

John to John: the Manuale Sacerdotis and the Daily Life of a Parish Priest

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Manuale Sacerdotis, the priest's handbook, is a five-part Latin text of between twelve and twenty chapters in each part, written probably at the end of the fourteenth or beginning of the fifteenth century by John Mirk, who was by then prior of the house of Austin canons at Lilleshall in Shropshire.¹

Mirk's choice of Latin as the medium for the *Manuale* explains why it has been overshadowed by his two other works, the *Festial* and the *Instructions for Parish Priests*. Both these vernacular texts have been published,² but Mirk's third work, the *Manuale*, has not been printed, although it has been edited twice as doctoral theses.³ The most detailed treatment in print is that of Alan Fletcher on the manuscripts and the *Manuale's* place in the tradition of *pastoralia*.⁴ The recognition that the *Manuale* has been previously accorded is not, however, commensurate with its interest, as it is hoped that this article will demonstrate, and an edition incorporating a translation with *en face* Latin text is currently in preparation by the present author in collaboration with James Girsch, on whose critical edition this article is dependent and to whose kindness and scholarship I am indebted.

¹ On Mirk, with particular reference to his *Festial*, see S. Powell, 'The *Festial*: The Priest and His Parish', in *The Parish in Late Medieval England*, eds Clive Burgess and Eamon Duffy, Harlaxton Medieval Studies XIV (Donington, 2006), pp. 160–76.

² *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies, by Johannes Mirkus (John Mirk)*, ed. Th. Erbe, Part I, EETS ES 96 (1905); *Instructions for Parish Priests by John Myrc*, ed. E. Peacock, EETS OS 31 (1868), rev. F. J. Furnivall (1902); *John Mirk's Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. G. Kristensson, Lund Studies in English, 49 (Lund, 1974). S. Powell's edition of the *Festial* is to be published by the Early English Text Society.

³ 'The *Manuale Sacerdotis* of John Myrc: An Edition', ed. M. W. Washburn (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Chicago, 1974); 'An Edition with Commentary of John Mirk's *Manuale Sacerdotis*', ed. J. M. Girsch (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Toronto, 1990).

⁴ A. J. Fletcher, 'The Manuscripts of John Mirk's *Manuale Sacerdotis*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 19 (1988), 105–39. There are briefer studies in G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c.1350–1450* (Cambridge, 1926), pp. 47 (fn. 1), 245, 297, W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 215–17, and P. Heath, *English Parish Clergy on the Eve of the Reformation* (London, 1969), pp. 1–4.

The base-text of the edition will be that of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 632, from which all quotations in this article are taken. Thirteen *Manuale* manuscripts are extant, all of which date from the second half of the fifteenth century,⁵ and all of which may have been in the hands of secular priests or regulars, judging by inscriptions and the other contents of the manuscripts.⁶ Mirk himself was an Austin canon at Lilleshall abbey in Shropshire from at least the 1380s.⁷ In the Preface to the *Manuale* Mirk calls himself prior,⁸ whereas the colophon to the *Festial* text in London, British Library MS Cotton Claudius A.II. calls him canon,⁹ which may suggest that the *Manuale* was a work of later life.¹⁰

Austin canons followed the rule of St Augustine but in comparison with monks they led active lives in the world, with an outreach duty and sometimes even serving as parish priest in churches attached to their abbey.¹¹ Mirk's three works are intensely practical and pedagogic. The *Festial* is a collection of ready-to-preach sermons, probably originally sixty-four in number, arranged (in Mirk's original format) from Advent Sunday to All Souls' Day, with a final sermon for the Dedication of a Church. Mirk explicitly stated in his Prologue that it was written for priests with little learning and few books who had to undertake the duty of preaching and teaching their parishioners all the principal feasts of the Church year.¹² The *Instructions* is similar in intention. Again, it is directed at the ill-equipped priest (specifically here, a curate). It is a 1,934-line pastoral manual in rhyming couplets (and so easily read and even perhaps in part memorised), which offers the priest guidance on his duties, particularly in relation to pastoral instruction (ll. 69–535),

⁵ They are listed by Fletcher, 'Manuscripts'. Cambridge, Trinity College Library MS B.ii.23 is precisely dated to 1474.

⁶ For example, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 549 contains Carthusian tracts and was written in part by Stephen Doddesham of Sheen Charterhouse. Less certainly, Cistercians at Kirkstall abbey in Yorkshire may be linked with York, York Minster Library MS XVI.O.11 (Fletcher, 'Manuscripts', pp. 114–15, 122). For details of other manuscripts, see further in Fletcher, 'Manuscripts'.

⁷ For the dating, see S. Powell, 'A New Dating of John Mirk's *Festial*', *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 29 (1982), 487–89, and A. J. Fletcher, 'John Mirk and the Lollards', *Medium Aevum*, 56 (1987), 217–24.

