

The Life of Nuns

Love, Politics, and Religion in
Medieval German Convents



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Cover image: *Apparition of the crucified Christ from the vision of Dorothea von Meding in 1562*, painted in 1623, on the nuns' choir in Kloster Lüne. Photo by Sabine Wehking. ©Kloster Lüne

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IV. Love and Friendship

In the convent, love and friendship have a long tradition. Love linked the nuns with their bridegroom Christ. His love created a community in which the women not only felt connected to one another but were also able to include others, creating a fellowship which opened the door to a close relationship with God. Their function as mediators between God and mankind meant the nuns played an important part in this process. Thus bonds of love and friendship assumed a major role in the nuns' everyday lives both inside and outside the convent. For women who spent their lives in enclosure and hence could not personally make their concerns heard in a medieval society, one which relied heavily on actual physical presence, these relationship networks were of crucial importance: relationships to the bishop and the ducal family, to the urban patriciate, to theologians and abbesses and neighbouring convents, to the families and friends of individual nuns – to some extent, such communication defined their sphere of action. From the cloister they utilized every opportunity to maintain and cultivate these bonds: through letters, gifts, intercession, advice and mutual aid. All shades of love and friendship can be found in the lives of the nuns. In writing, this is reflected in the friendly correspondence with other nuns or the impressive intellectual exchange between siblings, as well as mystical texts containing declarations of love for their bridegroom Christ which were inspired by the passionate language of the Song of Songs.

1. Friendship Beyond Convent Walls

Friends in Need Are Friends Indeed

The diary of our nun from the Heilig Kreuz Kloster begins with the death of the abbess Gisela von Damme on 8 October 1484. In that year

the plague raged in Braunschweig, the disease from which she may have died unexpectedly after only two years in office. The death of the head of the convent constitutes a crisis for any community, one in which the Heilig Kreuz Kloster received help from the neighbouring Cistercian monastery of Riddagshausen: 'Our close friend',¹ a monk from Riddagshausen, visited the nuns and comforted them with a sermon on the 'death of Deborah, Rebecca's nurse'. The diarist notes that comparison with the biblical loss of Rebecca's 'nurturer', the great-niece of Abraham, was a 'sweet consolation'.² 'Friends in need are friends indeed':³ the nuns in Lüne also knew this and emphasized the great importance of friendship in times of emotional distress. For example, 'good friends'⁴ looked after the possessions of the nuns of Heilig Kreuz Kloster when they had to leave their convent in 1485. Good friends also helped when the convent wanted to set up its own dairy farm but was in danger of failing due to the resistance of its own provost. First they laboriously persuaded the provost, then they made it possible to establish a herd by means of donations: 'At this time (1486), a certain Heinrich Wilken fell ill in the head and offered up a cow in honour of Heilig Kreuz Kloster for his recovery; this cow was the first. Soon other good friends gave us other cows and then we began to have them on our farm'.⁵ Friendship can thus be expressed in very concrete terms: in cows, in small gestures or even in the fact that nuns visiting Wienhausen were 'most honourably' sent home by the abbess in her own carriage 'for the sake of old friendship'.⁶

Love of God that inspired the ties of mutual friendship and connected the earthly to the heavenly realm, with religious women bearing particular responsibility for the latter: they were, so to speak, 'experts' in divine assistance. Friends pray for one another: during a riot in Braunschweig, on both sides also involving relatives of the nuns,

1 *intimus amicus noster*, fol. 1v.

2 *dulciter est nos consolatus*, fol. 1v.

3 Literally: 'Necessity proves who your friends are' (*in necessitatibus amici sunt probandi*, Letter 13).

4 *boni amici*, fol. 7r.

5 *Ipsa tempore valebat male in capite quidam vir Hinricus Wilken, et offerebant I vaccam in honore sancte crucis pro sua sanitate, et illa erat prima; mox alii boni amici nostri dederunt nobis alias, et tunc incepimus eas habere in nostra curia*, fol. 10r.

6 *remisit nobis honorifice nostras sorores cum suo proprio curru et servo et aliqua dona misit nobis propter amicitiam*, fol. 22r.

'our *domina* secretly asked some sisters to pray for the liberation of their friends'.⁷ In this case, it took longer than desired for the turmoil to pass but the nuns were practised intercessors. A large number of the surviving letters invoke a specific act of friendship: mutual intercession for the living as well as the dead. The fact that these relationships defined the nuns' sphere of action is shown by the following story: a friend of the convent, probably a canon of the collegiate church of St Blasius in Braunschweig, had demonstrated his affection by showing the nuns – who were, of course, not permitted to leave the cloister – the tunic of St Anne from the treasury of relics in Braunschweig. The women won him for an important diplomatic mission, namely the wooing of a possible candidate for the all-important office of provost in Heilig Kreuz Kloster.⁸

Sibling Love in the Klara Kloster

Friendship networks that did not stop at the convent walls also connected the Nuremberg humanist Willibald Pirckheimer (1470–1530) with sisters and daughters who lived as nuns in the neighbouring convents. One thing immediately becomes clear when reading the countless letters exchanged between them – the ladies possessed wit and humour. These letters provide us with special testimony to the role played by friendship in correspondence across convent walls. The humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), who enjoyed widespread fame, wrote admiringly that if England had its Mores – the learned family of Sir Thomas More – then Germany had its Pirckheimers. In January 1520, Willibald's sisters Sabina and Eufemia thanked their brother, a weighty man in any sense, for a lavish new chasuble, the measurements for which had obviously been based on his own physique: 'When we looked at the chasuble, we realized that you had had it made according to your own stately figure. It is handsome and large. When you become a priest and our confessor, it will be just right for you'.⁹ Letters and gifts played an important role in friendly

7 *rogavit domina nostra aliquas sorores secrete, ut facerent aliquam oracionem pro liberatione suorum amicorum*, fol. 27r

8 *peciit, quod nostrum optimum vellet facere contra ipsum sacerdotem*, fol. 32r.

