

Defending Women's Communal Life—Caritas Pirckheimer at Nuremberg (1524)

Abstract

Protestant reformers condemned celibacy and advocated marriage. According to Luther and his followers, the problem with celibacy was not the abuse thereof—as most earlier reformers had argued—but rather the celibate life in and of itself. God, after all, had decreed marriage for the replenishment of the population but also for the curbing of lust. In places where Protestants got the political upper hand, they usually tried to abolish ordered religious communities—a move that met with stronger resistance from female communities than male ones.

This “memoir” (actually more of an apologia) by Caritas Pirckheimer (1467–32), prioress of the convent of St. Clare's (Franciscans) at Nuremberg, relates the most famous case of nuns' resistance to the dissolution of their community.

Source

Chapter 1. Portents of Trouble, 1524

The following describes part of what happened to our convent here at St. Clare's in Nuremberg during those dangerous, tumultuous times, and also includes some letters written in those days.

As is well known, for a long time it was prophesied that when we reached the year 1524, a great flood would undermine and change everything on this earth. And although this was generally understood to mean a flood of water, it turned out that the stars portended less such a flood than much tribulation, anxiety, and trial, and then a great shedding of blood. In the aforementioned year it happened that many things were altered through the new doctrine of Lutheranism [*luterey*], and a great dispute arose concerning the Christian faith. Furthermore, in many localities the church's ceremonies were abolished and the clerical estate was entirely ruined. There was preaching about “Christian freedom,” meaning that the church's laws and the vows of religious persons were to be regarded as worthless, and that no one was obliged to obey them.

Thus it happened that many nuns and monks made use of such freedom and left their convents and orders and threw off their habits; some married and did what they pleased. From this arose great contention and animosity, for many of the powerful and many of the ordinary folk came day after day to visit their relatives in our community. They preached to the sisters, told them about the new doctrine, and argued unceasingly about how the religious estate was so damnable and seductive, also that it was not possible to gain salvation in it, and how we all belonged to the Devil. Some of them wanted to fetch their children, sisters, and aunts from the convent by force, using many threats and big promises—the half of which they could have scarcely made good on.

These attacks and disputes lasted a long time and were often conducted in hot anger and with hurtful words. Yet through God's grace no sister was moved by them, for which the Franciscan friars were blamed, as it was said that the friars had so instructed us that it was impossible to convert us to the new faith as long as we had friars for our preachers and confessors.

When we heard that the honorable City Council had decided to take our chaplains from us by force, I reported this to the community and took advice from them. The sisters deliberated about how they

would be affected if the convent were taken from the friars' legal governance and brought under the power of spoiled priests and escaped monks. The sisters agreed unanimously that we should not wait for the Council to deprive us of the priests by force, for it would not be easy to get them back, even if we complained as much as possible. We should submit a petition now and tell the Council clearly how grievous and harmful such a change would be to us, and express the great hope that it would take this to heart.

Thus I followed their advice and composed a petition, which is given below. I read it to the community. All sisters without exception approved it and advised me that in addition to the petition I should write to the guardian and also to Sir Hieronymus Ebner^[1] and Sir Martin Geuder,^[2] so that the petition could have greater effect. [...]

Chapter 5. The First Petitions

[There follows Abbess Caritas' petition to the convent's official guardian, the magistrate Caspar Nützel. He is asked to protect them against the government's impending decision. She writes in the same sense to her brother-in-law, Martin Geuder, and she directs a petition in the name of the community to the City Council, dated in the Advent season, 1524. All three of these documents have the same subject: the nuns wish to retain their Franciscan chaplains, who have served them for 250 years. The petition to the City Council speaks to the political situation in the city.]

We also hope that we have behaved toward the common man^[3] in what we have done and what we have not done in such a way that [...] no one can charge us with unjust or dishonorable behavior. We do not doubt that Your Wisdom^[4] has never said such things about us. [...] If our priests, who have served us and our predecessors' spiritual needs for 250 years, were to be taken from us in these tumultuous and contentious times, the common man, who is in any case inclined to believe the worse, would doubtless think badly of us. He would believe that Y.W. were prompted to this command by some particular action of the priests or ourselves. This would damage the reputations not only of ourselves but also of Y.W., our priests, our families, and those magistrates who are friendly to us.

[The abbess notes that they are suspected of paying the priests a great deal, but she points out the convent's poverty.] It is also true that we give no more than meals and clothing to the two priests who preach to us, hear our confessions, and perform other spiritual services for us, and that secular priests would not serve us for so little.

