar table features a small predella, like a decorative band, dotted with hagiographic motifs, which combine with the decorations on the façade, applied directly to the stone. In the centre of the altar lies the open missal and to the left the chalice, placed in an unusual arrangement for the celebration of the rite: it was common for illuminators not to depict such details faithfully, seeking instead to capture a clear conceptual synthesis of the theme being depicted.

Figure 5. *Missal used in Lyon*, 15th century, Municipal Library of Lyon, ms. 515, f. 11r. Photograph: Institute for Research and History of Texts, National Centre for Scientific Research (France).

Another Tournai missal, dating from the early 15th century and held at the Valenciennes Municipal Library, shows a very interesting figurative development of the

4 Lyon Municipal Library, ms. 515 (0435).

altar.[5] Here, the clergyman is transformed into a supplicant who, like the faithful reciting Psalm 24, directs his soul towards God, who receives it from heaven, not in a funerary context, but in a wholly spiritual one. This is not a journey of the soul, a movement from earth to heaven, but rather a spiritual pilgrimage through which the soul is directed towards God, just as prayer is directed or as the sense of order and directionality of worship is organised. The altar in this image is a block of stone with niches, the central one likely providing access to the altar stone in which the relics are kept. The cloth of the altar cloth covers the entire upper surface and reveals a small border at the front, almost completely covering the sides. The altarpiece is arranged in the form of a pediment with a frieze in the shape of an inverted T, with no figurative motif other than its gilded colour.

Figure 6. *Missal used at Saint-Amand de Tournai*, 15th century, Valenciennes Municipal Library, ms. 118, f. 9r. Photograph: Institute for Research and History of Texts, National Centre for Scientific Research (France).

Although most of these compositions are found in missals—that is, books intended for use at the altar—we also find this iconographic theme in other types of manuscripts

5 Valenciennes Municipal Library, ms. 118.

specific to certain clerics, such as pontificals. In this case, the arrangement of the elements is slightly different, as it is necessary to provide the image with the identification corresponding to the ecclesiastical's episcopal rank, incorporating the pontifical insignia into the elevation of the soul. A good example is the image preserved in a pontifical in the Bayeux Municipal Library, dating from the late 14th century[6] , which shows a bishop raising his soul towards God. The homunculus in this image appears mitred, just like the bishop, as episcopal consecration imprints a character upon the soul of man. The altar table is relegated to the background in this composition, positioned like a sarcophagus and covered with a tablecloth. One also notes one of the assisting clerics, who holds the crosier whilst the main scene unfolds.

Figure 7. *Pontifical*, 14th century, Bayeux Municipal Library, ms. 61, f. 15v. Photograph: Institute for Research and History of Texts, National Centre for Scientific Research (France).

6 Bayeux Municipal Library, ms. 61.

This visual motif underwent a marked evolution during the Late Middle Ages, which is worth examining as it runs parallel to the complete codification of the orientation of the medieval altar. Thus, the earliest iconographic depictions of this motif began to appear around the mid-13th century. The surviving manuscripts from this period, such as a missal from the Municipal Library of Reims[7] or an antiphonary from the Municipal Library of Rouen[8] , feature an identical layout in which God remains at the top, separated from the altar itself, and in which the homunculus is depicted facing directly towards the location of the sacrificial altar. The divine presence is thus situated on high and not at the very centre of liturgical prayer, as Byzantine liturgical theology demonstrates. The figure of God the Father appears in a gesture of blessing with one hand and holding the globe of the earth in the other, depicted in a timeless manner and alluding to his role as creator of the universe. It is only in the Rouen Antiphonary that the homunculus's head turns to look directly at God, which could signify that only the soul knows where to direct its attention, even if the body and the whole human being are unaware of it.

Iconographic representations of this theme in the 14th century show a marked evolution, not so much in the placement of the figure of God the Father as in the interaction between him and the homunculus on the altar. Two Parisian missals, both held at the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris[9] , feature this illustration accompanying the text of the Introit for the first Sunday of Advent. Depicted in side perspective, the praying soul emerges from the hands of the clergyman, who is kneeling in adoration before the altar. Both altars are shaped like a quadrangular table, probably made of marble and covered with a tablecloth. One contains an altar cross, whilst the other contains the chalice covered with a purificator, which hangs towards the back of the altar. God the Father appears in a cloud that opens in the sky and receives the prayer whilst blessing the scene. Perhaps more interesting is the scene depicted in a Parisian missal preserved in Lyon[10] , in which the figure of God the Father appears in the centre, beneath an architectural canopy, and holds the soul as if to take it with him. At the same time, the homunculus and the clergyman himself turn directly towards the altar on the right-hand side, which has remained virtually untouched by the divine intervention.

