

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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VI. Reformation

When the Reformation was introduced into the imperial city of Nuremberg in 1525 and Catholic mass was banned, the Nuremberg patrician and learned humanist Willibald Pirckheimer, who had openly declared his allegiance to Protestantism in the previous years, wrote a desperate letter at Easter to his humanist friend and Luther's confidant Philipp Melanchthon. He begins his letter: 'With you, my Philipp, I see myself compelled to seek refuge; I implore your advice and help ...'. The reason for Willibald's despair was the situation in the Nuremberg convent of the Poor Clares, over which his sister Caritas Pirckheimer presided as abbess and where his daughters lived. During Advent 1524 the Franciscans had already been taken away from the nuns as pastoral carers and confessors, and now the monasteries and convents in Nuremberg were gradually being dissolved with gentle pressure or even force. Only the Poor Clares steadfastly refused to give in to the council's urging. In his letter of advice,¹ the Protestant preacher Andreas Osiander found unambiguous words, especially for Abbess Caritas Pirckheimer: there would be no peace in the convents unless they first rooted out the weeds and got the *Birckamerin* (Caritas Pirckheimer), out of there. In moving words Willibald describes to Melanchthon how the women had long been deprived of all spiritual support, including confession and the Eucharist; and how he himself considered the priests they were offered as replacements to be untrustworthy. On the contrary, they took such delight in abusing the poor women and behaved so arrogantly towards them that the nuns were likely to become more obdurate than to change for the better: 'This sex, as you know, wants to be persuaded, under no circumstances to be forced'.

1 *Ratschlag über die Klöster*, 31 May 1525.

Of course, it soon becomes clear that Willibald Pirckheimer could not approve of a breach of monastic vows. When, in 1525, Willibald allowed his daughter Katharina to remain faithful to her vows, her reply reveals she was well acquainted with Luther's criticism and her father's point of view: She 'does not think she will be blessed in the nun's habit, but still thinks she will please her heavenly bridegroom better in that than in a gown bedecked with pearls'. As a sign of gratitude, the daughter calls him not only her biological but also her spiritual father. Willibald's criticism of monastic life was ignited by the narrow-mindedness of the mendicant friars in theological and philosophical matters – these 'most impudent scroungers' who lived off the labour of others. In terms of systemics, his criticism referred first and foremost to the doctrine of justification through works: to what was, in his eyes, a misunderstood clinging onto liturgical rites which had been introduced at some point in the past – the ceremonies – or onto regulations governing asceticism and fasting, the origins of which were unclear. The Protestants, on the other hand, took as their starting point the grace of God alone, *sola gratia*, and had scant regard for the efficacy of pious works. The Protestants' criticism was, therefore, also directed primarily at the papal practice of indulgences, which positively flourished in the years immediately preceding the Reformation and especially in the Jubilee Year of 1500.

1. The Papal Legate Arrives in Town

In December 1502, there was only one topic of conversation in Braunschweig, namely the imminent arrival of the papal legate, Cardinal Raymond Peraudi, who, as a high-ranking diplomat for Pope Alexander VI, had been sent to northern Germany in 1500 to announce the Jubilee Indulgence. The legate was still in Erfurt and subsequently in Magdeburg, but from there he was already conducting negotiations about his reception with the city of Braunschweig and the old Duke William II the Younger of Braunschweig, who died in the summer of the following year.

The Announcement of the Legate

Initially, the arrival of the distinguished guest was a long time in coming, but on 18 February 1503, a Saturday, suddenly everything went very fast. The word in town was that Cardinal Raymond Peraudi would be arriving in Braunschweig in two days. The entire clergy was to march in procession to meet the papal legate outside the gates as a sign of respect – the Cistercians from Riddagshausen and the Benedictines of St Giles with their abbots, the Dominicans and the Franciscans – and all were to do so in full ecclesiastical regalia. The provost of the Heilig Kreuz Kloster with his chaplains and scholars was also invited. Indeed, not a single ecclesiastical order in Braunschweig was forgotten; only the nuns of the Heilig Kreuz Kloster were excluded, as the diarist notes with regret – for the protection of their virginity and their duty to observe enclosure. Yet they did not want to do without women altogether. To ensure the procession did not lack glamour, all the girls in the town who had reached the age of majority were called upon to take part, dressed in black robes, their hair adorned with caps and green ribbons, although some respected widows were entrusted with the supervision of the girls. The richer families were meant to help the poorer ones to ensure everyone presented a dignified appearance. A high-class reception naturally included music; and everyone who owned an instrument was therefore called upon to play and sing. A magnificent reception ceremony for the cardinal, one befitting the status of the rich and powerful Hanseatic city of Braunschweig, was a matter of honour. Usually on such occasions, cities presented themselves as well-ordered, peaceful communities in imitation of ‘heavenly Jerusalem’, the biblical ideal of a civic community in which everyone, rich and poor, lived together happily and safely.

On that cold Saturday in February 1503 Henry the Elder of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, the old duke’s son, had received the cardinal in his ducal seat, the neighbouring town of Wolfenbüttel. The timing was convenient, because the next day the cardinal was to accompany the duke to the Augustinian convent of Steterburg to celebrate the spiritual wedding of the latter’s daughter, Elisabeth, during mass: she was to receive the habit and the nun’s crown in Steterburg, as was the custom there. The Braunschweig town councillors were also invited to the ceremony and the banquet there, but when they arrived, the church

was already so full that they could find neither a place to stand in the church nor anywhere to stable their horses. After a few hours, therefore, they returned to Braunschweig, tired and still hungry. This was also particularly annoying because the cardinal had granted full remission of all their sins to everyone who had taken part in the celebration. Moreover, so that the event would not be forgotten, Raymond Peraudi also granted a major indulgence to all those who visited the convent on the anniversary of the investiture ceremony of the duke's daughter. A few years later, in 1515, Elisabeth was appointed prioress to lead the community in Steterburg and to guide it through the difficult years of the Reformation.