⁸ For example, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 632, f. 68 ('Iohannes, dictus prior de Lylleshull').

⁹ 'Per fratrem Iohannem Mirkus compositus, canonicum regularem monasterii de Lulshull' (f. 125v).

¹⁰ Fletcher, 'Lollards', p. 222. This is not inherently unlikely, but, on the other hand, the references to him as canon are posthumous so cannot have the same status as the *Manuale* reference to his being prior, which is in Mirk's own dedication of the text.

¹¹ For Mirk's associations with St Alkmund's, Shrewsbury, see Powell, '*Festial*', pp. 163–4.

¹² For the Prologue (quoted from London, British Library MS Cotton Claudius A.II., f. 1v), see S. Powell, 'John Mirk's *Festial* and the Pastoral Programme', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 22 (1991), 85–102, p. 86.

hearing confession (ll. 675–1698), the sacraments of baptism and confirmation (ll. 536–674), and the performance of the last rites (ll. 1699–1838). In the course of the work, Mirk deals with the Paternoster and Ave Maria (ll. 404–25), the Creed (ll. 426–53), the articles of the faith (ll. 454–525), the seven sacraments (ll. 526–35), the ten commandments (ll. 849–972), the seven deadly sins (ll. 973–1302), the seven deeds of mercy (ll. 1355–64), and the seven virtues as remedies for the seven deadly sins (ll. 1551–1624). The *Instructions* therefore covers material which it had been the duty of the priest to teach since the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, but which had acquired greatest importance through the 1281 Lambeth Constitutions of Archbishop Pecham of Canterbury, and, more recently but for the other province, through the 1357 Injunctions of Archbishop Thoresby of York, the vernacular version of which is known today as *The Lay Folk's Catechism*.¹³

The *Manuale* is similarly a pastoral work, addressed to the priest, indeed, to a specific priest. It is however a different sort of work from the *Instructions*, and it does not provide the details of the tenets of the Church which the *Instructions* provides, although a little of its general advice is the same as that of the *Instructions*, such as what to do if an insect falls in the chalice.¹⁴ It draws on the tripartite *Oculus Sacerdotis* (1320–8) of William of Pagula, particularly the *Sinistra Pars*, but to some extent also the *Pars Oculi* and the *Dextera Pars* which supplied Mirk's material for the *Instructions*.¹⁵ The latter is in the vernacular, but Mirk wrote the *Manuale* in Latin for two reasons: firstly because he was writing a more academic work than the *Instructions*, one in which, for example, canon law is frequently quoted; and secondly because he had things he wanted to say to his addressee which were not appropriate for anything other than a clerical readership, indeed, which are dealt with, as Owst pointed out long ago, 'in remarkably outspoken fashion',¹⁶ and which in another context would be called anti-clerical.

The addressee was one John (hence the first part of the title of this article, 'John to John'): 'To his dearest friend, 'dominus' J[ohn], vicar of A, John, entitled prior of Lilleshall: greetings in the name of the Author of salvation'.¹⁷ Four of the

¹³ On *pastoralia* and preaching, see Pantin, *English Church*, pp. 189–219, L. E. Boyle, *Pastoral Care, Clerical Education and Canon Law* (London, 1981), H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 196–227, and, in relation to the *Festial*, Powell, 'Pastoral Programme'. For *The Lay Folk's Catechism*, see the edition by T. F. Simmons and H. E. Nolloth (EETS OS 118, 1901).

¹⁴ Cf. *Instructions*, ll. 1749–1838 *passim* (especially ll. 1825–34) and *Manuale* (MS Bodley 632, f. 87). If possible, the insect should be drunk, but, if not, it should be taken out and washed well over the chalice, after which the washing water should be drunk and the insect burnt.

¹⁵ L. E. Boyle, 'The *Oculus Sacerdotis* and Some Other Works of William of Pagula', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 5 (1955), 81–110.

¹⁶ Owst, *Preaching*, p. 47 (fn. 1).

