

# An Assessment of the Histories of Religious Communities in Germany

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In the course of the last century hundreds of thousands of noble-minded and intelligent men and women from all classes and peoples have made their vows in religious orders with joyful hearts, and have upheld their vows to the last breath despite being mocked, calumniated and persecuted. It is precisely in the last centuries that the rush to enter the ancient Orders has grown remarkably. Vocations have flourished in every part of the Church so that countless new congregations have come into being with the blessing of the old Orders. This is not the result of chance or the product of a morbid mood! If it is true that God guides the destiny of the Church and the individual believer, and that he always sends the Church help according to her needs, we cannot deny that the finger of God is to be discerned in this development. Indeed we have to admit that these are the workers God has called into his vineyard.<sup>1</sup>

Otto Braunsberger S.J. ends his *Survey of Catholic Orders in the Nineteenth Century* with these words. Written in 1901, this study provides a rich source of material and valuable statistics, but it breathes the spirit of the era following the *Kulturkampf* in Germany. The Catholic religious communities still felt bound to justify themselves. Such an apologetic attitude has been largely overcome today, at the beginning of the third millennium. The current histories of religious communities in the German-speaking world, although still largely written by insiders, attempt to provide an objective judgement and show critical distance without denying that their sympathy lies with their subjects. Naturally we can still find a defensive attitude. It is evident in various anniversary publications, and in advertisements and pamphlets aimed at generating an understanding of the religious life. Both tendencies have to be considered when dealing with the historiography of religious institutions. In what follows certain fundamental tendencies will be discussed that affect

1 Braunsberger, *Rückblick auf das katholische Ordenswesen*, 206.

the present state of the historiography of religious communities in Germany. This will include a profile of the research of the last decades. Then some selected themes will be dealt with, concluding with suggestions for future research.

## *Fundamental Tendencies in Histories of Foundations Established in the 19th and 20th Centuries*

### Histories of the Congregations

Jubilees have always been a welcome occasion to survey history and this is also true of the history of religious communities. In the course of the last decades a number of congregations founded in the 19th and 20th centuries have opened their archives in order to make a survey of their history. In the process some wide-ranging studies have been written which, because of the spread of many of these Congregations, are not limited to Germany. Foundations in the north of Germany take in the Belgian and Dutch, those in southern Germany the French, Swiss and Austrian spheres of influence. Special mention must be made of monographs on the Sisters of our Lady of Coesfeld<sup>2</sup>, the Franciscan Missionaries of Heythuysen<sup>3</sup>, the Sisters of St Elizabeth<sup>4</sup>, the Steyl Missionary Sisters<sup>5</sup>, the Steyl Sisters of the Adoration<sup>6</sup> and the Society of the Divine Word<sup>7</sup>, the Mauritian Franciscan Sisters<sup>8</sup>, the St Catherine Sisters<sup>9</sup>, the Congregations of the Sisters of St Paul<sup>10</sup>, the Sisters of St Joseph<sup>11</sup>, the Oberzell Sisters<sup>12</sup>, the Hildesheim Vincentian Sisters<sup>13</sup>, the

- 2 Böckmann and Morthorst, eds., *Geschichte der Kongregation* (1992); id., eds., *Geschichte der Kongregation* (1994); Böckmann, *Aufbruch, Neubeginn, Wachstum*.
- 3 Cools and Van de Wijnperse, eds., *Sein Werk – nicht das meine*; Ostermann, *Gott wird sorgen*.
- 4 Mertens, *Die Berliner Ordensprovinz der Grauen Schwestern*; id., *Geschichte der Kongregation der Schwestern von der heiligen Elisabeth*.
- 5 Moroder, *Steyler Missionsschwestern SSPS*.
- 6 Cottet, "Contemplation et mission"; Müller, *Kontemplation und Mission* (English translation *Contemplation and Mission*).
- 7 Bockwinkel, *Steyler Indianermission in Paraguay*; Huppertz, *Begegnungen zweier Welten*; Müller, *Die Geschichte der Indianermission*; Steffen, *Missionsbeginn in Neuguinea*.
- 8 Frese, *Die Mauritzer Franziskanerinnen*.
- 9 Hinzmann, ed., *Sein Ruf – unsere Antwort*.
- 10 Riess-Stumm, *Kongregation der Schwestern vom hl. Paulus*.
- 11 Ronig, *Mitten in der Welt*.
- 12 Schraut, *Antonia Werr*.
- 13 Sterner, "Sankt Vinzenz".

