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Introductory Remarks

In the evening of Wednesday the 8th of February, in the Year of the Lord 1525, a banquet was held in the canons’ community house [convivio canonicorum] in the Norwegian town of Stavanger. The occasion was the annual celebration of the dedication day of the neighbouring church of St Mary [dies dedicationis beate Virginis Marie]. According to custom, a great number of the city-folk were present: men and women, clergymen as well as lay people. And the atmosphere was cheerful and peaceful—to begin with. But when the banquet was over, one of the guests was lying fatally wounded on the floor, after having received a blow on his head by the sword of one of the canons. The preserved document mentions the full name of the perpetrator: Torgillus Amundi, or Torgils Amundsson (which must have been his Norwegian name), whereas the poor victim is only referred to by his first name, Petrus [Peter].

Five months later a letter was issued from the Apostolic Penitentiary in Rome granting first of all an absolution [absolutio] for homicide, and secondly a dispensation [dispensatio] for the irregularity [irregularitas] contracted by the event that also allowed the supplicant to be eligible for all sorts of possible future benefices. In the penitentiary protocols his story, as a homicide case, was registered under the de diversis for-mis/materiis column, as was the normal procedure with this category of supplications. And it was reported in minute detail. From the fact that the very same canon Torgils some five years later is mentioned

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2 T. Jørgensen and G. Saletnich, Letters to the Pope: Norwegian Relations to the Holy See in the Late Middle Ages (Stavanger, 1999), pp. 62–65. See also Synder og Pavemakt, 165–66.
In a diploma as abbot in one of the bigger Norwegian monasteries,\(^3\) we can conclude that the obtained penitentiary littera with the papal fiat [approval] must have reached the repentant canon in his distant location on the west coast of Norway.

Few sources from the late Middle Ages render a better illustration of the web that connected individual destinies and actual incidents of life from all corners of western Christendom with the curial centre of Rome than the recently opened archives of the Apostolic Penitentiary in Rome with its thousands of registered supplications. The Torgils case from Stavanger is, in this respect, a most representative text. A special characteristic of the penitentiary supplications is that they represent a crucial meeting point between concrete—often acute—situations of local individuals within their small worlds, on the one hand, and the overarching larger world of the standards and regulations of canon law on the other. The involvement by the priest Torgils in a murder case in outlying Stavanger, as distant from Rome as possible on the European continent, thus, was not merely a local event but was a matter of serious concern to the Holy See.

In this chapter we will give an introduction to the newly registered Norwegian and Icelandic supplications to the Holy See and will contribute to the interpretation of penitentiary supplications in the light of comparisons to similar texts from other areas. We will take a close look at the institution of the Papal Penitentiary and will provide some notes on the relations between canonical regulations and local law codes.

**Periphery and Centre in Medieval Europe**

Although the new world of the Americas was about to become known to Europe at the time of the supplication from Torgils, the country of Norway was, as seen from Rome, still, as it had been throughout the Middle Ages, looked upon as “the last country of the world,” bordering the Seventh Sea [*mare septentrionale*], in Nordic sources sometimes referred to as the Sea of Fog. The metropolitan see of Nidaros—today Trondheim—was in 1525 still the northernmost of all church provinces in western Christendom.

\(^3\) Utstein Monastery in Rennesøy near Stavanger, *Diplonatarium Norvegicum*, vol. 4, ed. C. C. A. Lange and C. R. Unger (Christiania, 1858), no. 1094 [hereafter DN].