Since the papal legate was already in nearby Wolfenbüttel, the councillors in Braunschweig assumed the cardinal would enter the city the following day. Preparations for the arrival were made in great haste. At the sixth hour on Monday morning everyone, including the priests of the Heilig Kreuz Kloster, marched in their finery and an orderly procession to meet the cardinal outside the city walls. When the priests from the Heilig Kreuz Kloster had left, nothing held the servants, maids and prebendaries there any longer and they ran after them. 'Unfortunately we were not invited', noted the diarist, 'but we still fervently hoped that the cardinal would visit us and give us the pope's blessing and absolution. In the meantime, we made intensive preparations for his arrival and rehearsed the Easter chant with which we wished to receive him'.²

For the time being, it did not come to that. At the eleventh hour, Provost Georg Knochenhauer and the clerics returned to the convent with their reliquaries and censers, just as they had left, but having accomplished nothing because the cardinal had not appeared. Henry's wife, Duchess Catherine of Pomerania, had not let the distinguished guest leave because she wanted him to sing mass for her the following morning. Thus the councillors ordered everyone to assemble again at the seventh hour on the following Tuesday to meet Cardinal Raymond

2 *Nos quoque, licet non eramus invitate, tamen sperante in proximo nos visitandas a prefato cardinali, [...] et quod personaliter deberet nos invisere seu visitare ac papali benedictione et absolutione letificare [...]. Inde ergo accepta fiducia preparavimus nos ad eius adventum affirmando omni studio cantum, cum quo ipsum suscipere gestiebamus, videlicet 'Advenisti' paschale et responsorium 'Audi Israel', fol. 174v.*

Peraudi a second time. This time, as was now known, Duke Henry himself would, in company with other high-ranking nobles, counts, bishops and abbots, solemnly escort the legate to the town. This, in turn, aroused conflicting feelings in the council, for the previous years had witnessed serious disputes and a feud with Henry the Elder, who, when seizing sovereignty over the town of Braunschweig, had made harsh demands with which they did not want to comply (cf. Chapters I.1 and I.2). The matter was, therefore, delicate.

A Splendid Arrival – Without the Heilig Kreuz Kloster

Although ‘not adorned with gleaming gold like the streets of Jerusalem’, the streets and squares of the town through which the cardinal would be led were ‘nevertheless swept clean and cleared of dirt’, as the Cistercian nun stresses with some pride; the fronts of the houses were decorated with tapestries and flags; and in the windows stood musicians playing their instruments.³ On Tuesday, the prelates, monks, clergy and girls now marched through the Stone Gate a second time to meet the cardinal and waited patiently for his arrival from the eighth hour in the morning until the first hour after noon, although already quite tired. When the company finally approached the town, those assembled intoned the verse ‘Thou art come, O desired one’⁴ and led the papal legate to the sound of kettledrums and trumpets through the streets of the town to the collegiate church of St Blasius inside the ducal castle complex and to a town palace that had been erected especially for him. The arrival of the cardinal left no one untouched; everyone who was able ran to meet him and ask for his blessing, which resulted in great pushing and shoving. Those who could not push their way through to him, remarks the Cistercian nun, were deeply annoyed.⁵ Cardinal Peraudi’s reception, it seemed, eclipsed all the receptions that had ever been held in Braunschweig.

While waiting for the return of the clerics to the Heilig Kreuz Kloster

3 *Strate eciam erant platee, per quas induendus erat, et si non auro mundissimo ut platee civitatis Ierusalem, tamen scopis mundate et purgate; tapecia insuper et dorsalia ceteraque ornamenta erant dependencia pre foribus domorum, in fenestris autem stabant luzares reddentes diversos sonos musicales*, fol. 176v.

4 *Advenisti desiderabilis* from the Easter sequence *Cum rex glorie*.

5 *et quicumque illic pervenire non poterat, grave ferebat*, fol. 177v.

on Tuesday, the maids in their impatience climbed up to the very top windows in the nuns' dormitory, hoping to see or hear something, but in vain. Finally, the scholars returned with the relics and recounted with what dignity and splendour everything had passed off and that only the white cloaks of the Riddagshausen Cistercians had been a little dirty. In imitation of Christ's arrival into Jerusalem, the cardinal had chosen a mule as his mount for entering the town and given everyone the papal blessing willingly and with a cheerful countenance until he had reached his palace, where he dismissed the people. The nuns of the Heilig Kreuz Kloster were sad and disappointed that they had not set eyes on the lofty guest from Rome, nor shared in the papal blessing. Provost Georg Knochenhauer showed some understanding and a few days later, together with the nuns' confessor Ulrich Pawes, set off for the residence of Cardinal Peraudi to persuade him to visit Heilig Kreuz Kloster in person and to console the nuns by giving them the papal blessing. He had previously informed the abbess of his intention so that she could in the meantime decorate the convent with tapestries and prepare it for the visit. To help in persuading him, the provost and confessor carried precious gifts with them, a gold-plated lamb of Christ and silk pontifical gloves, which the cardinal obviously liked and gladly accepted. He nevertheless sent his apologies, saying that due to other commitments he was unfortunately unable to comply with their request.⁶

On the men's return, the nuns took this news hard. The lay sisters had spent the whole day cleaning the convent from top to bottom; the *sacrista* had laid out the paraments in the choir and decorated the church with tapestries and wall hangings. The girls, in their choir robes and veils, had run from one corner to the other all day in their excitement; and quite a few of the choir nuns had emulated them – as the diarist notes critically – in order to see what needed to be done if he came, all the while singing in loud voices. 'It was especially hard for me', she admits in a rare personal remark, 'and for the others who have St Matthias as their personal Apostle, for it was St Matthias's Day'. What an honour that would have been! She comments: 'We had all worked so hard, preparing the convent and rehearsing the festive chants, that our

6 *offerentes ei agnum deauratum, cirothecas serico et auro more pontificalium cirothecarum ornatas cum aliis exentiis; visis autem cirothecis amanter eas suscipiens, benigne respondens excusabat se dicens illo die non valere desiderium nostrum implere certis ex causis*, fol. 183r.

old sisters had to laugh and opined that they had never experienced anything like it as long as they had lived'.⁷

The abbess made one last attempt and wrote to the cardinal asking him to honour the community with his visit. Together with the letter, she sent him two statues of the Virgin Mary, which she asked him to consecrate and endow with the privilege of indulgences. Her fervent pleas at least moved the cardinal to the promise of sending one of his doctors to the convent on Ash Wednesday to afford the nuns full remission of their sins and to place the consecrated ashes on their heads. He also consecrated the two Madonnas and conferred on each an indulgence of one hundred days for those who, in their devotion, prayed the rosary before them. If the appropriate number of prayers were said before the statues of the Madonnas, a total of 1,000 days of remission from purgatory could thus be acquired, a prospect which added to the appeal of the convent church and the community. This did not come cheap. The account book of the Cistercian nuns of the Heilig Kreuz Kloster lists the large sum of one mark, six shillings and one denarius for the cardinal's letters of indulgence and his remuneration. At least Peraudi kept his promise. On Ash Wednesday, one of his doctors of theology actually appeared at the convent. He imposed on the nuns the obligation to pray three paternosters: every hundred days they would pray one paternoster for Cardinal Peraudi, one for the pope and one for all Christendom. The abbess summoned the doctor come to her at the end of his visit so that she could talk to him about questions of progress in religion. Because his Latin was too foreign and she did not really understand him, she had to let him go without anything having been achieved.

