




ARTICLE

A Musical Variation on Late Medieval Religious Reform: Johannes Nider and the Observant Dominican Liturgy

CJ Jones 

Department of German and Russian, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA
Email: cjones23@nd.edu

Abstract

The Dominican friar Johannes Nider (1380–1438), known today as the father of witchcraft literature, played an important role at the Council of Basel (1431–49) on the Council's delegation to the Hussites and its deputation on religious reform. Despite Nider's reputation as a reformer of religious communities, his approach to communal liturgy has not attracted close attention. This article focuses on his broad theoretical treatise, *De reformatione religiosorum* or *De reformatione status cenobitici* (On the Reform of the Religious State), in which Nider articulates a philosophical concept of reform as the restoration of beauty, manifested in well-ordered and balanced proportion. In the interest of universal applicability, the treatise remains abstract. However, biographical descriptions of Nider from his contemporaries and the visitation letters he wrote to women's convents show Nider as an engaged liturgical leader, a talented singer with a robust voice, and a zealous expert in the legal particulars of Dominican liturgical regulations. In light of these contexts, *De reformatione's* sweeping laments over liturgical neglect and academic metaphors of well-disposed proportion are not just rule-hammering and scholastic fancy but rather universalized expressions of Nider's lived commitment to Dominican musical and ritual practice.

Keywords: medieval history; religious reform; Observant reform; liturgy; singing; Dominican order

The Dominican friar Johannes Nider (1380–1438) is a central figure in the history of fifteenth-century ecclesiastical reform. He rose to prominence at the Council of Basel (1431–49), having played an instrumental role in securing a Hussite delegation to negotiate reconciling with the Roman Church.¹ Today, Nider is best known as the father of witchcraft literature, because of the space he devotes to it in his most famous work, *Formicarius* (The Anthill). However, as Michael Bailey has shown, all of Nider's work was grounded in his commitment to reform.² Both at the Council and within the Dominican order, he championed religious reform through his role as a leader in the Observant movement. Named for the emphasis its adherents placed on strictly observing monastic rules, the Observance deeply influenced fifteenth-century discourses on ecclesiastical reform, not least because Observant reformers like Nider occupied strategic positions in the Church hierarchy.³ Indeed, the Dominican order had expressly sent Nider to Basel in 1429 to reform the friary there, before representatives of the Church assembled for the Council.⁴ An experienced reformer within

Article last updated 20.02.2025

¹For overviews of Nider's activities at the Council, see Werner Tschacher, *Der Formicarius des Johannes Nider von 1437/38: Studien zu den Anfängen der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen im Spätmittelalter* (Aachen, 2000), 61–70; Michael D. Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park, PA, 2003), 22–26. For an introduction to the Council of Basel, see Michiel Decaluwé, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson, eds., *A Companion to the Council of Basel* (Leiden, 2017).

²Bailey, *Battling Demons*.

³For overviews of the Observance, see James D. Mixson and Bert Roest, eds., *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond* (Leiden, 2015); Kaspar Elm, ed., *Reformbemühungen und Observanzbestrebungen im spätmittelalterlichen Ordenswesen* (Berlin, 1989).

⁴Bailey, 20–21.

his order, Nider was also positioned to influence reforming discourses in the broader Church as a member of the Council's deputation (i.e., committee) on religious reform. This group sought to promote both ecclesiastical and monastic reform, for example, by reviving and strengthening both diocesan synods and the provincial chapters of religious orders, as well as by supporting individual petitions for the reform of specific communities.⁵ This deputation faced a challenge, however, in the gap between universal concepts of church restoration and the practical implementation of local reform initiatives.

Johannes Nider had a pronouncement on nearly every aspect of fifteenth-century reform. Previous studies have examined his positions on poverty, diet, semireligious women, mysticism, witchcraft, and even business ethics.⁶ Despite Nider's reputation as a reformer of religious communities, his approach to communal liturgy has not attracted close attention.⁷ Nider did articulate a position on liturgical reform in his broad theoretical treatise, *De reformatione religiosorum* or *De reformatione status cenobitici* (On the Reform of the Religious State). However, since this treatise is addressed to members of all religious orders, it does not treat liturgical matters with any specificity. Such vagueness affects all issues handled in this work, such that it appears, in James Mixson's words, to be merely "a timeless harvest of seemingly self-evident religious commonplaces."⁸ Still, Mixson is able to show how *De reformatione* responded to the concerns of Nider's contemporary moment in its debates over religious poverty. Here, I explore the tension between the abstract and the particular by showing how Nider's seemingly general platitudes about liturgy in fact were rooted in his concrete experience as a reformer of Dominican liturgy and musical practice.

This article argues that Nider's aesthetic conceptualization of reform as harmonious proportion was not mere abstract scholasticism, but instead arose from his experience as a liturgical singer. In *De reformatione*, Nider develops a philosophical concept of reform as the restoration of beauty, manifested in well-ordered and balanced proportion. In the interest of universal applicability, the treatise remains abstract. However, as I will show, Nider's discussions of liturgical neglect and of reform as re-tuning spring from practical and even visceral experiences.

Two other sources serve to demonstrate Nider's expertise in Dominican liturgical regulations, as well as his capabilities as a singer: Johannes of Mainz's account of reform in the Basel friary and Nider's visitation letter to the Observant Dominican women's convent of Unterlinden. These sources show Nider as an engaged liturgical leader, a talented singer with a robust voice, and a zealous expert in the legal particulars of Dominican liturgical regulations. In light of these contexts, *De reformatione*'s sweeping laments over liturgical neglect and academic metaphors of well-disposed proportion are not just rule-hammering and scholastic fancy but rather universalized expressions of Nider's lived commitment to Dominican musical and ritual practice.

Johannes of Mainz's *Vitas fratrum*: Nider as Liturgical Leader

When it comes to contextualizing fifteenth-century treatises, the number of surviving sources is both a blessing and a curse. The Basel University Library today owns over five hundred manuscripts and early

⁵Birgit Studt, "The Reforms of the Council," in *A Companion to the Council of Basel*, eds. Michiel Decaluwé et al. (Leiden, 2017), 282–309, here at 295–303.

⁶James D. Mixson, *Poverty's Proprietors: Ownership and Mortal Sin at the Origins of the Observant Movement* (Leiden, 2009), 117–19; Michael D. Bailey, "Abstinence and Reform at the Council of Basel: Johannes Nider's *De abstinentia esus carniarum*," *Mediaeval Studies* 59 (1997): 225–60; John Van Engen, "Friar Johannes Nyder on Laypeople Living as Religious in the World," in *Vita religiosa im Mittelalter*, eds. Franz J. Felten and Nikolas Jaspert (Berlin, 1999), 583–615; Bailey, *Battling Demons*; Gábor Klaniczay, "The Process of Trance: Heavenly and Diabolic Apparitions in Johannes Nider's *Formicarius*," in *Procession, Performance, Liturgy, and Ritual*, ed. Nancy van Deusen (Ottawa, 2007), 203–58; Daniel A. Wren, "Medieval or Modern? A Scholastic's View of Business Ethics, circa 1430," *Journal of Business Ethics* 28, no. 2 (2000): 109–19.