7 Reims Municipal Library, ms. 230, f. 1r.

8 Rouen Municipal Library, ms. 250, f. 1r.

9 Mazarine Library, Paris, ms. 407, f. 1r and Mazarine Library, Paris, ms. 408, f. 1r.

10 Lyon Municipal Library, ms. 5122, f. 4r.

Later in the 15th century, other compositions chose to depict a complete altar with numerous liturgical objects and elements present, evoking the iconographic arrangement that we shall see in the visual theme of the Mass of Saint Gregory. In a missal preserved at Solesmes Abbey[11] , the altar faces a window in the wall, through which the image of God the Father appears. However, the altar is not set within the window as in the case of the aforementioned ms. 515 from Tours, already mentioned, but the faithful are placed between the altar and the divine presence, suggesting a new mode of representation in which both the cleric's soul and the altar remain turned towards the Lord, unlike many of the faithful who merely contemplate what is happening at the altar.

A second type of image, much more widespread, follows a more traditional pattern, such as that found in two missals: one from the Municipal Library of Abbeville[12] and the missal of Pierre de Laval from the Angers Library[13] , which are based on an identical drawing. In these illustrations, the altar occupies a central and fundamental position, with all its elements: altarpiece, altar cloths, altar front, sacra, missal and sacred vessels. The homunculus rises from the priest's hands towards the heavens, where the sky opens and one can see the representation of God the Father with the orb of the world and the papal tiara, dressed as the eternal priest and surrounded by angelic choirs. The faithful are placed in perspective on either side of the altar, but whilst some contemplate the soul's ascent towards God, most focus their attention on the altar itself without being fully aware of what is taking place.

Given the variety of forms this visual theme takes, it is easy to see how altars from the early Middle Ages are arranged in such a way that, during the liturgy, the priest turns his soul towards the Lord, directing not the layout of the altarpiece itself, but his own consciousness towards a reality that is symbolically higher. The arrangement of the faithful from different perspectives is not necessarily due to a compositional choice by the illustrator, but reflects a model tending towards unity in the direction of the ritual Eucharistic prayer, an aspect that has already been discussed during this meeting.

4. The altar and its objects in Masses presided over by saints

Images from the High and Late Middle Ages established a series of iconographic themes which we grouped together a few years ago under the category of 'Masses

11 Library of Solesmes Abbey, ms. 215, f. 1r.

12 Abbeville Municipal Library, ms. Inc. 46, f. 1r.

13 Angers Municipal Library, ms. ad. 49, f. 1r.

presided over by saints'. These are Eucharistic visual themes in which a cleric celebrates the Eucharist at the altar, but this cleric possesses specific attributes or is placed within a more complex visual programme that allows him to be identified as a specific holy priest or bishop. Generally, this Eucharistic action gives rise to a miraculous evocation: the present appearance of God, who is depicted in bodily form on the altar, of the Virgin Mary, or of a thaumaturgical reality at work during the celebration of the Eucharist. The inclusion of saints in images depicting the celebration of the Eucharist may have served several purposes: on the one hand, it alluded to the holiness sought through the sacrament of Holy Orders; on the other hand, the incorporation of miracles occurring during the celebration of the Eucharist helped to legitimise the real presence of Christ in this sacrament and to present it as the central sacrament of the Christian life. The images of the Mass of Saint Erard, the Mass of Saint Basil, the Mass of Saint Clement and the Mass of Saint Ambrose are among the earliest iconographic developments of this theme, which we have recently addressed in a monograph, *[14] *, published recently.

A second type of these images comprises what we have termed 'miraculous masses', because they depict a specific divine intervention, such as the Mass of Saint Martin of Tours, which is so widespread in Romanesque iconography. This second type includes the so-called Mass of Saint Giles, such as the one depicted on a late 15th-century panel at the *National Gallery* in London. The visual composition is very interesting, as is the story it depicts. Charlemagne begs the saint to forgive him for a sin he cannot confess. Saint Giles offers the Eucharist, asking for divine intercession and God's favour for the king. At the moment of consecration, an angel descends upon the church altar and grants Charlemagne forgiveness in the form of a special bull which he holds in his hand.