The cardinal stayed in Braunschweig for four or five weeks, partly because he was suffering from gout. At the end of March, though, he

7 *Et nos hec audientes indigne tulimus, quod in tanta sollempnitate talem destructionem incassum nobis excitaverant, nam die illo post refectionem converse converse purgabant in aliquibus locis, sacriste portabant preparamenta ad chorum, tapecia ad sanctuarium sternentes illud tapetibus et dorsalibus et scapualibus, puellae currebant cum cappis et peplis de loco ad locum, similiter et persone plurime conventus nostri discurrebant querentes et investigantes, quid agendum esset, si veniret, significabant, musicabant et alique aperta voce, quae illis videbantur, edisseriebant; quod quidem mihi et ceteris, quibus erat beatus Mathias apostolus, valde grave erat et moleste tulimus, quod non sufficiebat eis, quod multo iam studio in diebus precedentibus purgando et parietes fricando claustrum preparaveramus. Tantum namque in hiis laboravimus ob reverenciam adventus eius, quod seniores nostri ammirantes in gaudio dicebant: "Qualia talia numquam vidimus, quoad quidem viximus", fol. 183v.*

wanted to set off for the northern provinces in the direction of Bremen. Because the attack of gout had not yet completely subsided, a light carriage was built for him to minimize the pain in his limbs throughout the journey. Then an incident occurred in which the nuns played a part. Some of the cardinal's companions wished to visit the Cistercian nuns before they left, also because they had not managed to persuade the cardinal to visit the Heilig Kreuz Kloster as the nuns had repeatedly requested. To this end and without further ado, the companions took the carriage which had been built for the papal legate and drove it to the convent cemetery – where the carriage promptly broke down. The nuns' confessor Ulrich Pawes noticed their misfortune and gave them some advice. Above all, he urgently exhorted them, as the diarist knew, 'not to join us in the convent, lest they disturb our devotions, because it was 21 March, the feast day of St Benedict'.⁸ Even in the Heilig Kreuz Kloster in Braunschweig, which had not been reformed, enclosure was also carefully observed. Hence Ulrich Pawes kept the guests with him, gave them refreshments and gingerbread and whatever else he had in the house and they consumed every last morsel: 'There were 15 doctors of theology with their servants; and he thanked God when he got rid of them again in the evening with good fortune and without any major havoc'.⁹

Ten days after the accident with his travelling coach, on 30 or 31 March 1503, or so the Cistercian nuns notes, 'the aforementioned honourable and pious Cardinal Raymond Peraudi sent us his energetic penitentiary' (*devotissimus et reverentissimus sepefatus dominus cardinalis Raymundus ... misit ad nos suum penitencionarium, virum strennuum doctoremque eximium*, fol. 190v), that is, the member of his retinue who was responsible for the distribution of signs of grace such as indulgences. She continues:

He gave us two gold florins and asked that we include the cardinal in our prayers so that he might return to the papal court in Rome in good health and in peace and might complete the mission he had been charged to

8 *dedit eis concilium, quid de curru facerent, et premonuit eos, ne ad nos intrarent, ne forte nobis impedimentum in nostra devocione facerent, erat enim eo die festum Sancti Benedicti*, fol. 190r.

9 *porrigens eis electuarium et tortas piperatas, quas nos mellificatas dicimus, videlicet honnickoken unde wat he sodens hadde, unde se eten dat ome al up. Erant enim doctores cum suis ministris viri, ut estimo quindecym, he danckede godde, dat he or vor dem avende mit heyle quid wart*, fol. 190r.

perform, for which God grant him mercy. Our abbess gladly agreed to this request, but asked the learned man that, humbly begging, he might, on his departure from the town, lead his master the cardinal along such a route that he would pass our convent and at least visit our church and gladden us with his fatherly blessing. The papal penitentiary promised to carry out her request faithfully and to direct the cardinal's mind and path in our direction. He was successful and the cardinal promised the confessor Ulrich Pawes that when he left Braunschweig on Saturday, 1 April he would pass our cemetery on his way out of the town. If the convent came to meet him with the priests in processional order, he, who for his departure again rode the mule on which he had entered, could pass us and give us the greeting of peace and the blessing with his own hand.¹⁰

That was the plan. The Cistercian nun noted in her diary:

It seemed like a major event to us and so we discussed whether the cardinal might not leave by another town gate and we might have left enclosure for nothing and made a laughing stock of ourselves. Hence the confessor set out once more to see the cardinal and learned from his own mouth that he had every intention of passing by us on his departure from the town and of bestowing the blessing of peace on us one by one by holding out to us with his own hand a pax board with the lamb of God and the cross for the kiss of peace. When the confessor heard this, he immediately sent for the abbess because time was running out, told her what he had heard and instructed her on how everything could proceed with dignity and honour. The abbess then gave instructions that the priests should precede us with crosses, relics and thuribles and intone the sequence 'Thou art come, beloved'; and then we should add 'Hear, O Israel' in antiphonal chant. When the cardinal approached, the abbess would step forward a little and prostrate herself before the papal legate

10 *misit nobis II florenos rogans intima devocione, ut personam eius cum omni frequentia ipsius dignaremur suscipere in oracionibus nostris, ut cum salute et pace mereretur remeare ad curiam Romanam et ut legacionem, qua fungebatur, posset ita perficere, ut deo gratum esset et sibi meritum aliisque proficuum in vitam eternam. Quibus petitionibus cum domina nostra annuisset, petiit, ut reverendissimum dominum suum humili supplicatu ad hoc adduceret, quatenus in discessu suo, si iter apud nostrum monasterium faceret, ne nos inaniter transissiret, sed dignaretur ecclesie nostre ad modicum approximare et sic nobis sua paterna benedictione letificare. Qui cum se facturum promittens valedicensque recessit et negocium nostrum fideliter promovens animum reverendissimi cardinalis ad petitionem nostram inclinavit innuitque confessori nostro propositum cardinalis, quando in sabbato sequenti recessurus iter per nos faciens declinare vellet a turba ad cimiterium nostrum, et qualiter illi obviam esset a conventu et clero nostro procedendum, quodque ipse personaliter mulo incedens stantibus nobis per choros vellet per nos transsire et nobis manu propria pacem esset porrecturus ac benedictionem daturus (fol. 190v).*

and then, rising again, kiss his hand and receive the blessing of peace. The nuns would then come forward two-by-two also to kiss his hand.¹¹

When, on the day of his departure, the cardinal himself sent the nuns the news that he would personally visit and bless them, everyone reacted with great joy and prepared to meet the illustrious guest. The abbess permitted them to don their finest white Sunday robes. These robes, the Cistercian nun noted critically:

I mention the robes here because it seems to me that in future we must take better care not to display such slovenliness again. One wore a very short robe; another had thrown a fur covering over her robe; one girl's coat shone white; another's was dirty and in tatters. Quite a few people were unpleasantly affected by this, which is why something similar should be prevented in future, if possible.¹²