⁷In my chapter on Nider's reception of Cassian, I establish that Nider considered liturgy important for Observant religious women, but do not examine practical details of liturgical reform *per se*. CJ Jones, *Ruling the Spirit: Women, Liturgy, and Dominican Reform in Late Medieval Germany* (Philadelphia, 2018), 97–126.

⁸James D. Mixson, "The Setting and Resonance of John Nider's *De reformatione religiosorum*," in *Kirchenbild und Spiritualität: Dominikanische Beiträge zur Ekklesiologie und zum kirchlichen Leben im Mittelalter*, eds. Thomas Prügl and Marianne Schlosser (Paderborn, 2007), 319–338, here at 321.

prints associated with that city's medieval Dominican friary, the majority of which were produced in the fifteenth century.⁹ The topics covered in the volumes include not only moral and religious matters, but medicine, astronomy, grammar, law, etc., not to mention the letters, charters, and administrative documents.¹⁰ The richness of this archive is not unusual for Central Europe, and the sheer number of surviving sources poses a challenge for reconstructing an intellectual portrait of a figure such as Johannes Nider, let alone of a movement like the Observance. This article selects two texts for close reading, each contained in a manuscript miscellany. With Jean Gerson's *Mountain of Contemplation* and Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* alongside treatises on monetary debts and contracts as well as an explanation of impediments to legitimate marriage, the first manuscript I consider exemplifies the interconnectedness of moral discourses that characterized not just Nider's thought but the fifteenth century more broadly.

The text on which this section focuses provides a firsthand account of the Observant Dominicans who reformed the Basel friary in 1429.¹¹ The *Vitas fratrum predicatorum conventus Basiliensis* (Lives of the Friars Preachers of the Basel Community) was composed by a Dominican friar who had not himself participated in the reform, but who joined the community a short time afterward and personally knew many of the men involved, including Johannes Nider. The author—Johannes Fintzel or Binder, known as Johannes of Mainz—came to Basel late in 1431 to represent the archbishop of Mainz, Conrad of Dhaun (r. 1419–34), at the Council.¹² Impressed with the religious life of the newly Observant Basel friars, Johannes entered the Dominican order in 1434. He served as the Basel friary's lector from 1442 until 1444 and composed the *Vitas fratrum* during this time.¹³ Many of the anecdotes about the Observant Basel friars derive from Johannes's firsthand experiences, including his account of Johannes Nider's priorate in Basel (1429–34), although he also incorporated secondhand stories about Nider's time in Nuremberg (1428) and Vienna (after 1434).¹⁴ The *Vitas fratrum* touches on some of the same points as Nider's more abstract treatise, *De reformatione*, including liturgical participation and musicality. The picture of Nider as a dedicated and stentorian singer undergirds his treatise's abstract rhetoric of liturgical neglect and harmony with the specificity of concrete practice.

Johannes of Mainz portrays Nider exceeding the order's requirements for liturgical participation. According to Johannes, during his tenure at the University of Vienna, Nider refrained from taking advantage of a dispensation that would have legitimately exempted him from liturgical responsibilities. The anecdote in the *Vitas fratrum* concerns the weekly announcement of liturgical assignments; who covered which readings, who sang which chants, and who celebrated which masses. It was apparently common to call out the academic rank of friars who had attained the baccalaureate, but Nider found this prideful. Johannes of Mainz explains, "this humble master and regent of Vienna heard baccalaureates announced in the duty roster according to these titles: 'The Reverend Father Baccalaureate So-and-So.' This man, fearing ostentatious glorification, approached the writer of the duty roster privately and ordered him to write his name simply as Friar Johannes Nider. Doing this, he left a marvelous example of humility for young and old."¹⁵ The exemplum conveys Nider's humility in eschewing the repeated

⁹Philipp Schmidt listed 541 volumes in his reconstruction of the Basel friary's medieval library. Today, a search on swisscollections.ch for "Dominikanerkloster Basel" as previous owner yields 649 results. Philipp Schmidt, "Die Bibliothek des ehemaligen Dominikanerklosters in Basel," *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 18 (1919): 160–254.

¹⁰Schmidt, "Die Bibliothek des ehemaligen," 181.

¹¹Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, A XI 42, f. 97r–119r. A full description of the manuscript and its contents is available online at <https://swisscollections.ch/Record/991170513601305501> (accessed September 13, 2023).

¹²Franz Egger speculates that Johannes von Mainz may be the "dominus Johannes...capellanus" mentioned in the record of the archbishop's delegation. Franz Egger, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Predigerordens: Die Reform des Basler Konvents 1429 und die Stellung des Ordens am Basler Konzil (1431–1448)* (Bern, 1991), 34 n. 4.

¹³Egger, *Beiträge zur Geschichte*, 33; Anne Huijbers, "Observant Memory and Propaganda in Johannes of Mainz's *Vita Fratrum Predicatorum Conventus Basiliensis* (1442–1444)," *Church History* 87, no. 3 (2018): 718–39, here at 723.

¹⁴Anne Huijbers examines the presentation of Johannes Nider in the *Vitas fratrum* with a focus on exemplary virtues. Huijbers, "Observant Memory and Propaganda," 733–36.

¹⁵"Ipse Magister humilis et Regens wyennensis audiret legi Baccalarios in tabula sub hiis titulis: 'Reverendus pater Baccalarius talis vel talis.' Ipse, timens pompam elationis, scriptorem tabule secretius adiit et fratrem Johannem Nyder se simpliciter annotari iussit. Quo facto, senibus et parvulis mirificum humilitatis exemplum dereliquit." Basel, UB, A XI 42, f. 107r.

announcement of his status and academic rank in the reading of the duty roster. More fundamentally, it reveals that Nider, and perhaps many of his brethren also, accepted and performed weekly liturgical duties while active at the University of Vienna. These friars provide a countermodel to the delinquent monks, whom Nider charges with neglecting the liturgy in *De reformatione*.

It may seem self-evident that members of a religious community would take turns singing and reading in the communal liturgy, but this was not expected of active university scholars in late medieval Dominican communities. In 1439, for example, the Dominican general chapter mandated that all friars must contribute substantially to the community's liturgy, specifically excepting friars with teaching responsibilities: "All friars should attend the choir and receive liturgical assignments in the duty roster, except for those who teach or preach or compose books or who are usefully occupied in temporal affairs."¹⁶ This expectation was not new; similar mandates regarding the duty roster appear in the acts of the general chapters of 1397, 1417, 1421, 1428, 1431, and 1437, each time explicitly exempting active lectors and university scholars from liturgical duties.¹⁷ The reform ordinances imposed on the Basel friary in 1429 also explicitly addressed the duty roster, again excusing lectors and masters of theology from liturgical responsibilities: "Every priest, unless he is a master in theology or the lector of a community or a lector or cursor who is actively teaching in the order, should be assigned as hebdomadarian and to read masses in his turn."¹⁸ In Basel, exempt persons still must attend the communal liturgy, but they are not required to take turns serving as liturgical presider (hebdomadarian). Throughout the early fifteenth century, Dominican superiors repeatedly demanded increased liturgical engagement from the friars, but always exempted lectors and university masters from leadership roles, even in reformed Observant communities.

