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# ENLIGHTENED MONASTICISM

## Some Examples from the Holy Roman Empire

Ulrich L. Lehner

The famous historian Thomas Nipperdey started his magisterial German history with the words: "In the beginning was Napoleon." For the theme of this paper, Napoleon was not the beginning but the *end* of the story, since the peace between Napoleon and the Holy Roman Empire (1801, Luneville) meant the end of the German Reichskirche and with it the end of the Catholic Enlightenment/Reform Catholicism.<sup>1</sup> It meant the end to a powerful experiment, namely the en-

<sup>1</sup> See Ulrich L. Lehner and Michael Printy, eds., *Brill's Companion to the Catholic Enlightenment in Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). On the importance of religious orders for the intellectual development of the West, see Derek Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The most recent study on German Benedictine Enlightenment is Niklas Raggenbass, *Harmonie und schwesterliche Einheit zwischen Bibel und Vernunft. Die Benediktiner des Klosters Banz: Publizisten und Wissenschaftler in der Aufklärungszeit* (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2006). Despite the importance of the monks of St. Maur for the development of modern historical criticism, hardly any works of this school are translated. An exception is John Paul McDonald, ed., *Jean Mabillon—Treatise on Monastic Studies* (1691). *Translated with an introduction* (Lanham:

gagement of Catholic thought with Enlightenment ideas and practices, and moreover the end of monastic culture in the Empire, which had contributed greatly to the achievements of this reform movement. The order which most strongly added to this diverse group was the Benedictines. From around 1715 on, one can find isolated traces of Enlightenment ideas among them, but from the 1740s onward, a large number of monks were keenly interested in the Enlightenment, i.e., the philosophy of John Locke and Christian Wolff, and later on Immanuel Kant and even Johann G. Fichte.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I would like to outline first the dynamics of eighteenth-century Benedictine life, which enabled what I would call “monastic Enlightenment,” and then give some examples that chart a few streams of thought in German monastic life in the eighteenth century.

### ✱ Benedictine Enlightenment ✱

There is no monocausal explanation of why the Benedictines became the champions of the Catholic Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> However, a number of factors contributed to this phenomenon.

First, unlike the Jesuits or the mendicants, the prelate orders were organized in a decentralized way. The advantage of this decentralization was that each superior was free to open or close the doors of his monastery to Enlightenment thought. No abbot was bound, as other religious superiors were, to a specific theological school.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the houses of the prelate orders communicated with each other on a regular basis and maintained common colleges or novitiates for their monastic students. Only the Benedictines, however, who enjoyed a privileged

University of America Press, 2004). See also Dom Aidan Bellinger, “Superstitious Enemies of the Flesh? The Variety of Benedictine Responses to the Enlightenment,” in Nigel Aston, ed., *Religious Change in Europe 1650–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 149–60.

<sup>2</sup> See my forthcoming book *Enlightened Monks*. See also Ulrich L. Lehner, “Theologia Kantiana ac Benedictina?,” in Norbert Fischer, ed., *Kant und der Katholizismus* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 234–61.

<sup>3</sup> The theses about the Benedictine Enlightenment were originally published in my article “Ecumenism and Enlightenment,” in *Pro Ecclesia* (2009). The editors’ permission for reprint is gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>4</sup> Heribert Raab, “Das Fürstbistum Fulda (1752–1802/03),” *Archiv für Mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte* 41 (1989): 173–201, at 184.

status in the ancien régime Church, seem to have engaged thoroughly in international relations. The correspondence of German Benedictines with their fellows in France and Italy brought the ideas of Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), Malebranche (1638–1715), and Muratori (1672–1750) to study cells in southern Germany.

Third, we can detect not only letter correspondence, but also the exchange of scholars and students between abbeys, which contributed to the sharing of knowledge. For example, the monks of St. Emmeram in Regensburg or of St. Blasien in the Black Forest invited professors of the French Maurist abbeys to teach their young monks sacred (Syriac, Arabic, Hebrew, etc.) and modern languages. In return, some German monks studied in St. Maur, a French Benedictine congregation that was responsible for the rise of historical consciousness and scholarship in the order, which also contributed to a new openness of the monks toward new ideas. Even a Parisian study house for Benedictine students from Germany was planned, although never executed.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, besides letters and scholars, a book exchange system was established. The Benedictine monks in Southern Germany not only sent free copies of their publications to other abbeys, they also invented a highly sophisticated interlibrary loan system that allowed Benedictine scholars to have access to the rarest books on the continent.

