

Taking Control of Village Religion—Wendelstein (Franconia) (October 19, 1524)

Abstract

In the southern German lands during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, it was common for village communes to establish or demand the right to approve and depose their village priest. In some cases, communes established new parishes, just as abbeyes, nobles, and princes had established and endowed local parishes in earlier times. The establishment of parishes points to a growing sense of local communal autonomy. On October 19, 1524, a new pastor was installed in the parish church in Wendelstein, a village near the small town of Schwabach in the region of Franconia. The village lay under the authority of the margraves of Brandenburg-Ansbach, who had provided the parish with its new priest. As this text shows, however, the village's mayor and court felt empowered to put certain conditions on the priest's installation. The language of the text is heavily communalist, especially in stressing that the priest was not to be the commune's master but rather its servant. Villagers' demands for the free preaching of the pure, unadulterated Gospel suggest the influence of Luther's movement.

Source

[October 19, 1524. The charge given by the village mayor and the commune of Wendelstein near Schwabach to their pastor.]

Now, dear brother and good friend, since, though not called by us, you have come here at the command of our lord, the aforementioned Margrave,^[1] to be our servant, you should take heed of our desires and wishes about how you should comport yourself in the future.

1. We hold you to be no lord but a servant and employee of the community, and you have not to command us, but we to command you. And we therefore command you to proclaim faithfully the Gospel and the Word of God loud and clear according to the truth and uncorrupted by human teachings.
2. In the community and in the church you should follow the Gospel as a true servant of Jesus Christ. You should distribute the Sacrament of the covenant of Jesus Christ and in all things follow what the Lord has taught and commanded us to do.

You should deal in a similar fashion with the sacrament of baptism, so that the people shall understand it and be reminded of their own baptisms. Whatever is useless or blasphemous, though, you should avoid entirely and at all costs, adhering like a true pastor to the eternal and unique Word of God, and allowing yourself to be frightened from it by neither human law nor human command.

If, however, you behave to the contrary and play the lord and live as you please, you should know that we will not only regard you as a false servant, but we will drive you like a ravening wolf into the net and tolerate you among us no more.

Item, in the past we often had trouble and enmity from the priests, who burdened us with collections, mass stipends, fees for the sacraments, and other inventions, which cost us a lot of money. Now, however, since we have been taught by the Gospel that these things are given to us freely by the Lord [Matt. 10:8] and should not be sold for money, it is our opinion and decision that we are not legally obliged to pay you or anyone else such payments.

Since, however, the servants of the Word may expect support and sustenance from those among whom they proclaim the Word, and since we are well aware that this office or pastorate was endowed by our ancestors, and that the community's servants and pastor can and should receive their pay from this endowment, we do not intend to diminish what belongs to this office, whether tithes or the rights to use the woods, pastures, and/or the plow land, but to leave them to you as agreed. You, as a true servant, may use them according to your needs, as we state above. Whatever else has been demanded and shorn from Christ's flock, on that you shall have no claim, but you shall be content with what you have.

If it should happen that you have complaints against a member of the parish, you shall not enter a suit at Eichstätt nor anywhere else, but only before the appointed judges of this land.[2] Conversely, no one shall cite you before any court but that of the local judge or that of our gracious lord, the Margrave, or, in his stead, the officials at Schwabach.[3]

It happens from time to time that the Sacrament must be carried to the sick in other villages that belong to this parish. When it has to be taken to Raubersried [1.5 km away], we shall not be obliged to provide you with a horse. You shall nonetheless have to ensure that no one is left untended.

With this we consider the matter closed, and we affirm that this is the way it shall be, whether you occupy the office or not. And we admonish you in a brotherly manner to take the matter to heart, and to behave as a humble servant of the Lord, who fashions His Word according to the truth. May God help you and all of us! Amen.

On such Christian terms the pastor of Wendelstein took up his office, agreeing to obey as a true servant of the parish, as God gives him grace. The Wednesday after St. Gallus's Day, 1524.

NOTES

[1] Margrave Casimir of Brandenburg-Ansbach (1481–1527)—trans.

[2] Wendelstein lay in the diocese of Eichstätt, to whose episcopal court cases involving clergy were supposed to be referred. This statement, therefore, directly challenges the bishop's jurisdiction over his parish priests—trans.

[3] The town of Schwabach lay in the lands of the margraves of Brandenburg-Ansbach. This statement is in the spirit of a long line of Catholic reformers who advocated stripping the bishops (and abbots and abbesses) of their temporal jurisdiction. It goes further, however, in opposing the bishop's jurisdiction not only in temporal matters—trans.

Source of original German text: *Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkrieges*, compiled and edited by Günther Franz. Darmstadt: WBG, 1963, pp. 315–17.

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