INTRODUCTION

On Ash Wednesday of 1259, Nicola of Rouen, a choir nun at the monastery of Saint-Saens in Normandy, gave birth to her second child by Simon, the rector of the village church at Saint-Saens. The birth took place inside the monastery where Nicola was subsequently churched. The child was sent to Rouen to be raised by one of Nicola’s sisters. In July of that year, during a regular episcopal visit to the monastery, Bishop Odo of Rouen heard about the child and Nicola’s churching and included the information, without further comment, in his register.1 By 1259, the purification of women after childbirth was a very old custom in France dating back, at least, to the ninth century, but at the time of Nicola’s churching, the meaning and importance of this ancient custom was in flux.

The practice of churcing in France went back to the early Middle Ages and began as a purification of a new mother about a month after the birth of a child. Without the purification, a woman was prohibited from entering a church for fear she would desecrate sacred space with blood pollution. Gradually, in ways that cannot be traced with any precision, customs accumulated around the purification. By the twelfth century, it was a rite performed in the parish to which the new mother came, in the company of other women, bearing a candle and an offering. We have no way to know if Nicola’s churching conformed to these customs, but her purification can surely be explained in terms of sacred space. Her blood pollution would have endangered the monastery chapel and without purification Nicola would have been unable to participate in the divine office or other prayers central to her life as a choir nun. Yet even as Nicola was being purified in order to protect sacred space from blood pollution, the meaning and customs surrounding the rite were already evolving in a different direction.

While churcing remained a rite of purification, the meaning and importance of that purification changed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as theologians became less concerned about blood pollution as a threat to sacred space and instead began to discuss it as an obstacle to marital intercourse. Acting in concert with this new concern, French bishops began issuing legislation aimed at controlling access to the rite. Their efforts made

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churching into a privilege for properly married mothers. Unwed mothers, marginalized by these developments, continued to find illegal means of obtaining the rite, seeking the healing or spiritual comfort it offered. Bourgeois matrons and their families, on the other hand, benefited from the bishops’ legislation and surrounded the celebration with secular customs intended to enhance social status and family honor. The French term for this occasion, relevailles, or getting up, suggests the common perception of the day as a celebration of a mother’s ability to rise from childbed and return to an active life with her family. For both practical and social reasons, this was a significant moment for women and their families. Churching, consequently, became important for husbands as a means of expressing their status within the community as the head of a proper household. Thus, this “women’s rite” became very useful to men. These divergent understandings of the rite ensured that churching became a site of conflict over issues of power and authority.

As a mark of social status, churching also helped to create social identities. A woman who was married to the father of her children was identified as a proper matron and a respectable member of the parish community by her right to a public churching. Conversely, women who conceived and gave birth outside of marriage were identified as sinners and marginal members of the community by being denied a proper churching. Churching, thus, helped to shape the definition of the proper woman by insisting that all mothers be married and equating unwed mothers with bad women. These definitions, in turn, shaped the borders and identities of Christian communities by including some women and their husbands and excluding other women and the men associated with them.

The liturgy of churching, celebrated at the parish church, was the main event around which these social constructions operated. As it was celebrated in late medieval northern France, churching centered on a mass attended by the new mother, her birth attendants, and family. The mass was sometimes preceded by a blessing at the church door and was always followed by the new mother receiving a blessing and the gift of pain bénit, blessed bread. The liturgical celebration was customarily followed by a feast honoring the new mother and her family. Following her purification, a woman was allowed and probably expected to resume her sexual role as wife, since the ritual had cleansed her of blood impurities that would have made intercourse dangerous.

By the dawn of the Reformation, churching was an ancient custom rooted so deeply in the lives of medieval women, their families, and their communities that reformers found it virtually impossible to eradicate. Between the ninth and fifteenth centuries, the ritual of churching had developed into an established liturgical form and the public service had