¹⁷ Of the ten manuscripts with this greeting, MS Bodley 632 is the only one to have 'B', not 'I' or 'Iohanni': 'Amico suo karissimo domino B., uicario de A., Iohannes, dictus

ten manuscripts with this epistolary address call him John 'de S.', and Alan Fletcher has argued that this might be John Sotton who was vicar of St Alkmund's Shrewsbury from January 1414.¹⁸ Fletcher has demonstrated that 'vicar of A' (in eight manuscripts) for 'vicar of Alkmund's' is not impossible, although it is probably unusual (the date is also rather late), and the 'A' (which might be merely a token initial) is more likely to refer to a placename. If the addressee was a canon, like Mirk, with pastoral responsibility, 'A' could refer to a benefice owned by Lilleshall, such as Atcham in Shropshire or even Ashby de la Zouch in Leicestershire.¹⁹ Whether or not a canon (and there is no evidence that he was), the relationship between the two men which prompted Mirk to write the *Manuale* may have been that of kinsmen – one of the chapter headings is: 'How the prior addresses his kinsman concerning the observance of the previous matters'.²⁰ Mirk himself, however, calls John only his 'dearest friend',²¹ and, conventional amongst religious, 'dearest one'.²²

Part 1 of the *Manuale* (eighteen chapters) focusses on the priest himself: what makes a good priest? and, rather more detailed, what makes a bad priest?²³ The distinction is, in fact, between good priests and 'modern priests', as in the heading to Chapter 7 of Part 1: 'That modern priests indulge more in worldly vanities than in divine exercises'.²⁴ The distinction between 'sacerdotes moderni', today's priests, and 'uita boni sacerdotis',²⁵ the life of the good priest, appears to strengthen the suggestion that Mirk is writing in older age from a position of wisdom and experience.²⁶ Good priests have due reverence for the priesthood and

prior de Lylleshull: salutem in auctore salutis' (f. 68). Cambridge, Trinity College Library MS B.ii.23 has the initial 'N' (i.e. 'nomen', name). However, a later reference in the text makes plain that the recipient was indeed called John: 'Disce igitur et tu, Iohannes, Sanctum Iohannem diligere, et pro Deo et Sancti Iohannis amore elemosinas erogare' ('Learn therefore, you too, John, to love St John and to bestow alms in the name of God and for love of St John'), MS Bodley 632, f. 95v.

¹⁸ Fletcher, 'Lollards', p. 222 and fn. 27.

¹⁹ *Victoria History of the Counties of England*, ed. R. B. Pugh, *A History of Shropshire*, vol. 2 ed. A. T. Gaydon (London, 1973), 70–1, 78.

²⁰ 'Qualiter alloquitur prior cognatum suum de obseruancia premissorum' (MS Bodley 632, f. 97). However, the chapter headings are unlikely to be original, and it is perhaps conceivable that 'cognatum' renders 'fratrem', brother.

²¹ See fn. 17 above.

²² 'Karissime', e.g. MS Bodley 632, ff. 68, 69, etc. The *Instructions for Parish Priests* also address the reader specifically in terms such as 'pou preste curatoure' (l. 11), 'leue brother' (l. 1917), and 'dere prest' (l. 1913).

²³ See the Appendix for the parts and chapter headings in Girsch, 'Edition'.

²⁴ 'Quod moderni sacerdotes magis indulgent mundi uanitatibus quam diuinis exercitiis' (MS Bodley 632, f. 71).

²⁵ MS Bodley 632, f. 71v.

²⁶ That he is addressing someone of younger age and less experience is a corollary of this.

live unworldly lives – they avoid litigation, they despise the world, and they have not been promoted falsely. Bad priests prefer archery to contemplating the wounds of Christ and playing ball to using the quill;²⁷ they chant feebly in church but sing cheerfully enough in the pub; they are silent in the pulpit but noisy following the hounds; they chase after witticisms but are slow to look into manuscripts; they are illiterate, worldly, drunks and gluttons, gamblers, fornicators and (the final insult) businessmen.

The focus and aim of this first part of the *Manuale* is quite clear, but thereafter the structure of the book appears to have eluded most commentators (although Pantin seems to have discerned it). Fletcher thinks it ‘new and idiosyncratic’,²⁸ and even its editor, James Girsch, calls it ‘a curious compound’ and ‘a derivative and discursive work’ and feels that ‘the principle of division between the Partes ...is not always clear’.²⁹ Nor is its place in the pastoral tradition straightforward. Fletcher compares it with pastoral manuals of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in comparison with which ‘it might well appear eccentric; for example, it lacks the emphasis on confession and penance which is central to much of the thirteenth-century material, and the exposition of the six points of Pecham’s programme which so frequently appears in fourteenth-century works’.³⁰

However, these comments on structure and content are based on the assumption that Mirk was trying to do what others had done before him, that is, to produce a standard work of pastoral instruction in a standard format. Mirk is doing something different, reflective of his fresh and pragmatic approach to problems. He is indeed an intensely pragmatic man, and the *Manuale* is directed very closely at a specific problem (and, indeed, a specific person). The work is not intended to explain how to confess someone properly or how to baptise a child or what the seven deadly sins are (Mirk had already done that in the *Instructions*),³¹ but to attempt to shock a young man (and hopefully other young men) into awareness of what being a priest actually means. The whole of the *Manuale* is imbued with the importance of the priesthood: ‘the priesthood is indeed to be absolutely trembled at and greatly to be feared’ (Part 1, Chapter 4).³² It is imbued with the reverence with which the sacrament must be approached, the huge responsibility of the man who has been ordained to celebrate the Eucharist, and the duty of that

²⁷ In the first clause, the association of a target with the wounded body of Christ is subtle, while the second clause depends on alliteration: ‘Plus uero diligunt ad limites sagittare quam stigmata Christi mente tractare, palmare pilam quam occupare penam’ (MS Bodley 632, f. 71v).