Fifth, Benedictines all over Europe tried to organize themselves in scholarly societies.<sup>6</sup> Although the founding of a Benedictine academy in the Empire was not successful until the 1790s, the monks contributed heavily to other learned associations, for example, the Olmütz Academy of the Unknown or the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.

Sixth, these innovative ways of communicating and exchanging knowledge steadily decreased the fear of contamination by Protestant thought and increased the readiness of the Benedictines to engage with the most pressing contemporary problems in theology, philosophy, science, and Church politics. In fact, the monks saw no danger in corresponding with Protestants at all. For instance, when

<sup>5</sup> The 1683 journey of the erudite French Benedictine Jean Mabillon (1632–1707) through German, Austrian, and Swiss abbeys increased the enthusiasm of the monks for the spirit of St. Maur, in particular for the integration of church history into the theological curriculum and the careful critical analysis of historical documents. See Jean Mabillon, *Vetera Analecta, sive Collectio veterum aliquot operum et opusculorum, cum itinere Germanico* (Paris: 1723).

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Hammermayer, *Geschichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1759–1807*, 2 vols. (München: C. H. Beck, 1983), passim; Ludwig Hammermayer, "Die Benediktiner und die Akademiebewegung im katholischen Deutschland (1720–1770)," *Studien und Mitteilungen des Benediktinerordens und seiner Zweige* 70 (1959): 45–146.



the Italian Benedictine Cardinal Quirini traveled to Swabia in 1748, he met the Lutheran theologian Johann Georg Schellhorn in order to discuss the works of Christian Wolff. Around the same time, Oliver Legipont from Cologne, who wanted to start a Benedictine Academy of Sciences, recommended a Protestant, Johann Christoph Gottsched, as an honorary member. In Fulda, the Benedictines planned an ecumenical reunion-academy and in Erfurt, they were heavily involved in the foundation of a Protestant theology department.

### ✱ 1740: The Sycophantic Strife in Salzburg ✱

In 1708, the Benedictines of Bavaria desired more freedom in teaching philosophy to their younger monks. However, the abbots insisted that the curriculum should strictly follow scholastic ideals, and when Fructuosus Scheidsach gave an explanation of the Catholic Mass using atomist theories in 1715, he was easily silenced. The drive for independence and individualism, however, was no longer stoppable. In the course of the eighteenth century, one can detect how all aspects of monastic life were infiltrated and transformed by Enlightenment ideas and a new lifestyle accordingly: For instance, cells were no longer regarded as sacred space but as living and working rooms in which guests could be entertained and refreshments served. Also, the tonsure was no longer universally regarded as a sign for the crown of thorns, and by the end of the century, we find monks with full heads of hair or even wigs. The habit became increasingly unpopular as well—French clothes, silk scarves and hats, etc. even replaced traditional attire in some instances. However, this change did not happen rapidly but over decades, and in Germany, a number of these examples accelerated or slowed the process of secularization.

One instance that decelerated the dissemination of Enlightenment ideas in the Catholic south of Germany was the so-called sycophantic strife, which took place in 1740 in Salzburg. The university there had been supported since 1618 by a consortium of thirty Bavarian, Austrian, and Swabian Benedictine abbeys. Around 1720, it had about 1,700 students, but in the following decades the enrollment steadily declined.<sup>7</sup> In

<sup>7</sup> Johann Laglstorfer, *Der Salzburger Sykophantenstreit um 1740* (PhD dissertation, University of Salzburg, 1971), 1–4; Stefan Benz, *Zwischen Tradition und Kritik, Katholische Geschichtsschreibung im barocken Heiligen Römischen Reich* (Husum: Matthiesen, 2003), 554–55. Cf. Andreas Kraus, “Lodovico Antonio Muratori und Bayern,” in Andreas Kraus,