While the convent, together with the provost, waited in their own rooms for the cardinal's arrival, lay people flocked from all directions and a tremendous crowd formed, filling all the streets and alleys from the cardinal's residence as far as the cemetery of the Heilig Kreuz Kloster. Because the nuns were not sure which gate he would be led out of, and the Heilig Kreuz Kloster was directly outside the gates of the town, the abbess had taken the precaution of sending out the

11 *Et quia videbatur nobis magnum negocium, tractabatur, et ne forte per aliam viam educendus esset et sic nos de clausuris non esset casse egresse fieremus illucio populo. Idcirco accescit confessor noster in presenciam ipsius cardinalis et audivit ab eo, quod propositum habere declinandi ad nos in egressu suo de civitate et dandi singulis benedictionem pacem, porrigendi manu propria agnum dei vel signum crucis ad osculandum. Quibus auditis, quia iam instabat hora eduxionis, fecit vocari dominam nostram et proposuit ei, que audivit, et instruxit eam, quomodo se habere deberet et qualiter cetere omnes, ut omnia cum summa reverencia et honore fieri possent. Et hec omnia nostra domina ulterius dixit nobis, quando sacerdotes nostri cum crucibus et reliquiis et turibulis cantando, Advenisti desiderabilis' (Cantus a02107) [...] adiungeremus, Audi Israel' (Cantus 006143). Et qualiter illi appropinquanti domina nostra procedendo modicum deberet se prosternere ad terram, deinde surgens de terra accedere ad osculandum manum ipsius perceptura pacem, quam illi cardinalis porrigere vellet, et prima in accessu antequam oscularetur manum cardinalis osculare deberet manum propriam, sicque due et due accedentes veniam peterent; deinde in accessu ad ipsum manum propriam oscularentur et sic posce accedere ad manum ipsius osculandum (fol. 192r).*

12 *De cappis autem idcirco hic mencionem facio, quia videbatur mihi, quod in futuro esset precavendum, ne tanta difformitas in habitu nostro appareat sicut tunc: uni erat cappa nimis curta, altera pellicium extendebatur ultra cappam, unius cappa apparuit candida, alterius sordida et perfusa, unde etiam aliqua erant valde permote in animo – ideo, si potest, caveatur in futuro (fol. 193v).*

maids so they could let the convent know 'if the cardinal rode out of St Peter's Gate so that we could then set off in an orderly fashion'.¹³ The maids passed the abbess's instructions on to street urchins, who were meant to inform the nuns. The boys, in turn, had no wish to squeeze through the throng either, so without hesitation they climbed up to the windows of a taller house and saw the town dignitaries, who were leading the cardinal out, coming through the old town and approaching St Peter's Gate. Because the street boys now believed that the cardinal would follow the town councillors directly, they ran to the convent at top speed to let the nuns know that the cardinal was approaching. The provost with his clergy and scholars led the procession with censers and saints' relics:

and paused at the inner gate of our cemetery. The abbess with the oldest nuns, then the middle and youngest nuns together with the girls and the lay sisters, set off in processional order so that no one remained in the convent, and everyone left it, even the very old and the sick. Thus we waited for almost a quarter of an hour, with the huge mass of people all around us, until one of our servants shouted from the top of a tower that the cardinal had left by another gate and was already far away. When the provost became aware of this, he immediately urged the abbess that they should withdraw; and he himself moved into our church with his priests. As we followed them, we heard the people clamouring and shouting: 'Oh, what have we seen? Why have they allowed the virgins to go out and endure this shame for nothing?'¹⁴

A part of the crowd still ran after the cardinal at top speed via a short cut and managed to come close to him and receive his blessing together with those who followed. The diarist notes:

13 *ut considerarent diligencius, quando de valva Sancti Petri exiret, quia tunc adhuc competenter possemus exire, fol. 194v.*

14 *Prepositus cum sacerdotibus et scolariis presedebant nos cum turibilibus et sanctorum reliquiis et subsistebant iuxta portam interius cimiterium nostrum, et domina cum senioribus post eos, deinde medio cres et minores, deinde puelle et converse per choros; sicque stantes omnes singule in suo ordine, et nulla ex nostris mansit in claustris, sed omnes eramus extra tam seniores quam infirmi, exspectavimus ferme unam quadrans de hora inspectante nos undique populo, donec unus de familia nostra de cacumine turris clamaret, quia per aliam valvam divertisset, remocius fieret nobis. Quod prepositus intelligens premonuit dominam nostram, ut regrederetur, ipseque cum clero precessit ad ecclesiam nostram, nosque insequentes audivimus populum tumultantem et vociferantem: "O quid vidimus? O quare virgines fecerunt exire et afflictionem incassum ferre?" (fol. 195r).*

But we, when we had returned to the convent, lamented to one another our sorrow at having been enticed and embarrassed, asking ourselves in our hearts whether it might not, perhaps, be attributed to our negligence and carelessness that we now had to forgo the blessing of such a bishop. In the meantime, one of those who had accompanied the cardinal returned and told us that the venerable cardinal, when he had been escorted out of the town, had carefully inquired where the convent of the nuns called St Crucis stood, because he wished to pass by there; and that he had noted with great displeasure and a hard countenance the answer that the convent he sought was not at that town gate but another. Moreover, he had added: 'So that those nuns might not be deprived of the blessing they had hoped for, I shall grant them and all who wished to follow me and could not such indulgences and as great a blessing as those who followed me'.¹⁵

As a condition of this indulgence he stipulated the praying of a paternoster. Moreover, the Cistercian nuns adds, lest it seem doubtful to those who followed: 'We have heard not only from one person but from several that the cardinal looked very angry and then proclaimed the indulgence and the performance of the prayer that was linked to it'.¹⁶

As the Cistercian nuns heard later, the town's citizens accompanied the papal legate as far as the outer defences of Braunschweig. Then he sent them back to the town, although they had to be forced to turn back because they were reluctant to leave him. The cardinal then proceeded to Wienhausen, where he was received by Duke Henry of Celle and escorted by him to the nuns, who received him very worthily and honourably and on whom he bestowed a blessing and great benefits.

15 *Cum autem nos ad claustrum regresse conquereremus ad invicem, quod ita seducte et confuse fuisset, dicentes in cordibus, ne forte propter neglienciam vel incuriam subtraxerit nobis benedictionem tanti pontificis. Interea rediit quidam ex hiis, qui post cardinalem abierant, et nunciavit nobis, qualiter reverendissimus dominus cardinalis, cum se extra civitatem pervenisse vidisset, diligentius inquisierit, ubi claustrum virginum, quod sancte crucis dicitur, conditum iaceret, quia ibi perducere cuperet, et cum quanta indignatione suscepisset responsum illius, qui ei intimabat, quod monasterium illud, de quo quereretur, non apud illum valloam, sed ab altera parte civitatis iuxta aliam valloam positum esset, quomodoque torvo vultu circumpiciens indigne hoc ferre ostenderit et quomodo post hoc subiunxerit: "Ne ergo ipse virgines moniales priventur sperata benedictione, dabo eis et aliis, qui me sequi cupiunt et non possunt, tantam indulgenciam et tam largam benedictionem sicut eis, qui me secuti sunt; et qui eis hoc ex parte mea intimaverit, singularem optinebit indulgenciam."* (fol. 196r).