²⁸ Fletcher, ‘*Manuale*’, p. 106.

²⁹ Girsch, ‘Edition’, pp. XVII, XLII, XXXI.

³⁰ Fletcher, ‘*Manuale*’, p. 107.

³¹ This comment assumes (rightly, I think) that the *Instructions* was an earlier work.

³² ‘Tremendum est omnino et pertimescendum ualde sacerdotale officium’ (MS Bodley 632, f. 70v).

man to live the life of a priest.³³ But above all, Mirk's concern is that one young man dear to him has taken the order of priesthood too frivolously and is not aware that 'the whole life of a good priest, if he lives rightly, ought to be a cross and a martyrdom' (Part 1, Chapter 7).³⁴

We will return to that young man at the end of this article. If the contents of the *Manuale* are not those of a typical pastoral manual, nor is its structure typical of a pastoral manual. Girsch is right to say, as noted above, that 'the principle of division between the Partes ... is not always clear'. Mirk does not produce discrete Parts – he is happy to continue a previous topic in the first chapter of the next Part, a technique which intensifies the pace and flow of the work as a whole. He is discursive too, moving from one topic to another and then back again, but the topics are always related and the stream of consciousness flows as in thought or as in an actual letter (which we have no reason to believe this was not, at least in its first instance). With the ease of experience, he moves from the practical detail to the spiritual intention easily and properly. Mirk is equally relaxed about his structural divisions – there are no problems with minor internal divisions, for example, the three kinds of thoughts with which the devil tempts the priest (part 2, chapter 9),³⁵ or the three steps of the altar (part 4, chapters 7–9),³⁶ but the speed and energy of his writing sometimes tend to lead him away from his initial topic, so that, for example, the last four of the six special virtues needed by a priest remain elusive.³⁷ Nevertheless, none of these matters affects the real overall structure which is clearly discernible but has been largely overlooked by other commentators.

It is this structure which explains the rest of the title of this article: 'the *Manuale Sacerdotis* and the daily life of a parish priest'. As has been seen, Part 1 introduces the subject of the priest, what is a good and what is a bad priest. This is the real matter of the whole of the *Manuale*. It is not a pastoral manual as such. It certainly provides facts and details to do with the way in which a priest should comport himself in his parish, but these facts and details serve a specific purpose, less descriptive than didactic: to establish the authority and sanctity of the priesthood, not in the minds of the people (for whom Mirk obviously did not write), but in the minds of the priests themselves. Thus even a minor detail such as what to do if an

³³ In Part 1, Chapter 5, Mirk derives 'sacerdos', priest, from 'sacra dans', offering sacred things, or otherwise 'satis dans', offering enough, that is, offering Christ who is enough for all (MS Bodley 632, f. 71).

³⁴ 'Tota itaque uita boni sacerdotis, si recte uiuat, crux debet esse et martirium' (MS Bodley 632, f. 71v).

³⁵ MS Bodley 632, f. 80.

³⁶ MS Bodley 632, ff. 89v–90.

³⁷ The first is holiness (Part 2, chapter 3), the second innocence (Part 3, Chapter 1), the third perhaps cleanness (Part 3, Chapter 3), and it may be that the three steps of the altar (faith, hope, charity) are the final three (Part 4, chapters 7–9). Cf. MS Bodley 632, ff. 77v, 82v, 83v, 89v, passim.

insect falls in the chalice is less a rule to be learnt and remembered (though it is that) than an indication of how the priest's every action must affirm the sanctity of the sacrament and the reverence in which he holds it. The detail is not bureaucratic but essential.