9 *Wir sehen das meßgewant dafür an, du habst es nach dir lassen machen. Ist ye ratlich und*

relations between the siblings. On 7 July 1524, St Willibald's Day, his daughter Katharina and his sisters Klara and Caritas (1467–1532), the latter the abbess of the Nuremberg convent of the Poor Clares, sent him homemade confectionery made with rose oil; and in turn Willibald sent them glasses and mead for St John's Day.¹⁰ To a certain extent, gifts could replace personal presence and could, therefore, also be carriers of meaning as part of symbolic communication. In June 1520, Willibald offered to send Eufemia and Sabina chain mail for their practice of asceticism. The sisters gratefully declined: 'You wrote to us in your previous letter with regard to one or two rusty old coats of mail. We thank you for being so well-meaning. However, because we are not used to riding, we would know of no other use for them than the scouring of pans'.¹¹ Then, with a twinkle in their eye, they remark that even their dressing gowns are often too coarse for them, such tender martyrs are they. Further, because Caritas had already sent them hair shirts from Nuremberg, they write: 'So keep your chain-mail shirts yourself'.¹²

Willibald who agreed with Erasmus of Rotterdam in his criticism of Catholic monastic life and his scepticism of Protestants and most particular his dislike of 'runaway' monks who had fled the monasteries, had obviously poked fun at the nuns for what he saw as their pointless ascetic practices. In summer 1520, all three were still able to take this ironic use of iron with humour. Yet Willibald does not conceal his ambivalence towards convent life from the Protestant reformer Philip Melanchthon and adds that – like everyone else – he previously had been under the wrong impression that he was well advised in allowing his daughters to lead a religious life: 'For, to confess it openly, like others I was mistaken at the time and thought it best if they "became religious", as they call it'.¹³

Before the Reformation, religious life as an alternative to marriage

groß. Wenn du ein pfaff wirst und unser peichtvater, wird es dir gerecht sein, Letter 665.

10 Letter 885.

11 *Du hast unß vergangner zeit geschriben eines oder zweyer rostiger panczer halb. Dancken wir dir dennoch, das du so gutwillig pist [...]. Die weil wir aber der reyterey gancz ungewont sein, westen wir sy nit anderst, denn die pfannen zu fegen, ze nützen.*

12 *Darumb so behalt deine panczer selber*, Letter 696.

13 *Nam, ut ingenue fatear, errabam tum cum caeteris putabamque natis optime consultum, si religionem, ut vocant, ingrederentur*, p. 388.

had been an established choice for the female members of the respected Pirckheimer family and also attractive for Willibald's own family, since six sisters and three daughters had entered convents. His sisters Sabina and Eufemia lived in the Benedictine convent of Bergen near Neuburg (Bavaria). From 1521 onwards Sabina was abbess of the Bergen community, followed after her death by her sister Eufemia. Willibald's youngest daughter Caritas also entered Kloster Bergen in 1517. His sister Katharina lived with the Benedictine nuns in Geisenfeld, while Walburg lived in the convent of the Poor Clares St. Jakobus am Anger in Munich. Willibald's sisters Caritas and Clara lived in the community of the Poor Clares in Nuremberg, which his daughters Katharina and thirteen-year-old Crescentia also entered in 1513. Admittedly, Crescentia remained 'a child' all her life and was dependent on care. When she died in 1529, Willibald expressed criticism to his elder daughter Katharina regarding the role of convents in the provision of care and repeated the apparently widespread view that monastic life made people peculiar. Katharina attributed this criticism to the 'enemies of convents' and replied to her father: 'But, dearest father, do not let your heart be weighed down and do not let the enemies of convents persuade you that we create so many fools. I hope we have fewer of them in our convent than in the city itself'. According to Katharina, only one nun was really mad; two others were a little strange, but perfectly useful. She continues, 'We have no more such people', and asserts that this particular cap did not fit: 'We would not like, even unwittingly, to be the cause of this'.¹⁴

As with all deeper relationships, the bond between the siblings was also subject to stresses and strain over the years. Willibald Pirckheimer could react quite touchily at times. When his daughter Barbara married in February 1518, he told Caritas that, incidentally, he preferred to deal with ordinary people rather than the highly regarded. His comment presumably referred to his lifelong friendship with Albrecht Dürer, who was not a member of the Nuremberg patriciate. When, therefore, Caritas advised him to be more careful about making such remarks in