[She also undertakes to instruct the magistrates about what goes on in the life of the convent, taking care to place the emphasis on Bible reading, so as to appeal to those magistrates who were Lutherans or inclined to the Lutheran party.] We can also inform Y.W. in all truth that we daily pray and read the Old and New Testaments in German and Latin, to the best of our ability, and take pains to try to understand them correctly. Each day we read not only the Bible but also whatever else we need or seems most suitable, but not the polemical works of theology, which burden our consciences and, we believe, violate the rule of Christian simplicity. We hope, truly, that God will respond to our heartfelt pleas and not keep His authentic Holy Spirit from us, so that we hear the Word of God correctly and in its true meaning—not according to the word alone but also to the Spirit. And although some allege of us that we rely on our own deeds, hoping to be saved by works alone, yet through God's grace we are well aware—whatever is said about us to the contrary—that no one can be justified by works alone, as St. Paul says, but only through faith in Our Lord, Jesus Christ, in that which He has taught. [...] We also know, on the other hand, that a correct, true faith cannot be without good works, just as a good tree must bear good fruit, that God will reward each according to his desserts, and that when we appear before Christ's judgment seat, each will be received according to his desserts, whether good or bad.

[The abbess addresses the charge that the nuns despise marriage and the married life.] We do not despise

the married estate, for we know that whoever marries a young maid does a good thing. We also know, however, from St. Paul's teaching, that whoever does not marry does an even better thing. If we choose to serve in celibacy,[5] no reasonable person can object. If, on the other hand, someone has no inclination for this life or does not wish to remain with us, we have nothing against her. We have no intention of forcing any sister to remain in community instead of returning to her parents. We want to judge no one, for each person must judge himself; and each will be judged alone, when she comes before God's judgment seat. But just as we force no one, we do not want to be forced, and we wish to be free in the spirit, not in the flesh. This cannot be, however, if alien pastors are forced upon us. This will open the path to the destruction of our community. For even if we were still being served with God's Word and the sacraments, if the priests are taken from us and the bishop no longer has jurisdiction over us, there will be no visitations. But visitations are essential to our monastic life, not to speak of dealing with the matters that arise daily in the convents.

Chapter 6. Ursula Tetzl Comes for Her Daughter

[In the days when this first act against St. Clare's seemed to be pending, some patrician families began to take action. The first to act was Ursula, wife of Friedrich Tetzl, who came on February 3, 1525. In these days the agitation in Nuremberg was reaching its peak, which came with the great officially sponsored disputation in the spring, after which the city government declared the city for Lutheranism.] In 1525 on the day after Our Lady's Purification [February 3], Ursula Tetzl came to me and insisted with strong words that I should allow her to enter the convent, for she wished only to speak with her daughter, Margaret, about the salvation of her soul. I refused, saying that she knew that it was not customary to allow anyone to enter who was not needed within. She then threatened that this would have to change. She demanded that the gate be opened and her daughter should come to it, so that none should overhear them. I refused this, too, and said that I did not want a new custom to become established by acceding to her request. If I permitted it to her, others would want to do the same. Then, too, her own daughter had asked me not to open up, for she feared she would be removed by force, since she doubted she could defend herself if the doors were opened.

After many words back and forth, I sent her daughter into the chapel and had the window opened through which the holy Sacrament is administered to us.[6] At this window she talked for more than an hour to her daughter apart from and outside the hearing of any nun.[7] After she departed, Sister Margaret Tetzl, the dear child, came bitterly weeping to me and the other sisters and complained amidst many heartfelt tears how her mother had so grimly tortured her. With loving and hateful words, with threats and promises, Mrs. Tetzl had tried to force her to come home, but Sister Margaret defended herself with all her might. At last she told her mother that no one could bring her out of the convent, for with God's help she would stick to her vows to God. Thereupon her angry mother departed, saying that the daughter ought to obey, for the mother would not permit her to remain in such a corrupting condition. This hurt the child so much that I and all the other sisters were moved by sympathy for her. And she asked us fervently not to allow her to be torn away from us, or else we should have to account for her soul on the Last Day. She asked me to confer with our guardian. *[The abbess wrote to Caspar Nützel and asked for his advice. He did not reply.]*

After a few days Mrs. Tetzl came again, this time with her brothers, Sir Sigmund and Sir Christoph Fürer. In harsh language they demanded that I give Mrs. Tetzl her daughter, for she had been taught so well by the Gospel and the preachers that she could not in good conscience leave her in the convent. She also condemned the whole clerical estate and mocked everything we do and don't do.

