

CHAPTER 15

FROM REGENSBURG

TO RACINE :

AN ODYSSEY

Maria Benedicta Bauer, a nun of Heilig Kreuz (Holy Cross) Monastery in Regensburg, Bavaria, had long followed with interest a nineteenth century movement among Bavarian nuns to undertake a mission of education for the masses of German Catholics who were emigrating at that time to the United States. Organized primarily by the directors of the Ludwig Missionsverein and its collaborators in America, these nuns were prepared to leave their cloisters to teach the children of the emigrants.

Maria Benedicta herself had been prepared to join the effort as early as 1827. That particular mission, for reasons unknown, was canceled. But later, as prioress of her convent, she sent Holy Cross women to America in response to a plea from the Benedictine Abbot of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, Boniface Wimmer. The first of these women established a school in Williamsburg (now Brooklyn), New York, in 1853. They were joined by others from other convents in the following years.

Though no records of the Pielenhofen state school of that period have survived, it was almost certainly there that Maria Anna received her early education. In any case, it has been established that she did not attend either of the only two Bavarian nuns' schools to have survived the secularization, Holy Cross and Santa Klara in Regensburg.

At the age of seventeen, three years after the end of the Napoleonic domination of Bavaria, the blacksmith's daughter entered the Dominican monastery of Holy Cross to become part of a story that was already six hundred years old. There, after a year of candidature and another of novitiate, she made her first profession of vows in 1822. Her solemn profession would, by Bavarian civil law, have to wait until she was thirty-three years old. She spent most of her early convent years teaching in the school for girls for which the nuns had been forced to assume responsibility in 1803 as the price of their continued existence as sisters. Already a fairly accomplished pianist and organist, she was soon in charge also of musical education within the community.

On January 16, 1845, Maria Benedicta Bauer was elected prioress of Holy Cross, then a community of sixteen choir nuns and eight lay sisters. By the time she would be elected to her fifth three-year term, the community would have grown to thirty-one choir nuns, twenty-one lay sisters, five novices and four candidates.

Her terms as prioress were marked by a vigorous but always popular, campaign of reform in a community whose discipline had suffered from the adaptations at first made necessary by the Secularization of 1803 to 1817, but later simply eroded. Her efforts at outreach included a proposal in 1855 to receive and educate a number of abandoned African slave girls who would eventually be returned to Africa as teachers. She was also bent on the material improvement and expansion of the monastery. To that end she engaged in several remodeling projects and founded the first branch houses of Holy Cross, each with its own school for girls of the farming and laboring classes. Through this last enterprise, an operation that had barely survived forty years became an aggressively pursued ministry for the Regensburg Dominican nuns. For the prioress, the establishment of branch houses should have been first of all a ministerial effort within the broader post-Secularization "re-Catholicizing" of Bavaria. But she apparently saw it also as an opportunity to transfer nuns who were having problems within the Regensburg monastery to communities where they might have better or be less trouble to her.

Maria Benedicta Bauer's dauv0.60(tholiciz)5(ing"))JTJ 77gve novices,u inR 8(i)-2(niw"atniciz)57f1 po

I never (in my innate simplicity) had a doubt that any but one only of those currently in this convent had any persistent resentment toward me personally. Nor did I feel the least resentment toward one or the other. And if at times I have been Hot-tempered and cross with one or the other,

instead of at Williamsburg where there had been the opportunity or incentive to learn it in the totally German school and community. Their two original companions elected to remain in Williamsburg[14]

The "English sisters" were, of course, the handful of Dominicans who had been sent out in 1830 from St. Catharine's in Kentucky to the hilltop town of Somerset on the National Road. By now they had a thriving convent and a day school not far from the friars' church and priory at Holy Trinity. Both of the new Bavarian arrivals found Somerset a refreshing interlude. But by August it seemed