14 *Aber, hercz lieber vater, [...] wolst dir dein hercz nit beschwern lassen und dir die closter feynt nit eintragen lassen, das wir so vil narren machen. Ich hoff, wir haben ir in unßerm closter nit als vil, als in der stat sein. [...] Nit mer hab wir solcher leut. [...] Wollten auch mit unbescheydenheyt nit gern ursach sein*, Letter 1253.

public, he became furious and refused to speak to or visit his sisters for over a year. He did not come at Easter either, with the result that the whole city took notice of their dispute. This put the Poor Clares in a difficult situation because they urgently needed their influential brother to mediate their concerns in the city. Since Willibald refused to accept an apology from Caritas, Klara now took the initiative – and Klara knew how to handle her brother. She wrote to him at the end of July 1519, saying bluntly that anyone who liked to dish out criticism must also be able to take it: ‘I have often been present when you have startled and reviled the worthy Mother, in private as well as in front of other people, and certainly often slung numerous nasty words at her. Balance, then, one thing against the other. We are all human’. She blames her own directness on the heat of the summer and the fireflies which appear around St Margaret’s Day (20 July), concluding her long letter with the words that this is ‘because I have written it just as it came into my head. And forgive me if I have been too harsh. We are now in the dog days, when St Margaret’s little worms have perhaps been going round in my head’.¹⁵ In a second letter, from September the same year, Klara invokes – even more clearly and obviously with humour – the image of nuns as simple-minded and fearful as shared by the nuns themselves and by many others: it was no wonder that they, such ‘poor little nuns’, feared the great man Willibald, ‘since we are often frightened even by a mouse so that we do not know where to put ourselves’.¹⁶ Klara possessed good powers of observation and her brother was aware of her frank, straightforward manner: ‘But, sweetest brother, I want to write to you straightaway about how my heart feels. You know full well that I don’t go in for fuss or flattery’.¹⁷ This combination of candour and a need for protection proved successful, and at Christmas 1519 Willibald showed he had come round and dedicated his edition of Fulgentius to Caritas.

15 *Ich pin oft mit und pey gewest, daz du dy wirdig muter allein und auch vor den leuten also entseczt host und also geschmecht und sicher oft vil poßer wort poten [...] Darumb rechnen ains gegen dem andern ab. Wir sind alle menschen. [...], denn ich in allein auß meinem kopf hab geschriben. Und verzeich mir, wo ich zu grob pin gewessen. Es sind yzunt die huncztage gewesen, mochten mir vileicht sant Margen wurmlein im kopf umb sein gangen, Letter 613.*

16 *Es ist kain wunder, dass wir armen nundlein einen solchen großen man furchten, so wir doch oft vor einer meuß erschrecken, das wir nit wissen, wo wir beleiben sollen, Letter 617.*

17 *Aber hercz lieber pruder, ich will dir geleich schreiben, wie es mir umb das hercz ist. Du waist wol, ich kann nit vil verworens noch federklaubens, Letter 613.*

Just how cleverly the women were able to play on the image of simple-minded nuns can be seen even more clearly when, in April 1525, Willibald composed a letter of petition on behalf of the Poor Clares to Christoph Scheurl (1481–1542), advisor to the council and mediator in the dispute over demands by Nuremberg council, which had adopted the Reformation. Klara thanks her brother for all the effort he has put into writing to ‘Doctor Troll’, using the nickname for Christoph Scheurl which the nuns had bestowed on the friend who had previously admired them so much but who, since becoming one of the Protestant reformers, had been so critical of them. She claims that Willibald had chased away Caritas’s tears with the letter, that she had laughed even though she was so sad. She goes on to report that Caritas had been very pleased with the petition and had immediately passed his text on to Scheurl’s aunt Apollonia Tucher so that she could write the letter in her name to her nephew. According to Klara, Caritas had not revealed to Apollonia that he, Willibald, was the author so that she would not let it slip to her nephew in a moment of weakness. Instead, Klara wrote that Caritas had added a bit of nuns’ gossip to the letter so that no suspicion would arise as to its authorship: ‘The Reverend Mother has included some silly nuns’ gossip because your letter is so well and sensibly written that suspicion might arise it had not sprung from her own head’.¹⁸ These remarks advise us to be cautious with regard to the attribution of authorship in convents; collective authorship must always be considered a possibility for letters and other monastic writings. Pirckheimer’s letters were read out in front of the entire convent and the replies, even if written in the name of individuals to specific addressees, were presumably agreed with the community in the same way.

Klara’s entertaining letters to her brother are written in German. The literary relationship between Willibald and his sister Caritas took place on a different plane. It could be said that the latter’s letters are characterized by a difference in tone; not only because the siblings communicated with each other in Latin but also because Caritas occupied a firm place in humanist circles, primarily through Willibald’s mediation. Willibald and the German ‘arch-humanist’ and

18 *Dy wirdig muter hat etlich ainfeltig nunnen teding dar ein gesezt, wann dein prief so wol und vernunftiglich gesezt ist, das man einen arckwon mocht gewynen, er gieng nit auß irem kopf*, Letter 917.

poeta coronatus Konrad Celtis (1459–1508), had bestowed on the gifted sister the honorary title of *virgo docta Germana* and placed her in the tradition of learned women, influenced not least by Celtis's recent discovery of the works of the canoness Roswitha von Gandersheim (c. 935–973). Moreover, the correspondence between Willibald and Caritas is characterized above all by notable affinity and profound intellectual debate. This intellectual plane later enabled them to come to terms with the literary expression of Lutheran criticism, a process that obviously also clarified their own positions.

