

Sent Out Into Time

The Foundation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in its Socio-Cultural Context

If we want to examine what it is that makes up our charism and our spirituality, it is essential to know something about the socio-cultural background in Germany and Bavaria at the time our Congregation was founded; after all, at one and the same time, they both belong to the foundation upon which the Congregation of SSND originated, flourished and richly unfolded. It will not be possible to understand the essence and the unique historic significance of our religious order, either for the origin and development of modern women's religious communities or for the world-wide Catholic educational system of today, until we not only know its religious roots, which indeed reach far back into history, but also the social and cultural context in which our order originated.

Such is the aim behind the present paper, and I have structured it on the basis of three questions:

1. What socio-cultural dates and developments influenced the foundation of our Congregation?
2. How did Bishop Georg Michael Wittmann and Mother Theresa meet the social and religious challenges of their time, and how did they overcome them?
3. What insights can we gain from this for our lives and our ministry?

As our Congregation was founded in Bavaria, I shall for the most part be restricting my observations of the socio-cultural situation to this south-eastern area of Germany, taking recourse to any direct German and European influences only as relevant.

Part 1

The Socio-Cultural Developments in Germany at the Beginning and in the Initial Decades of our Congregation

Anyone who has dealings with history in greater depth will come to the conclusion that it is the task of each and every epoch, in its own unique way, to overcome particular existential problems; in other words, the so-called "good old times" never have and never do exist.

The way in which people understand and mold the respective times in which they live, the way they regard themselves and their task within the concrete time-frame determine the way in which they record their history and, in so doing, set the course for the coming generations.

The foundress of SSND, Karolina Maria Theresa Gerhardinger, did just this in a permanent, exemplary and, in terms of the results, a most beneficent manner.

Important Political Events

Born in 1797, Karolina Gerhardinger grew up in a time of great political, social and cultural turbulence.

She was endowed with a keen intellect. As a child in her parents' house in Stadtamhof and, from 1803, as a pupil with the Canonesses of Notre Dame, she was well aware of the effects of the **French Revolution** and the **Napoleonic Wars**.¹

The "Reichsdeputationshauptschluss" of 1803 sanctioned and accelerated the **secularization** of ecclesiastical property and the dissolution of most of the monasteries. From today's point of view, the closing of the school and the Notre Dame convent in Stadtamhof in 1809 turned out to be one of the first decisive changes in the course of Karolina Gerhardinger's life.

As a young teacher, she experienced not only the up-and-coming Kingdom of Bavaria, but also the political tension between the old European aristocratic powers,

¹ Among other sources, this is documented by the report that from the loft of her parents' house on the night of 23 April 1809, together with her father, she took great interest in courageously watching Regensburg being bombarded by the French.

who were striving to restore the previous situation, and liberal powers, **demanding liberty** for the middle classes and **national unity**.

In **1848**, Mother Theresa returned from America to a country in revolutionary turmoil, where the **first German National Assembly** had just been convened in Frankfurt and the bourgeois intelligentsia were adamantly demanding their right to liberty. Mother Theresa's supporter and patron, King Ludwig I of Bavaria, had to abdicate the throne in favor of his son.

During the next 22 years, she and her sisters were to experience two further **wars**: in **1866** (on the way to German unification) the so-called War in Germany, and in **1870/71** the Franco-Prussian War.

In 1871, eight years before her death, the **German Reich** was finally founded and, **under Bismarck's power politics**, strove to gain hegemony in Europe.

Cultural and Intellectual Life

For reasons of space, I have only been able to briefly outline such political events; far more significant in a direct sense for the foundation and development of our Congregation, however, were the **cultural and intellectual life** of the time, and above all the **social changes** that were taking place when Mother Theresa was alive.