Johannes Nider and his active baccalaureate colleagues in Vienna were thus formally exempt from the rotation of liturgical responsibilities. In 1434, Nider had been appointed by the Dominican general chapter to lecture on Peter Lombard's *Sentences* in the Vienna friary. The following year, in April 1435, he was named regent of the theological faculty at the University of Vienna and was elected dean in April 1436.¹⁹ Throughout this period in Vienna, Nider held teaching and administrative roles that relieved him from liturgical duties. It is a testament to his humility that Nider wished to be named with a simple title in the weekly duty roster. That Nider assumed duties in the weekly rotation at all, even while holding academic positions that exempted him, demonstrates his commitment to communal liturgy. This portrait of his dedication provides a concrete example, specific to the Dominican order, against which *De reformatione*'s broad discussion of dispensation and liturgical neglect gains contour.

Beyond mere participation in communal ritual, the Dominican Observants placed value on the centrally approved chant. For example, the reform ordinances for the Basel Dominican friary outlined a range of punishments for friars who missed or disrupted the communal liturgy. Master General Bartholomew Texery imposed this set of comprehensive ordinances on the Basel friars at the latest when Nider was installed as reform prior on April 30, 1429.²⁰ They treat a wide range of issues, from tonsures to teachers, beginning with a series of injunctions concerning the divine office.²¹ Liturgy in the Basel friary must henceforth be celebrated "by all the friars assembled together in the choir."²² Anyone who missed a canonical hour, the Office of the Dead, or a communal procession

¹⁶"Omnes fratres sequantur chorum et notentur in tabula ad officia, nisi illi, qui legunt aut predicant vel libros componunt aut utiliter circa temporalia occupantur." Benedict Maria Reichert, ed., *Acta Capitulum Generalium Ordinis Praedicatorum*, 9 vols. (Rome, 1900), 3:243.

¹⁷Reichert, *Acta Capitulum Generalium*, 3:94, 149, 167, 203, 210, 242. "Active" is a key qualifier. The mandates state that the burden of teaching obligations earns the exemption, not the title.

¹⁸"Sacerdotes singuli, nisi sit magister in theologia vel lector conventus aut in Ordine lector vel cursor actu legens, ad ebdomadariam et missas legendas suis vicibus annotentur." Gabriel Maria Löhr, *Die Teutonia im 15. Jahrhundert: Studien und Texte vornehmlich zur Geschichte ihrer Reform* (Leipzig, 1924), 54–55.

¹⁹Bailey, *Battling Demons*, 27.

²⁰Löhr, *Die Teutonia im 15. Jahrhundert*, 63; Paulus von Loe, *Statistisches über die Ordensprovinz Teutonia* (Leipzig, 1907), 37.

²¹In the fifteenth century, Dominican admonitions, including those released yearly by the general chapter, commonly opened with affirmations of the liturgy's importance, and Texery's ordinances follow suit. Jones, *Ruling the Spirit*, 90.

²²"Ab omnibus fratribus simul in choro convenientibus." Löhr, *Die Teutonia im 15. Jahrhundert*, 54.

should be deprived of wine at the next meal, and those who missed matins of the Little Office of the Virgin also lost their pittance.²³ All chant must be performed with devotion and solemnity, “with pauses in the middle of verses . . . without descant in higher voices or in octaves or in any way other than what the notation of the order contains.”²⁴ Those who disrupted liturgical song by behaving impiously, disobeying performance instructions, or singing polyphony would spend the following meal eating only bread and water while sitting on the floor in front of their brethren. The Basel ordinances, which Nider was responsible for implementing, detailed a scale of punishments according to the degree of disruption to the order’s standardized liturgy, including embellishment of the order’s music.

Preserving musical uniformity was important for both practical and ideological reasons. On the one hand, following norms of performance minimized any confusion or mistakes that might disrupt the liturgy’s contemplative atmosphere. The times of communal worship were meant to foster prayerfulness; musical discord or ritual bumbling distracted from the proper disposition. For Dominicans, liturgical uniformity was imperative not only within a single community but across the whole order, since the friars were highly mobile. Traveling friars needed to be able to integrate themselves seamlessly into the liturgy of any Dominican community they visited.²⁵ On the other, liturgical uniformity was ideologically important, because it formed part of the vow of obedience and submission to the rule. Observant reformers were especially serious about the mandates to pause during psalm verses and sing the order’s melodies, since these were written into the order’s rule and constitutions. The Augustinian rule, to which Dominicans were subject, commanded that one “should not sing anything other than what you read is to be sung.”²⁶ The first chapter of the Dominican constitutions clarified that this meant the liturgy propagated by Master General Humbert of Romans, and this stipulation was confirmed by papal bull in 1267 and 1285.²⁷ The practice of singing psalm verses with a medial pause was likewise enshrined in the Dominican constitutions. From an Observant reformer’s perspective, enforcing these performance practices brought the Basel friars into compliance with the order’s constitutions, a fundamental requirement of Dominican belonging. Harmonious performance of the order’s music both represented and inculcated harmonious order among the friars in Observant communities.

Nider’s reform of the Basel friary entailed changing the community’s musical practices to bring them into line with Observant principles, which initially resulted in acoustic chaos. Johannes of Mainz contrasts the proper Observant song of the transplanted reformers with the unauthorized, but musically more advanced performance of the unreformed Dominicans: “In the choir, you heard regular pauses here and secular clauses there, punctuated phrases here and fractured tones there, singers here and descanters there.”²⁸ The “regular pauses” clearly refer to the constitutional mandate “that the cadence in the middle of a verse be observed with a pause.”²⁹ The contrasting clauses (*caudas*) likely indicate added melodic adornments at the end of phrases, a common feature of the *conductus* genre, examples of which survive from the Dominican friaries in Frankfurt and

²³A “pittance” was an endowed gift that improved standard monastic allotments, often in the form of extra or better-quality food. Mixson, *Poverty’s Proprietors*, 30.

²⁴“Cum pausis in medio versus. . . sine discantu in acutis vel in octavis vel quomodolibet aliter quam Ordinis nota contineat.” Löhr, *Die Teutonia im 15. Jahrhundert*, 54.

²⁵William R. Bonniwell, *A History of the Dominican Liturgy* (New York, 1944), 25.

²⁶“Nolite cantare, nisi quod legitis esse cantandum.” Luc Verheijen, *La règle de Saint Augustin*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1967), 1:421.

²⁷“We confirm the entire liturgy, both day and night, according to the correction of the venerable father, Friar Humbert, master of our order, and we want it to be observed uniformly by all. [Totum officium tam diurnum quam nocturnum secundum correctionem et ordinationem uenerabilis patris fratris Humberti magistri ordinis nostri confirmamus et uolumus ab omnibus uniformiter obseruari.]” “Liber Constitutionum Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum (iuxta codicem prototypum B. Humberti in Archivo Generali Ordinis Romae asservatum),” *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum* 3 (1897): 26–60, 98–122, 162–81, here at 37–38. For the development of the Dominican Rite, see Bonniwell, *A History of the Dominican Liturgy*.