In his early letters Willibald refers to Caritas as his 'most beloved sister' and, citing Horace to describe their spiritual kinship, as the 'second half of my soul'.¹⁹ Like the Nuremberg patrician and humanist Sixtus Tucher, whose correspondence with Caritas probably contributed to the raising of her spiritual and intellectual profile, Willibald also took a serious interest in religious matters. For him the Poor Clare obviously stood for the spiritual side of Humanism, for a high esteem for the transcendent as opposed to the earthly, for truths of timeless validity. As late as 1529, Willibald wrote: 'Human affairs should never be given preference over divine matters'.²⁰ For her part, Caritas chose the image of the 'hidden pearl',²¹ to describe Willibald's astuteness and wisdom, revealed in his understanding and interpretation of the Greek and Latin texts. Emphasizing her words with a quotation from Psalm 33:9, in 1502 she wrote to him about how beneficial and important it was for the virgins, busy with divine worship both day and night, to have a teacher such as him, one who taught them a deeper understanding of the sacred scripture enabling them to 'suck honey from the rock and oil from the hardest stone. For you can imagine for yourself how tiring it otherwise is constantly to sing psalms, yet be unable to pluck the fruit of liturgical chant'.²²

According to Caritas, the ability to interpret the liturgy in a

19 *soror charissima ac meae dimidium diminae*, 20 December 1503; referencing Horace's *Carmen* 1.3, where he says this about Virgil.

20 *divinis nequaquam humana praeferenda censeam*, Letter 44.

21 *margarita abscondita*, quoting Matthew 13:46.

22 *Revera res esset magnae utilitatis, si ingeniosae virgines, divino cultu die noctuque mancipatae, talem haberent praeceptorem, qui doceret eas, mel sugere de petra oleumque de saxo durissimo; alioquin frequenter psallare et fructum psalmodiae non posse carpere, quam taedium sit, ipse cogitare poteris*, Letter 33.

meaningful way – ultimately the ability to transcend everyday life – was crucial for cloistered nuns. Caritas herself enjoyed a particular mastery of this. In the letters addressed to her by Willibald, Christoph Scheurl and Konrad Celtis, the quality of her words is a recurring theme. In 1514, her brother wrote to Caritas about how much her letter had comforted him after his rescue from considerable danger: ‘For apart from the fact that I love you in a singular way, I do not know why all your letters do me so much good and have impressed themselves so devoutly into my deepest soul’.²³ The young Christoph Scheurl informs her that he carefully preserves her letters so that he has them on hand to refresh his exhausted spirit;²⁴ and that he reads them time and again in order to enjoy them. The tributes paid in these letters were certainly part of epistolary rhetoric, the *captatio benevolentiae*, but they were only effective if they captured the true essence of the matter.

An impressive example of Caritas’s ability to use words to be a friend to friends in need and her gift of – also humorously – deriving meaning from everyday situations can be found in the letter she wrote in 1502 to the unfortunate Konrad Celtis, who had recently been assaulted. She assures Celtis that he had all her sympathy because he had recently fallen among bloodthirsty robbers, been savagely beaten and robbed of all his possessions. She had no doubt, she continues, that he belonged to that select band of true philosophers who have the capacity for enduring all adversity with equanimity, even when every earthly thing had been taken from them – indeed, to those very philosophers who preferred the treasure of true knowledge and wisdom over all earthly goods. Such men would, therefore, be comforted by adversity rather than oppressed by the injustice they had suffered, which is why it was more beneficial than harmful for the wise to suffer such blows.²⁵

Friendship entails, then, not only an obligation to support, but also to speak out. Hence Caritas does not stop at this general reinterpretation

23 *Nam praeterquam quod te unice diligam, nescio quemadmodum tua me cuncta delectant scripta penitusque sancte animae meae inhaerent*, Letter 37.

24 *quocum animum defatigatum recreare queam*, Letter 68.

25 *et si non diffidam excellentiam vestram esse de numero perfectorum philosophorum, qui cuncta adversa aequanimiter norunt tollerare, etiam si omnia caduca et transeuntia eis auferantur, modo carum thesaurum verae scientiae et sapientiae, cunctis opibus preciosiorem reservent, quapropter in adversis magis consolantur quam de illatis iniuriis contristentur, profecto non ignari talia pati sapientibus magis prodesse quam obsese*, Letter 45.

