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Between Revival and Uncertainty. Monastic and Secular Female Communities in Central Europe in the Long Eighteenth Century

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This collection of articles in English and German presenting a study of specific female religious communities in Central Europe in the ?long? 18th century shows a confluence of several current research interests: religious life in previous centuries, the life of cloistered women within this context, the influence (not to say intrusion) of secular and church hierarchies into a religious community. The authors have focused on regions that because of language barriers have often been overlooked by Anglo-American scholars, namely Poland, Bohemia, Tyrol, Hungary and Austria. The English introduction is, therefore, particularly helpful as is the article by Olga M. Przyby?wicz about the Nunnery of the Order of St. Clare in Stary S?cz (Poland). The other articles are in German. The articles are grouped into three subsections entitled ?Contacts across the convent walls? (pp. 35?128), ?State interference in convents and secular chapters? (pp. 129?201) and ?Self-assurance? (pp. 203?96).

In her introduction, ?Between revival and uncertainty ? female religious life in Central Europe in the long eighteenth century? (pp. 11?34), Veronica ?apská discusses the distinctive features of the convent landscape in Central Europe, using examples from regions like Silesia (present-day Poland), Bohemia (the Czech Republic) and Hungary). In some respects the political situation was markedly different from that of

Western Europe. For instance, some lands had until recently been under the domination of the Ottoman Empire. Some had seen several reformation movements. In others there was no majority religion. Compared to west and southwest Europe, there was a far lower density of cloisters and most convent-houses were not of local origin, although there were some notable exceptions and local (sometimes royal) efforts to establish new convents. In spite of a decline in social prestige of monks and nuns, most convents were vital, stable and prosperous, with a rising number of vocations, including among women of the bourgeoisie. Although secular convents (German: *Stift*) had been rare in previous centuries, there was an increase in their number primarily in regions that were part of the Habsburg lands as were communities of regular Tertiaries, again evidencing a rise in the accessibility of religious community living to a broader female population. As ?apská points out repeatedly there were numerous interconnections between the religious and secular lives, not only through the actions of secular authorities but also through the participation of mostly aristocratic women who did not join the order but who were instrumental in founding new houses or who stayed for extended periods of time in the convents. The ?Josephist suppressions? (1782?9), the Prussian secularization of 1810 and last but not least the dissolutions that followed the partitions of Poland altered the monastic landscape. The author calls attention to the fate of those who were shut out of their cloister communities, and calls for a more systematic study of the ?post community stage? of their lives. By presenting the issues of church and state control; the attempts of cloisters to live with demands for a stricter *clausura* on the one hand and community involvement on the other, as well as the convent?s reactions to the attempted sequestrations, this introduction presents the monograph as a necessary part of a comparative approach to the history of cloister life for women in the 18th century.

The contributors have chosen to approach the history of the various convents through an intensive use of archival sources with great attention paid to the reactions and the fate of particular cloister communities and of individual nuns. In his contribution Stefan Benz (pp. 241?66) distinguishes this approach which he calls ?emic? with research that focuses on the reaction of outsiders then and now, which he calls ?etic,? concepts that until now have been used primarily in the social sciences. Benz?s research project at the University of Bayreuth attempted to establish the number of women cloisters in Central Europe in the 18th century (total: c.1600), and the existence of archival sources for such cloisters. In addition to the official and personal correspondence of the cloister inhabitants with the outside world, possible sources for an ?emic? approach are diaries and calendar notices, chronicles sometimes written after the dissolution of a cloister community and the necrologies of (former) nuns that enhance this emic approach and lead to a better understanding of the effects of historical occurrences on the individual members of the cloister community.