²⁸“Audisses in choro hinc pausas regulares illinc caudas seculares, hinc punctaturas illinc fracturas, hinc cantantes illinc discantantes.” Basel, UB, A XI 42, f. 98v. I thank my musicologist friends and colleagues who advised me on the terms *punctaturas* and *fracturas*, which are far from clear. By *punctaturas*, Johannes likely meant that the Observant reformers sang and read liturgical phrases with the melodic cadences indicated by the order’s strictly regulated punctuation. See Eleanor J. Giraud, “Melodic Lection Marks in Latin Manuscripts for Mass,” *Scriptorium* 71 (2017): 3–37, pl. 1–8.

²⁹“Ut in medio uersus metrum cum pausa seruetur.” “Liber constitutionum,” 37.

Soest.³⁰ Performing *caudas* violated the constitution to sing “without extending the voice in the pause or at the end of a verse, but rather, as was said, to end it briefly and succinctly.”³¹ Johannes further charges the unreformed friars with singing vocal polyphony, calling them *discantantes*, that is, singers of descant, which was explicitly prohibited by Texery’s ordinances for Basel. This accusation is strengthened by the survival of *organum* fragments (liturgical chants with—in this case—three-part harmony) from the Basel friary.³² Johannes’s rhetorical juxtaposition of *discantantes* with *cantantes* highlights the prefix *dis-* and its more general meaning; polyphonic descant is singing wrongly. In this concise, but heavily freighted passage, Johannes of Mainz encapsulates the dissonant aural experience of a single community with competing musical traditions, praising the simple and brief chant of the Observants and disparaging the more musically elaborate song of the unreformed friars. Narratively, the music of the Observants represents order and communal harmony, whereas the unreformed produce only discord.

Johannes of Mainz places Nider literally at the center of this chaos. Religious communities were divided into two halves called the right and left choirs, which sat in parallel choir stalls facing each other. In liturgical psalmody, the right choir and left choir alternated verses, passing the song back and forth. Johannes describes Nider directing both choirs with his clarion voice: “I often saw him walking from choir to choir and correcting those making mistakes. Hence, he had the custom of bel-lowing choral chant, primarily psalmody, pastorally and like a trumpet, now raising, now punctuating, now prolonging, but rarely abbreviating it.”³³ Johannes paints a vibrant picture of Nider running back and forth between the two rows of friars, singing both parts in an overpowering voice that forces the community to follow his music. Directing the community’s chant was usually the job of the cantor, not the prior, but Johannes unmistakably describes Nider as the primary agent of the Basel friary’s musical reform. Nider was thus not only committed to fulfilling ritual responsibilities, he was also an expert leader of Dominican liturgical song.

These aspects of Nider’s biography lend color to the universalized platitudes of his treatise. Johannes of Mainz’s *Vitas fratrum* reveals Nider as a devoted and vocal (pun intended) liturgical performer. During his time as university regent in Vienna, Nider respected liturgical duty such that he eschewed even legitimate exemptions from the duty roster. As prior of the Basel friary, he was responsible for implementing a reform that entailed changing the community’s musical practice. When Nider writes in *De reformatione* about liturgical neglect and musical proportion, this rhetoric flows from his experience as a vigorous singer, equipped to retrain communities in liturgical performance. Johannes of Mainz’s portrayal of Nider’s liturgical expertise is corroborated by the scrupulous detail of Nider’s visitation letter to Unterlinden. That document, however, exposes the incommensurability of reform principles with local implementation.

The Visitation Letter to Unterlinden: Nider as Musical Administrator

Beyond his musical reeducation of the Basel friars, Johannes Nider also promoted liturgical reform in administrative capacities. In 1431, the Dominican general chapter appointed Nider to collaborate with Guido Flamochetti, the prior of the Cambrai friary. More than a decade after the end of the

³⁰Eva M. Maschke, “Neue Conductus-Fragmente aus dem ehemaligen Dominikanerkloster in Frankfurt am Main,” *Studi musicali* n.s. 1, no. 2 (2010): 295–312. For the genre, see Thomas Payne, “Latin Song II: The Music and Texts of the Conductus,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Music*, eds. Mark Everist and Thomas Forrest Kelly (Cambridge, 2018), 1048–78.

³¹“Non protrahendo uocem in pausa uel in fine uersus, sed sicut dictum est breuiter et succincte terminetur.” “Liber constitutionum,” 37.

³²To be fair, these fragments survive as binding scraps and it is not certain that Dominicans ever sang out of the book they came from. Wulf Arlt and Max Haas, “Pariser modale Mehrstimmigkeit in einem Fragment der Basler Universitätsbibliothek,” in *Basler Studien zur Musikgeschichte*, ed. Wulf Arlt (Bern, 1975), 223–72. For the genre, see Edward H. Roesner, “Notre Dame,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Music*, eds. Mark Everist and Thomas Forrest Kelly (Cambridge, 2018), 834–80.

³³“Sepius ambulatentem vidi de choro ad chorum et erroneos emendantem. Hinc consuevit cantum choralem precipue psalmodiam pastoraliter et tubaliter reboare, nunc levare, nunc punctare, nunc protrahere, raro breuiare.” Basel, UB, A XI 42, f. 107v.

Great Western Schism (1378–1417), the Dominicans were still dealing with its aftermath.³⁴ Nider (representing the former Roman Obedience) and Flamochetti (representing the Avignonese Obedience) were commissioned to review the legislation that each Obedience had passed and to draft one single version of the Dominican constitutions and of the Dominican Rite to restore uniformity to the order's legislative foundation.³⁵ The acts of the following general chapter imply that they had successfully harmonized the constitutions, but that the order's liturgy had not been unified.³⁶ Nevertheless, evidence of Nider's approach to administrative reform of the liturgy survives in a visitation letter composed after his inspection of the Alsatian convents Unterlinden in Colmar and Schönensteinbach in July 1436. The letter to Unterlinden contains extensive and detailed instructions pertaining both to the sisters' musical practice and to their liturgical repertory.³⁷

Although the Basel *Vitas fratrum* paints Nider as a heroic champion of liturgical engagement and musical harmony, the visitation letter by its nature is less optimistic. The sisters' liturgy does not suffer from neglect or discord, but in numerous matters they are not in compliance with the order's uniform rite. Nider enjoins the Unterlinden sisters to sing more moderately, to celebrate saints with the appropriate solemnity, and to give up chants and melodies that were not centrally approved. The visitation letter proves Nider to be an extremely knowledgeable liturgist and an attentive singer, but it raises doubt as to the effectiveness of the Observant reform's efforts to change liturgical practice at the local level.