of painful events as an experience vital to the formation of genuine philosophical equanimity: 'What did the robbers do other than free you from the worry of worldly goods? What did they do when they beat you other than give you an opportunity to school yourself in practical virtue?' According to Caritas, Celtis actually had cause to be grateful to the robbers because the incident had, above all, allowed him salutary exercise in the highest virtue, namely holy suffering (*sancta patientia*), because according to the Apostle James he who suffers temptation possesses the perfect work (*opus perfectum*). Thus the outstanding philosopher Celtis (*eximius philosophus*) unexpectedly becomes a great theologian (*optimus theologus*) who accepts adversity (*adversa*) not only with equanimity but rather with joy – and does so all the more in view of the sufferings of Christ, which the Son of God had taken upon himself not involuntarily but of his own free will, in the form of vilification, beatings, robbery and the harshest death. Celtis could, therefore, regard himself as an honourable emulator of Christ. Reflection on this, writes Caritas – quoting Bernard of Clairvaux – is 'the highest philosophy'. In addition, she goes on to say she does not believe the attack was a coincidence. Rather, it was due to divine providence that this affliction had befallen him, Celtis, precisely at a time when the Passion of Christ was being celebrated, namely during the holy season of Easter: Christ had wished to offer him the opportunity, as it were, not simply to comprehend his holy Passion in his, Celtis's, mind, but actually to experience it on his whole body.

Caritas succeeds in providing Celtis with a new perspective on the experience which had so oppressed him. The abbess interprets the threatening situation in which Celtis had found himself in religious terms and elevates it in a way which the humanist would have considered appropriate for a religious woman (*religiosa*). Indeed, Celtis then thanks her warmly for her sympathetic letter on the occasion of his attack by robbers. He sends Caritas a copy of *Norimberga*, his learned description of Nuremberg, enclosing with it a verse dedication to her, which reads: 'Full of consolation, bringing means of healing, which quickly erased from me the intense pain and grief of my soul'.²⁶ Her words to him

26 'Ad Charitatem [...] carmen': *Dulce solamen mihi epistola mox / virgo reddebis variis medelis / quae mihi tristes pepulere et acres / mente dolores*, April 1502.

quickly made him forget the pain of his body and the distress over the loss of his possessions.

Friendship and love were of great importance in the conditions enforced by enclosure. They represented the 'cement' or 'glue' which bound together the members of the convent, the lay sisters and the clergy, the different communities and all the participants in their internal and external networks. The nuns reflected on the various forms of friendship and love which these respective relationships brought to the fore and employed them pragmatically in their communications. The foundation on which the community was built was their relationship to one another as 'brides of Christ', which, as a 'bond of love', predetermined their interaction. In 1484, a nun from Lüne gave articulate expression to this idea in a letter to a friend in another convent: 'For we have all been chosen by Christ and been gathered together to honour his name. Although admittedly unworthy, we are all glued together by the bond of love for Christ'.²⁷



Fig. 21 Two nuns wearing crowns, the initials GLM und GF on a capital in the cloisters of Kloster Ebstorf. Photograph: Wolfgang Brandis ©Kloster Ebstorf.

²⁷ *Nam a Christo omnes electe ac in unum congregatae ad glorificandum nomen ipsius et, licet indigne, tamen conglutinate in vinculo amoris Jesu Christi*, Letter 235.

Above all, in creating a sense of community this bond of love created the potential for the women to develop and grow in their shared striving towards God. At the end of the fifteenth century, the dean of St Jakobi in Rostock wrote to the provost of the nuns in Lüne, Nikolaus Schomaker, that 'it is not knowledge of God but love for God that makes us blessed'.²⁸ The nuns, in turn, emphasize to their provost their own knowledge that he cherishes them as his dearest friends above all others, locating their close relationship in body and spirit within a finely differentiated framework: as a convent, they, the nuns, are, as it were, the limbs of his body and their spirit is 'glued together' with his spirit.²⁹ This elevated tone of friendship is not entirely disinterested: faced with Nikolaus Schomaker's imminent death, the women wanted to ensure the provost did not favour others over them in his will – a concern that was by no means unfounded.

It is striking that the image of being inseparably 'glued together' is one repeatedly used for spiritual friendship. For example, at the end of the fifteenth century, a nun from Kloster Lüne writes how delighted she had been to receive a letter of consolation and gifts from a friend in another convent as a 'sign of love'. For, she continues, my soul is 'glued to yours as Jonathan's soul was to David's and, if I could, I would strip myself of my robe for you as Jonathan did for David'.³⁰ Unfortunately that is not possible, she continues, so instead she sends a veil and sweet, spiced fish and a little basket of sweets and titbits. What, then, is the meaning of the 'glued-together' souls and David's friendship with Jonathan? Why is this image not only invoked as a role model by this nun, but frequently echoed in other convent letters, too?

28 *quare non cognitio Dei, sed amor in Deum nos beatos efficient*, Letter 18.

29 *conglutinatus*, Letter 24.

30 *Attamen pro inditio caritatis immense, qua anima mea conglutinata est anime vestre, veluti anima Jonathe conglutinata est anime Davidis et dilexit eum Jonathas quam animam suam (1 Samuel 18:4), ita ego diligo vestram reverentiam in visceribus Jesu Christi [...]. Et si foret michi possibile, quod ego tantilla possem me expoliare tunica nostra et reverentie vestre eam prestare, quemadmodum Jonathas fecit Davidis, hoc ex fundo cordis libenter facerem*, Letter 189.