14 Pazos-López, Ángel (2023). *Images of the Medieval Liturgy. Theoretical Approaches, Visual Themes and Iconographic Programmes* (Valencia, Tirant Lo Blanch).

Figure 8. *The Mass of Saint Gilles*, c. 1500. *National Gallery, London.* Photograph: *National Gallery.*

Beyond the miraculous event and its place as one of the scenes from the saint's life, the image is of great interest from the perspective of the depiction of altars in the late Middle Ages. The altar for the Mass of Saint Gilles is a fixed piece of furniture, draped with a fabric *antipendium* and covered with a decorative textile border, upon which the altar cloth is laid. Attached to the altar is an altarpiece with an altar frontal, inlaid with precious stones. Above this altarpiece, a cross, also inlaid with precious stones, presides

over the entire altar furnishings. Particular attention should be paid to the presence of the green curtains, which we shall discuss later, and to the rails used to move them. We should also note the meticulous depiction of the cushion on which the missal rests and the way in which the liturgical book is depicted, open on the altar. All these elements help to evoke the manner in which altars were depicted in the late Middle Ages.

However, the most widespread iconographic theme of the Miraculous Eucharist presided over by a saint was, until its prohibition in the 16th century, the Mass of Saint Gregory. Its widespread popularity, both on the Iberian Peninsula and in northern Europe, can be explained both by the devotional nature attributed to the Eucharist in medieval times and by the explicit depiction of the miracle of transubstantiation in a visible form. The tradition behind the theme is based on the doubt of an acolyte assisting the pope – or of a worshipper attending Mass, depending on the source consulted – regarding the real presence of Christ under the Eucharistic species. The setting is almost always attributed to the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem in Rome, and the presence of Pope Gregory is linked to the Gregorian Reform, a process that took place well after the pontificate of Gregory the Great, but was legitimised in the 11th century under his name. The rise of Eucharistic devotion in the 13th century, which led to the establishment of Corpus Christi, was undoubtedly the inspiration behind the conception of this visual theme centred on the celebration of the Eucharist.

In all surviving examples, the arrangement of the elements is the same: Pope Gregory celebrates the Eucharist and, at a certain point during the consecration, the image of Christ himself appears on the altar, often surrounded by *the arma Christi* or the instruments of the Passion. One of the earliest examples we shall examine is a Spanish panel held at *the Metropolitan Museum of Art* in New York. Its small size, less than a metre, and the fact that it is framed within a cut-out panel suggest that it may be one of the images forming part of an altarpiece with a broader iconographic programme. The image shows Pope Gregory genuflecting after the consecration of the wine. On the altar, a miniature figure of Christ, depicted as the Man of Sorrows, pours his blood into the chalice: a trickle flows from his side, falling directly into the cup. Behind the saint, two assisting deacons hold the ends of the chasuble, adorned with rich damascene patterns, whilst carrying lit candles as a sign of respect at the moment of consecration.

Figure 9. *Mass of Saint Gregory*, c. 1485–1495. *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York. Photograph: *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

The altar table is an important feature of this image. Although its base is made of stone, with decorative elements on the plinths, the altar is covered with a fabric altar front and several fabric panels that surround it like a border. Above it, a white linen cloth serves as the Holy Shroud, catching the drops of blood falling from the wounds on Christ's feet. Above the altar, one can see not only the chalice, but also a corporal with a simple paten and a host, presumed to be already consecrated, as well as a purificator whose red embroidery matches the decoration of the tablecloth. On the left-hand side, depicted in the perspective of the image as if in the background, one can see the missal, open at the page of *the Te igitur* – the illustration of the Crucifixion bears this out – and the papal tiara, which indicates who is presiding over the Eucharist. On the right-hand side, a small pedestal supports several metal cruets. Above the altar, an altarpiece serves as a backdrop and, in the background, the open liturgical curtain reveals the instruments of the Passion

mentioned above. The intercession of the Virgin Mary is depicted in the rear stained-glass window, without any direct involvement in the miraculous event depicted.

Another panel depicting the Mass of Saint Gregory is now in the Burgos Museum and probably originates from the church in Cogollos. A work by the Italian-Flemish painter Pedro Berruguete from his later Castilian period, it divides the composition into three distinct spatial planes presented in a highly original manner. In the foreground, the clergy gather around the altar, including the deacons present, the cardinals and the officials of the Roman Curia. In the background is the miracle taking place at the altar, where Christ is seen standing in bodily form before the open altar rail, leaning on the cross. The third plane is formed by the souls in purgatory saved by God, beneath the timeless iconographic representation of the Eternal Father, whom we see through an open portal, for it is through the sacrament of the Eucharist that Christians may be saved and attain eternal life.