To return to the structure: if Part 1 establishes the theme of the good and bad priest, Part 2 (fifteen chapters) appears at first not to offer a new topic but merely more of the same, that is, further advice on the proper behaviour of the good priest – how to comport himself amongst the undisciplined; always to keep in mind the sanctity of the priesthood; the six virtues specific to the priest, beginning with holiness. In fact, however, Part 2 begins a subtle journey through the daily life of the parish priest. This becomes apparent in Chapter 4,³⁸ which begins at the break of day, when the priest should follow the advice of St Hilary of Poitiers and repeat the Vulgate Psalm 53 three times, together with the Paternoster and the Ave, raising both his heart and his hands to God. He should then make the sign of the cross and humbly repeat a prayer (which Mirk sets out for him) of thanks for safe deliverance from the dangers of the night and for all God's benefits. In Chapters 5–6,³⁹ Mirk urges John not to love his bed too much. If Ambrose says that the sun should not rise on the bed of any Christian, how much more important it is that a priest should get up before sunrise. Anyway, the devil sends bad thoughts to the sleepy priest, which is why, when subdeacons are ordained, the bishop tells them to be wakeful, and why Peter Cantor quotes Cato's similar pronouncement. In these dangerous early hours of the morning, dreams and masturbation may pre-occupy the young man, and Mirk offers advice on, and explanation of, both.

The priest has now started his day, and the rest of Part 2 takes him through the hours up to the end of the morning office. Mirk draws out the spiritual and doctrinal implications from the concrete details and backs up his words with scriptural, patristic, and legislative authorities, as well as with an occasional exemplary narrative.⁴⁰ First the priest gets dressed, modestly in mid-calf garments and certainly not in red, green or yellow (which, Mirk points out, are colours forbidden by the legate Ottobuono's 1268 constitutions). He should wear sheepskin or rabbitskin (no other sort of fur); he should not have a silver belt, dagger, sword, or knives, in short no worldly ornaments at all; and his tonsure should be correctly shaven. He should examine his conscience carefully at this point in the morning, before going to his church to say the office, proceeding at a decent pace, not too fast nor too slow; without sword or staff or bow and with no accompanying dogs

³⁸ MS Bodley 632, ff. 78–78v.

³⁹ MS Bodley 632, ff. 78v–79.

⁴⁰ Although there are not as many as in the *Festial*, where Mirk's *narrationes* are an integral part of every sermon, the inclusion of these popular stories even in the *Manuale* with its clerical, not lay, audience demonstrates how integral they are to Mirk's teaching style.

or hawks, just with a book, reciting Psalms as he goes, and praying for the dead as he passes through the churchyard. Once in church, he should say the prayer 'Introibo ad altare Dei', that is, 'I shall go to the altar of God' (Vulgate Psalm 65: 13), take holy water, genuflect before the crucifix, and say a prayer in honour of Christ's wounds (Mirk suggests an appropriate one).⁴¹ Then the priest should pause and cleanse his heart of all external thoughts and say the office carefully and solemnly – nor should he ever be late in doing so. Part 2 ends with advice on how important it is for a priest to confess even the smallest sins often (at least once a week according to Ottobuono), and to do the appropriate penance.⁴²

At the end of Part 2 the priest has reached the conclusion of the morning office; Parts 3 and 4 will take him through the preparation, physical and mental, for mass and the celebration of the Eucharist; Part 5 will deal with his comportment during the rest of the day. The celebration of the Eucharist is the actual and metaphorical highpoint of the priest's day, hence its position here and the fact that it constitutes nearly half of the whole *Manuale*. It is not that the Eucharist is part of the daily service of the priest – he need not say or even hear mass every day, although he certainly should every Sunday (Part 4, Chapter 3).⁴³ The Eucharist is crucial to the daily life of the priest because it is the essence of the priest: his celebration of it is what sets him apart from other men, it is what brings him closest to Christ who first celebrated it and at the Last Supper instituted the sacrament of ordination. Every possible detail is given in Parts 3 and 4 (twelve and fourteen chapters respectively), all tending towards exactitude of ritual and proper recognition of the sanctity of the celebration.⁴⁴

For example, in Part 4, Chapter 10, when the priest reaches 'Qui pridie' ('who, the day before ...'), he must remove all vain thoughts from his heart, and from there to 'Unde et memores' ('whence, mindful ...'), that is, throughout the consecration,⁴⁵ his attention should be directed to pronouncing all the words distinctly as in the canon of the mass. At 'Qui pridie', totally separated from the worldly and intent only on the spiritual, he should receive the Host humbly in his hands, raise his heart and eyes to God, believing that heaven is opened at that moment, and make the sign of the cross on the Host.⁴⁶ At the word 'fregit' ('he

⁴¹ Mirk emphasises that divine office should only be said in church, not in a room or a garden, perhaps a reference to some of the unorthodox meetings held at the time.

⁴² The illustrative *narratio* is one from the miracles of the local saint, Winifred, which Mirk also uses in the *Festial* (Erbe, *Festial*, pp. 100/14–101/2). See too fns 51 and 68. MS Bodley 632, f. 88.

⁴⁴ As an Arrouaisian house, Lilleshall placed great emphasis on the proper performance of the liturgy.

⁴⁵ *The Sarum Missal edited from Three Early Manuscripts*, ed. J. Wickham Legg (Oxford, 1916), p. 222/10–223/3.