2. The Idea of Friendship

In the Old Testament the ‘classic’ pair of friends were Jonathan, the son of King Saul, and David, the youngest son of Jesse, whom Yahweh summoned from the flocks and elected to be king. As the son of the ruler, it was actually Jonathan who ought to have assumed the kingship, but he remained steadfastly loyal to his friend David, in opposition to his own father. When Saul persecuted his friend, Jonathan saved David’s life because he recognized that God had called David and considered God’s authority higher than that of his father. Jonathan renounced his own right to kingship in favour of his friend. The power of his renunciation brings about a deepening of his friendship with David which is constantly aligned to the will of Yahweh; in turn, their friendship achieves a hitherto-unknown intimacy in the passage quoted by the Lüne nun: ‘And it came to pass, when he had finished his conversation with Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was joined to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as he loved his own soul’. Jonathan and David entered into a covenant of friendship (*foedus*); and Jonathan removed the outer garment (*tunica*) that he wore and gave it to David, as well as the rest of his clothes, even his sword, his bow and his belt: ‘Then Jonathan, the son of Saul, arose and went to David in the forest, and strengthened his hand through God, and said to him, “Fear not, for the hand of my father Saul will not find you, and you will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you; but my father Saul also knows this”. So they both made a covenant before the Lord’³¹. David’s later lamentation for his slain friend and the latter’s royal father was adopted as an Old Testament reading in the church’s Liturgy of the Hours.³² In the Old Testament friendship is a gift from God, a ‘holy consolation’³³, a treasure and means of healing in life that offers protection against all kinds of adversity. Friendship is the higher quality of life, rooted in faith in God and opening new horizons for friends. God is always the third party in this relationship.

The lofty ideal of unbreakable friendship and love which was strong enough to overcome even death was already known in Antiquity.

31 *Percussit ergo uterque foedus coram Domino*, I Samuel 23:15–18.

32 2 Samuel 1:17–27.

33 Jesus Sirach 6:14.

Horace's line about Virgil as 'other half of his soul' became proverbial, as the letter by Willibald referenced above shows; while Virgil, for his part, coined the unforgettable phrase 'Love conquers all'³⁴ and described friendship as a force of perpetual growth. Cicero's definition of friendship in his *Laelius de Amicitia* (44 BC) became particularly influential: for him, friendship is nothing other than an 'agreement in all matters divine and human infused by benevolence and love'.³⁵ Cicero believes that, apart from wisdom, no better gift than friendship was given to mankind by the immortal gods, but that all the characteristics of this friendship exist in the many possible forms of mutual accord.

Based on Cicero and inspired by the Christian transformation of the concept of friendship, which is witnessed before God, the twelfth century English Cistercian abbot Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167) developed a powerful idea of spiritual friendship in *De amicitia spirituali*. In the prologue, Aelred, elected abbot by the monks in 1147, recounts how Cicero's book on friendship had fallen into his hands, a work he had considered unsurpassable until, after entering the monastery, he had discovered something incomparably more sublime, namely the essence of spiritual friendship. His book *On Spiritual Friendship* is conceived as a dialogue. He begins the first book by welcoming the friend entering the room with the words: 'Behold I and you, and I hope the third among us is Christ'.³⁶ The presence of Christ turns their friendship into a 'holy covenant'. In lucid language Aelred explains to his readers precisely what he feels Cicero lacks: namely, the shared, connective love for Christ, which elevates and enriches every bond of friendship. In a striking scene, he also describes the relationship between love and friendship. When he looks around the monastery, so the abbot writes, he loves all his brothers, the perfect and the less perfect, dearly and deeply – but only a select few are suited to a genuine, lifelong bond of friendship which creates the potential for spiritual development by opening a way to share worlds of inner experience and spiritual ascent. Aelred develops a powerful ideal of spiritual friendship which, in harmony with a person's love for God, opens new horizons of knowledge for friends through their joint ascent

34 *omnia vincit amor*, 10th Eclogue, 69.

35 *omnium divinarum humanarumque rerum cum benevolentia et caritate consensio*, Lael. IV.

36 *Ecce ego et tu, et spero, quod tertius inter nos Christus sit*, II,1.

of the path to the inner soul. According to Aelred, 'holy love' which embraces a friend leads upwards to that blessed love which allows us to embrace Christ. In the end, we savour to the full this most spiritual of all the fruits of holy friendship, awaiting perfect bliss. Then all the fear which now fills us is banished; all the suffering we must now bear for one another is overcome.³⁷ The formative aspects of the consolation and help gained from friendship, benefits invoked by so many letters written in monasteries in the late Middle Ages, are also laid out here, as are the sharing of joy and sorrow. What also becomes apparent is the importance of a frank word like that of Klara Pirckheimer at the right time and the commitment to sometimes difficult truth among friends and the part played by friendship in forging a community. Aelred also provides a biblical model for the various roles and different forms of friendship within the spiritual community: Jesus entrusted Peter with the keys to the kingdom of heaven and therewith his church; while he revealed the secrets of his heart to John. Peter is destined for action; John is reserved for love: 'I wish him to remain so until I come, says the Lord'.³⁸ This special bond is strikingly expressed in the devotional image of Christ embracing John (see Figure 22). Aelred's ideal of friendship bears fruit, and allows his monastery of Rievaulx to blossom. Upon Aelred's death in 1167, the chronicle reports that he had doubled everything there: monks and brothers, land and goods and all the equipment, but that he had tripled discipline and love within the order.

