In 1024, along with the rebuilding of the cathedral, Gerard I bishop of Cambrai commissioned the compilation of a huge three-part chronicle, The Deeds of the Bishops of Cambrai. This text is not only an important witness to contemporary affairs; it is itself a political weapon in the bishop’s attempt to achieve governmental supremacy over his secular and ecclesiastical rivals. Although the language of the chronicle is conservative, what is in fact narrated is a record of great political innovation. At the very moment that various ecclesiastical reform movements begin to create the sharpest possible separation—legal, sexual, and so forth—between the clergy and the laity, the church begins to claim for itself an ever wider authority over ever more intimate aspects of secular life. By the end of the century this process eventuates in a transformed sense of secular society as the societas christiana, ideologically universal but in practice local, exclusionary, and embattled.

In 1023, after a decade of tumultuous and contentious rule, Gerard, bishop of Cambrai, began a project he had dreamed of since the day he first entered the city in February 1012. Finally free from enemies at home and abroad, he began to rebuild the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Cambrai. Fearful of never finishing the great task that circumstances had forced him to defer for so long, he was especially grateful for what he considered to be the miraculous discovery of two quarries of beautiful stone a mere quarter-mile from the city, and the work was completed in just seven years.
In November of 1030 the church was ready for consecration, and Gerard planned an extraordinary ceremony. Gerard and Richard, abbot of St. Vaast, both dressed in their most splendid robes, entered the church in solemn procession carrying the relics of St. Géri, founding bishop of Cambrai. While the clergy and the lay people, weeping with joy, sang the Laudes to greet the saint, Gerard placed him directly on the bishop’s throne. To his right and his left, the relics of the sainted Merovingian bishops Aubert, Vindicien, and Hadulf had already been arranged as if to assist St. Géri in officiating at the ceremony, and in their midst were the bishop’s staff that had belonged to St. Vaast along with that saint’s physical remains. Around the altar, in order of their ranks, were the sainted dead of the diocese—martyrs, confessors, and virgins—so that they all appeared to join the living members of the congregation in the holy ceremony:

Who is able to describe worthily the splendor of such glory, or who—even the most eloquent—could encompass such a great office in words? When you see the bodies of the saints in a single congregation with the clerics and people of our diocese; and the chorus of monks mixed with the voices of the canons; and not only the inner city but even the whole surrounding countryside overflowing with crowds of men and women. [Quis enim tantae gloriae pompam digne sufficit enarrare, aut quis dicacissimus verborum ambitu tantam dignitatem poterit cohibere? ubi videlicet sanctorum corpora nostrae diocesos cum plebe et clero in unum congregata, ubi choros tam monachorum quam et canonicorum catervatim commixtos, ubi etiam non tantum urbeb interius, verum et campos exterius passim utriusque sexus multitudine pernatare videres.] (III.49.40–45)¹

The chronicler presents this dedication ceremony as a culminating vision of the unity and hierarchy of the world as manifest in the community of Cambrai. The whole history of the diocese participates with the living congregation in a display of order, continuity, hierarchy, and just power. In the miraculously completed building, the founding bishops seem to live again to officiate for a congregation that joins the dead with the living, the clergy with the people, monks living under a rule with secular canons, the urban population with the rural, and men with women. The sainted dead of the diocese, each in their own rank, make hierarchy and order visible and present. In this powerful ideological representation, the community is imagined as the outcome of a continuous past overseen by an unbroken succession of just authorities stretching from the founders of the town to its current bishop. Of course, this representation is a dream. Moreover, like all dreams it speaks also in spite of itself: by summoning up its vision of order and social harmony it tells us, as well, of social division, competing interests, and conflict—between cleric and lay, canon and monk, man and woman,