the 1730s, due to the close ties of the Archbishop's court to Italy, a small circle of men started to come together to discuss Enlightenment ideas, especially those of Ludovico Muratori. The friends promised to be mutual guides to one another on their way to wisdom and to work hard to eradicate ignorance, "which reigned over Salzburg."<sup>8</sup> One book in particular functioned as their programmatic manifesto: Muratori's *De ingeniorum moderatione in religionis negotio* or *On the Moderation of our Cleverness in Religious Matters*. This book, which argued for a moderate Catholic liberalism, defended the Copernican revolution, advocated serious reforms of theology, and argued in favor of doubt as a healthy component of rational thinking even in theological research; after all, doubt presupposes the use of reason, while unreflected theology led to intolerant and zealous actions, Muratori thought.<sup>9</sup> Muratori and his Salzburg friends considered the "Blutgelübde," an oath every student and professor in Salzburg had to take, as a good example of an irrational defense of faith, because it implied that one should sacrifice his own life to defend the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception against critics. For Muratori, that was mere fundamentalism, especially because at that time it was not even a dogma. A number of Benedictine professors were actively involved in the Salzburg Muratori circle. One of them wrote: "May God allow that we are successful and that finally not only stupid, useless...and brain numbing stuff is eradicated [from our curriculum]...[, but that] a true, healthy and useful philosophy is offered to our youth."<sup>10</sup> This was easier said than done, since many opposed them, and the Capuchins and Franciscans in particular were in an uproar about it. The Benedictines, so they claimed, lectured more about heretics than about Catholic authors. Fortunately, the Enlighteners won, although both sides were silenced by the Archbishop, which slowed the modernization process of Salzburg considerably. However, Salzburg implemented a number of reforms; for example, it was the first German university to include experimental physics in its curriculum.

*Bayerische Geschichtswissenschaft in drei Jahrhunderten* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1984), 212–32.

<sup>8</sup> Laglstorfer, *Der Salzburger Sykophantenstreit*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Laglstorfer, *Der Salzburger Sykophantenstreit*, 29–33; Eleonore Zlabinger, *Ludovico Antonio Muratori und Österreich* (Innsbruck: Kommissionsbuchhandlung, 1970), 69–70.

<sup>10</sup> Archiv der Erzabtei St. Peter/Salzburg: Odo Gutrath, *Rerum gestarum annotationes I* (1737–1743), HS A 150, fol. 93 b–94, at Laglstorfer, *Der Salzburger Sykophantenstreit*, 41.

## \* Rothfischer and Other Radicals \*

Thus, the groundwork was laid for a monastic Enlightenment in Southern Germany, and when a number of Benedictine students from Regensburg went to the city of Salzburg a few years later, they were already trained in Wolffian philosophy and moderately modernized theology. One of them was the rising star of the order, Gregor Rothfischer. Back in his home abbey, Rothfischer became overly ambitious and requested more and more privileges and liberties. He knew the free-thinkers, especially Spinoza, defended a strict superiority of the state over the church, and modern critical exegesis. In his autobiography, he tells us that due to his fear of being incarcerated; he fled by night from the monastery St. Emmeram to Leipzig in the spring of 1751. He met Christian Wolff there and asked for his help to convert to Protestantism, but Wolff was not very forthcoming. Instead of supporting Rothfischer, Wolff, who was for many the leader of the Protestant Enlightenment, advised him to go back home to the cloister. Rothfischer, more confused than ever, nevertheless left the Catholic Church under the auspices of Johann Salomo Semler, the father of liberal Protestant theology in Germany. Soon afterward, we find Rothfischer appointed as professor of philosophy in Helmstedt, supported by the duke of Brunswick and Johann Friedrich Jerusalem, where he published a number of books and died a few years later.<sup>11</sup>

For the enlightened Benedictines, however, Rothfischer's escape was a major blow. They now had to defend themselves against critics who believed that religion and Enlightenment were incompatible. For the next two decades after that, one can detect tendencies to protect the monastic spirit, especially discipline, against influences from the outside, but that ultimately proved to be impossible. Even if an abbot closed the main door to the Enlighteners, the windows were still open, so to speak, since it was no longer possible to escape the influence of the time. Every abbey subscribed to about three to four newspapers and several academic journals, all of which naturally brought information from the outside world within the monastery walls. Moreover, the communication network of private letter exchange still functioned, and last but not least, the fact that the young monks were increasingly forced by the bishops to study at city universities and no longer in their community colleges, exposed their minds to the spirit of the time.