Figure 10. Pedro Berruguete. *Mass of Saint Gregory*, late 15th century. Burgos Museum. Photograph: Burgos Museum.

Two liturgical objects are visible in the foreground, albeit somewhat indistinctly: a bucket with a sprinkler for holy water and a torch holder, probably used to hold one of the candles carried by the deacons. On the altar, decorated with tablecloths and fabrics, are the same objects already present in the previous panel: the missal, the chalice, the paten and the tiara. Only two candlesticks have been added at the ends, along with a triptych containing the Roman Canon, which would later take the form of an altar canon. The custom of piling so many liturgical objects on the altar does not appear to be a mere matter of practicality, but rather an exercise in the artist's free expression, allowing him to incorporate the most exquisite details and demonstrate his mastery of detail, as was common in 15th-century Flemish painting.

The final example we will examine is housed at *the Museo Nacional de Arte* de Cataluña. It is a version of the same theme as the Mass of Saint Gregory, but in this instance painted by Diego de la Cruz during the last two decades of the^{15th}century. We shall not repeat the elements we have already identified in the same composition in the previous works. What is interesting about this image are the numerous details hidden within the altar itself. On the one hand, the altar is depicted here as a stone table with a niche on the side. In this niche are placed the cruets which, in other images, are found on an auxiliary shelf, in the manner of a credence table. The armrest of a kneeler serves, together with the appropriate cushion, as a support for the papal tiara, which has lost its place on the altar table. On the altar cloth, however, one can see an embossed paten, absent in the previous examples, on which the divisions of the recesses for the sacred particles are marked by a special engraving in the surface pattern. The candlesticks above the altar are more ornate, but the deacons' candles have been replaced by simple candlesticks. Above the altar stands a small jug with a dish: this is not a water jug for washing the celebrant's hands, but the jug of vinegar given to Christ to drink on the cross, which, in this instance, forms part of the elements of *the Arma Christi*.

Figure 11. Diego de la Cruz, *Mass of Saint Gregory,* c. 1480. *Museo Nacional de Arte de Cataluña*, Barcelona. Photograph: *Museo Nacional de Arte de Cataluña.*

The iconographic depictions of the Mass of Saint Gregory are a real visual delight for identifying the objects that were placed around the altar during the celebration of the Eucharist. The painters' desire to include as many details as possible makes these images a valuable treasure trove for understanding the practical uses of altars, such as providing additional storage space, such as credences and niches, as well as being adorned with numerous layers of textile elements, richly combined with one another and with the fabrics in direct contact with the Eucharistic elements, such as corporals and purificators. Furthermore, the richness of the liturgical vestments reveals an almost complete codification of the liturgical vestments used throughout the modern era and up to the^{20th}century for the celebration of the Christian liturgy. These vestments, adorned with embroidery, appliqués and unique fabrics, demonstrate that no expense was spared in equipping the sacristies of the most remarkable cathedrals and the most important places of worship with valuable vestments, although very few of these vestments have survived to the present day.

5. The Altar in Contemplation of the *Latens Veritas*

When Thomas Aquinas most likely composed a poem entitled **Te devote laudo** in the 13th century – later known as **Adoro te devote** and set to music in the 17thcentury to become a Eucharistic hymn – he described the Christian God as **latens* veritas*, that is to say, the truth hidden or concealed within the Eucharist. This reality of the Eucharist as the mystery of a God incarnate in the Eucharistic species and 'hidden' from physical sight reached its zenith in that same century, with the gradual rise of Eucharistic devotion brought about by the codification of the feast of *Corpus Christi* or the Feast of the Body of Christ. In the iconographic themes associated with the Christian altar of the Late Middle Ages, we can therefore find visual evidence that allows us to understand more precisely how this 'hidden truth' of the sacrament was made tangible through sensory experience.

Liturgical curtains (*cortinis, pannum, velum, tetravela*) are the first element worthy of note, serving to conceal the Eucharistic elements from view and thus to hide part of the Mass from the congregation. A late 14th-century manuscript of Guillaume de Digulleville's **Pilgrimage of Human Life** reveals a curious image of Moses celebrating the Eucharist, hidden behind a liturgical curtain.[15] The illuminator parts the greenish curtain, holding it artificially to the right-hand side, as if to suggest, somewhat indiscreetly, a hidden window through which we can see the ritual taking place behind it, which is none other than the doxology with the pyx raised.