The French Revolution, the repercussions of which characterized the whole of the 19th century, was in principle the political consequence of the **philosophy of rationalism and the Enlightenment**. This new way of thinking in the 18th century not only freed people from unreasoned patterns of thought handed down through the generations and from social and religious restrictions; it also robbed them of the security, hitherto taken for granted, that in principle a certain order governed their lives and religion would grant them refuge. Now, society in the old world was soon out of joint. Rather like the times we live in today, there must have been a feeling of uncertainty as to what was happening, now that old structures were breaking down.

On the other hand, we must not forget that it was especially in Germany that this new thinking also gave birth to some of the most prolific epochs in artistic creativity, particularly in the fields of music and literature.

The 83 years of Mother Theresa's life encompassed the cultural epochs of "Storm and Stress", Classicism, Romanticism, Biedermeier and Realism². In one way or another, she would have been affected by the theories of **nationalism** and **liberalism**, and quite probably came into contact with the philosophy of thinkers like Hegel, Schopenhauer, Marx and Nietzsche.

Social Changes

At any rate, she was directly aware of the effects that intellectual movements were having at the time on the social changes and in particular on the ensuing problems, problems that she experienced at first hand. Her childhood came to an end in 1809 with the abolition of the school she loved so much. At the age of only 12, she was faced with the full reality of life – in agreeing to become a teacher, a profession which, had she been free to decide, she would not have chosen; and in the subsequent harsh type of training for this profession. It was not until the years that followed that she also increasingly came to regard it as a vocation.

We know nothing about what she dreamt about as a young girl, or rather of what she would have wanted to dream about had she had the time. Yet we do know about her **determination** to face the demands that life placed on her and to recognize in these demands the will of God. We also know, thank God, that at the same time she remained sensitive and glad at heart, and from a very early age acquired a measure of wisdom at which we can only wonder today.

Apart from the **movements for freedom**, the great **social topics of the 19th century** were especially the **question of education** (above all for women and girls from the lower classes) and the **social question**. For faith and for the church, the resulting problems posed a challenge of proportions hitherto unknown, a challenge that in most cases came to be regarded as a threat.

As a result of secularisation, the monasteries in particular were largely robbed of the

² In this connection it is worth remembering the composers of **the German Classical period** *Joseph Haydn* (1732-1809), *Ludwig van Beethoven* (1770-1827) and *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (1756-1791), also those of **the Romantic period** *Franz Schubert* (1797-1828), *Robert Schumann* (1810 – 1856), *Anton Bruckner* (1824 – 1896) and *Richard Wagner* (1813 – 1883), all of whom most certainly influenced Mother Theresa's early intellectual development no less than the poets of the two epochs: the **Classicists** *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe* (1749 – 1832) and *Friedrich von Schiller* (1759 – 1805), and **Romanticists** like *Jean Paul*, *Novalis* and *Eichendorff*. The politically involved poet *Heinrich Heine* (+1856) and the most significant lyricist of the 19th century *Annette von Droste-Hülshoff* (+1848) were both born in the same year as Mother Theresa.

resources and the possibilities to continue running the schools that up till now had been in their charge. The “**educational vacuum**” that was created as a result could hardly or at least only unsatisfactorily be filled by the state. Those most severely affected by this were the children from the middle and lower classes, in particular girls.

The process of **industrialization**, which had already started during the first thirty years of the 19th century, first of all brought about poverty and then the **destitution of large sections of the lower classes**. What as a result of globalization we can watch happening today on a world-wide scale, both economically and socially, was going on at that time in central Europe: the structures underlying social ties were breaking down, the gulf between rich and poor was becoming increasingly wider and wider, the few people that were rich were amassing more and more wealth while the masses of people living in poverty were getting poorer and poorer. Whole branches of craftspeople, such as the weavers, were being deprived of the basis of their livelihood.

In the hope of finding a better way of making a living, quite considerable sections of the poor population migrated from the countryside to the towns – where, ultimately, their search was completely in vain. Many died of starvation and exhaustion at an early age, leaving behind their usually numerous children as helpless orphans.