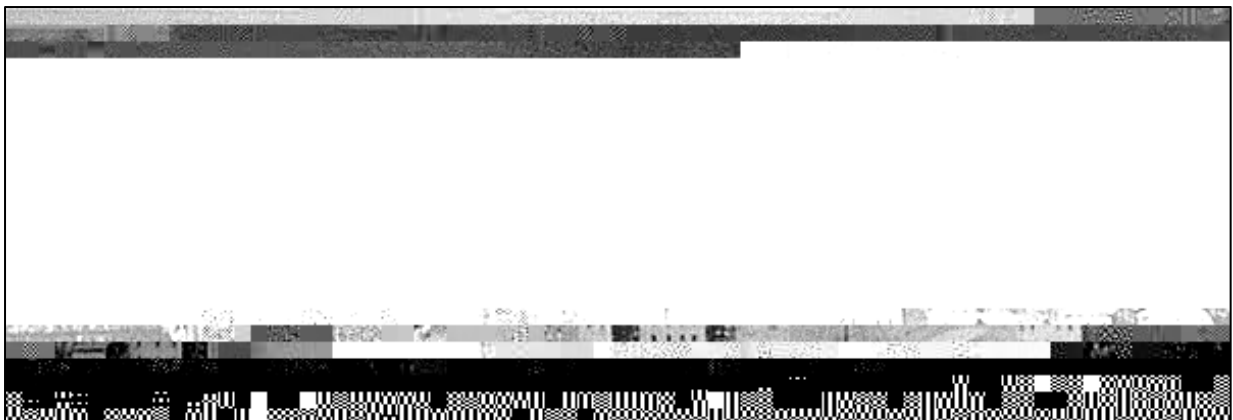
John Martin Henni,

The earliest surviving word from Bishop Henni on the matter came only after Maria Benedicta had written in early December to ask permission to begin building the following spring [26]. Then later in the same month she wrote to tell him that she was beginning to realize that

Green Bay is so small, and the Germans so poor that they send scarcely thirty-six children to the school, and hardly half these are able to pay two shillings a month. We receive as a rule no more than four dollars a month, but our expenses are usually half again as much. Besides, our holy says we are never to build a convent if there is no prospect for continued existence [27].

Henni reminded her quite gently in his response: "You, dear Sister, probably already know that I've always objected to the founding of a motherhouse in Green Bay. I gladly consent to your establishing a school there, but the motherhouses always have an independent location and more spacious grounds.... I am sure that there are more suitable places [28]. As a month later he wrote with suggestions of several possible Wisconsin locations, urging that she take a trip to visit each of them in spring [29].

There is no evidence at all that Maria Benedicta ever followed his suggestion. On May 1 she signed the deed to a house in Racine, and on May 12 she and her small community, along with a few boarding students and nuns, arrived to take possession [30]. The nuns opened their first Racine school in the basement of St. Patrick's Church on June 1, raising money to supplement tuition by giving concerts at which their superior presided on the organ [31].



Racine, Wisconsin, in 1858, looking south across the Root River from St. Patrick's Parish

By 1863 the sisters were teaching in several schools in Racine and one in Port Washington. The next year saw the establishment of an academy for girls within the new motherhouse that had been built at Pearl and Chippeway Streets (later named Park Avenue and Twelfth Street).

When tuition, concerts and grants from the Ludwig Missionsverein did not bring in sufficient funds to support the school, the nuns received Bishop Henni's permission to beg from door to door. Maria Thomasina found this task not entirely pleasant, as she wrote to Rev. Paul Kagerer of the Ludwig Missionsverein:

Last autumn, so that we would be able to pay the pressing debts we had assumed for the needed addition to the building [for the academy] actually had to go out, with our bishop's permission, to take up a collection among the people. That was a difficult duty for me, but the example of our holy father Dominic gave me courage to go from house to house and beg for a kind donation from the people. I devoted weeks to this duty, and here and there had to put up with great unpleasantness. But in this case the unpleasantness could only lead to trust, since our begging got us out of our pressing need.[32]

All this while, the sisters were continuing to live the monastic regimen of the Second Order and to maintain cloister to whatever extent they could. The stomach cancer that had surely been present already for a few years before Maria Benedicta left Regensburg became more serious in early 1865. By June of that year she was confined to bed, and Maria Thomasina found herself taking on more and more responsibility for the young community. The prioress died on October 13, 1865, leaving eight professed sisters, seven novices, and eleven candidates.

Because there were not enough perpetual professed sisters to hold a canonical election, Bishop Henni appointed the thirty-one-year-old Maria Thomasina prioress. She was in office less than a year when she contracted typhoid fever from a novice she was nursing. Unaware of the gravity of her illness, she decided to preach the community's annual retreat in late August 1866, when the scheduled preacher died at the last minute. The retreat, for which her carefully written conferences still survive, ended with the reception of three novices on August 28. The second prioress of Racine Dominicans died on September 6.