⁴⁶ Almost as a footnote, Mirk adds that, although the priest makes the sign of the cross, the blessing comes from God. In all, the priest makes twenty-five signs of the cross in

broke ...'),⁴⁷ he must not break the bread but continue with the words of the consecration, 'Hoc est enim corpus meum' ('for this is my body') straight without a pause and then adore the body of Christ with head and body bowed and knees bent. He should not kiss the Host but raise it for the people to adore, but not too high and not touching it except with four specially consecrated fingers.⁴⁸

With Part 4, the Eucharist is over, and Part 5 (twenty chapters) begins with the advice to engage in silent devotional reading after mass and points out that confessions are better heard after than before mass. (As usual, this is for an intensely pragmatic but also spiritual reason – that the priest may hear things during confession which would prey on his mind during mass.) He should not hurry to have lunch, and, when he does eat, he should behave decorously at the meal-table and leave as soon as he has finished. Unless he has a duty to perform, he should not go out after mass, and, if he does go out, it should be with a mature colleague. If he can, he should stay at home, do some manual labour or read or write or work in the garden. Later he will have dinner, although Mirk disapproves of dinner, saying that we eat dinner less for need than habit and greed, and commenting that he can be brief about the dinner of a good priest, because the dinner of a good priest ought to be brief (Part 5, Chapter 13).⁴⁹ After the meal, the priest should go to his room but not go straight to bed. Instead he should think through the day, ask pardon for anything blameworthy, and, if necessary, prepare for confession the following day. Then he may go to his bed and say a prayer of thanks for safe deliverance through the day, a prayer in which he includes his family and friends, benefactors, enemies, the Catholic Church, the souls for whom he is bound to pray, and the souls in purgatory. Finally he crosses himself and lies down for the night with another prayer on his lips. A subsidiary text in this final part weaves into the details of the end of the priest's day advice on other topics prompted by thoughts of closure – the appropriate behaviour of the sick priest and of the ageing priest, and the need to spurn the world and prepare for death.

The structure of the daily life of the priest is therefore apparent in the *Manuale*, and it is that on which this article focusses, not on the numerous related issues which arise out of the basic structure. One only should be mentioned here, as evidence of Mirk's orthodoxy (if such be needed) and his willingness to tackle (in a Latin work not for lay consumption) the most difficult problem of his day. His lengthy treatment of transubstantiation and the Lollard heresy arises naturally out of his description of the consecration of the elements and occupies the three fol-

the celebration of the mass, but each blessing comes from God.

⁴⁷ *Sarum Missal*, p. 222/15.

⁴⁸ As another quasi-footnote, Mirk cites Remigius and others as authorities for the fact that the canon of the mass should be said secretly and not loudly.

⁴⁹ 'De cena boni sacerdotis brevis sermo sufficit, quia ipsa cena brevis esse debet' (MS Bodley 632, f. 96v).

lowing chapters (Part 4, Chapters 11–13). He outlines the Lollard heresy and emphasises the crucial role of faith in the orthodox dogma and the irrelevance of human reason. In the sacred elements the body of Christ is fully present but hidden, ‘like the sun behind a cloud, when only the cloud is seen, hiding the sun, but the hidden sun does not suffer any dimming of its brightness’.⁵⁰ Like the apostle Thomas, who saw Christ as man but believed in him as God, we see the accidents but believe the body and blood. This may be proved by the life of St Odo, Archbishop of Canterbury, whose clerks were converted from their lack of faith by the elements turning into the bleeding body of Christ.⁵¹

Mirk’s way of working is to use the basic theme of priesthood, to interweave into it details of the daily life of the priest, and to produce a final work in which instruction and ideology are not separate matters but are dependent each on the other and explained each in relation to the other. The *Manuale* is by no means merely a technical guide, as the *Instructions* is. There are certainly rules to being a priest, and Mirk deals with them, but they are not by any means only rules to be observed externally – there are inner rules too. Indeed, Mirk has begun the *Manuale* with the statement that the good priest is one who follows a Rule. Adapting St Paul to the Romans so that ‘regula’ (rule) is substituted for ‘lex’ (law),⁵² Mirk says: ‘To be honest, living without a rule is nothing less than dying’ (Part 1, Chapter 2).⁵³ Mirk himself followed the Rule of St Augustine, but the rule by which he says all priests should live is not a monastic rule but the rules of Christ’s own life as they are revealed in the Gospels: love, obedience, poverty, preparedness,⁵⁴ contempt of the world, flight from worldly honours, not seeking after riches, carrying your own cross, and, last but not least, following Christ and sticking with him. Such observances are bitter at first but become over time sweeter than honey and the honeycomb to the servant of God.