Figure 12. *Pilgrimage of Human Life*, 14th century, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris, ms. 1130, f. 8v. Photograph: Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes, Centre national de la recherche scientifique (France).

15 Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris, ms. 1130.

The use of these cloths to cover the altar in the West has not been sufficiently addressed in the historiography of the liturgy, as it is highly likely that there were no rubrics concerning the appropriate moments for drawing them back and opening them, as these gestures were part of a distinct dimension of tradition and custom (we must not forget that this is indeed the primary source of the liturgy). Even though Mario Righetti mentions that in the East these curtains served to 'conceal from the eyes of the faithful that part of the Divine Office corresponding to the Canon' and that in the West this practice was never recorded, the appearance of numerous examples of curtains, along with the corresponding canopies, rings and handles, reveals a very different reality. Why decorate altars, not only with curtains but also with the mechanisms for their proper handling, if these mechanisms had no active role in the liturgy of that time?

Figure 13. *Book of Hours*, 15th century, Lyon Municipal Library, ms. 5142, f. 157r. Photograph: Institute for Research and History of Texts, National Centre for Scientific Research (France).

An illustration of the Mass of Saint Gregory, included in the visual section of a 15th century French book of hours[16] , is presented to us in a manner very similar to that described above, with the host being raised just as Christ appears in a tomb behind the altar, supported by an angel. The altar area is surrounded by four large candlesticks, of which we see only three, framed by curtains held together in pairs. The curtains act to completely enclose the side space and fall all the way down, thus obscuring the process of transubstantiation by which the Eucharistic elements are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. Although this practice does not appear in the rubrics of the missals of the time, the written sources of medieval allegorists mention the presence of these curtains, often determining their symbolic meanings, as Honoré d'Autun does in the 12th century:

> *On pallia.* The pallia, which are hung in the Church, are the miracles of Christ, which are read in the Church.
>
> Honoré d'Autun, *Gemma animae*, C. CXXXVII.

For his part, a few years later, Sicard of Cremona mentions the curtains amongst all the fabrics and textiles hung inside the church, also alluding to the significance of the colours used for some of these curtains:

> The altars and the church are adorned with pallia, curtains and brocades, and linens, tapestries with historical scenes, royal crowns, or other such items, or marked with various symbols; all of which pertain to the miracles of Christ, or to the future glory which, through the examples of our forebears and our own merits, indeed through the manifold and fruitful works of God's grace, shall be revealed in us. […]
>
> Therefore, the pallium or white curtain signifies purity, the red one charity, the green one contemplation, the black one mortification of the flesh, the multicoloured one the variety of virtues, the linen one tribulation, and the holloserica signifies virginity, so that through visible adornments we may be moved towards the invisible, and with an eager mind seek the glory laid up in heaven.
>
> Sicard of Cremona, *Mitrale*, Chapter XII

16 Lyon Municipal Library, ms. 5142.

Towards the end of the 13th century, in his **Rationale**, Guillaume Durand expanded upon the description of these liturgical curtains, specifying their number and their placement within the church, and indicating the occasions on which these liturgical veils were removed:

> It should be noted here that three kinds of veil are hung in the Church, namely, that which covers the sacred, that which separates the sanctuary from the clergy, and that which separates the clergy from the people. The first is a sign of our law. The second is a sign of our dignity, for we are unworthy, indeed incapable, of beholding the heavenly. The third is a restraint upon our carnal desires. The first, namely the curtains which extend from either side of the altar when the priest enters the sanctuary, as will be explained in the fourth part, under the heading *'On the* Sanctuary', signifies that, as it is written in Exodus 34, Moses placed a veil over his face, because the children of Israel could not bear the brightness of his countenance, and as the Apostle says, this veil is still today over the hearts of the Jews. Secondly, namely the curtain which is spread before the altar during the Mass in Lent, signifies that the veil was hung within the tabernacle, which separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place, as will be explained in the introduction to the fourth part, whereby the Ark was veiled from the people, and was woven with marvellous workmanship, and distinguished by a beautiful variety of colours, which was torn during the Lord's Passion, and by that example, curtains today are woven with varied beauty. *Concerning the aforementioned veil, and what the curtains ought to be like, see* Ex 26:36.
>
> Durand, *Rationale*, Book I, Chapter III.