I replied that I had already told Mrs. Tetzl that I was not keeping her daughter here against her will. I said the same thing to her now. But neither would we drive her out against her own will, which would be against propriety, the clear Gospel,[8] and sisterly love. To this the Fürer brothers said that I should allow the daughter to live with her mother for four weeks, so that she could be instructed in the true faith and

hear the Gospel as it is preached in this city. I replied that Mrs. Tetzl recently spoke with her daughter alone for more than an hour, plenty of time to explain her opinion. [...] I said that I was willing to bring the daughter to the visiting window again, where she could talk to all three of them with no one else present. If they could convince her to leave with them, I would open the door and the gate. But if the child did not agree, I had to ask them to try to force her. Neither the mother nor her brothers, however, wanted to say even a single word to the child, either at the chapel window or the visiting window.^[9] They said that they knew that the daughter would not leave the convent of her own free will, but they were unwilling to leave her in here. After a long argument I said to them that we had received the child with the knowledge and will of the honorable City Council, and we could not allow her to be taken from us without the knowledge and will of that same body. We will ask the Council in writing what is right and just. They said that this was fine with them, and that they, too, would petition the Council. Then they departed.

The dear, pious child, Margaret Tetzl, was deeply troubled that her kinsmen would not listen to her, for she would dearly like to have talked with them. She thought that through her kinsmen her mother would be persuaded to leave off this unjust action.

A few days later Sir Caspar Nützel came, and I recounted these events to him. He thought that I should not complain so much, for more was about to happen. The magistrates have been informed by their scholars that the monastic life is worthless, has no basis in the gospel, etc.

Sister Margaret, all in tears, presented her case to him and begged and asked him most insistently to speak with her kinsmen, the Fürers, that for God's sake they should listen to her before taking her by force. The guardian, however, took none of this to heart and only mocked her. At the end, however, he said that she should herself write mostly humbly to Sigmund Fürer, which she did. She wrote most humbly and asked him most urgently to come to the convent with his brother. To this he sent the following reply:

Dear friendly little kinswoman!

I received your letter and request and have shown it to my brother. Since we know pretty much your views and also the will of your mother, which will not change, we consider it useless to come to you. We commend the whole matter to God, Who will rule everything to please Himself, not to please men. Therefore, be happy and trust in God alone.—Sigmund Fürer.

[The prioress now wrote to the guardian to ask for advice about Margaret Tetzl, saying that if the City Council ordered her removal, the guardian and two magistrates should be present. Nützel replied that Ursula Tetzl would petition the City Council, and, when she did, he sent the prioress a copy and advised her to send her own letter to the magistrates.]

Chapter 11. Ursula Tetzl Petitions the City Council

[Ursula Tetzl's petition to the City Council recounts the story from the beginning.] Years ago my dear late husband and I encouraged our dear daughter to enter St. Clare's convent, for then we knew no better than that by giving God a living offering we would wash away our own sins and that life in the convent would promote her own soul's welfare. Now, however, I have been so instructed through listening and reading that I am fully convinced that the monastic life is not recognized by God and is nothing but a human invention and a hypocritical departure [from the correct way of life]. For this reason, pressed by my troubled conscience, with my two dear brothers I demand that the honorable prioress return my daughter to me. She replied that, since they had accepted my daughter with the knowledge and will of Y.W., she cannot surrender her without Y.W. permission. She added that she would inform you about it, but since she has not done so, worry about my own and my daughter's salvation compels me to ask Y.W. for God's sake to take the matter to heart. My daughter came into this prison when she was only 14 years

old, when she was still innocent and lacked the ability to distinguish between good and evil. Y.W. should also consider that at the Last Judgment, Christ will demand not prayers, fasting, silence, clothing, eggs or meat, but only faith and love of neighbor. He will come to me and arrange that my daughter should come to live with me again for a while.

I will promise Y.W. and pledge with my brothers that when my daughter is instructed in the Word of God—which she cannot get from the monks, in whose clutches her soul must hunger—that she will thereafter be entirely free and not under compulsion. She can stay out here with me, a poor widow, and her siblings, or go back into the convent, where she perhaps will have a better and more sufficient life. This will put my conscience at rest. [...]

[*The prioress now submitted another petition about the Tetzl affair to the City Council*].^[10] It is true that the daughter came in the convent quiet, but she had already attained the age of reason, so that she could well discriminate good from evil. Furthermore, though mothers are justly honored by their children, they have no such authority over them as fathers have, and none at all over those who stand under neither maternal nor paternal authority, according to the law. This plaintiff, therefore, has no power to remove her daughter from the convent against her will. The daughter cannot be blamed for following her own conscience. Thus the woman cannot maintain that her conscience is troubled because she acted as she did and related her views to the daughter, who then stuck to her own intention. The daughter must in the future be responsible for herself, and not the mother, who is not absolved of any responsibility for her. The woman may well satisfy her own conscience by removing the child against her will from the convent, but we leave that up to God. We, too, are obliged to keep our consciences clear and do what we must. And what we cannot prevent, we must tolerate. [...]