Although covering quite a number of regions in Central Europe, there are common themes that run through the entire volume. One of them is the existence and enforcement of the *clausura*. This especially concerns the authors of the first of the three sections ?Contacts across the convent walls?. This first section includes Jan Zdichynec, "'*Quia sic fert consuetudo??* Die Klausur in den Zisterzienserinnenklöstern der Frühen Neuzeit, Vorschriften, Wahrnehmung und Praxis? (pp. 37?68); Janine Christina Maegraith, ?Klosterapotheken und ländliche Armenfürsorge am Beispiel südwest-deutscher Frauenklöster? (pp. 69?96); and Olga Miriam Przyby?owicz, ?Stabilisation and Continuity, The Nunnery of the Order of St. Clare in Stary Sacz from the Visitation of Cardinal Jerzy Radziwill (1599) to the Reformation of Bishop Kajetan Soltyk (1763)? (pp. 97?128). The three articles discuss how the cloisters dealt with the demands of a strict *clausura* and the attempts by church officials to establish, enforce and maintain its rules, cutting off most of the contact with the outside world. Even lay orders like the Tertiaries were supposed to adopt a *clausura*. As Jan Zdichynec purports, the enforcing of these measures was mostly top-down. Using the directives established at the Council of Trent, the bishop, the visitator and the head of an order (all men) were charged with imposing a strict enclosure on the women cloisters. Whereas the rules underwent only small modifications, the agencies entrusted with visitations and enforcement changed over the ages. As concrete examples Jan Zdichynec describes the history and consequences of *clausura* for two cloisters near the cities of Görlitz and Zittau (presently Eastern Germany) as examples how local history and circumstances dictated and allowed immediate and long-term modifications. Using women cloisters in Southwest Germany as examples, Janine Maegraith shows how convents reached out to the community across the *clausura* to administer medicine and alms to those in need and the political and social implications of such charitable

actions (table on p. 71). Olga Przyby?owicz shows how two visitators almost about 150 years apart found essentially the same adherence to the *clausura* in the Polish cloister of St. Clare in Stary Sacz. The visitators? reports also evidence the varied activities within the cloister walls and the distribution of duties and chores.

On the other hand there were the demands by secular authorities that the convents contribute to the welfare of the communities around them and be self-sufficient. In the latter half of the 18th century, those in regions under the direct rule of the House of Habsburg, especially during the reign of Joseph II were subjected to the emperor?s attempts at sequestration. The emperor had no understanding for a life of ?only? contemplation (?bloß vitam completivam?, p. 131) and demanded that cloisters (male and female) be ?useful?. They were to be engaged in education or in treatment of the sick. This posed to be a problem for those orders who had emphasized the contemplative life and whose sole purpose had been to provide such a life to single women and widows. It also was directly opposed to the *clausura* that had been so vigorously imposed. This is the topic of the second section entitled ?State interference in convents and secular chapters (German ?*Stifte?*) with the following articles: Christine Schneider, ?Die Auswirkungen der josephinischen Klosteraufhebungen auf den Wiener Ursulinenkonvent? (pp. 131?54); Ellinor Forster, ?Die Aufhebung der Tiroler Damenstifte am Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts im Kontext des veränderten Umgangs mit Adelsprivilegien? (pp. 131?54); and Christine Tropper, ?Die Entwicklung des Konvents des Benedikterinenstiftes St. Georgen am Längsee im 18. Jahrhundert? (pp. 183?202). Christine Schneider in her discussion of several convents in Vienna is especially able to show what happened to the inhabitants of discontinued convents like that of the Poor Clares and Carmelite nuns, and to those that were spared because they were engaged in education or the care of the sick, like the Ursulines, the Salesians and the Elisabethan nuns. The latter were forbidden to take new novices but had to accept those turned out of the sequestered convents, which required many efforts at accommodating on all sides. The cloister inhabitants also had to abandon at least on the outside their much favored festive practices. Ellinor Forster reports on the abolition of four secular women chapters in Tyrol. Although such chapters came in all shapes and sizes, depending on the needs of the founders and the inhabitants, they usually (but not exclusively) provided the aristocracy with a (sometimes temporary) domicile for their widows and single women, and did not adhere to a *clausura* or vows of poverty. Their abolition in the 18th century also shows the diminished power of the aristocracy to influence official decision-making. Also interesting are the attempts of the individual chapters to distinguish themselves from convents in their claims that sequestration orders should not apply to them. In: ?Die Entwicklung des Konvents des Benedikterinenstiftes St. Georgen am Längsee im 18. Jahrhundert? (pp. 183?202), Christine Tropper shows a somewhat similar development for the Benedictine *Stift* St. George in Carinthia (Austria), although this institution had engaged in the education of girls and the care of the sick, and although the affected civil authorities supported maintaining the *Stift* because of these activities.