The visitation letters that Nider wrote to each convent survive in a manuscript miscellany, which includes entries in numerous hands, most notably that of the later Dominican reformer Johannes Meyer (1422–85), and which evidently served as a repository of institutional memory in the Basel friary for decades.³⁸ On many folios, different handwriting and different shades of ink reveal layers of additions and adaptation as the Basel Dominicans kept their records up to date. Unlike the edifying orientation of the first manuscript discussed, the contents of this miscellany are largely administrative documents, some in Latin and some in German. The two visitation letters appear alongside transcribed correspondence, papal privileges, legal documents, and membership lists pertaining to the friars' oversight of Observant women's communities in the region. This manuscript served as one of the main sources for Gabriel Maria Löhr's 1924 edition of documents and records relevant to the Dominican Observant reform in southern Germany, including Master General Bartholomew Texery's reform ordinances for the Basel friary, discussed in the previous section. Although Löhr edited the entirety of the letter to Schönensteinbach, he abbreviated the Unterlinden visitation letter, noting with apparent dismissiveness that "most of the regulations address details in the prayer hours and rubrics."³⁹ Whether Löhr was uninterested in liturgical matters or unable to reconstruct the highly technical stipulations from the abbreviated Latin, he suppressed fully two-thirds of the visitation letter.⁴⁰ This omission highlights a further challenge in researching the fifteenth-century reforms. Scholars now develop expertise in various facets of the period, for example, canon law, economic history, and liturgy. However, for the reformers who produced these documents, these issues were intricately interconnected with concrete repercussions for daily life. The seeming eclecticism of these manuscript miscellanies reflects the degree to which each of these areas of practice and knowledge were integrated in religious life.

³⁴See Joelle Rollo-Koster and Thomas M. Izbicki, eds., *A Companion to the Great Western Schism (1378–1417)* (Leiden, 2009).

³⁵Reichert, *Acta Capitulum Generalium*, 3:220.

³⁶The 1434 acts include a note that everyone should bring a copy of the Dominican constitutions to the following general chapter to correct their copies against the master general's exemplar. Reichert, *Acta Capitulum Generalium*, 3:237. There is no mention of the liturgy, rubrics, or ordinarium. Raymond Creyens, "L'ordinaire des frères prêcheurs au moyen âge," *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 24 (1954): 108–88, here at 138.

³⁷Löhr, *Die Teutonia im 15. Jahrhundert*, 68. In contrast, the only liturgical stipulation in Nider's letter to Schönensteinbach commands that sisters who are too ill to attend matins must lie in the infirmary and not in the dormitory.

³⁸Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, E III 13, f. 100r–101v. A full description of the manuscript can be downloaded as PDF from <https://swisscollections.ch/Record/991170500152805501> (accessed September 13, 2023). For Johannes Meyer's career, see Johannes Meyer, *Das Amptbuch*, ed. Sarah Glenn DeMaris (Rome, 2015), 1–11.

³⁹Löhr, *Die Teutonia im 15. Jahrhundert*, 68.

⁴⁰All of the examples in this section are drawn from these liturgical regulations on f. 100r, which Löhr omitted from his edition.

Visitation letters, designed to correct a community's errors or shortcomings, provide valuable insight into the gap between universal norms and local practice. Unterlinden had been reformed in 1419 and, in theory, ought to have been following Observant practice for seventeen years by the time of Nider's 1436 visitation. Nevertheless, many of Nider's injunctions for the sisters sound quite similar to his reforms in the Basel friary. The sisters who cannot come to the choir for communal liturgy should read the hours "not rushing, but rather at a proper pace and distinctly."⁴¹ Nider also addresses the sound quality of the sisters' music, instructing that "the sisters should not unreasonably cry out at a high pitch on feasts."⁴² Without further context, "at a high pitch" (*alte*) is ambiguous; it is not certain whether "high pitch" refers to their volume (i.e., they should not be loud) or whether it refers to the upper registers of their vocal range (i.e., they should not sing high notes).⁴³ Either way, Nider found that the sisters' performance of the liturgy, both in the choir and in private observance, failed to display the appropriate degree of prayerful attention.

In addition to musicality and performance, Nider's review of the Unterlinden liturgy also encompassed what the sisters sang. Indeed, most of the corrections concern unauthorized liturgical observances that deviate from the Dominican order's norm. The letter opens with an invocation of the Augustinian rule, which "prohibits that anything be sung other than what one reads is to be sung." The Unterlinden sisters, Nider writes, "have songs that contravene the rule."⁴⁴ They apparently had been singing the wrong melody for several chants, which must be sung, he enjoins, "to the order's melody." Nider specifies a long list of days on which the sisters should not be singing sequences, a genre of florid strophic chant sung just before the gospel reading at mass on feasts of the highest rank (*totum duplex*).⁴⁵ Moreover, they should never sing the Marian sequence *Ave praeclara* but instead only those approved by the order. Even a reformed, Observant convent such as Unterlinden did not rigidly adhere to the Dominican order's liturgy.

In the course of the visitation, Nider must have conducted a thorough review of the community's liturgical books. The letter admonishes the sisters not to celebrate the feasts of St Anne (26 July), St Elizabeth of Hungary (19 November), and St Katherine of Alexandria (25 November) with greater solemnity than accorded by the order.⁴⁶ Since the visitation occurred in late July, it is conceivable that he observed the convent's celebration of St Anne firsthand, but he did not stay long enough for the November feasts of St Elizabeth and St Katherine. He must have found those and the other discrepancies by inspecting the sisters' books. In particular, Nider's extensive comments about the Unterlinden sequence repertory indicate that he examined the convent's mass books to assess their compliance with the order's standardized rite.

⁴¹"Non velociter, sed mature et distincte." This last phrase is a quote from the rubrics of the private missal, enjoining priests who perform private masses to enunciate. Franciscus-M. Guerrini, ed., *Ordinarium Juxta Ritum Sacri Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum* (Rome, 1921), 250.

⁴²"Non clament sorores alte irrationabiliter in festis."

⁴³The following admonishment, insofar as it can be reconstructed, seems to suggest that it refers to vocal register. Nider enjoins that "one should not direct the song louder/higher because of the st-?, which she directs more/further [nec una propter st-?, quem plus dirigit, dirigit cantum altius]." The st- word is too abbreviated to reconstruct and not obvious from context. Nevertheless, the proximity of *cantum* and *altius* suggests singing high in the vocal register, especially in light of the fact that Nider uses this vocabulary in his treatise to describe re-pitching a choir that is singing flat. If Nider is ordering the liturgical leader not to sing loudly when governing the choir, this would seem amusingly hypocritical in light of Johannes of Mainz's description of Nider's "bellowing [reboare]."

⁴⁴"Cantus habent contra regulam que prohibet cantari quod non legitur esse cantandum."

⁴⁵Nider chides the Unterlinden sisters for singing sequences on the Octave of Corpus Christi, the Octave of the Visitation, the Octave of John the Baptist, the Octave of Mary's Conception, and the Conception of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was the patron saint of the Unterlinden community. The feast of his Conception was not practiced universally throughout the order, but the Unterlinden sisters had special permission to celebrate this feast for their patron, although evidently not with a sequence at mass. For the genre, see Lori Kruckenberg, "Sequence," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Music*, eds. Mark Everist and Thomas Forrest Kelly (Cambridge, 2018), 300–56.

⁴⁶"The feasts of St Katherine and Elizabeth should not be done more solemnly than semiduplex. On the day after the feast of St James, they should not sing mass for St Anne as *totum duplex*. [De festis beate katherine et Elizabeth non sollempnius fiat quam semiduplex. In crastino festi sancti Jacobi non cantent sub toto duplici missa de sancta Anna.]"