Maria Benedicta Bauer's work in this country had been marked from the beginning by her determination to Americanize. She had emphasized in her advertising for her schools that

5. Chapter Acts, Heilig Kreuz, January 16, 1845 (Bistum's Zentralarchiv Regensburg (hereinafter BZAR) K1 114/19:Priorinwahlen 1832-1900, and Schematismus der Geistlichkeit des Bistums Regensburg für das Jahr 1844 (Regensburg: Georg Joseph Manz, 1845).
6. Schematismus der Geistlichkeit des Bistums Regensburg für das Jahr 1857 (Regensburg: Georg Joseph Manz, 1857).
7. While Maria Benedicta's own proposal seems not to have materialized, a group of such girls was actually received by the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Munich about the same time. Every one of these girls, however, died of lung diseases and emotional trauma before their planned transfer to the United States. (M.B. Bauer correspondence ABZK1 114/6, Klausurdispense 1832-1944; Notre Dame documentation from SSND Archives.)
8. Documentation for the various renovation projects as well as for financial aspects of the branch foundations is found in Maria Benedicta Bauer's notebooks, Radon Dominican Archives. Correspondence concerning the branch houses of Niederviehbach (1847), Mintraching (1853), and Williamsburg (1855) is found in BZAR, KL 112/1: Filialkloster Niederviehbach K1 114/29, Filialkloster Mintraching 1852-1860; and K1 114/31, Filialkloster in Williamsburg (USA): 1853-1895. Other documentation in the archives of Ludwig Missionsverein Munich, and Kloster Maria, Niederviehbach.
9. Letter of Bishop von Senestrey, announcing the deposition to the nuns of Heilig Kreuz and its branch houses (BZAR K1 114/2: Oberhirtliche Visitation, 1837-1921). No such letter, it seems, was sent to the nuns in Williamsburg, although they were still subject to the prioress of Holy Cross.
10. Tagebuch II, June 15, 1854. The one whom she suspects resents her is probably Reginalda Brener, friend of Cäcilia Solleder. The reasons for Reginalda's resentment will be dealt with shortly.
11. Letter of Dominicus Lentz, O.P., socius to the Master, to Maria Benedicta Bauer, Jan. 27, 1857. BZAR K1 114/2: Oberhirtliche Visitation, 1837-1921.
12. BZAR, K1 114/31 Filialkloster in Williamsburg (USA): 1853-1895
13. This correspondence has not survived, or at least it has not yet been found.
14. Crescenza Traubinger had in the meantime been received into the Williamsburg community as Sister Maria Dominica. Both she and Cunigunda Schell, already defessed, lived out their lives as members of the Williamsburg group.
15. Letter of Maria Benedicta Bauer to Bishop John M. Henni, Jan. 14, 1861, Archives, Archdiocese of Milwaukee (MM).
16. Letter of Bishop James Whelan to Bishop John M. Henni, Nashville, March 7, 1861, MM.
17. Sister Mary Frances Walsh, who chronicled the journey of the early years at St. Cecilia's in Nashville (The Annals of St. Cecilia Convent: 1860- 1888), never mentions the presence or participation of the two Bavarian nuns. This could be explained by the fact that she was concentrating only on her own congregation. Certain discrepancies, however, between her account and Maria Benedicta's lead one to suspect that the omission reflects the tension which seems to have grown between Maria Benedicta (and possibly Maria Thomasina) and the former Somerset sisters by the time they parted company.
18. Maria Benedicta Bauer to Bishop John M. Henni, Jan. 14, 1861, MM.
19. Maria Benedicta Bauer to John Henni.
20. Archives, Ludwig Missionsverein Munich (#395).
21. Maria Amanda von Schenk, first of the superior Niederviehbach convent.
22. As Mother Maria Hyacintha, she would be appointed by Bishop Henni to succeed Mother Benedicta and Mother Thomasina after the untimely deaths of the two prioresses within a year of each other (October 1865 and September 1866). The other candidate from the Notre Dame community was Cunigunda Loesch. She became Sister Rosa, but was later obliged to leave the Racine community.

30. The German Catholic newspaper *Wahrheits Freund* under the date of May 28, reports that "On the twelfth of