Chapter 32. The Nuns Deliberate on their Situation

[...] I called the sisters to a chapter meeting and asked for advice from each as to what we might do concerning these serious matters, on which depended the destruction of our convent and, indeed, all religious life. I desired to know from each sister separately whether she wanted to accept the new rules the City Council had laid upon us. All voted, without exception, both together and individually, to keep to the rule to which their vow to God bound them, and to refuse the rule laid upon us by the City Council. Humbly and voluntarily they declared that they did not wish to be free [of the convent]. They would gladly obey me and do whatever I said, if only I would stay by them and not abandon them in their distress and fear. And so I promised once more my loyalty to them, that I would remain with them at the risk of life and limb until death, if need be, if only they, for their part, would remain steadfast in the true Christian faith and in the religious life. If they wanted, however, to turn Lutheran or be unfaithful to [Christ] their bridegroom and open the convent, I would not remain here a single day more.

Thus we consoled one another in faith and with fervent tears, and we vowed again to remain faithful to one another in sisterly love. And we declared before God as a community that we would not voluntarily accept anything that was against God and our holy rule. Yet, if we were compelled, we wanted Our Lord to recognize that we had to yield to force, against which we could not defend ourselves. We once again renewed our promise that if we had to obey something that was against our rule, we would not continue to do it any longer than necessary, and at the moment the situation improved, we would stop.

Concerning the unwanted window grate: since it could not be refused (and in order to avoid something worse), the sisters voted that I was to have a single window grate installed, and that it would be used in accordance with our rule to the greatest extent possible. The rule did not entirely prohibit us from seeing the speaker's face, and the sisters declared that they did not want the [new] rule of speaking without another sister present. They had nothing to say to their relations, they declared, that they would not say before a third party. Besides, it would be dangerous to speak with outsiders alone, because then it could be alleged that we had said something we never said at all. As things are now, our words and actions are

already being distorted.

The issue of dress proved most difficult. The nuns wished to ask some good friends for advice about how we could defend ourselves against this and other changes. I agreed and asked some good friends, who were knowledgeable and good-hearted, for advice as to how we could defend ourselves. The friends said that it was unthinkable for us to oppose these people, and that we must yield a little in order to prevent the destruction of our community. Our foes, the friends added, use great force in everything they do. Speak as they might, they in fact fear neither emperor nor pope, nor even God Himself! To them, nothing matters except saying this is the way things must be—this way and no other, and they have been heard to boast of being more powerful than the pope himself. [...]

[The City Council had declared that the community had to accept two changes: a grate in the visiting window, so that the nun and the lay visitor could view each other; and the removal of the nuns' habits in favor of laywomen's clothing. The prioress's lay advisors told her that the new rule concerning the grate was suggested by magistrates who, friendly toward the nuns, thought this change would avoid the greater evil of being forced to open the convent to lay visitors. On the matter of clothing, the friends advised her to wait, for the issue of giving up the habits had roused support for the nuns in the City Council.] The community of Pillenreuth, they told us, had strongly opposed abandoning their order's habits.^[11] Their leader, Magdalena Kress, asked her brother Christoph,^[12] who was then an officer of the Swabian League, to help her preserve the habit. He told his sister, the magistrates were informed, that if she was dissatisfied with one habit, she might put three, one over the other, and Kress himself would dare anyone to remove the habits from his sister. The idea was that she could retain her habit; we might also preserve our community's privileges, if we all stand together.

Later, on the Saturday before Trinity Sunday [June 10, 1525], Hieronymus Ebner and our guardian, Caspar Nützel, demanded from us the release of their daughters, Katharina Ebner and Clara Nützel. Although the honorable City Council had ordered us to change our habits, we were told that these two women would not have to do that, because next week they would be removed from the convent and clothed appropriately. Oh, what fear, anxiety, and heartbreak now began for these poor children! One cannot imagine how wretched their lives were from this moment on. Yet they still hoped to save themselves as nuns.

Chapter 33. The Patrician Women Come for Their Daughters

On the following Monday came the wives of Hieronymus Ebner, Caspar Nützel, Friedrich Tetzl, and Sigmund Furer; they rode in a carriage and tried to force their way into the convent. Since I refused and would not let them in, they said: "We have permission from our husbands and from the entire City Council to enter the convent as often as we please, and we demand to be let in."^[13]

"I have a quite different order from the honorable Council," I replied, "which stipulates that they do not want this convent opened."