Part 2

The Foundation of our Congregation as a Solution to the Social, Religious and Educational Problems of the 19th Century

Upheaval, wars, the call for liberty and national unity, social questions and political decisions on education, all of which were in urgent need of solutions: such was the world in which Mother Theresa heard the call of God, and followed it. Among the millions of her contemporaries living in the same sort of situation and suffering as a result, it was Karolina Gerhardinger who, in her own unique way, also pledged her life to helping the poor to be free and take account of their own human dignity, thereby overcoming their despair and deprivation.

Our Foundress Heard God's Call through the Events of the Time

The social question and the **educational problems** were not only closely connected, they were also mutually dependent. This was something Bishop Georg Michael Wittmann and, along with him, his most able and faithful student, Karolina Gerhardinger, both recognized. They both understood this perception to be the mission entrusted to them by God, to face the problems of their times.

This is why, immediately after the Notre Dame School in Stadtamhof had been shut down, Wittmann made sure that lessons for the girls were continued. He commissioned his chaplain, Georg Mauerer, to train three young girls, among them the twelve-year-old Karolina Gerhardinger, to become teachers. As it was his conviction that the spread in moral waywardness among young women could only be stemmed if **free and independent female teachers** were to teach and educate girls, he devised the ingenious plan of founding a **contemporary religious order for women** to take on this task.

The idea was that the sisters should not only be capable teachers, but also in a position to teach in small communities wherever needed and whenever called out. They were to live in poverty, in order to show solidarity with the poor, thereby enabling towns and small country parishes, who had only meagre financial resources at their disposal, to afford their services.

Wittmann remained firmly attached to this belief for more than twenty years, working patiently and single-mindedly at putting it into practise, despite all the resistance and difficulties he was confronted with. During this long period, Karolina Gerhardinger proved not only to be a most diligent teacher, building up and running an exemplary school in Stadtamhof, but also a young woman of great spiritual talent and maturity. Together with Wittmann, she interpreted the foundation as the "work of God" and placed herself unconditionally in the service of this mission.

Mother Theresa Constantly Obeyed Her Conscience

This was the reason why, even when Wittmann died on 8 March 1833, she did not permit herself to stray from her path, nor could she have been prevented from opening the first convent of our Congregation in Neunburg vorm Wald on

24 October 1833, striving with enormous **single-mindedness** and speed from then on to spread the Congregation.

Against all odds, both internally and externally, she spent her whole life doing only what she perceived to be the will of God. It was in this that her strength consisted; yet it was also in this that the great **trials in her life** she would have to endure were founded. When, in 1858, amidst the conflicts over the constitution of her order, she writes, "Follow your guiding star. It will lead you safely to Jesus,"³ she also shows us what it is that gives her her **sole security**: the insight of her conscience, given to her by God.

It was not only that there were no models on which to fashion the foundation of her religious community; her whole intention was most unusual, if not to say revolutionary, for it contradicted both the spirit of the age and the church tradition of religious orders. The Enlightenment had left its mark on bourgeois society, which now mistrusted any new religious community at a time when it was believed that the old monasteries had only just been eradicated. Moreover, the reactions of the church hierarchy, deeply insecure as a result of the Enlightenment, ranged from amazement to indignation at the courage of a woman presumptuous enough, as General Superior, to head a congregation of women that would not stop growing and was spreading out over two continents. Moreover, it was impossible for a number of secular and church officials and decision-makers to understand the fact that, on the one hand, the School Sisters of Notre Dame were far ahead of their time regarding both their educational and teaching concepts, and the organization of their schools, and yet, on the other hand, that they wanted to connect their **open-mindedness in worldly matters and outstanding practical competence** with a traditional type of secluded life in a convent.