16 *Et ne ambiguum videatur posteris, sciant, quod hoc non solum per unum, sed potsmodum per plures dictum, quod ita torve respexerit cardinalis et quod indulgenciam tantam dederit ac oracionem pro indulgencia consequenda pronuntiaverit, fol. 197v*

2. Convents during the Reformation

As the example of the intensive efforts to obtain indulgences from the cardinal demonstrates, it was a matter of considerable importance to both the citizens of Braunschweig and the nuns to participate in the church's blessing of grace. Religiosity had by no means declined in pre-Reformation society, quite the contrary: the church reforms of the fifteenth century had intensified and deepened it.

The Indulgence as a Penitential Practice

What exactly are indulgences? Indulgences are part of the practice of penance, which consists of several steps: first, repentance of the heart (*contritio cordis*) for one's misdeeds; second, explicit confession of sins (*confessio oris*); and third, expiation of the temporal punishment for sin (*poenae satisfactionis*), which would otherwise have to be suffered in purgatory. Together, these three steps make up the sacrament of penance. With indulgences, it is not the sins themselves that are forgiven but the temporal punishments for sin, which remain even if the sin itself has been expunged – and which would otherwise have to be expiated in purgatory. Purgatory was understood as a time of purification of the soul before the last judgement, the time when God would finally sit in judgment on people's souls. In the medieval Catholic understanding, individuals could 'work off' these temporal punishments for sin themselves through prayers, almsgiving or pilgrimages; or they could simply buy themselves free with an indulgence. To this end, money or endowments were given to the church so that it would intercede for the sinner with its treasury of grace, the relics, and obtain for him remission of his punishment for sin, redeeming him from purgatory through the church's infinite treasury of grace. For this act the sinner gave his money to the church, giving rise to the sarcastic quip: 'As soon as money in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory's fire springs!'

Enclosure disadvantaged the nuns; unlike their relatives in the secular world outside the convent, they could not approach the papal legate directly, but on the other hand it also gave them an exclusive, privileged position. As special mediators between God and the world, as brides of Christ who prayed for the salvation of mankind through their prayers, they enjoyed a high status in medieval society, one which

no one could challenge – until the Protestant Reformation called the entire theological basis of monastic life into question. The central point of Lutheran theology was that no man could earn grace for himself, not even through a pious life and good works, a path which monastic life represented *par excellence*. While there had previously been consensus that the intercession of the saints and also the prayers of nuns helped the soul in purgatory and saved it from torment, the Protestants were certain that not even the intercession of the saints was of any use, since they rejected it as not being anchored in the Bible and constituting a later invention by the church. Through the removal of its mediating function and the focus on the individual grace of Christ, the nuns' prayer was devalued and an important foundation removed from monastic life, which lived from the perpetual intercession for the community of patrons and their families. Martin Luther rejected monastic vows as invalid because, in his opinion, they constituted a bargain with God. Whoever wanted to live poor, obedient, chaste lives could continue to do so, but they no longer involved an obligatory, lifelong commitment to an institution.

Conversely, the features of the Reformation which made it attractive to many lay people – the opening-up of new forms of participation in theological discourse and active involvement in worship – were of only limited value to the women in the convents. They did not need German translations in order to read biblical texts, nor did they need vernacular chorales to join in the singing in church, or explanations of the mass in German. They had long been writing their own Bible-based manuscripts, singing hymns and sequences in their services of worship, and they had acquired sufficient theological competence.

Between Persistence and Renewal

While the monastic reform had intensified the religious life of monks and nuns, filling it with new horizons of meaning, the Protestant Reformation meant a break with the belief in the ability of monastic vows to secure salvation. This was new and by no means uncontroversial. Many communities of nuns therefore bitterly resisted the attempt to introduce Reformation teachings, which deprived them of their

accustomed way of life and communities. An anecdote from Kloster Medingen illustrates this controversy. When, in 1524, Duke Ernst of Braunschweig-Lüneburg sent a New Testament in Low German to Kloster Medingen, Abbess Elisabeth Elvers was reputed to have burnt it in the brewery. The eighteenth-century history of the convent by the Protestant minister Johann Ludolf Lyßmann, who provides the only source for this, cites the incident as justification for the duke's order to confiscate the convent property 'when he received news of the blind zeal shown against the Holy Bible'. In the more detailed report, the event appears as an irrational act on the part of the abbess which, in the long run, did not prevent the conversion of the convent but did delay it:

Thus, through the Reformation begun by *Luther*, the truth that is Protestantism finally began to be revealed in her time, even though the abbess, for her part, remained inimical to it until her last hour [26 May 1524]. The world-renowned Prince *Ernestus Pius* made every effort to introduce the Protestant Reformation in his whole country and hence especially in our convent as well. In 1524, in order to lay the initial foundation for it, he sent here the translation, in Low German, of the New Testament, completed the previous year by the blessed *Luther* and printed in Wittenberg. He did this so that the nuns could read it both for themselves and publicly when at table. However, the mere name *Luther* was enough to make her detest the entire book; therefore, without much hesitation, she took it to the brewery and threw it into the fire that had been built there.

What the Protestant pastor interpreted as an expression of irrational antipathy, the nuns saw as a rejection of the duke's unlawful interference in spiritual matters. The study of Latin texts in particular was an expression of the nuns' conception of themselves and their spiritual role, as had become clear in the measures implemented by the convent reform (Chapter V.2). From the nuns' point of view, the duke clearly exceeded his sphere of competence.

The further development of the conflict in Medingen is typical of the struggle to find a viable solution for convents in territories with Protestant territorial lords. It escalated under the abbess's successor, who took office shortly after the incident in the brewery. With Margaret Stöterogge, who like her predecessor came from the ruling patrician class in Lüneburg, a strong woman took office at the end of 1524 and

held it for forty-three years. The fathers of both abbesses, Dietrich Elvers and Hartwig Stöterogge, were, as Lord Mayors, closely connected to the convent and also acted as executors for the provost of Medingen. They made sure that the convent was not disadvantaged vis-à-vis the provost's relatives and they were very familiar with its financial situation. Moreover, Margaret Stöterogge had direct experience of the monastic reforms: she had entered the convent in 1504 when it was still under Margarete Puffen, who, when she died in 1513, was praised in Latin hexameters on her gravestone as the 'renewer' or, literally, 'repairer' of that religious house.¹⁷ Like her predecessor, Margarete Stöterogge had been raised in a convent which offered excellent theological and musical training; and for a while she certainly held the new role of table-reader, which had been created under the reform and always fell to the youngest nun. Accordingly, both abbesses reacted to the duke's continued provocation with a collective response from the convent and also the wider family networks. There was particularly close co-operation with the Benedictine convent of Lüne, situated just outside the town of Lüneburg. We are exceptionally well informed about their handling of the duke's reformatory advances thanks to the rich correspondence from that time. The Medingen abbesses are frequent correspondents, since both Elisabeth Elvers and Margarete Stöterogge wrote to relatives in Kloster Lüne and regularly exchanged views with Mechthild Wilde, who presided over the convent as prioress, on legal issues such as the ownership of benefices or how to proceed with regard to the duke.