Tellingly, Unterlinden's three surviving graduals (liturgical manuscripts with music for mass) largely confirm Nider's observations about their musical repertory, but they bear few indications that the sisters followed his mandates. All three manuscripts contain the sequence *Ave praeclara* with no marginal annotations or erasures that would signal a change in practice.⁴⁷ Similarly, all three manuscripts provide the sequence *Gratuletur mundus* for the Conception of John the Baptist, and two of them include *Sanctissime virginis votiva festa* for Katherine of Alexandria, neither of which was officially approved by the Dominican order.⁴⁸ The Unterlinden sisters did, in fact, own the music for illicit sequences, which the visitation letter accuses them of singing; if they did stop using them after Nider's inspection, they still did not remove them from their books. Conversely, Nider's letter enjoins the sisters to sing Dominic's usual sequence for the feast of his Translation and not the contrafact *Laetabundus*. This particular *Laetabundus* is nowhere to be found in the Unterlinden graduals. Other Observant Dominican sisters sang this sequence; its text is found in a missal produced by Sister Elisabeth Töpplin, Schönensteinbach's chantress.⁴⁹ Perhaps the Unterlinden sisters did remove it as ordered, or perhaps this injunction was meant for the co-transmitted Schönensteinbach visitation letter. The survival of the other unapproved sequences suggests that the Unterlinden sisters did not follow through on Nider's stipulations. Comparing the visitation letter to the convent's surviving music manuscripts underlines the divergence between normative expectations and local practice.

In the early fifteenth century, such local deviations were aggravated by the lingering aftereffects of the Great Western Schism (1378–1417), during which the Dominican liturgy had developed independently in the Roman and Avignonese Obediences, obscuring the legal status of many liturgical regulations. Many such liturgical changes were revisited in the years after reunification and reconfirmed for the entire order, but not all.⁵⁰ In the Unterlinden visitation letter, Nider seems to treat as invalid anything not explicitly reconfirmed by the reunified general chapter. For example, he prohibits the sisters from singing the last four verses of Dominic's sequence *In caelesti hierarchia* during his octave and on Tuesdays throughout the year.⁵¹ Dominicans had been singing mass for Dominic every Tuesday since 1362.⁵² The truncated sequence had been formally added to this observance by the general chapters of 1405, 1407, and 1410—that is, within the Roman Obedience during the Schism.⁵³ Although it had been legally ratified at the time, the practice does not seem to have been reconfirmed post-Schism. Nider's directive to Unterlinden suggests that this practice ought therefore to have been discontinued in the former Roman Obedience.⁵⁴ As the Observant Dominicans sought to restore a uniform liturgy in the second quarter of the fifteenth century, they ran up against genuine confusion over the legal

⁴⁷Colmar, Bibliothèque des dominicains, ms. 136, f. 274r; ms. 312, f. 285r–286v; ms. 317, f. 199r–200v. For Unterlinden's sequence repertory, see Christian Meyer, *Collections d'Alsace, de Franche-Comté et de Lorraine, Vol. 1: Colmar, Bibliothèque municipale* (Brepols, 2006), 133–34; Jeffrey F. Hamburger et al., *Liturgical Life and Latin Learning at Paradise bei Soest, 1300–1425: Inscription and Illumination in the Choir Books of a North German Dominican Convent*, 2 vols. (Münster, 2016), 1:220–21.

⁴⁸Colmar, Bibliothèque municipale, ms. 136, f. 266r; ms. 312, f. 276r; ms. 317, f. 195r; and ms. 136, f. 279r; ms. 312, f. 279r–280v. For a table showing which were the core approved sequences for Dominicans, see Hamburger et al., *Liturgical Life and Latin*, 2:49–53.

⁴⁹Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, St. Peter perg. 45, f. 289r. Anne Winston-Allen, "Making Manuscripts as Political Engagement by Women in the Fifteenth-Century Observant Reform Movement," *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 42, no. 2 (2016): 224–47, here at 227. Johannes Meyer recorded Elisabeth Töpplin as chantress when he became confessor of Schönensteinbach in 1458.

⁵⁰Reichert, *Acta Capitulum Generalium*, 3:160–61, 164–65, 180–81.

⁵¹"Nor should the last four verses of the sequence for St Dominic be sung during his octave, nor at mass on Tuesdays throughout the year. [Nec cantentur ultimi quatuor versus sequentie de sancto dominico infra octavas eiusdem, nec feria tertia in missa per annum.]"

⁵²Bonniwell, *A History of the Dominican Liturgy*, 217.

⁵³Reichert, *Acta Capitulum Generalium*, 3:112, 133, 137.

⁵⁴However, the practice must have spread throughout the order, since a sequence for Dominic's Tuesday mass, indicated by the incipit *Laudes ergo*, was enshrined in the liturgical rubrics printed by Juan of Palencia in 1576. Juan of Palencia, *Ordinarium sacramentorum caeremoniarum, et divini officii, ad ritum fratrum Praedicatorum, in duos libros distributum, ex antiquis purgatum et correctum, atque ex recentioribus & adnotationibus aliisque necessariis auctum*, 2 vols. (Salamanca, 1576), 2:104v.

status of liturgical practices that had been introduced during the years of the Schism. The universal (or at least order-wide) norm to which local practice should conform was no longer entirely clear.

In 1436, the women's community of Unterlinden in Colmar had the dubious privilege of undergoing a visitation by the order's premier expert on liturgical law. As noted above, Johannes Nider had been appointed to reconcile the differences between liturgical practices in the former Roman and Avignonese Obediences in 1431—only five years before his visitation in Unterlinden. Nevertheless, it is not clear whether the sisters actually implemented any of Nider's corrections, giving up special chants and melodies that they may have cherished as part of their community's tradition. Documents like this visitation letter provide valuable evidence for how centralized institutions communicated broad norms and how individual communities handled them (or did not) in the uncertain years of the early fifteenth century. Moreover, the visitation letter for Unterlinden confirms Johannes of Mainz's portrait of Nider. It shows him to be attentive to liturgical practice, knowledgeable of the order's regulations, and experienced in the musical aspects of liturgical chant. These characteristics, grounded in Dominican practice, underlie the broad and universal arguments of his reform treatise.

Liturgy and Music in *De reformatione religiosorum*

The detailed and specific corrections that show up in the Basel chronicle and the Unterlinden visitation letter have no place in the treatise *De reformatione religiosorum*, which Nider wrote in the early to mid-1430s, likely while he was prior in Basel and active at the Council. Indeed, Nider's involvement with the Council's deputation on reform provides the immediate context for the treatise, which broadly lays out the benefits of religious reform and the best arguments to counter its opponents.⁵⁵ Issues such as the medial pause in psalm verses and the correct melodies for certain feasts are specific to Dominican practice and thus irrelevant for the treatise's broader audience. Nevertheless, two major themes arise in the treatise that can be traced back to Nider's interests. First, Nider argues that the practice of dispensation from liturgical participation damages religious communities at their core. This position suits the university regent who continued to accept liturgical assignments. Second, Nider uses metaphors grounded in musical practice to describe an aesthetics of reform that draws on his experience as a singer. Although the treatise does not showcase Nider's profound expertise in Dominican liturgy, its universalized arguments do grow out of his particular experiences as a liturgical leader within his own order.