The fact that Mother Theresa held to the principle of a convent life and above all to the constitution of the Congregation as prescribed by Bishop Wittmann was interpreted by the Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Karl August Graf von Reisach, as the obstinacy of a domineering woman, which he was determined to break once

³ Letter # 2534 of 3 January 1858

and for all. Hence, on 22 April 1852, he appeared at the Anger Convent, accompanied by his vicar general and secretary, and demanded that Mother Theresa and all the sisters of the Motherhouse immediately submit to his episcopal authority; otherwise, he threatened to excommunicate them.

There seemed to be no way out for Mother Theresa, which is why her response under the circumstances is a **shining example of spiritual wisdom, freedom and greatness**, and as such is one of the most valuable legacies she has bequeathed to us School Sisters of Notre Dame: she knelt down before the Archbishop and declared, "I shall submit to your Grace's jurisdiction, provided that this does not contradict the will of God or my conscience."⁴

In Everything She Did, She Served Life

Mother Theresa was able to be so courageous, so steadfast, and so staunchly imperturbable because she was never searching for herself; the only important issue for her was the **honor of the living God and the salvation of the people** to whom she felt committed. Her sharp intellect would always immediately perceive the core of an issue, of a need, of a task; and her heart full of love would not spare her any trial or tribulation in single-mindedly taking the right path. After meeting her once, King Ludwig I of Bavaria said, "**This lady knows what she wants, and what she wants is eminent and noble.**"⁵

From the beginning of the foundation and almost throughout her whole life, such "great thinking", such absolute determination brought Mother Theresa misunderstanding, underestimation and calumny. Again and again, she was denounced not only to the church and state authorities but also to her patrons, by those that envied her, as being arrogant, domineering and wasteful. There was even many a sister who could not follow her magnanimity and thus felt obliged to lodge a protest against her plans. This happened, for instance, **in 1838/39**: while the Congregation was still in its infancy, Mother Theresa set about establishing **the first higher school** in Amberg; a few petty-minded sisters were of the opinion that, by

⁴ Records compiled by Sister M. Foreria, Archives of the Order

⁵ Quoted from Ziegler, M. L., Mother Theresa Gerhardinger 1797-1879, p. 9

Founding such schools, all Bishop Wittmann had been aiming at was a simple, practical type of basic education for young girls in so-called "elementary schools for ordinary people". Mother Theresa opposed such narrow-minded interpretations by remaining steadfast in her conviction that the situation at the time made it absolutely essential that girls and women, especially those from the lower classes, should be educated as comprehensively as possible, in particular in foreign languages; only then would they be in a position to earn themselves a living on their own. It was precisely in this way, however, that she created the decisive preconditions for women to become independent and develop their personal freedom.

In this way, Mother Theresa spoke up for the **emancipation of women from inhumane dependence**, with determination, quite unpretentiously, as if it went without saying, and long before the first feminists entered the fray in Europe. And she did so in the same way she tackled everything: in a manner that was practical, purposeful and competent.

She was not the one to develop fancy socio-political or educational theories and write academic papers; instead, she acted quickly and energetically, wherever and whenever she saw there was a challenge to meet. She knew what her mission was and what possibilities she had – and applied them with enormous confidence in God. Once, when she was in great distress, she wrote, "When the Lord blesses us, a little bread will suffice for many".⁶

In the **female teachers' seminary** that she founded (it was, by the way, the first one in Bavaria and most probably the very first in Germany), she carefully ensured that her sisters were trained in exemplary fashion so that they would be in a position to give their best in their schools.

Together with her sisters, she addressed the various needs of the time in an attentive and adaptable way, developing **educational and training institutions tailor-made for each individual concrete situation**. She founded

- elementary schools to enable all social classes to receive a sound basic education,
- schools of further education for the additional training of young women who had left school,

⁶ Letter # 2527 of 19 December 1857

- higher schools for fostering especially gifted girls.