The Conflict with the Duke

At the same time as he interfered in the sovereignty of the convent, the duke demanded that Provost Mahrenholz draw up an inventory of the goods belonging to the provost. This was customary for ecclesiastical authorities in all Protestant states because the sovereign was, after all, also the supreme ecclesiastical ruler in his territory. The convent community naturally saw things differently. Mahrenholz made the list under protest the same year but assured himself of the backing of the entire convent, which in turn acted in consultation with the local bishop of Verden,

17 *reparatrix hujus ordinis domus.*

Christoph von Bremen, who was also bishop of Bremen. Above all, however, the nuns were supported by Lüneburg town council, which was largely composed of their closest relatives. Further interventions and encroachments by the duke followed one after the other: in 1529, the provost was removed from office and replaced by a captain who was subordinate only to the duke. This completely abolished the convent's election rights. All priests and scholars were dismissed along with the provost and the nuns were left with only one confessor. When this did not change the nuns' attitude, in 1536 parts of the convent were demolished, the most symbolic being the wall which protected enclosure. This had only been completed under Abbess Elisabeth Elvers in 1518 and concluded the reformation process, replacing an earlier wooden fence as the only demarcation.

The wall stood for the monastic seclusion demanded by the reform as well as for the exclusion of secular influence. Duke Ernst used this symbolic potential to demonstrate his own power. One third of the stones from the demolished walls he used to have the 'Fürstenhaus' built in Medingen as a dowager residence for the duchess; and, within sight of the convent, had his own likeness mounted on the façade as a portrait in the classical style. From the convent's perspective, the duke's actions constituted a counter-reform to their own, monastic reform: his 'deconstruction' of the convent razed to the ground the external sign of this monastic reform, namely, enclosure. With the destruction of the bell tower built by Provost Ulrich von Bülow and the severing of the clappers on the other bells, the outward sign of the praise of God fell silent, the sound which had marked the nuns' feast days and divine services for miles around. Monastic reform had achieved a new strictness in the observance of enclosure and of the rule, but this was now disrupted by the demolition of the nuns' choir. In 1542 the dispute reached a new peak: the duke forbade all contact between the women and Lüneburg with its surroundings and thus their family network. He summoned the abbess to Celle to confiscate the property of the provost once and for all. This prompted Margaret Stöterogge to seek temporary shelter in Hildesheim as the nearest Catholic territory as a precaution. She took with her the convent's legal titles, the deeds and privileges in the convent archives. Some of the most valued manuscripts from the convent can therefore now be found in the library of Hildesheim Cathedral (see Figure 30).

A Lutheran Preacher as a Challenge

Most grievous was the appointment of a married Lutheran preacher who was a former monk. Accordingly, the nuns, like the Pirckheimer siblings in their correspondence (Chapter IV.1), referred to him as a 'runaway monk' (*ausgeloffen münnich*), someone who, in their eyes, had broken his oath of profession to God and therefore committed perjury. The interpretation of events from the nuns' point of view comes to light in the letters of complaint addressed by them to Bishop Christoph of Bremen. The bishop then obtained a letter of protection from Emperor Charles V, who, in a letter to Duke Ernst of Braunschweig-Lüneburg dated 29 February 1544, took up the nuns' arguments and turned them into a fundamentally anti-Lutheran attack. The confiscation of their liturgical books and devotional texts prevented the nuns from carrying out their reformed services of worship; instead, only 'forbidden, damned new Lutheran doctrine' was preached to them. For them it was, as the imperial letter put it, the 'banishment, prevention and aberration of their traditional Christian nature, extermination, ruin, disadvantage and harm'.¹⁸

Particularly revealing for the quarrel with the new faith in Kloster Medingen is the letter of complaint about the Lutheran preacher written by the convent to the ducal governors and councillors in Celle on 1 June 1553, only one year before the official adoption of the Lutheran Reformation. In it the pastor is no longer rejected on principle, but simply because of his own personal ineptitude: for three years Preacher Bierwirt had been 'listened to with diligence but, unfortunately, without much edification', since he had preached some useful things, 'yet always much useless stuff mixed in, diabolical, cursed and given over to Satan with body and soul and many more heinous expressions which we do not even wish to mention'.¹⁹ The nuns cite as witness Captain Franz Enghusen, who had been appointed by the duke and taken over the function of provost. He would be in a position to confirm that listening to Bierwirt's sermons was unbearable and that the nuns all refused to

18 *verjagung ... Verhinderungen unnd Irrungen, Ires heerprachten Christenlichen Wesens, außreutten, verderben, nachtail, und schaden*, Urkundenbuch Medingen No. 697/8.

19 *doch jummer vele unnutte sage manckt gemenget, vormaledyet, vordomet und dem sathan mit lyoe und ze le hennegeven und noch vele gruwelicke wordt, de wee thomale nicht mogen anthen.*

receive the sacrament from him: 'We are, therefore, so upset that we can no longer expose ourselves to his sermons. Nor are any of us willing to receive communion from him'.

The abbess suggested to the duke that he appoint in his place Johann Linde from Uelzen, who had promised to distribute holy communion *under one kind, only in the form of bread, and to act as confessor. They had listened to sermons by him on a trial basis and could become used to him if need be, whereas predicant Bierwirt had 'harassed' (*molestert*) them in his sermons as in everything else. The decisive request concerned their own participation in the services of worship: 'But we ask that you continue to let us sing the mass – introit, kyrie, gloria and preface – in Latin. We do not intend to sing all these hymns in German, for we are used to the Latin hymns'.²⁰ In other words, they were not willing to exchange the solemnity of Latin for German in the liturgical pieces to which they were accustomed.