Sisters of the Immaculate Conception<sup>14</sup>, the Teutonic Order<sup>15</sup> and the Oblates of St Francis de Sales.<sup>16</sup> At present the histories of the Sisters of St Hedwig, the Franciscan Sisters of Siessen, the Comboni Missionaries and the Pallottines are being written. Conceived partly as histories of the community and partly as histories of the missions, these publications by missionary communities offer a reflection on their work in the various colonies. Many of these communities have felt so encouraged by their positive experiences with already published studies that they have commissioned their own academic members or professional external historians to undertake more thorough investigations. Much is to be expected of the current boom in such studies in the coming years.

Of course, at present there is no standard methodology for a history of congregations and provinces and so there are many and varied approaches to the investigations being carried out. The choice depends on the readership targeted by the publication, which in many instances is made up of members of the community being studied; as a result, a descriptive rather than analytical approach is used. Other problems arise from the perspective of the study. If the starting-point is the archive of a General Council, a survey of the total development of a community is easier, and there is less likelihood that insignificant details will be enlarged upon; however, there is a great danger that only the mainstream will be described, while interesting and possibly dissident developments will be glossed over. Another source of tension arises from the nature of a religious community. Even if most of the foundations established in the 19th and 20th centuries have developed into real businesses in the course of their history, they nevertheless remain congregations with a spiritual life and a lifestyle derived from it. Both points of view have to be considered in any historical review. It is precisely the original combination of an outward and visible commitment to hospitals, social projects, schools and missions together with the daily practice of religious life - which includes periods of withdrawal during novitiates, retreats and times of religious formation in which a great deal of time, money and personnel is invested - that goes to make up the specific character of orders and congregations. This, and the conflicts that result from it, as well as the way these conflicts are resolved or destroy communities, could offer new incentives for a historiography concerned with social forces and mentalities.

14 Mertens, *Geschichte der Kongregation der Marienschwestern van der Unbefleckten Empfängnis*.

15 Demel, *Die Deutsche Orden einst und jetzt*.

16 Haussner, ed., *Geschichte und Sendung*.

The dissertation by Relinde Meiwes is a pioneer work that compares women's congregations in the former Prussia.<sup>17</sup> Initially situated in the context of research on the middle-class (Bielefeld Special Research Project on "The Social History of Modern Middle-Class Society"), she has widened her original horizons to offer a history of the social and cultural milieu of women's communities (which to a large extent are to be found among the new congregations) in the 19th century. It is her special merit to have drawn attention to the fact that religious congregations made an important contribution to the emancipation of women and the professionalisation of social and educational work. Even though the women's congregations mainly served to create and stabilise a Catholic milieu, they nevertheless embraced all the possibilities offered to them. Although the members were subject to obedience and the structures of their communities, Meiwes was able to state: "A way of life that was liberated from the needs and demands of the individual made it possible for the Sisters to work in a creative way in the charitable, educational and religious fields".<sup>18</sup> Relinde Meiwes' study opens up new perspectives precisely with regard to the possibilities of working as a Church. The boom in the membership of women's congregations had an effect on "feminine forms of devotion"<sup>19</sup>, as well as significantly increasing the number of women working in the pastoral field. The effects of this comprehensive contribution, both quantitatively and qualitatively, on the Catholic Church in the 19th and 20th centuries are still largely unstudied and would need to be considered in separate studies of the individual communities. This applies also to the ability of religious associations to undergo change. Meiwes mentions "the professionalisation of their work, the use of the means of communication and the professional way in which a community is led".<sup>20</sup> It is precisely in those periods of their history that were marked by conflict that the Congregations made a contribution to the emancipation of women. This would need further investigation.

17 Meiwes, *"Arbeiterinnen des Herrn"*; see also id., "Religiosität und Arbeit als Lebensform".

18 Meiwes, *"Arbeiterinnen des Herrn"*, 311.

19 *Ibid.*, 312.

20 *Ibid.*, 313.