Further on in the same book, he explicitly refers to the curtains on either side of the altar, to indicate at what point in the Canon this ritual sign is performed:

> To signify this, the priest enters the sanctuary, as it were veiled by certain curtains which are on either side of the altar, as will be explained below in the fourth section of the Canon, concerning the words 'Hanc igitur'. It is also called the Secreta because it is said secretly and in silence; for Christ, coming to consecrate his body, prayed secretly and alone from the hour of the Last Supper until he hung on the cross, which prayers the Secreta signifies.
>
> Durand, *Rationale*, Book IV, Chapter XXXV.

Iconographic depictions clearly show the presence of curtains as early as the 14th century. Although this practice may have been influenced by Eastern traditions, the layout of Eastern altars – beneath quadrangular canopies – would not explain the inclusion of rails for moving these veils, which were most likely intended to conceal the *latens deitas*. There is an initial group of images depicting a specific part of the Mass canon, and consequently the curtains appear to veil these moments. These are the images used to illustrate certain French missals, such as the one held in Cardinal Mazarin's library in Paris[17] . A cleric bows before the offerings, hands clasped, assisted by two deacons. The altar is depicted here as a large wooden piece of furniture, covered with at least two cloths: a lower one, from which a blue border matching the suspended canopy stands out, and the other white with lace decorations, upon which the corporal, chalice, purificator and pail are clearly visible. On one side of the altar (the side furthest from the viewer), a pole attached to the altarpiece protrudes. Hanging from this pole are curtains of a dull purple, fastened to the pole by a golden cord.

Figure 14. *Missal*, 15th century, Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris, ms. 410, f. 152r. Photograph: Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes, Centre national de la recherche scientifique (France).

17 Mazarine Library, Paris, ms. 410.

Another manuscript from the same library contains the *Decretals* of Pope Gregory VIII and features an illustration of the consecration of the bread in which a young assistant lifts the celebrant's chasuble to facilitate genuflection, whilst holding a lit candle.[18] We have already mentioned this gesture in a previous publication[19] , although in this case the scene is of great significance as the altar drapery is the same colour as the celebrant's chasuble. The perspective allows us to see not only the curtains on the right, as in the aforementioned missal, but also those on the left, fully drawn and secured to the frame by hooks.

Figure 15. *Decretals of Gregory VIII*, XV^{e}, Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris, ms. 208, f. 158r. Photograph: Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes, Centre national de la recherche scientifique (France).

A scene from the Mass of Saint Gregory, preserved in a book of hours at the Municipal Library of Tours[20] , shows Saint Gregory kneeling and gazing upon the royal presence on the Eucharistic table, whilst holding the sacred host aloft after having consecrated it. The altar seen in this illustration is adorned with a green textile

18 Mazarine Library, Paris, ms. 208.

19 Pazos-López, Ángel (2017). *Image and Presence of Medieval Sacramental Liturgy in the Triptych of the Redemption at the Prado Museum*. Eikón / Imago 6(2): 169–200.

20 Tours Municipal Library, ms. 218.

antipendium featuring gold decorations, which likely resemble embroidery. A linen tablecloth covers the surface of the altar and, placed directly above it, one can see the sacred vessels: the chalice and a ciborium for communion under the species of bread. The perspective of this image is very interesting because, although it is incorrect in terms of the volumetric treatment of the spaces, it evokes the symmetry of the forms by presenting the altar opening outwards in a trapezoidal shape, with the two curtains fully unfurled.