<sup>11</sup> On his life see my *Enlightened Monks*, forthcoming.

By the 1770s and 1780s, one can find a growing number of radical Enlightener-monks. Among them were Leonhard Gruber from Metten, who became a close friend of Isaac Iselin and Friedrich Nicolai, as well as Benedikt Werkmeister, who as early as 1782 called for a universal tolerance of all religions and freedom of the press, the end of celibacy and a diminution of papal influence, and also Roman Schad from Banz, who was a friend of Wieland and became professor for German idealism in Jena. Yet, not every search for the light of reason ended happily. Nonnosus Gschall from Oberaltaich committed suicide after he was charged with Socinianism for applying historical criticism to biblical hermeneutics. Remarkably, though, he was buried with all honors on the monastery cemetery.

Apart from these instances, we can find moderate monks who followed Enlightenment ideals. Abbot Arbuthnot of the Scottish Abbey in Regensburg expressed his idea of rational pursuit in a book on physics as follows: "Whoever will follow nature, which teaches us through unchangeable experiences, will not be and cannot be betrayed. This teaching is the immutable law of the eternal being itself."<sup>12</sup> Thaddeus Rinderle from St. Peter in Freiburg invented a calculus machine, Placidus Heinrich from Regensburg was the first to teach meteorology at a German university, Basil Sinner invented an optical telegraph, and Sanderad Müller from Trier excavated Roman artifacts in Trier.

Beda Mayr, from the abbey of Donauwörth near Augsburg, published a treatise on ecumenism in 1778, in which he pleaded for a reunion of the Christian churches and proposed some considerable compromises toward that end, for example, giving up papal and ecclesiastical infallibility.<sup>13</sup> In 1789, Jakob Danzer from Isny caused the students in Salzburg to strike when he was dismissed from office due to his eudemonistic and Pelagian moral theology. In 1792, Bernhard Stöger, also in Salzburg, defended the French Civil Constitution of the Clergy, while in the Jakobsberg abbey in Mainz monks joined the Jacobine clubs and demanded liberty, equality, and fraternity. Similarly, in 1795 Ulrich Peutinger from Irsee applied the systems of Kant and Fichte to Catholic theology in his book *Religion, Revelation and Church*, while a year later, the abbey of St. Gall signed one of the first modern constitutions in Europe, abolishing serfdom and granting its subjects a considerable number of rights.

<sup>12</sup> Andreas Kraus, *Die naturwissenschaftliche Forschung an der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1978), 18.

<sup>13</sup> See Ulrich L. Lehner, ed., *Beda Mayr—Verteidigung der katholischen Religion* (1789) (Leiden: Brill, 2009), i–xc.

## \* 1768: The War of Prüm \*

There is one other instance, however, which must be noted when speaking about German Benedictines in the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment because it illustrates how hard it can be to determine which changes in the monasteries were due to the Enlightenment, to Jansenism, or to both. Between Trier and Aachen lies the abbey of Prüm, which is especially famous for its medieval manuscripts. However, in the eighteenth century, it was renowned for being the most revolutionary abbey in the whole Roman Empire. Ever since the archbishop of Trier had gained control over the abbey in 1574, the monks had been trying to reestablish their old rights. In 1719 the prior had even published a book about it, with the result that he was imprisoned by the archbishop for the next twenty years. Nevertheless, this did not weaken the abbey's desire for independence. Very much like the Jansenists in Port Royal or other French abbeys, the monks were unimpressed by the frequent attempts to bring them under control. We do not know how many Enlightenment books they had actually read, but we can assume that they had a standard collection containing Locke, Wolff, perhaps even Montesquieu. They certainly had newspapers and journals and were regularly informed by merchants and others in the world. The religious state of the abbey, however, was disastrous. The monks behaved as if no monastic duties existed and they were completely "secularized."<sup>14</sup>

When the archbishop of Trier died in 1768, the Cathedral chapter was in charge of the church revenues, and the choir-bishop [*Chorbischof*] Karl Emmerich von Hagen (1711–1779) traveled to the abbey of Prüm to visit the monks. When he arrived, something extraordinary happened. The monks refused to let him in and declared that while no bishop was named, the abbey had redeemed its rights as an independent duchy. Hagen returned with a small crowd of his militia which tried to open the great entrance door by force, but as the chronicle describes it, "suddenly it rained stones on them." From the tower and all the windows, the monks threw rocks down at the confused soldiers, who ran away in fear.<sup>15</sup> Upon hearing about what had occurred,

<sup>14</sup> One of the monks was even involved in one of the few documented cases of child abuse by clergymen then.