The bonds of friendship between the nuns, which they invoked in their letters and demonstrated in their gifts, recall all the aspects and levels of meaning which had been known, and repeatedly re-interpreted, from Antiquity onwards. Indeed, as was already understood in classical antiquity, ideal and reality could be poles apart, especially when it came to friendship. Often the practical nature of friendship appears to dominate in everyday monastic life, but the formative, connective Christian ideal of friendship always resonates. The women were skilled in deploying, for their own purposes, the immense potential inherent in establishing relationships and spiritual closeness; they were also versed in cultivating and preserving it as a

³⁷ *De amicitia spirituali*, III, 132.

³⁸ Book III, 117; referencing John 21:22.

crucial network of friendships. In the process, personal and collective friendship, intimacy and polite distance merge seamlessly. For example, in one letter, a nun from Neukloster Buxtehude addresses the prioress in Lüne as ‘my special and dearest friend’, whom she then informs, now using the polite plural form of address, ‘that we’ – namely the entire convent – ‘have put a new roof on the church and the nuns’ choir’.³⁹ The singular voice of the writer is interwoven with the plural voices of the collective.

The conditions which prevailed in enclosure shaped the specific ways in which the nuns cultivated and expanded their many and varied friendship networks, which were crucial to the functioning of their institution within society. They cultivated old and traditional relationships and created new ones through formal requests for friendship with nuns in other convents – as ‘pen friends’. What others cultivated as relationship networks in a society dependent on personal presence, the nuns knew how to achieve from enclosure using words and gifts. Friendship is based on a shared love for Christ; it offers comfort and support in times of need; it sometimes requires frank words; opens new spiritual horizons; enables collective growth; and delights through small gifts and small tokens of affection. The words chosen by the nuns in their letters and the references they summoned up were shaped by the high ideal of spiritual friendship. Love for Christ – in which they were experts – was the common bond which permeated and glued their networks together.

3. Christ Embracing John the Evangelist as Spiritual Bridehood

Particularly impressive in its representation of an intimate relationship is the sculpture of Christ embracing John the Evangelist, a type found mainly in southern German convents in the upper Rhineland and across the German south-west. It illustrated for the nuns the special relationship of love, trust and friendship between St John and Christ, offering them a figure with whom to identify in the form of

³⁹ *mea specialis ac precordialissima amica, [...] dat wy, Dei cooperante gratia, unse karken et chorum wedder under dack ghekreghen hebben*, Letter 289.

the youthful, virginal Evangelist. On the cross, Christ had entrusted his mother Mary to John and thus – as successors to Mary – also the nuns. Due to his virginity, John was as physically close to Christ as the nuns; they were also united by their imitation of Christ, the *imitatio Christi*. This representation developed out of the account of the Last Supper, at which John, ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’, rested his head against Christ’s chest in anguish at the announcement of the latter’s suffering. This gesture took on a life of its own as the embodiment of the close bond between the faithful soul and Christ, also known as ‘St John’s Love’ (*Johannesminne*). The earliest examples derive from the twelfth century and are found in manuscript illuminations for the feasts of St John, as in the *gradual from the Swiss Dominican convent of St Katharinental (1312). This convent also possessed a similar sculpture since their chronicle reports that ‘Master Henry from Constance made a sculpture of St John from walnut wood, one so beautiful that everybody was amazed, even the master himself’. This points to one or more workshops in the region of Lake Constance and the upper Rhineland which produced these and other high-quality figural groups, such as scenes of the Visitation. They were carved mainly for convents: the Augustinian canonesses in Inzigkofen (near Sigmaringen); the Dominican convent of Mariaberg (between Reutlingen and Sigmaringen); the Cistercian convent of Wald (near Meßkirch); and, around 1320, the Benedictine convent of St Martin in Hermetschwil (Switzerland).

Only a few of these groups have remained *in situ*. One such is the group from the Cistercian convent of Heiligkreuztal which represents the seated figures of Christ and John and at 101 centimetres high is almost two-thirds life size.



Fig. 22 Heiligkreuztal: Christ embracing John. Photograph: Markus Schwerer
©Staatliche Schlösser und Gärten Baden-Württemberg.

The back is hollowed out, since the group was not free-standing but originally kept in an altar shrine which was opened on special occasions. The medieval colour scheme was certainly more restrained – the remains of colour on other groups, such as that from Inzigkofen (now in the Bode Museum, Berlin), display similar decoration of the face with slightly reddened cheeks and mouths, but much less brightly coloured robes. The painting on the group from Heiligkreuztal was refreshed in the Baroque and, in keeping with period taste, given a lustre finish with a metallic sheen intended to imitate precious materials – a sign of the esteem in which the medieval devotional image was held by the community right up until the modern era. It is now housed in a niche where it can be seen