They said: "If we enter the convent, it will not become an open convent on that account."

I told them: "When you come in, others who have children here will also want to enter, and the convent would then be made open. With the help of the living God, I will prevent that as long as I can."

When they saw that I would never allow them to enter, they tried to force me to bring their children into the church, so that they could speak to them freely about God's Word and their souls' salvation. I would not permit that, and I told them that I had received their children with the magistrates' approval and would not give them up without the same approval.

To this they replied: "We have sufficient authority to enter, whether you wish it or not. Just tell us

whether you are keeping our children from us against the Council's orders, and we will procure a written order that will demonstrate to you how serious the matter is."

I said to them: "The children's fathers asked to hear what the children have to say." Then the women became angry and said: "If the fathers were here, they would carry their children out, and you'd get what you deserve." They knew very well what they were doing and how far they could go. They also asked where the visiting windows were, which the honorable Council had ordered us to close, and said that they were well aware that we should all become so defiant toward the honorable Council. So I said: "It is not possible that we could become so in so short a time, but if we had four weeks time, we could do it." Then Mrs. Ebner spoke up and said that she had to speak alone to her daughter and instruct her sufficiently in God's Word.

After a long dispute I offered to let Mrs. Ebner speak to her daughter alone through the visiting window, or through the little window in the chapel, through which we receive the holy Sacrament, or wherever else she desired. But she didn't want that, saying that she didn't feel secure from being overheard in the chapel. Then she became very angry and said that she didn't want to meet the children at all, and she threatened that she would go and come back with enough authority to make me see reason.

On Tuesday Mrs. Ebner accused me strongly before the entire Council, speaking through her attorney, Nikolaus Haller. He related that I had been so hostile, proud, and strident to the ladies, how I had withheld their children from them by force against the orders of the honorable Council, how I had refused to let them speak with their children at all, and how I had called them liars. The root of the last charge was that they had said to me that I allowed other women into the convent—women who in truth had never set foot here—and that they could produce witnesses who had seen with their own eyes that I permitted this one or that one to enter. Since I had contradicted the truth on this point, Mrs. Ebner said, she knew that she had to say falsely that I had allowed her to do this more than once. I said that I was not calling her a liar, but that this was not true. She perverted this and others of my words and charged me with many other bad things.

On the same day after dinner two magistrates, Sebald Pfintzing and Endres Imhof, were sent to me. They gave me a good talking to, saying that the women had entered a complaint against me, and that the honorable Council was so angry with me, because I had disobeyed their orders and kept the children from their parents, whom by divine ordinance they were bound to obey. I had also defied the honorable Council in other ways. On which account the magistrates were put out with me, which would bring no good to me or the convent. I had prevented the children from speaking to their parents, which was illegal. Therefore, it is the Council's final judgment and decision that, if these people do not wish to let their children live with us, we should know that when the mothers come to fetch their children on the following day, I will have to let the children go freely and without argument. The honorable Council wishes it done this and no other way, however the children feel about it.

I told them that the events had not happened as they were reported to the honorable Council. I repeatedly offered the women the opportunity to speak with their children either through the visiting window or the chapel window. They refused my offer. They were determined either to force their way into the convent or to have the children brought out into the church.^[14] It was true that I had refused to allow coming and going in and out of the cloister, not from mischievous intent but on the grounds of the magistrates' own orders. The two magistrates, after all, were present when Sir Sigmund Fürer ordered us on behalf of the Council not to open up the cloister. If people went in and out, the cloister would be breached. It would soon be a major breach, for if one did, all the others would want to do it as well. I told them that the Council's word to me would be honored. I will rely on that, and, with the help of the living God, there will be no open convent as long as I live.

I then told them how the women had behaved. They were surprised and said that a lot of bad things had

been reported to the honorable Council, and I was truly cooked alive in the pot. I should reflect on my actions and should in the future not keep the children from their parents by force, when they came to fetch them, for we would have no peace as long as they kept coming. Perhaps things will then go better, and we will be somewhat relieved of the daily incursions and tumult.

I told them how glad the nuns were that two of their fathers had been sent to them, before the mothers came again, so that they could speak with the men. They replied that that would not happen. If the nuns returned to their fathers' houses, they would have plenty of time to speak with their fathers.

At last I asked them to repeat my reply to the honorable Council and to tell them the truth against this unjust charge. They promised to do as I wished. And, indeed, Nikolaus Haller was asked why he had said these things to the honorable Council. He replied that he had said nothing but what the women had told him. He had assumed that they spoke the truth. And thus they stood exposed as liars.