## Orders and Congregations in their Regional Context

Besides the history of individual communities, research has taken an interest in the history and structure of "landscapes of convents". The main emphasis has been on foundations established before the 19th century. Sometimes the dominant note is one of nostalgia for a certain type of convent, or touristic interest and the possibility of finding mental and spiritual relaxation in a religious house. However, more recent studies show that the impact of individual religious houses on a region can only be assessed if all are seen together.<sup>21</sup> From this point of view initial studies have been made of Lower Saxony<sup>22</sup>, the Emsland<sup>23</sup>, Eichsfeld<sup>24</sup> and the Eifel.<sup>25</sup> The role of the new foundations of congregations and secular institutions requires a more intensive treatment than has been provided by publications to date. Even though there is a great need for publications about convents in the time before secularisation to be completed, nevertheless a study still needs to be done of the new 19th and 20th-century foundations in their regional context. Until now research into the Catholic Church from the point of view of religious communities has been largely neglected. This lack could now be remedied by taking a number of local religious foundations as a starting-point, or by studying those communities that had a decisive influence on a region. There is no doubt that the religious were competing for influence through their various spiritual, pastoral and charitable contributions.

## Biographical Starting Points

The lives of significant persons in an order provides an occasion for research into its past. A common topic is the biography of the founder, which is often connected with the beatification of the person concerned. In recent years, a number of biographical studies, including collections of source material, have been published on the lives of Sisters Theresia of Jesus Gerhardinger<sup>26</sup>,

21 Demel, "Der Deutsche Orden in Schlesien"; Kaboth and Scharf-Wrede, eds., *Ursulinen in Duderstadt*; Ritter, *Mutig Welten erschliessen*; Schaffer, "Schulorden in Hohenzollern"; id., "Bildungsarbeit katholischer Orden"; Weber, *Vestigia Burana*.

22 Heutger, *Niedersächsische Klöster*.

23 Bays, ed., *Von Klöstern und Klosterleuten*.

24 Opfermann, *Die Klöster des Eichsfeldes*.

25 Brauksiepe and Neugebauer, eds., *Klosterlandschaft Eifel*; Mötsch and Schoebel, eds., *Eifflia sacra*.

26 Chrobak, ed., *Selige Theresia von Jesu Gerhardinger*.

Franziska Schervier<sup>27</sup>, Katharina Kasper<sup>28</sup>, Antonia Werr<sup>29</sup>, Regina Protmann<sup>30</sup>, Maria Merkert<sup>31</sup>, as well as the Fathers Arnold Janssen<sup>32</sup>, Johann Baptist Jordan<sup>33</sup>, Joseph Kentenich<sup>34</sup> and Alexander Menningen.<sup>35</sup> In the process of writing such biographies efforts must repeatedly be made to avoid the temptation to produce an expurgated hagiography. Writers must be prepared to make a critical assessment of the history of their own community, something that was not often the case particularly in older biographies. Even though it is important to study individual people in order to understand a religious community, it must nevertheless be kept in mind that the founder did not act alone. The close connection to the beatification process means that such biographical studies always run the risk of neglecting those who were closely connected with the founder at the time of foundation, as well as other internal and external factors. Greater emphasis should also be placed on the reception given to the founders. There are many examples of how difficult it has been for communities to come to terms with their beginnings; sometimes it has taken many years or decades for them to do this. This fact is illustrated by the way the Franciscan Sisters of Waldbreitbach have had to come to terms with their founder, Rosa Flesh, or the Brothers of Mercy of Montabaur with their founder, Peter Loetschers. The tensions in the Pallottine Society with the various communities of the Schoenstatt Movement concerning the different roles of their respective founders, Vincent Pallotti and Joseph Kentenich, is also a case in point. An account of personal conflicts, however, has to take into account that there will be resentment and objections on the part of the members involved.

27 Fietzek, *Worte allein vermögen nichts*.

28 Amend and Berndt, eds., *M. Katharina Kasper*; Provinzleitung der Armen Dienstmägde Jesu Christi, ed., *Lebensspuren, Hoffnungszeichen*.

29 Schraut, *Antonia Werr*.

30 Feldmann, *Neuer Geist sucht neuer Formen*; Steffen, ed., *Die Katholische Kirche ehrt eine Braunsberger Bürgertochter*; Ziesche, *In seinem Lichte*.

31 Albrecht, *Maria Merkert*.

32 Alt, ed., *Arnold Janssen SVD* (1994); id., ed., *Arnold Janssen SVD* (1996); id., ed. *Arnold Janssen* (1999).

33 Generalatus societatis divini salvatoris cura commissionis internationalis historicae societatis, ed., *Das geistliche Tagebuch Johann Baptist Jordans*.

34 Mengedot, Pollak and Schmiedl, eds., *In seinem Herzen ein Feuer*.

35 Schmiedl, *Alexander Menningen*.

## Common Themes

Studies of the histories of the orders show five underlying themes common to many, if not most of the communities.