at eye level, as was probably the case for the nuns. There Christ, bearded and with long, dark hair, sits on a bench with the beardless youth St John, whose hair is blond and curly. John's head has sunk onto Christ's breast and he rests with his eyes closed, while Christ, whose head and body lean towards him, rests his left hand on John's shoulder; their right hands interlock. It is the gesture of betrothal, established in Antiquity as the *dextrarum iunctio* and resembling the 'hand-fasting' (*hand-truwen*) mentioned in poems about Christ as bridegroom from the Lüneburg convents. The intimate gesture of the hands simultaneously evokes the Song of Songs, in which the lovesick bride says: 'His left hand under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me'.⁴⁰ The two figures, who both wear a long-sleeved undergarment with a gold hem and whose voluminous cloaks, draped over their knees, swing down in parallel folds to their bare feet, demonstrate perfect unity, literally hewn from a single block and inseparable. Christ's gaze is directed not at St John but straight at the viewer. Medieval literature attributes to the gaze an almost physical ability to emit rays; the eyes were regarded as the 'gateway for love'. The gaze thus constitutes the starting point for the growth of love, all the way through to physical union. A hexameter on the *gradus amoris*, the stages of love, puts this in a nutshell: the gaze leads to confiding conversation, which leads to touch and from there to a kiss – and finally to the act of union (*visio, colloquium, tactus, osculum, actus*). The exchange of gazes between Christ and the observing nun includes her in the bond of love between John and Christ; conversely, it also means that the virginal youth, John, assumes the place of the nun as the bride of Christ.

Physical closeness to Christ was a given for the nuns on several levels. In the Eucharist they received in the one form of bread both the body and blood of Christ, whereby he was meant to be present before their spiritual eyes in all his corporality. This is particularly vividly illustrated by the numerous sculptures of Christ in Wienhausen Kloster. The wound in the side of their statue of Christ as he is rising from the tomb has a hole behind which the relic of the holy blood owned by the convent may have been kept, so that the blood from Christ's actual body turned the wooden image into the real presence.

40 *Læva ejus sub capite meo, et dextera illius amplexabitur me*, Song of Songs 2:6.



Fig. 23 The Resurrected Christ. Photograph: Wolfgang Brandis ©Kloster Wienhausen.

The figure changed with the various church festivals. At Easter, two angels could be placed next to the central figure as a proclamation of the Resurrection, and a victory flag was placed in Christ's hand. Just as the priests had different vestments in the different colours of the church year, Christ and the angels also had 'holy robes', the colours of which signalled the times of fasting or joy for the nuns. The nuns had made these garments in their parament workshops out of the same sort of precious fabrics as the clerics' robes; some of the fabric used for the statues had come into the convent as their own trousseaux, so their own festive garments were tailored to fit Christ. Robes were also made for the

figures of the Christ child, for whom not only clothes but also cradles have been preserved. Wienhausen's larger-than-life figure of Christ in the Holy Sepulchre could be dramatically revealed by the lowering of the lid – or the empty tomb demonstrated by opening the doors below.



Fig. 24 Holy Sepulchre. Photograph: Wolfgang Brandis ©Kloster Wienhausen.

The relics in the head of Christ transformed the sculpture into far more than a wooden figure: it was the Real Presence at the heart of the convent. Some representations of Christ also double as tabernacles and had inbuilt repositories for the bread which was transformed into the body of Christ.

Many texts from the mystical tradition in the convents unfurl dialogues with Christ which take up and continue the passionate language of love found in the Song of Songs. In the thirteenth century, three women associated with Kloster Helfta stand out. Their texts not only filled convent libraries but equally shaped lay devotion. They were Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1207–c. 1282), Mechthild of Hackeborn (c. 1240–1298) and Gertrude the Great (1256–1302). In her 'Herald of Divine Love' (*Legatus Divinae Pietatis*), the latter created a comprehensive liturgical exegesis. One of the visions recorded in the text for the benefit

of her fellow nuns reads like the direct transformation into literary form of the sculpture of Christ embracing St John: when Gertrude assists in the nuns' choir at matins on St John's Day, John himself takes Gertrude's soul by the hand, transports her into spiritual rapture and leads her to Christ to rest together with her on Christ's breast (Book IV.4). He places her on his left, while he himself takes a seat on Christ's right, like the recursive reflection of the sculpture. Gertrude reports that she lays her head next to the wound in Christ's side and hears his heart beating. Thereupon she asks John why, if he had also sensed this while resting on Christ's breast, he had not written it down – to which John replies that his harkening to Christ's heartbeat was intended as a revelation for a time yet to come when the world, its love for God grown cold, would have to revive it. Gertrude does not cease her reenactment of the scene from the Last Supper there, but vividly develops it further. In a striking twist, John grants Gertrude's wish to see him in his heavenly form. Suddenly she sees him hovering on an 'infinite ocean within the heart of Jesus', as he had become so drunk with the desire to taste God that his Gospel burst forth from a vein in his heart and poured out over the entire world. When, time and again, the nuns revived the biblical story through the liturgy on St John's Day, the external eyes of the body that saw the sculpture of Christ embracing John helped the inner eyes of the spirit to access the entire cosmos which encompassed this story of an exceptional relationship. As John confirmed, this was uniquely possible for them in the convent: Christ's love had been given to him as a reward for his virginity, and thus it was promised to them, too.

The works of the women from Helfta and the devotional texts based on them, such as those by the Medingen nuns and many others, develop models of bridal mysticism which can be adapted across the sexes and boast a powerful impact. Far beyond the Reformation, the language and images of love developed by the nuns in the convent both gave wings to the imagination and shaped the bridal mysticism in religious literature, music and works of art.