In this the nuns were successful: on 6 March 1554 the unpopular preacher was replaced by Johann Linde, as requested, and the chants for the mass remained in Latin. The insistence on these passages from the mass remaining in the familiar wording points to the importance of the liturgy in providing a source of identity as part of the women's convent life, a part which had recently been reinforced in the monastic reform of the fifteenth century. The devotional manuscripts written in Kloster Medingen illustrate how the nuns had practised writing new meditations and spiritual exercises based on the texts of the Latin mass. Some of the prayer books dedicated to the veneration of the personal Apostles (whose importance for the nuns was already apparent in the disappointment of the diarist that on 'her' Apostle day the cardinal did not come) demonstrates vividly how the Medingen nuns wrestled with the representatives of the Lutheran Reformation over every nuance of this spiritual heritage. In the manuscript written by a nun whose personal apostles were the Saints Peter and Paul, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, individual words and phrases have systematically been erased; the erasures concern the notion that the deceased saints intercede with God on behalf of those who invoke them. This is visible,

20 *bidden averst missam, introitum, kyrieleyßon, gloria in excelsis, prefationem uns in Latino wylllet singen laten; dat wy scholden dudesch singen alße de senge, wo dusse gedan hefft, denke wy nicht tho donde, denne wy der Lattinschen senge gewonth.*

for example, in a prayer written in Latin and addressed to Christ. In the middle of 'grant me the spirit of wisdom and understanding', the words 'through the intercession of St Peter' have been erased after 'me'. In order to be able to continue using the Latin meditations and prayers written in the convent itself, the nuns were apparently prepared to give way on particularly contested areas of the veneration of saints. The erasures correspond to the points attacked by Luther in his treatise on the intercession of the saints published together with the 'Open Letter on Translation' (*Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, 1530). They allowed the nuns to continue the practice of a personal relationship with the Apostles as patron saints, a practice which was of particular personal importance to them. Thus, 95% of the devotional text could remain in existence. A similar intervention is shown in the psalter written by the then *cantrix* Margarete Hopes, who had entered the convent at the same time as Elisabeth Elvers. The Latin prayer addressed to her patron apostle John the Evangelist as intercessor and mediator was cut out and replaced by a prayer in Low German addressed to God the Father and invoking Christ as intercessor and high priest. The scribal hand which added this prayer resembles that of the young Margaret Hopes, but is shakier, so it seems plausible that the *cantrix* herself adapted her personal copy of the psalter to the new situation in order to continue singing the Liturgy of the Hours in the familiar format.

Latin Educational and Low German Vernacular Language

In most convents in the late Middle Ages, there was some form of bilingualism: Latin, which was necessary for the liturgy, and alongside it the vernacular. For this reason, scribal activity in Medingen had also taken place over centuries in both Latin and Low German. It was, therefore, not a fundamental rejection of German as a language of piety that was expressed in the vote for the Latin liturgy. Rather, the women defended the latter because, as *lingua sacra*, Latin was the 'language of wisdom', with whose wording and exegetical traditions they were familiar; and because scholarly Latin distinguished the liturgy from forms of devotion in the lay world. It was precisely this difference between the laity and the religious that the Protestants sought and intended to abolish. The letters from Kloster Lüne make

it clear that the other convents in the region also insisted on the familiar Latin. In Kloster Lüne this led to a parallel service: while the Lutheran minister appointed by the duke preached in German for the lay congregation from Lüneburg in the convent church below, the nuns continued their customary Latin prayers in their choir. After the dismissal of the clergy, they also conducted the entire mass on their own, each one silently reading the parts that were otherwise spoken by the clergy.

The Nuns Yield Ground – And Stand Fast

How long a convent's resistance to the Protestant reformation lasted and what shape it took depended on the order to which it belonged, on Catholic church structures, the respective convent's legal status and its composition. The family relationships of the nuns were also decisive. The Medingen convent was composed of members of patrician families with excellent relations to the Lüneburg council, whose stance towards the Reformation was sceptical. Like Willibald Pirckheimer from Nuremberg and his sister, the learned Abbess Caritas Pirckheimer, the fathers, brothers and other relatives of the Medingen nuns engaged in a scholarly exchange with their relatives and discussed controversial theological issues with them in their letters. As *master salters of the Lüneburg saltworks, the nuns' relatives administered the wealth from which the convent was financed and had no interest in surrendering these family foundations to the duke without a fight. Once the attitude towards the Reformation of the Lüneburg families eligible to serve on the council changed, things began to happen in the convent.

In Medingen the public acceptance of the *Confession of Augsburg, i.e. Protestantism, was ultimately due to the abbess's correspondence with her brother Nikolaus Stöterogge. He understood what Willibald Pirckheimer had also written (Chapter IV.1): the women wanted to be persuaded and not forced! In a letter from June 1554 Nikolaus Stöterogge skilfully uses the Latin hymns defended by his sister as a means of persuasion and, citing a stanza by Thomas Aquinas which was sung in the convent at Corpus Christi and during Lent, points out that 'communion under both kinds' had already been praised by the ancient church. He also took further action, sending his sister 'for

occasional instruction' (*pro informatiuncula*) the pamphlet by which he himself had been converted who had 'also wandered in darkness and blindness in times past', as well as 'a booklet' (*eyn bokeschen*) on the Lord's Supper by Urbanus Rhegius, who was active as a reformer in Lüneburg.

Four years later, Urbanus Rhegius himself wrote an 'Open Letter to the Entire Convent of Virgins of Kloster Wienhausen against the Unchristian Chant *Salve Regina*'. In it he points out that in the fourth century the Council of Laodicea had explicitly forbidden the singing of chants composed by lay people in church as well as the reading of texts other than the Holy Scriptures. He cites two more church councils and concludes that an unlearned person must have written the *Salve Regina*, since it would contravene the Ten Commandments and the gospels if Mary were thus made into a 'goddess'. Even Mary herself would protest against this. His argument is that none of the church fathers, neither Augustine nor Chrysostom, mentions the *Salve Regina* and this misguided development was set in motion by unlearned bishops. In Kloster Medingen as in Kloster Wienhausen, the theological dispute caused the nuns to surrender and signal their acceptance of the Lutheran Reformation. In Medingen they agreed as late as 1554 to accept the chalice at communion. By accepting, the nuns ensured they could continue their spiritual life largely undisturbed and had a say in the appointment of the parish priest and in the continuation of the Latin hours and liturgy of the mass.

Documentary evidence of convent life after 1556 shows that, in both its spiritual substance and the nuns' everyday experience, it mostly continued the customs of the fifteenth-century convent. Even in the late seventeenth century, a statue of Mary was displayed on high feast days; a Latin inscription beneath praised her as the queen of heaven and asked for intercession. It was not until the tenure of Abbess Catharina Priggen, who presided over the convent from 1681 to 1706, that the inscription was replaced by a text from the epistle to the Hebrews in the translation from Luther's bible. The statue of Mary, however, continued to be displayed in the nuns' choir on feast days, and the feasts of Mary and the convent's patron saints continued to be celebrated. Documents from the Early Modern period speaking of 'traditional customs' refer to the status quo which had prevailed since the monastic reform of the

fifteenth century, such communal meals, which continued until 1698. The abbess of Medingen still uses the medieval crozier with the Virgin Mary and St Maurice for ceremonial occasions to this day.