### Caritas

A recognised conclusion of much of the research, although still with too little regional foundation, is the fact that the orders of the 19th century were “pioneers of charity”.<sup>36</sup> This applies to the Catholic congregations as well as to the evangelical missionary movements (“Diakonie”). In fact, the contribution of the Catholic foundations can be better understood in the context of inter-confessional studies.<sup>37</sup> Special mention must be made of a monograph by Maike Wagener-Esser on the social network of the Diocese of Münster in the 19th century, one of the few instances of research findings being applied to a context that involved the work of religious communities.<sup>38</sup>

### The Kulturkampf and its Consequences

Research into the Catholic milieu has come to the conclusion that the *Kulturkampf* was a turning-point in history. The effect of the *Kulturkampf* on the various religious communities was that most of them had to leave Germany. A series of studies is concerned with the fate of congregations in this period, but also with its consequences, in particular their re-introduction after the *Kulturkampf*.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, a history of religious communities could provide a valuable and complementary contribution to studies of the Catholic Church as a whole. It could show the means used by religious communities during the *Kulturkampf* not merely to survive, but also to develop strategies for growth and diversification. At the time, communities not wholly engaged in charitable work were forced to close or go into exile.

36 Bari, “Pauline von Mallinckrodt”.

37 Cf. Schaffer, “Die Pflgeanstalt Mariaberg”; Sterner, *Die Kongregation der Barmherzigen Schwestern*; Trapp, “Christliche Caritas”.

38 Wagener-Esser, *Organisierte Barmherzigkeit und Seelenheil*; see also id., “Christgläubige zu Werken der Barmherzigkeit vereint”.

39 Cf. Häger, *Klöster nach dem Kulturkampf*; Müllejäns, *Klöster im Kulturkampf*; Weiss, “Gründungsversuche der Redemptoristen”.

## Nazi Period

In the context of an evaluation of the attitudes of the Catholic Church during the Third Reich, the role of religious institutions at this time has also been studied. Older studies covered the court cases on monetary and morality questions; however, these have to be seen now in the light of the latest research. More recently research has centred on the activities of individual members of the communities.<sup>40</sup> On the whole, the Nazi regime viewed the orders and congregations, far more than the Catholic Church as a whole, as part of the opposition.<sup>41</sup>

As a result of the debate that started in the summer of 2000 on the compensation to be paid to people engaged in forced labour in Germany, the role of the Catholic Church has again been examined. Starting with a TV report on the people forced to work in the Benedictine Monastery at Ettal, research was started in the dioceses and religious communities to find out how many such workers were employed and what they did. Since brothers and priests had been called up to do military service, they had to be replaced so that the war effort could continue. By February 2002 it was possible to name 2800 people who were employed in this way by Church organisations, mainly in the farming sector, but also in hospitals and households. The Catholic Church has already begun to pay compensation to individuals. As for the treatment of the forced labourers, it has been shown that they received better and more humane treatment than in the large industrial firms. However, this does not mean that in individual instances this was not the case. The first documents are in the process of being published, but it will take some time before reliable figures and statements on the circumstances of the forced labourers are available.<sup>42</sup>

## Associations of Religious Superiors

Actual political challenges, in particular the requirement that provision should be made for the old age of members of religious communities, show clearly the evolution of the attitude in religious communities towards taking

40 Cf. Wielgoss, "Aufbruch oder Stillstand?".

41 Cf. Leugers, *Gegen eine Mauer*; id., "Dominikanerpater Odilo Braun".

42 Cf. Pfister, ed., *Katholische Kirche und Zwangsarbeit*; Barwig, Bauer and Hummel, eds., *Zwangsarbeit in der Kirche*; Rotberg, Wieland and Schüller, eds., *Zwangsarbeiter und Kriegsgefangene*.



communal action. The centenary of the Conference of Religious Superiors, now the Association of Religious Superiors in Germany, was the occasion for the commissioning of a study. Antonia Leugers presented a comprehensive survey of the current position and a critical history of the "Common Interests and Solidarity" of the Association of Religious Superiors.<sup>43</sup> The recent opening up of the archives of the Association of Religious Superiors in Germany and of the German Catholic Missionary Council, as well as the preparation of a website that will make on-line research possible, could give individual communities an incentive to work through their archives so that regulated access to them will be possible.<sup>44</sup>

### The Second Vatican Council and the Reforms that Followed

A final important theme of the past years has been the contribution of the orders to the Second Vatican Council and to the reforms initiated by the Council in keeping with the charisma of the individual founders.<sup>45</sup> It has become evident that German-speaking Council Fathers and theologians in particular reflected on the reforms of the Council and drove it forward in a tense struggle with intransigent forces within the Curia. With hindsight the way in which the Decree on Religious Life, *Perfectae caritatis*, came into being can be seen as a paradigm of the process of transformation undergone by the Catholic Church in the course of the Second Vatican Council. It is only when the various phases of the Council are seen together - from the *consilia et vota* of the Preparatory Commission and the Conciliar Commission, to the discussions in the Council hall and its application by the Curia officials and the individual religious communities - that their explosive character becomes fully evident.