Chapter 34. The Patrician Mothers Remove their Daughters from St. Clare's

On Wednesday, the Vigil of St. Vitus, which was also the Vigil of Corpus Christi [June 14, 1525]—this most holy day was neither festively observed nor was the most worthy Sacrament accorded the slightest veneration^[15]—the wicked women sent word to me an hour before dinnertime that at dinnertime they wanted to come and fetch their children. They also wanted to bring other folk, so that I would be convinced that they had sufficient strength to do what they intended. I sent immediately to the town hall and asked for two witnesses to be sent and to be present at this event. Since the women wanted to bring companions, there should also be others on our side so that the women could not bring unjust charges against me. The poor children, not knowing when this would happen, had made plans and still had hope. When the confrontation did happen, they would be saved, because using force on them against their will would not be permitted. But when I called the children together and said, “your mothers will fetch you in an hour,” all three of them fell to the floor and cried and wept and acted so piteously that God Himself in heaven would have had pity on them. They wanted to flee and hide themselves, which I would not permit, for we were worried that these people would break open the cloister by force and search it for them. If that happened, their misfortune would be greater yet. Yet the whole community wept and wailed, for these were pious, able children, who had behaved well in our midst, and who were heart and soul against leaving us.

Sister Margaret Tetzl was 23 years old and had been 9 years in holy orders. Katharine Ebner and Clara Nützel had come into the order on the same day and had professed their vows together on the 3rd of May, six years ago. Katharine Ebner was 20 years old and Clara Nützel was 19 when they were removed from the community. With many tears we took from them their veils and belts and the white habits and dressed them in shirts, belts such as lay folk wear, and scarves on their heads. With the other professed nuns I led them into the chapel. There we waited a full hour until the grim she-wolves arrived in two big wagons. Meanwhile the news had spread among the common people, who gathered in large numbers, just as when a poor fellow is being led to his execution. The whole street and the convent's courtyard were full, so that the women with their wagons could scarcely enter the yard. They were ashamed to see so many people there, and they would much rather that we had sent the children out through the back garden gate. Therefore they sent to me the two men, Sebald Pfintzing and Endres Imhof, whom the Council had delegated to be my witnesses. I didn't want to deal with them, because I wanted nothing done secretly. I said to them, “If the women are acting justly, they have nothing to be ashamed of.” I would not let the children leave but through the door through which they had entered the convent, the chapel door.

Thus, around eleven o'clock in the morning the fierce he-wolves and she-wolves came to get my dear little sheep. They entered the church, drove all of the other people out, and barred the door. Unfortunately, I had to open the door from the chapel into the cloister, and they wanted me and the

children to come out into the church. But I didn't want to do that. They wanted me to order the children to go out alone, but I didn't want to do that, either, leaving it for them to do. But none of the children wanted to put even a single foot over the threshold. The mothers then asked the two magistrates to put an end to the business, for the common people were gathering, and there might be a disturbance. So I said to the magistrates, "You go and speak with the children and ask them to come out, for I can and will not force them to do that which is deeply repugnant to them." So the two magistrates entered. And I said to them: "Here I bring to you my poor orphans, as you yesterday commanded me on orders from the Council, and I commend them to the greatest Shepherd, Who saved them with His precious blood." We said our good-byes, dripping with hot tears, and the children threw their arms around me, crying loudly, and begged me not to let them go. Alas, I could not help them. I went away with the sisters and left the poor children alone in the chapel. I barred the door from the chapel to the cemetery, so that no one could enter the cloister.

Then the wicked women came into the chapel: the grim Tetzl she-wolf with a daughter, Mrs. Hieronymus Ebner, Mrs. Sigmund Fürer, Mrs. Caspar Nützel (our guardian's wife) with her brother, Lienhart Held, in the guardian's stead, and also the young son of Sebald Pfintzing and others. The women told the children with sweet words to come with them, but if they would not, they would be forced to come. The brave little knights of Christ refused with word and deed, as best they could, crying, shouting, pleading, and begging; but they got less mercy there than they would have in Hell.

The mothers told the daughters that by God's law they were bound to obey, and that they should make things simple and just go. For the mothers had come, so that the children's souls could be saved from Hell, and their consciences could no longer bear the thought of the children in the Devil's grip. The children cried out, "We don't want to leave this pious, holy convent, where we are not at all in Hell. But if you force us to come out with you, then we will be cast into the abyss of Hell. [...] Although you are our mothers, we cannot obey you in matters that would damage our souls."