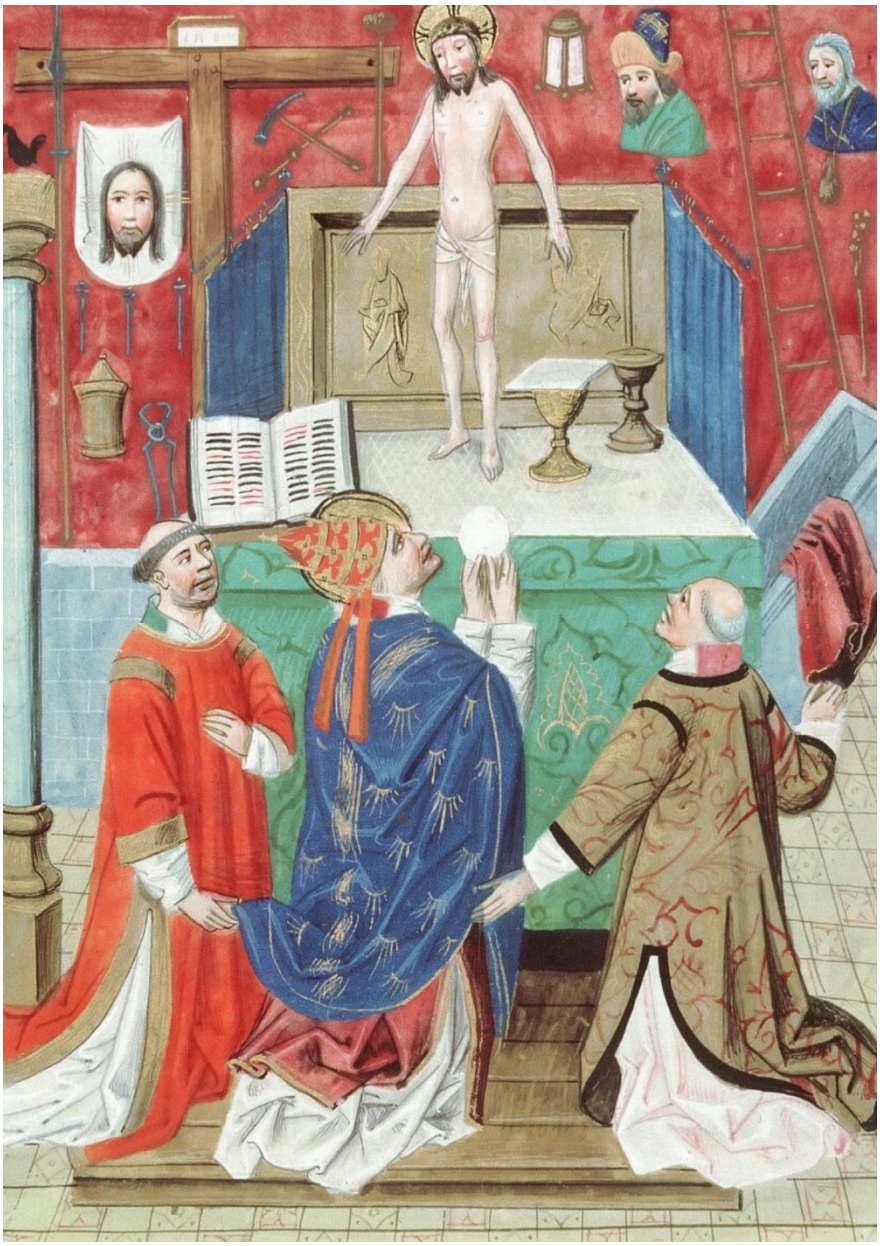

Figure 16. ***Book of Hours*****,** 15th century, Municipal Library of Tours, ms. 218, f. 183v. Photograph: Institute for Research and History of Texts, National Centre for Scientific Research (France).

A second group of images in which the curtains appear is linked to the Israelites' altar of burnt offerings, visually depicted as an altar in a Christian church. An illustrated

Bible held at the Municipal Library of Lyon[21] depicts God speaking to Moses, who is on his way with animals to offer a sacrifice on the altar. However, the altar we see is not a monumental stone altar like that of the Old Testament temple, but follows the format we saw in the French missals mentioned above. In this example, the drapery is a dull purplish colour and is attached to the stand by a braided gold cord, which demonstrates the variety of techniques used to develop this type of decoration.

Figure 17. *Illustrated Bible*, 15th century, Municipal Library of Lyon, ms. Inc. 57, f. 87r. Photograph: Institute for Research and History of Texts, National Centre for Scientific Research (France).

The same Old Testament theme appears in a manuscript of the Decretum Gratiani, this time dating from the14thcentury and held at the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris.[22] In

21 Lyon Municipal Library, ms. Inc. 57.

22 Mazarine Library, Paris, ms. 1290.

this instance, the image depicts the complete architectural setting of the temple, evoked in formal analogy with a Christian church. Moses and Aaron are shown kneeling, hands outstretched, imploring God, who, in this case, does not manifest himself visibly. The altar is depicted prepared for the Eucharist, with a stone structure on two steps raising it up. It is covered with a cloth whose colourful decorations are visible from the front and a white linen tablecloth that hangs down at the sides. The curtains are only visible on the left-hand side of the altar, as the side perspective prevents the right-hand side from being seen. In this instance, the fabric of the veil is a dull green, held in place by light-coloured rings.