Much can be learnt about Mirk from the *Manuale* – a moralist, disciplined, dedicated, pragmatic, a pedagogue, but also a very humane man. He clearly took deep offence at those priests who were happy to separate their lives from their vocation. Analogies with Chaucer’s Parson are trite but pertinent: it would appear of Mirk that ‘Cristes lore and his apostles twelve | He taughte but first he practised it hymself’.⁵⁵ As he says to John: follow the rule of the Gospels ‘so that you may live in a ruled and ordered way and offer the example of your good life to others’.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ MS Bodley 632, f. 91.

⁵¹ As at fns 42 and 68, the same *narratio* is used in the *Festial* (Erbe, *Festial*, pp. 170/29–171/11).

⁵² Romans 2: 12: ‘Qui sine lege uiuunt, sine lege peribunt’ (‘For whosoever have sinned without the law, shall perish without the law’), MS Bodley 632, f. 70.

⁵³ ‘Sane sine regula uiuere nichil aliud est quam perire’ (MS Bodley 632, f. 70).

⁵⁴ ‘Lumbos precinctos habere’ (‘having girt loins’), MS Bodley 632, f. 70.

⁵⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, General Prologue, ll. 527–8.

⁵⁶ ‘Ut regulariter et ordinate uiuas et aliis bene uiuendi exemplum prebeas’ (MS Bodley

This picture of Mirk corroborates the impression of the other works, but what we learn specifically from the *Manuale* is his solicitude for one individual, the John to whom John Mirk writes. He refers to this other John constantly in the *Manuale* – he makes a statement and adds: ‘Ecce, karissime’ (‘see, dearest’);⁵⁷ he gives a good example and adds: ‘Tu igitur/ergo, karissime’ (‘therefore, you, dearest’);⁵⁸ he gives a bad example and adds: ‘Tu autem, karissime’ (‘but you, dearest’).⁵⁹ He addresses him at greatest length in the Preface to the work and again in the last five chapters of the final Part. The *Manuale* itself is therefore enclosed (as it were) between the covers of John Mirk’s letter to the other John. Unusually, this letter is found in nearly all the manuscripts.⁶⁰

In the Preface Mirk presents himself as one who has taken on the task of drawing the draught of doctrine from the well of charity for the benefit of others, and as such he is confident that he in turn will taste the draught of eternal life from the springs of the Saviour. As the apostle James says, the man who turns the sinner back from his sin will save a soul from death and hide a multitude of sins.⁶¹ This is an ominous start for John, the addressee, linking him to the Biblical sinner. At this stage it is at least allusive, but Mirk soon moves from the general to the specific to complain about those clergy who live undisciplined lives and for whom he has taken on himself to ‘apply the medicine of correction to their wounds’.⁶² This he will do with a strong will, with some learning, but mostly with the grace of God, and he will write to John for his benefit and that of others, as well as for his (Mirk’s) own eternal merit. In doing so, he will write in a frank and direct manner – John should not be offended at his rustic style (of two evils, a holy rusticity is better than sinful eloquence).⁶³ Those who flatter John do not love him tenderly, and those

632, f. 70).

⁵⁷ MS Bodley 632, f. 71.

⁵⁸ MS Bodley 632, ff. 71, 72v.

⁵⁹ MS Bodley 632, f. 71v.

⁶⁰ The two abridged manuscripts, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Hatton 97 and Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.i.14, omit the dedication, and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Digby 75 is acephalous (Fletcher, ‘Lollards’, p. 224 (fn. 27) and, for a description of the manuscripts, ‘*Manuale*’).

⁶¹ James 5: 19–20: ‘Si quis autem errauerit ex uobis a ueritate, et conuerterit quis eum, scire debet quoniam qui conuerti fecerit peccatorem ab errore uie sue, saluabit animam eius a morte et operit multitudinem peccatorum’ (‘My brethren, if any of you err from the truth, and one convert him: He must know that he who causeth a sinner to be converted from the error of his way, shall save his soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins’).

⁶² ‘Medicinam correccionis eorum uulneribus apponere’ (MS Bodley 632, f. 68).

⁶³ ‘Melius est de duobus imperfectis rusticitatem habere sanctam quam eloquenciam peccatricem’ (MS Bodley 632, f. 68). Pantin, *English Church*, comments on Mirk’s ‘elegant style’ (p. 215), and Mirk’s ‘rustic’ comment may be a reference to the informality and familiarity of his address to John.

who call him 'blessed' are in fact his seducers. Mirk will not be like them – indeed he will use the second person singular pronoun 'tu' throughout because the plural is a polite means of flattery and not appropriate to holy speech. Finally, at the end of the Preface, John is urged to read the book once and, then, not to throw it into a corner, but to keep on reading it, having it so often in his hands that he will think of it as '*Manuale Sacerdotis*', the handbook of the priest.