Katharina Ebner spoke to her mother: "You are the mother of my body but not of my soul, for you did not give me my soul. Therefore, I am not obliged to obey you to the harm of my own soul." The mother mocked her and said that she was willing to take responsibility before God and to accept any guilt for any sins they were committing. Mr. Held opened his hands so that Clara Nützel should thrust her hands into them, and he said that he would take upon his own soul the guilt for all the sins she would ever commit and would claim responsibility for her on the Last Day.

Each mother argued with her own daughter, sometimes with promises and sometimes with threats, while the children continued to cry loudly. The quarrel and contention went on and on. Katharina Ebner spoke so bravely and earnestly, and she supported all of her comments from the Bible. She began each comment with a biblical quote and told the mothers how gravely they were violating the Holy Gospel. Later on, when the men were once more outside, they said that in their whole lives they heard nothing like it. The young girl spoke for a whole hour without pause but without a single superfluous word, everything so well considered that each word weighed a pound.

Neither side would yield to the other. The children did not want to leave, and the lay people did not want force to be used, as Mr. Held and the mothers were threatening to do. The latter said that if the children would not leave with them and make it stick now, they should know that they would not be allowed to stay in the convent. Sooner or later they must leave. On that they had no choice, for people would be sent who were strong enough to get the job done. They would be bound hand and foot and carried out like dogs. All in vain, for the children would not give in.

Then the magistrates sent to me once more and said that they were so worried that they did not know how to carry out their orders, for neither side would yield to the other. Katharina Ebner in particular was so defiant and stalwart, and she had fought with the magistrates so much that the latter had not a dry

stitch on. Had the men known what a fight lay ahead, 30 Gulden each would not have lured them into the place. God help them, that for the rest of their lives they would not be involved in such a humiliating business. If they left now, however, the matter would be most unfortunate for me and for the community, for we would be attacked with force, and in the end it would happen as it must happen. They asked me to speak to the children and persuade them to leave. They asked me to release the children from their vows, which perhaps they feared to violate. I replied: "I already told you that I have no power to dissolve a promise made to God." Then the magistrates asked that I go back into the chapel with them, so that the mothers would see that I was present. The men would protect me from their arrogance. Thus, with several other sisters I returned to the chapel. There stood my poor little orphans among the angry wolves, struggling with all their might. I greeted the mothers and said to them: "I would have voluntarily brought your daughters here, as I promised the Council I would do, and now you see how badly they wish to depart." Then the mothers asked me to release the daughters from their vow of obedience.[16] Then I spoke to the children, saying, among other things: "Dear children, you know that from that which you have promised to God, I cannot release you. I won't intervene at all but will commend the whole matter to God. He will settle it in His own good time. But as concerns whatever you owe to me, I absolve you from all obligations, to the degree that I am allowed to do. I said the same to you earlier, when we were alone." With this the worldly folk[17] were satisfied and said that I had done my duty, and they required no more of me. What had been promised to God was in any case invalid, for the vows were already dissolved, because the children had no power to make any vows, except for baptismal vows.[18]

The three children cried as if from one mouth: "We don't wish to be released. What we promised to God, we hope with His help to keep. Even if the Reverend Mother released us before the entire community, we would not leave. For we are bound to no obedience that is against our vows." Margaret Tetzl then cried: "Oh, dear mother, do not drive us away from you!" And I said: "Dear child, you see that I cannot help you against so great a force. You would not want the convent to suffer even greater damage. I hope that we will not be parted for good but will come together again and remain eternally with our true Shepherd. I commend you to Him, Who has saved you with His precious blood."

Then Katharina Ebner spoke: "Here I stand, and I will not be moved. No person can drive me out. If I am taken away by force, I will resist forever, and I will cry my complaint to God and the whole world." Even as she spoke, Mr. Held grabbed her arm and began to pull her away. The sisters and I then ran away, not wishing to witness this miserable scene. Some sisters, who remained standing before the chapel door, heard much quarreling, scuffling, and noises of dragging over the children's howls and cries. Each was dragged by four men, two in front and two in back. At the threshold young Ebner and the Tetzl girl threw themselves into one another's arms, the latter having had one foot nearly torn away. The wicked women stood there and blessed their daughters according to every rite.

Mrs. Ebner threatened her daughter, just as the latter was brought out, that if she did not come away, she would be thrown from the pulpit's ladder. Or she would be thrown to the ground and beaten. Once Mrs. Ebner had her daughter brought into the church—amid curses, ridicule, wails, and tears—there began an incredible shouting, crying, and groaning, as the girls were stripped of their order's habits and dressed in lay clothing. Their cowls, however, were not taken home with them.[19] The cries and struggles were heard by the sisters who stood in the choir and by the lay folk who stood before the church, as many as normally gathered for an execution.