Also in this field comprehensive studies have been made of exemplary communities.<sup>46</sup> They show that religious communities are capable of change, but they also clearly reflect the present crisis in many religious institutions.<sup>47</sup>

43 Leugers, "Die Superiorenevereinigung"; id., "Vereinigung Deutscher Ordensoberen"; id., *Interessepolitik und Solidarität*.

44 Cf. "Anordnung über die Sicherung und Nutzung der Archive"; Kühnel, "Die Umsetzung des kirchlichen Archivrechts".

45 Cf. Schmiedl, *Das Konzil und die Orden*; Haas, "Das II. Vatikanum als Wendepunkt der Ordensgeschichte".

46 Cf. Damas, "Missionarin sein – aber wie?"; Göttlicher, "Ordensreform".

47 Cf. Rheinbay, "In dynamischer Treue zum Charisma des Ursprungs. Spiritualität im Wandlungsprozeß geistlicher Gemeinschaften"; Schepens, *Zeichen der Zeit*.

## *Suggestions for Future Research*

### Origins and History of Development

**D**espite all the efforts to write a complete history of the various religious communities, it is still necessary to study the circumstances that led to their foundation. On the one hand, a more detailed examination of southern Germany and Austria needs to be made, a region that has been far less studied than the former Prussia. On the other hand, from the point of view of a specific period, studies need to be done on the conditions governing the continued existence or renewal of religious communities in the first half of the 19th century: industrialisation and pauperism; the lack of Catholic education; spiritual starting points and favourable circumstances; the possibilities of financing new foundations, their integration into the state and Canon Law, etc.<sup>48</sup>

### Prosopographical Starting-Point

Many individual questions and the historical development of religious communities can be clarified by critical biographies of significant members based on original sources. From the point of view of social history it would be necessary to extend the prosopographical starting-point. It would be a rewarding task to collate such biographies from the point of view of the place of origin, social stratification, professional education, as well as the “careers” of religious communities, using diocesan statistical sources or the personal files of the members of individual communities. Only in this way would it be possible to eliminate obvious discrepancies in the numbers of members and to avoid re-counting people who left one community and entered another.

48 Cf. von Campenhausen, ed., *Der Allgemeine Hannoversche Klosterfonds*; Franitza, “Der Allgemeine Hannoversche Klosterfonds”; Weiss, “Die deutschen Redemptoristen”; Wolff, *Viele Wege führen nach Deutschland*.

## Kulturkampf

In contrast to the traditionally negative appraisal of the *Kulturkampf* and its consequences for religious communities, Relinde Meiwes posits the thesis that the *Kulturkampf* did not bring about a decline, but on the contrary initiated an extension of the possibilities open to communities of women in particular. In order to underpin this thesis it would be necessary to provide a new survey of this period, as well as to study its influence on the individual institutions.

## National Socialism

The German Martyrology of the 20th century includes 65 members of 28 religious communities at the time of the Third Reich.<sup>49</sup> In view of the continuing debate on the role of the Church in this period, it is necessary, over and above Antonia Leugers' publication on the activities of the Association of Major Superiors, to shed light on the attitude of individual communities to the Hitler regime. What were the different forms of adaptation or confrontation? What support did the various positions receive within the community? And how did they deal with their "memories" of the Third Reich? The debate about the use of forced labour has given rise to new questions in this regard, not so much about fundamental attitudes, but rather about the actual behaviour of members of religious communities during the Third Reich.

## The Crisis of the Second Half of the 20th Century

Finally, from the historical point of view, it is necessary to pursue the question why membership in religious communities has dropped and to investigate the effects of the inner crisis in religious communities in the second half of the 20th century. Other subjects that need to be studied include the following: the reasons for the growth in membership in the first half of the 20th century; the increasing pluriformity of religious socialisation; the effects of increasing modernisation and secularisation on the self-concept and praxis of enclosed communities; the interdependence of the drop in membership in central Europe and the boom in membership outside Europe.