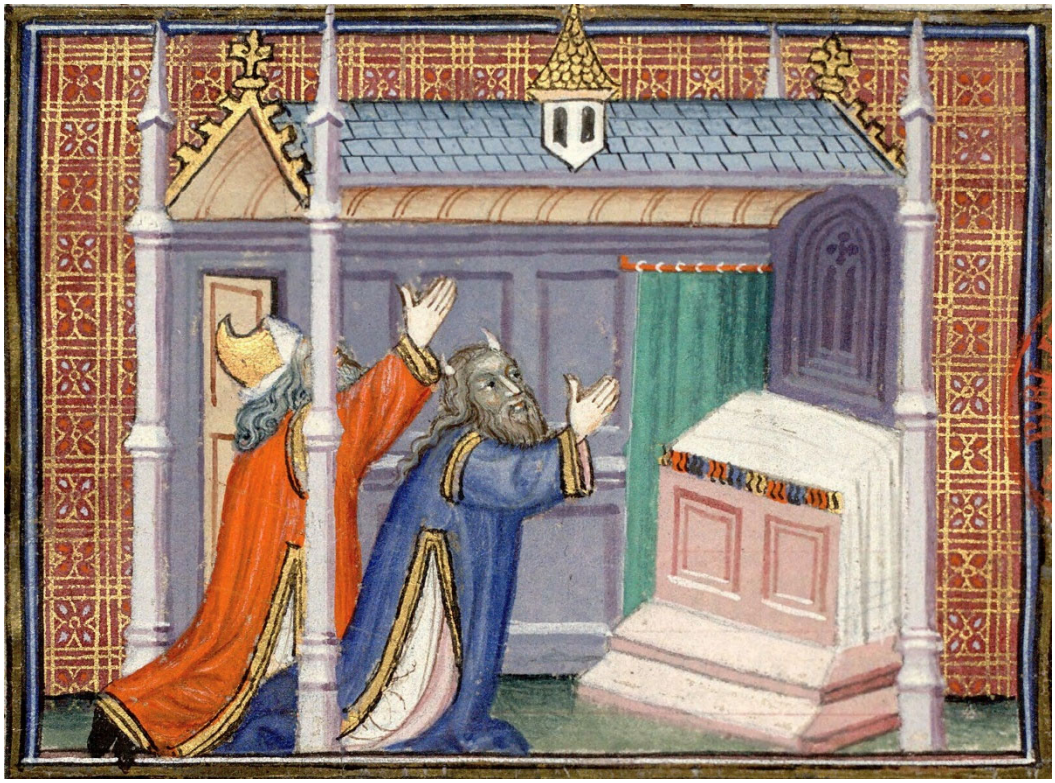

Figure 18. *Gratian*, *Decretum*, 14th century, Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris, ms. 1290, f. 35v. Photograph: Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes, Centre national de la recherche scientifique (France).

The visual examples in which liturgical curtains are depicted bear witness to a ritual practice – the act of drawing and opening the veils – intended to conceal the divine mystery within the Eucharist. These are not essential elements of the rite, such as the position of the clergy, the use of certain vestments or the depictions of sacred vessels, but they contribute to the setting of the ritual scenes and bear witness to the presence of curtains, veils and hangings whose uses are clearly determined by the liturgy, even if they are not specified in the rubrics of the liturgical books.

6. Conclusions

To conclude this presentation, it is worth examining a few questions that contribute to our understanding of late medieval altars within the sphere of influence of the Roman rite. First of all, the value of the artistic image as a source of medieval ritual culture must be emphasised. Many details concerning the arrangement of objects, the presence of features such as curtains, or the use of textiles to decorate their surfaces can only be attested through the iconographic representations of the period, which act as an iconographic record of customs and practices, beyond the texts themselves.

Secondly, iconographic themes such as miraculous masses presided over by saints, the offering of the soul to God, or images of textile details such as curtains provide insight into the layout, construction, form and function of medieval altars, as well as their relationship with other ritual elements that contributed to the aesthetic and sensory experience of Christian worshippers in the Middle Ages. Knowledge of the characteristics and written sources of these iconographic programmes is essential for a proper understanding of medieval rites.

Thirdly, the depictions of the liturgy found in tablets and manuscripts bear witness to certain characteristics of medieval spirituality that can shed light on discussions regarding the focus of liturgical prayer and its diversity, particularly in a Middle Ages where various ritual forms coexisted and where local liturgical practices were intertwined with popular and devotional culture. The value of the intangible aspect of the rite, transmitted orally rather than through the writing of rubrics in liturgical books, allows us to perceive medieval liturgy as an experience-oriented reality for Christians, clergy and the faithful, which goes far beyond the mere repetitive fulfilment of a set of formal and aesthetic guidelines.