It is impossible to escape the conclusion from the Preface that Mirk sees John, vicar of A, as one of these derelict priests, whom he describes in the first Chapter of Part 1 as unsuited for their position, having been ordained or preferred for money or for frivolous reasons. He denies the thought – 'you have undertaken the priestly office lawfully' – but adds 'as I hope'.⁶⁴ He is perhaps the sort of man who might read the *Manuale* once and then throw it into a corner of the room, so that Mirk at the end of his Preface has to ask him not to do so but to keep it in his hands always.⁶⁵ There are other references in the work too which link John with poor scholarship (Part 1, Chapter 8, Part 5, Chapter 2)⁶⁶ and with the desire for worldly gain (Part 5, Chapter 16).⁶⁷

Mirk's aim, he says, is to instil in John the fear of God, and the very first exemplary narrative in the *Manuale* is Bede's story (which Mirk also uses in the *Festial*) of the man from Cunningham in Northumberland who died and came back to life in order to tell his vision of hell, purgatory, and heaven (Part 1, Chapter 1).⁶⁸ Just as the *Manuale* begins with this warning of hell, so it ends much later with Mirk putting into John's own mouth an admission of his fear of hell. Mirk, as it were, fulfils his own wish to terrify John by having him enact his terror: 'I fear hell, I fear the face of the Judge, which is to be trembled at and feared by even the angelic powers. I begin to shake from the anger of the powerful one, from the face of his rage, from the crash of the falling world, from the conflagration of the elements, from the strong tempest, from the voice of the angel and from the harsh word ...' (Part 5, Chapter 19).⁶⁹ The young John is one whom Mirk cares for and thinks is worth

⁶⁴ 'Tu igitur, karissime, quia sacerdotale officium legitime, ut spero, suscepisti' (MS Bodley 632, f. 69).

⁶⁵ This is the origin of the title: 'ut, ex usuali in manibus deportacione, Manuale Sacerdotis nominare consuescas' ('so that, by its being usually carried in your hands, you may be accustomed to call it the priest's handbook'), MS Bodley 632, f. 68v.

⁶⁶ Mirk urges him, even if he cannot understand what he reads at the altar, nevertheless to read it out humbly, slowly and carefully, and, even if he can understand little of the scriptures, to increase his knowledge, as Mirk himself did, by assiduous reading (MS Bodley 632, ff. 72, 93).

⁶⁷ Mirk trusts that he may not lose the reward of heaven 'propter cupiditatem siue blandimenta mundi fallentis' ('on account of cupidity or the blandishments of the deceitful world'), MS Bodley 632, ff. 74, 97.

⁶⁸ MS Bodley 632, ff. 69–69v, cf. Erbe, *Festial*, p. 5/12–36. See too fns. 42 and 51.

⁶⁹ 'Paueo gehennam; paueo iudicis uultum, ipsis angelicis potestatibus tremendum et pertimescendum. Contremisco ab ira potentis, a facie furoris eius, a fragore ruentis

taking time over, but who, he fears, may in the end only be convinced by the horrors of hell. In these last several chapters (16–20), when the *Manuale* is effectively finished and Mirk focusses again solely on John (although he has not forgotten him for a moment throughout the work), he insists that he is writing only out of love and points out that he has only exposed the bad habits of others (not John's own bad behaviour, although it is implicit that he might have done so, had he so wished) and only wants him to live a perfect priesthood.

In the *Manuale* we find the recording of medieval lives on two levels: one general, a record of the daily timetable of the priest, a digest of the spiritual and moral attributes of the good priest, a resumé of the sins of the bad priest; the other particular: an exposé of two lives, one that of John, vicar of A, at the start of life – wayward, easy-going, a priest; the other that of John, prior of Lilleshall, at the end of life – disciplined, stern, a priest with a duty of care and a bond of love to that other priest. John might ask: 'You're the one criticising me – why aren't you the sort of person you want me to be?' (Part 5, Chapter 20),⁷⁰ and the older and wiser John would answer mildly that the weaker often encourages the stronger, like the trainer standing alongside the wrestler and encouraging him to manly deeds and the glory and honour that come with the promised reward.

mundi, a conflagratione elementorum, a tempestate ualida, a uoce angeli et a uerbo aspero.' (MS Bodley 632, f. 97v).

⁷⁰ 'Cur tu, monitor meus, talis non es, qualem me monendo esse desideras?' (MS Bodley 632, f. 98v).

APPENDIX

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- 2 *Quod euangelium sit regula sacerdotum*, That the Gospel should be the Rule of priests, f. 69v
- 3 *Quod Christus in ultima cena sua omnes sacerdotes insimul ordinauit*, That Christ at his Last Supper ordained all priests at once, f. 70
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