With an eye to broad applicability, Nider's statements on liturgical reform in *De reformatione* largely address neglect rather than deviant practice. He writes of liturgical neglect as one of the negative results of unreformed behavior, such as pride in one's inherited status, the acquisition of beautiful things, and the abuse of dispensation. In each case, Nider frames neglect of the liturgy as a symptom of some root ailment. For example, he rebukes canons and monks who believe themselves above the law because of their noble birth. These noble-born religious suffer under such a delusion, "that they are ashamed to sing in the choir, read Masses, or dress honestly, thinking it disgraceful to their status and nobility."⁵⁶ Nider flatly asserts that this is false, adducing King David as a counterexample. If this biblical king exerted himself so in praise of God, these noble religious have no excuse for neglecting liturgical duties. Similarly, Nider criticizes private paintings, church murals, and lavish architecture, because these things invite delight in themselves and result in "neglect of the choir."⁵⁷ Neglect of liturgical duty results from misplaced values; "bad" monks and canons value noble birth and aesthetic enjoyment over observance of their order's ritual. Although noble birth is not thematized in the Basel *Vitas fratrum*, education and university status clearly play this role. In Johannes of Mainz's

⁵⁵See Mixson, "The Setting and Resonance"; and the discussions in James Mixson, "Observant Reform's Conceptual Frameworks between Principle and Practice," in *A Companion to Observant Reform in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond*, eds. James D. Mixson and Bert Roest (Leiden, 2015), 60–84.

⁵⁶"Ut verecundentur in choro canere, legere Missas, et vestiri honeste, suo statui et nobilitati dedecus esse putent." Johannes Nider, *De reformatione religiosorum libri tres*, ed. Jean Boucquet (Antwerp, 1611), 90.

⁵⁷"Chori neglectus." Nider, 114.

account, Nider not only continues to participate fully in the communal liturgy while serving as rector in Vienna, he also requested that his titles not be announced in the duty roster. Nider extrapolated his experience of social stratification among university-educated Dominicans to make a point in a broader realm.

This same anecdote relates to the question of dispensations that Nider raises in the treatise. He warns that the overuse of dispensations might lead to an insufficient number of participants to fulfill liturgical obligations. Dispensation was officially sanctioned release from a duty.⁵⁸ For example, sick friars could be dispensed from the usual restrictive diet or, as we saw above, active scholars could be dispensed from performing liturgical leadership roles.⁵⁹ Many religious men, Nider claims, abuse the possibility of dispensation, engaging in an illegitimate and unnecessary “flight from the choir and from singing the divine office.”⁶⁰ In an observation that must derive from his experience with Dominican practices of dispensation, Nider argues that the multiplication of useless officials disrupts orderly communal life. To compensate for a struggling prelate, a community appoints assistants. These officers are dispensed from liturgical duties (partially because the incompetent prelate does not know better), until finally, “the due number of servants in the choir is taken away from God.”⁶¹ Liturgical neglect results from administrative bloat. All religious rules and constitutions share a mandate to perform some form of communal liturgy. And, as Nider puts it, dispensations to do things “which are prohibited in the rule and constitutions are not dispensations, but dissipations.”⁶² In Nider’s view, participating in the liturgy is a core element of religious life, such that one may not legitimately be dispensed from it. Again, Nider’s personal commitment to serving in liturgical roles, as attested in the Basel chronicle, expresses itself as a generalized principle in *De reformatione*.

Throughout the treatise, Nider does not address specific abuses in the performance of liturgy, since each order’s rite was different and Dominican practices were not universal. In order to speak to a broader audience, Nider focuses on liturgical neglect, which cut across religious orders. Still, Nider’s personal experience with it was rooted in the Dominican order’s specific policy of liturgical dispensation for scholars and preachers. As noted above, the Dominican general chapter repeatedly addressed the issue of attendance during the fifteenth century. Performing the liturgy as prescribed required a large number of participants in different roles—candle-bearers, cantors, readers, soloists—and could not easily be done with a small group. Yet even when enough friars showed up, they often did not perform the full musical ritual. The Dominican general chapter released occasional exhortations that if a certain minimum number of friars was present, then “everything should be sung.”⁶³ The anxiety over poor attendance was motivated by the need for a minimum number of participants to perform the liturgy properly. The repeated admonitions that all must attend and that everything must be sung were, as noted above, continuously undermined by the exemptions for active preachers and scholars. The opinions Nider voices on dispensation and liturgical neglect, although couched in generalizable terms, pertain directly to his experiences and efforts within the Dominican order.

Similarly, Nider’s experience as a liturgical singer shines through in a beautiful metaphor for the practice of reform, which builds on an inner connection between reform and liturgical music. At the beginning of Book Two, Nider prefaces his practical tips with a scholastic definition of reform that proves surprisingly aesthetic. Reform involves three things: the existence of some prior form, the subsequent lack of said form, and the introduction of a new form in the likeness of the lost

⁵⁸Michael Vargas has shown that dispensation softened the order’s rigor from a very early period. Michael A. Vargas, “Weak Obedience, Undisciplined Friars, and Failed Reforms in the Medieval Order of Preachers,” *Viator* 42, no. 1 (2011): 283–308.

⁵⁹Gert Melville argues that systematically granting dispensations to officeholders was a peculiar feature of Dominican practice. Gert Melville, “The Dominican *Constitutiones*,” in *A Companion to Medieval Rules and Customaries*, ed. Krijn Pansters (Leiden, 2020), 253–81, here at 268–69.

⁶⁰“Fuga a choro et cantu diuini officii.” Nider, *De reformatione*, 75.

⁶¹“Deo subtrahitur seruitorum debitus in choro numerus.” Nider, *De reformatione*, 234.

⁶²“Quae in regula et statutis sunt prohibita; non sunt dispensationes, sed dissipationes.” Nider, 75.

⁶³“Totum cantetur.” For example, in 1401, “where there are twelve friars who are clerics, everything should be sung [ubi sunt duodecim fratres clerici, totum cantetur].” Reichert, *Acta Capitulum Generalium*, 3:104. See also “viginti fratres” in 1405 and “octo fratres” in 1410. Reichert, *Acta Capitulum Generalium*, 3:115, 137.

form.⁶⁴ This definition appears straightforward, but Nider introduces a twist by observing that *forma* is a synonym for *pulchritudo* and *speciositas*, that is, for beauty.⁶⁵ Making this association allows Nider to draw on Ulrich of Strasbourg and Thomas Aquinas, applying their statements about aesthetic and metaphysical beauty to the form of religious life. This philosophical sleight of hand works surprisingly well, since both thinkers define beauty as harmonious order, using terms such as *dispositio* (orderly arrangement) and *proportio* (proportion).⁶⁶ Beauty, whether in art or in human life, consists of well-ordered matter. Exploiting the double definition of *forma*, Nider aestheticizes religious life and makes the end goal of reform not drudgery and legal nit-picking but rather participation in beauty.