When the children were placed in the wagons that stood in front of the church, there arose a great wailing. The poor children called to the people standing there that they were being taken away unjustly and by force. They had been removed from the convent by force. Clara Nützel cried aloud: "Oh, dear Mother of God, you know that this is not my will." As they were taken away, several hundred fellows and others ran after each wagon. Our children wailed and wept aloud. Mrs. Ebner struck her little Kathy on the mouth, so hard that it bled all the way home. As the Ebner wagon stopped before her father's house,

Katharina began to cry aloud and weep, so that the people were touched with sympathy for her. Some mercenary soldiers, who had run along with the wagon, said that had they not feared an uprising—and also the city police who were present—they would have drawn swords and helped the children. In front of the Ebners' house on the Fruit Market, Katharina stepped down, put her hands together over her head, and complained weeping to the people there that this was happening against her will and unjustly. Almost all the women fruit sellers cried along with her.

How the poor children subsequently fared among these angry wolves, we don't know. Yet it was reported to us, about four days later, that Clara Nützel had not eaten a bite since was taken out into the world, and the others wept without ceasing. I am their witness before God and man that they did everything they could. They never said anything bad of the convent but always, when they were asked, said the best things about us and expressed great desire and longing to return. God help us to come back together in joy! We parted from one another with great sorrow. It was truly a bitter Corpus Christi Day for us. The sisters did not sit down to eat until well into the afternoon.

NOTES

- [1] The magistrate Hieronymus Ebner (1477–1533), a friend of Albrecht Dürer, belonged to a circle that was the chief point-of-entry for Lutheran ideas in Nuremberg—trans.
- [2] The magistrate Martin Geuder was Caritas's brother-in-law—trans.
- [3] The "common man" is a contemporary term for all those burghers who did not participate directly in the government of the city. It does not mean the poor—trans.
- [4] A collective honorific for the magistrates, hereafter abbreviated as Y.W.—trans.
- [5] Literally, "virginity"—trans.
- [6] In a strictly cloistered community, no outsider, including the convent's chaplain, was allowed into the cloistered (i.e., closed) part of the convent. Sacraments were administered to and conversations were conducted with nuns through windows such as this one in St. Clare's chapel—trans.
- [7] Strictly speaking, this interview violated the rule of claustration—trans.
- [8] A widely used slogan in the evangelical movements—trans.
- [9] Besides the chapel window, at which Ursula and Margaret Tetzl had spoken, there was a visiting window, through which the convent's ordinary business with the outside world was conducted—trans.
- [10] In this document, she reveals that Margaret Tetzl spent nine years in the convent, which, since she entered at fourteen, would have made her twenty-three years old—just about the mean age for first marriage at this time—trans.
- [11] This refers to a community of Augustinian canonesses at Pillenreuth, a village south of Nuremberg but within the city's territory. Founded in 1345, the convent was destroyed in 1552—trans.
- [12] Christoph Kress (1484–1535), patrician of Nuremberg, which he often represented in the Imperial Diet. At this time, he was one of the three officers or commanders of the Swabian League—trans.
- [13] For the sake of the narrative, these conversations, which were reported in indirect speech, have been transposed into direct speech—trans.
- [14] This passage is to be explained by the layout of the chapel and church. The church of St. Clare's itself was not within the cloistered (i.e., closed) area and was open to the public. It connected to a chapel, where the nuns heard Mass, and they received Holy Communion through the connecting window. Abbess Pirckheimer would allow the nuns to speak to their mothers at the window, but she would not bring them into the church, from which the mothers, of course, could have snatched the daughters and taken them home—trans.

[15] That is, in the two civic churches, St. Sebald and St. Lawrence. This marked a definitive breach with the Catholic order of worship. The deliberate neglect of the Feast of Corpus Christi was particularly significant, for this celebration was introduced during the Middle Ages and was especially popular in the cities—trans.

[16] A solemn profession, which makes one a full member of a monastic community, involves taking perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience—trans.

[17] She calls them “people of [in] the world,” perhaps a play on the connection between “lay” (i.e., not clerical) and “worldly” (i.e., not spiritual). She means the mothers and their supporters—trans.

[18] An interesting point, because in the practice of infant baptism, the godparents speak for the infant and supply with their faith the faith that is still lacking in the infant. The Anabaptists, who rejected infant baptism and accepted only adult baptism, made this point repeatedly against Luther and the other Protestant reformers—trans.

[19] The cowl, a kind of hood that covers the head, neck, and shoulders, was the chief visible sign of a person being “in religion,” that is, a member of a religious community—trans.

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