For the Lüneburg convents and a further group of foundations in Lower Saxony, it paid off that during the monastic reform they had built up such a close-knit network of allies and cultivated their theological arsenal. Whilst in many other territories converted to Protestantism, all monastic institutions were indiscriminately dissolved, in Lower Saxony a compromise was found in the continued existence of the convents as Protestant institutions. This permitted the preservation, under changed auspices, of a way of life and of educational establishments for women that were considered important. The modern 'General Convention of Abbesses of Protestant Convents and Collegiate Institutions in Lower Saxony' (*Generalkonvent der Äbtissinnen evangelischer Klöster und Stifte in Niedersachsen*) is a very active group, perpetuating these networks into the present and thus 'tending the hearth', to quote the title of a series of publications jointly published by the convents.

3. A Vision of the Reformation

A visual testimony from Kloster Lüne provides a unique illustration of the upheavals but also the continuities of the Reformation period. The vision of Dorothea von Meding was only painted in the early seventeenth century but illustrates events from 1562. At that time, Kloster Lüne had already officially affiliated itself to the Lutheran Reformation, but the old way of life was still present. The painting is titled 'A consolatory picture of the crucified Jesus Christ, which the venerable, noble, most honourable and virtuous virgin Dorothea von Meding, *Domina of Kloster Lüne, along with several other virgins, saw in the clouds on St Philipp's & St James's Day 1562 in the evening after six, just as it is painted here'.



Fig. 32 Vision of Dorothea von Meding 1562, painted around 1623, on the nuns' choir in Kloster Lüne. Photograph: Sabine Wehking ©Kloster Lüne.

Old Believers and Protestant Nuns in the Picture

A group of women can be seen, largely from the back, standing inside the convent wall. All the women wear black robes, which corresponded to the habit of Benedictine nuns, but their headdresses differ. The two women standing closest to the viewer, who therefore appear taller than the others, wear black veils over which the fabric strips of the nun's crown are clearly recognizable. The other women wear white veils, like those which were also worn by bourgeois women of status and formed part of the clothing of the women until the modern era. The different forms of the veil mark the difference between those who had taken their vows before the Reformation, who retained the nun's crown as a sign of their election as brides of Christ, and the women who had entered later and laid aside the visible sign of their eternal vow, but continued to see themselves as a community with a religious purpose, even if they rejected the meritorious character associated with entering the convent. The smaller figure on the left is probably meant to be the young Dorothea, for she lifts her head to look at the cross hovering above the group so as to be in direct eye contact with Christ, who looks down at them. Apart from her, the two Benedictine nuns and at least two other women look upwards, probably the 'several other virgins' mentioned in the caption, while the rest of the group look down, their hands folded in prayer – either their immersion in prayer has caused them to miss the vision in the clouds, or they are already meditating on it.

The Text of the Painting

The vision, which belongs to a long tradition of medieval spiritual visions, tells us a great deal about the self-image of women after the Reformation. The painting was held in high esteem, as demonstrated on the one hand by the reframing of the canvas and on the other by the fact it had been kept in the nuns' choir since at least the eighteenth century. The long, rhymed inscription under its title functions like a speech scroll for Dorothea von Meding: on it she addresses Christ and asks for an explanation of the vision. She surmises that the presentation of Christ's wounds is intended to dispel any last remaining doubts that Lutheran doctrine correctly represents the word of God, whilst the 'cunning' papacy should be overthrown. She refers to redemption through the

blood of Christ and his consolation through word and sacrament on earth and in the last judgement:

Tell me, O my heart Jesus Christ, if it does not harm my soul, why did you show me your holy wound at the evening hour? I think it happened in order that everyone should see clearly, that because God also wished to give Luther's word and speech to this place that you wished to spread the doctrine early and late with wise counsel, and completely overthrow the papacy with its false, cunning doctrine.²¹

The text is written in Early New High German, which in the course of the sixteenth century replaced Middle Low German in official written documents in northern Germany. This was a consequence of both the gradual decline of the Hanseatic League and the proliferation of religious publications in High German as a result of the Reformation, even if the confusion of dative and accusative in the phrase *an deinen Tod Freude finden* (find joy in your death) betrays the influence of spoken Low German. It is remarkable that the contents of this address to Christ, who appears as a 'consolatory image', could have been found word-for-word in the devotional books written in the course of the fifteenth century monastic reform – except, that is, for the anti-Catholic jibe and the mention of Luther. Dorothea von Meding may no longer have been crowned with the nun's crown, but her direct connection to Christ, his 'rose-coloured' blood and, above all, her markedly visual inner devotion are not an innovation of the Lutheran Reformation, but a continuation of the convent education she had received. Conventual women were prepared to encounter Christ in liturgy and devotion: He showed them his wounds as he had shown them to the apostle Thomas; he entered into conversation with them as he had done with Mary Magdalene and with the bride of the Song of Songs; and he presented himself to the trained eyes of the mind in the sacrament. The Revelations of St Bridget of Sweden played a special role in training the women to travel through meditation with 'the eyes of the mind' to the Holy Land. Bridget had

21 *Sag mir O mein Herz Jesu Christ / wenß meiner Seel nicht schedlich ist, / Worumb hastu zur abend stund / gezeiget mir dein heilig Wund / Jch dencke zwar eß ist geschen / daß iederman solt klerlich sehn, / Weil Gott LVTHERI wort vnd red / auch wolte geben dieser stett / Du wolst die lehre fru vnd spat / auß breiten weit mit klugen raht / Daß Pabsthumb aber stürzen gar, / mit seiner falschen listign lahr.* DI 76, no. 221, urn:nbn:de:0238-dt076g013k0022104.

experienced a detailed vision of the birth of Christ when she had made the journey to Bethlehem in 1373. With her account as a spiritual guide, it was possible, as it were, to raise the Christ child out of the manger when the priest elevated the host. In the nuns' choir, they had, since time immemorial, performed liturgical Easter celebrations in which they approached the altar as if it were the tomb of Christ. Hence the clouds of heaven also became legible to them as signs, allowing them to enter into dialogue with Christ. Whether before or after the Reformation, this dialogue remained the common thread in their prayers, which were performed at the traditional times of prayer.

Beneath the surface of the Lutheran polemic against the 'cunning doctrine' of the papacy, text and image thus speak of the continuity of community life, which continues to move in the rhythm of the saints' days, in which 1 May is noted as the feast of St Walpurga and the Apostles James and Philip. Moreover, everyday life is still marked by group rituals such as communal bloodletting (which a chronicle records as having been performed just prior to the vision) and shared religious experiences. Across the generations and confessions, the two nuns with the black veils and the woman with the white veil standing between them on the left have raised their hands in a parallel gesture of adoration and wonder, testifying that the personal dialogue between Dorothea von Meding and the crucified Christ is part of communal experience which has survived the Reformation.