Nider explicitly links this well-proportioned beauty to music in his illustrative examples. Nider's conceptualization of reform as an aesthetic endeavor grounded in harmonious proportion supports his argument that reform will always periodically be necessary. He compares law (*lex*) to sensitive machines, which require occasional maintenance by a diligent tradesman: clocks, boats, lyres, and choirs.⁶⁷ Each of these things wears down through normal use. Clocks may run either fast or slow and need to be adjusted. The friction of water wears at boats, which must be maintained to stay afloat. Playing the lyre, Nider writes, is an art that is stable in itself (*in se stabilis*) with fixed musical proportions, but plucking the strings causes them to relax. As the strings become looser, the musical proportions between their sounding tones deviate from the musical norm (*normam musicae*), producing a bad noise (*stridorem*). Periodic maintenance does not become necessary through misuse or abuse but simply normal wear and tear. In order to achieve beauty and harmony, musicians must regularly tune their instruments.⁶⁸

The metaphor of music perfectly exemplifies Nider's definition of re-form as the restoration of beauty, that is, ordered and harmonious proportion. With the reception of Boethius throughout the Middle Ages, the relationship between mathematical and musical proportions continued to be conceptualized using the monochord, a single string that could be divided into two sounding segments by pressure.⁶⁹ Divided according to well-measured proportions, the two tones would sound in harmony. This academic understanding of musical harmony, mathematically demonstrated on a stringed instrument, accords well with Nider's scholastic definition of form as beauty in well-disposed proportion. Nider explains that, like stringed instruments, religious life also requires skilled craftsmen, "who must repair those exceedingly delicate instruments, the mystical lyres of their religious order."⁷⁰ Although court musicians carefully observe the rules (*regulis*) of their art to please the ears of their earthly princes, leaders of religious communities seek the pleasure of the heavenly king. Therefore, they should do as much as humanly possible "in correcting their music and reforming their musical instruments."⁷¹ Proportion is key, however, and Nider cautions against too much rigor. Just as when tuning strings, religious reformers should neither create too much tension, nor allow too much slack. Both the theoretical and the practical aspects of instrumental tuning provide fitting metaphors for religious reform.

Nider gets the greatest mileage out of the lyre as a metaphor, but the specific way in which he describes the choir reveals his own experience as a singer and liturgical leader. Unlike his discussion of the lyre, which is grounded in academic and theoretical music, Nider's choral metaphor derives from a practical experience that will be immediately familiar to anyone who has sung in a group without instrumental accompaniment: the choir goes flat. Locating the metaphor explicitly in a liturgical

⁶⁴Nider, 131.

⁶⁵Nider, 125.

⁶⁶John Marenbon, "Aesthetics," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund, 2 vols. (Dordrecht, 2011), 1:26–32.

⁶⁷Nider, *De reformatione*, 227. Nider also lists the *periodus* of the human body, which must be maintained through the physician's art.

⁶⁸Nider, 228.

⁶⁹Thomas Christensen, "Music Theory," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Music*, eds. Mark Everist and Thomas Forrest Kelly (Cambridge, 2018), 357–81.

⁷⁰"qui reparare habent velut instrumenta nimis defectibilia, sui Ordinis citharas mysticas." Nider, *De reformatione*, 229–30.

⁷¹"In corrigendo suam musicam, et reformando vasa musica." Nider, 230.

context, Nider writes that “however high the choir begins liturgical song or psalmody, nevertheless, among people with low voices, the pitch will sink to such an extent that it is necessary for the cantor to re-intone higher.”⁷² The choir’s sinking pitch is a phenomenon Nider likely experienced often in liturgical psalmody. We can imagine him combatting it in Johannes of Mainz’s description of him walking back and forth bellowing at the two choirs of the Basel friary. Metaphor collapses into reality as Nider re-pitches their liturgical music in his efforts to reform their community.

Nider’s reform treatise, *De reformatione religiosorum*, remains intentionally vague throughout, avoiding any specific issues that would limit its applicability outside his own order. Nevertheless, certain concerns and the ways he addresses them grow out of his particular experiences as a Dominican reformer. His disparagement of those who think themselves above the liturgy and his warnings against overuse of dispensation are reflected in his own avid liturgical participation while regent at Vienna. His poignant etymology of reform as a return to beauty touches on his experience as a singer. Even through the general tone of this broadly conceptual treatise, Nider’s own expertise, his convictions, and his voice resound.

Conclusion

The sources examined here portray Johannes Nider as a fervent liturgical reformer with legislative expertise, musical experience, and a booming voice. In this context, Johannes of Mainz’s odd inclusion of *cantus* in his panegyric for Nider gains meaning. Drawing on his personal acquaintance with Nider in Basel and his experience of the community after Nider’s departure and death, Johannes paints Nider as the consummate Dominican Observant: “I testify that this holy man of God was the truest mirror of the Observance, a standard and an example to such an extent that his words and deeds, his song and his way of life was kept like a written law by those who came after him.”⁷³ Nider’s efforts to reform the Basel friary’s musical practices were evidently not in vain, and the community continued to sing Nider’s song long after he was gone.

The same may not be true of the Dominican sisters in Unterlinden, whose music manuscripts do not bear traces of Nider’s interventions. Whether or not they followed his directives, the visitation letter shows Nider as an expert in the Dominican order’s legislation and its musical repertory. Exhorting the sisters to desist from singing Dominic’s sequence on Tuesdays, he sought to implement the reconciliation of the order’s liturgy after the Great Western Schism. His admonitions to stop singing certain chants and to use the correct melodies attest to his deep familiarity with Dominican liturgical music.

Nevertheless, when composing *De reformatione religiosorum*, Johannes Nider omitted any concrete advice for liturgical reform. He composed the treatise in the context of the reforming work of the Council of Basel and envisioned a broad audience outside the Dominican order. The liturgies of each order and each diocese differed from each other, such that any specific reforms of Dominican liturgical practice would not apply to Franciscans or Cistercians, for example, who had their own distinct ritual customs. Nevertheless, Nider’s own experiences and convictions shine through in his vilification of liturgical neglect and his description of choral song. Nider’s dedicated participation in communal liturgy while regent at the University of Vienna lends depth to the treatise’s concerns that overuse of dispensation will harm liturgical observance. Likewise, his musical metaphors for reform appear more vibrant in light of Nider’s demonstrated activity as an experienced singer, attentive not only to the melodies being sung but also the musical quality of the performance. The treatise’s overall (intentional) lack of concrete recommendations may make much of it seem like a collection of spiritual platitudes. Yet Nider’s own experiences as a liturgical reformer informed the way in which he theorized religious reform.

For Nider, form is a synonym for beauty, which consists in well-ordered proportion. These beautiful proportions are fixed and eternal but are difficult to maintain in our material world. Monks, nuns, and

⁷²“Chorus quantumcumque cantum Ecclesiasticum seu psalmodiam alte incipiat, tamen apud habentes vocum grauedinem, tantum adeo descendit, ut necesse sit cantorem reintonare altius.” Nider, 228.

⁷³“Protestor hunc dei sanctum fuisse verissimum observancie speculum, regulam, et exemplum adeo ut eius verba et opera, cantus ac vivendi modus, quasi lex scripta teneatur a posteris.” Basel, UB, A XI 42, f. 106v.

canons fall from the perfect disposition of their religious order, just as choirs sink in pitch as they sing. Therefore, reformers are required, who, like experienced cantors, can find the proper pitch and restore the beauty of order. Reform, moreover, is ongoing. A single council cannot fix the disorder of the Church once and for all, any more than a choral leader could intone a chant one final time and never need to re-pitch again. Reform is that constant delicate monitoring of proportion by which one maintains beauty.