<sup>15</sup> Stadtbibliothek Trier: "Chronicle of the Nunnery of Niederprüm," written by Pastor Schuelen, HS 1716-775 2o, fol. 121. The chronicle is hardly readable due to the fading of the ink. Therefore a great help was an article by Karl Lohmeyer, "Die Barockbauten der Abtei Prüm und ihre Meister," *Bonner Jahrbücher* 122 (1912): 111–36, at 124–26. It was only after

the Cathedral chapter sent 160 (another source mentions 800) soldiers to Prüm, but before they could arrive, the abbey bribed villagers "and other low lifes...with bread and brandy" to help them in the "upcoming war."<sup>16</sup> The monks fixed a declaration on the church door in which the sovereign abbey dismissed all electoral employees, and when the soldiers finally arrived, the choirbishop asked the monks whether they were willing to surrender, which they of course denied. The attack on the abbey was ordered immediately, and shots were subsequently fired from the cloister tower and the windows. Two soldiers were killed and two were wounded. No one is certain whether it was the monks themselves who fired on the soldier, but we do know that they had patrolled the abbey and owned their own weapons, so they were probably armed. Moreover, Hagen was nearly shot, and this was straw that broke the camel's back. Regular troops from Coblenz were ordered to bring six big canons, and the monks were given a three-day armistice to consider their options. However, when the canons arrived before the end of the ultimatum, the monks sent two of their friars to the soldiers, asking if they would wait the full three days before bombing the abbey. They were immediately arrested and taken as hostages. That night, the troops approached the abbey through a nearby forest, aiming the canons at the six big convent windows. The next day, the monks were asked to surrender one last time. "Because the Drummer's glass was filled and refilled, he lost track of time and three minutes before the deadline, he stumbled out and reported the surrender. The six canons nearly shot all the monks dead at the breakfast table."<sup>17</sup> The monks surrendered, the soldiers marched in, locked up all the religious, sacked the abbey's wine cellar, kitchen, and probably the cells, too. On 9 February 1768, Choirbishop von Hagen inspected the abbey, lined up all the monks in the presence of soldiers, and made them solemnly swear to accept the chapter's sovereignty over the abbey. That was the end of the most intriguing war of eighteenth-century Germany, the eight-day war of Prüm. At least the official war ended here, although the strife continued. In 1770, allegedly by pure chance, one of the bishop's delegates was almost shot in the abbey. Only a settlement of the Imperial Court (*Reichskammergericht*) in 1782 calmed the

consulting the original that I found that the complete text was transcribed in P. Jodoci, "Der Prümer Krieg 1768," *Trierische Heimat* 11 (1934/35): 69–70.

<sup>16</sup> On Brandy see Roman Sandgruber, *Die Anfänge der Konsumgesellschaft. Konsumgüterverbrauch, Lebensstandard u. Alltagskultur in Österreich im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1982), 181–92.

<sup>17</sup> Stadtbibliothek Trier: HS 1716-775 2o, fol. 122.

situation: the abbey acknowledged that in the case of the bishop's seat being vacant, the cathedral chapter had full legal authority over them, and the chapter promised to never ask the monks again for a formal submission.<sup>18</sup>

Whether this strife for independence was motivated by Enlightenment ideas or Jansenist stubbornness, or the "spirit of the time," the war of Prüm illustrates the multifaceted history of Benedictines in eighteenth-century Germany: Shaped by new forms of communication, the reception of new ideas, and elements of modern lifestyle, Benedictine monasticism was transformed. In the German speaking lands, numerous monks were inventors in the field of science and key players in academic societies; moreover, many participated in the Enlightenment's philosophical and theological debates and contributed to the development of a specific Catholic Enlightenment that ended at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

<sup>18</sup> Theo Büsch, "Ursachen und Verlauf des Prümer Krieges 1768," *Heimatkalender / Landkreis Bitburg-Prüm* 1999: 88–92; Jodoci, "Der Prümer Krieg 1768."