The third section is entitled ?Self-assurance.? In addition to Stefan Benz?s contribution mentioned previously, it contains the following articles: Ingrid Facchinelli, ??Von Motiven und Bewögnus Ursachen zu Erbauung eines Closters?. Von der Gründung zur Abteierhebung von Kloster Säben (1686-1699)? (pp. 205?18); Christine M. Gigler. ??[...] miteinander in geistlichen Ordensüebungen, dan Unterrichtung der unschuldigen Mägdlein und Verferttigung der Kürchen Arbeithen gottseelig zu leben [...]?, Die Entstehung und Innere Organisation der Kongregation der Halleiner Schwestern-Franziskanerinnen im 18. Jahrhundert? (pp. 219?40); Teresa Schröder, ?Zwischen Chorgesang und Karten-Spiel ? Lebensführung und Herrschaftspraxis im Kloster und Stift? (pp. 267?98). It is in this section that we find the most detailed description of daily life in the convents, and how the founding, the maintaining and the abolishment of convents and secular chapters affected the inhabitants. Ingrid Facchinelli documents how in the case of the Cloister Saben in South-Tirol (previously Austrian, now an Italian province) church and local authorities supported its establishment, its self-sufficiency and prevented its sequestration. Christine M. Gigler does the same for the Franciscan Tertiaries in Hallein (near Salzburg) who were active in girls? education, although in that case the authorities were less supportive. Gigler includes the Hausordnung (house rules) of 1786 (pp. 234?40) that provide an excellent insight into the daily life of the cloister community. Daily convent life is also the focus of Teresa Schröder in ?Zwischen Chorgesang und Karten-Spiel ? Lebensführung und Herrschaftspraxis im Kloster und Stift? (pp. 267?98). She provides a detailed account of the organization,

hierarchy and social interactions in the largely bourgeois Cistercian convent in Rottenmünster (near Rottweil in Baden-Württemberg) and the mostly aristocratic *Stift* Essen. Both were under the direct jurisdiction of the emperor and both escaped dissolution by the Habsburg emperor only to fall victim to the Napoleonic sequestration. Their prime mission was to provide women with an education and a life style according to their station ? be they aristocratic or bourgeois ? in a pious setting. The article includes two wonderful portraits of the last abbesses that show them with all the symbols of their authority (pp. 274 and 285).

Between Revival and Uncertainty is certainly not the first book to discuss the particular interchanges between church and state authorities and religious institutions. In *Prosperities and Plunder* (1), Derek Beales demonstrates in detail the Austrian emperors? attempts at sequestration in their own lands. Beale?s emphasis is, however, on the emperors? decision and their attempted implementation. *Between Revival and Uncertainty* focuses on the reaction of the individual communities of women, who saw their lifestyle threatened, had to find different accommodations, and in some cases tried to take up the suggested activities with mixed success. In all of the individual articles, the emphasis is on the reactions of the women communities to outside pressures. Thus this detailed approach differs markedly from Silvia Evangelisti?s well known study: *Nuns A History of Convent Life 1450-1700* (2), which aimed to cover a ?broad geographical space and a time-span of two centuries.?

Between Revival and Uncertainty is about women convents and chapters. Male convents are not part of this focus. With this in mind, the authors have mined the local archives and a plethora of secondary sources that are listed in extensive footnotes. Most articles are the results of a close reading of existing documents, letters, official directives, visitation records, and chronicles. Even in the official documents the voices of the authors (men and women) ring clear. Special attention is paid to the lives of women in the convents and to the fate of those who had to leave convents that were slated for abolition.

I can only approve of the approach and the execution of *Between Revival and Uncertainty*. It shows an overall view of convent life mixed with individual insights by its convent inhabitants. It evidences a conglomeration of many research efforts of various regions, but manages to find one voice. And it does not forget that the women affected were individuals. Thus it provides a united landscape with individual differences. It seems, therefore, incongruent that my one reservation involves landscapes. It is often unclear where exactly the convents under discussion are located. Especially since this collection aims at a wider international audience, I would have liked to have seen further discussion of the regions in which the cloisters were situated, and under whose jurisdiction these were in the 18th century and in the present. There is a dearth of information on this vibrant heritage of cloister life because its documents and subsequent research are written in languages that are rarely mastered by non-native speakers or that are no longer the native tongue in the area under discussion. That is our loss, and I can only applaud the fact that the authors have made this study of Middle European cloister heritage available to us.

Notes

1. Derek Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution, 1650?1815* (Cambridge, 2003).Back to (1)
2. Silvia Evangelisti?s well known study, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life 1450?1700* (Oxford, 2007). Back to (2)

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