Possessing great empathy for the needs and deprivation of others, Mother Theresa, inventive as she was, set up a number of **out-of-school facilities**⁷, courageously sent her sisters abroad and out into the New World⁸. She especially loved and was devoted to the poor **orphans**, for whom she spared no effort in looking for ways and means to make a home for them in which they could live happily and thrive. The outstanding feature of the ministry of the first sisters was the **high quality of their work**. Mother Theresa was of the opinion that the best was only just about good enough for the children, for it was in them that she saw the chosen loved-ones of God; it was through them that she felt able to serve Jesus. Thus, it was hardly surprising that, more and more, her educational and training institutions were considered exemplary, and were very sought-after everywhere.

Today, we might well wonder how Mother Theresa was ever able to master the enormous workload that she had⁹, not to mention worrying about building up the Congregation, about the future of her foundation, and not to mention all the threats and attacks she had to fend off; to all this, there is but one answer: it was because she did everything **out of unselfish love**.

She never sought personal recognition; before making a decision, she never asked what consequences or inconvenience might arise for her personally; at all times, it was simply the "Work of God" that stood at the forefront of her work and her worries.

Above all, her letters from America to Matthias Siegert¹⁰ demonstrate quite clearly how very much she was subject to the ideas and patterns of thought prevalent at the time in her Bavarian homeland. Yet they also show how, through her love and her

⁷ For example, at a time when there was only limited transport available, she made sure that especially the higher schools were turned into boarding schools, and that children who were unable to get home at lunchtime because they lived such a long way away from school were given at least a bowl of hot soup. For the smaller children Mother Theresa established nursery schools; for children whose parents had to go out to work she set up so-called daycare centers. Here, the children and youngsters could feel safe and sound, give free rein to their excess energy whilst playing, develop their creative faculties, learn good social behavior and, not least of all, they could be supervised doing their homework.

⁸ In 1847, together with five sisters, she set out for North America; in 1858 sisters went to the Banat in Hungary and Romania, in 1864 to London.

⁹ In this context, it is well worth remembering that she was the one who not only drew up the plans for extending the Anger Convent to make it into the Motherhouse, curricula for the various types of school and the syllabi for the educational institutions; she also avidly corresponded with her sisters, with patrons of the Congregation, with bishops, kings and governments, correspondence amounting to more than 5,000 type-written sheets. In addition, she undertook strenuous, time-consuming journeys.

¹⁰ Letters # 0724 through # 0736

trust in God, she managed to break through these restrictions.

Mother Theresa was **great in contemplative prayer**. It was from her constant connection to God that she drew the enormous strength which we admire her for; this is how she summoned the courage and stamina to dare to set out on a long, arduous and extremely dangerous journey across the ocean by ship, not even 15 years after the foundation of the Congregation. It was not a thirst for adventure that motivated her, but quite simply the love for the impoverished children of German immigrants, whose education nobody cared about in a country populated predominantly by the English and the Irish. For their sake she withstood not only the great physical strain, but also the discouraging reactions of the bishops, most of whom were of Irish origin. Undaunted and patient, she put up with disappointments, setbacks, failures and humiliation, for she was well aware that she was in the service of "God's Cause".¹¹

It was Mother Theresa's unique and especial charism to convincingly fulfill in her own spiritual life the "unity of spirit" among the sisters that she was so concerned about. For her there was no separating her direct connection to God any more from her extremely active life, no separating her contemplation of an action and putting it into practise. Everything she did was proof of the connection between God and her spirit, and in everything she did this connection became visible and came to fruition.

Part 3

Our Charismatic and Spiritual Legacy as our Mission

We can basically only identify with Mother Theresa and her spirituality truly and properly if we understand it as the legacy and the mission to translate the **charism** of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in such a way that we can **apply it to today**, thereby once again making it bear fruit. Here is neither the time nor the place to reflect upon our charism in detail¹²; our task is merely to become aware that, like

¹¹ For instance, on 18 June 1848, she wrote Matthias Siegert from Buffalo: "As so much suffering, so much humiliation, etc. has befallen us, I myself expect great things." (# 0734)

¹² cf. YAS and the Call to Transformation in the 21st General Chapter

every generation of School Sisters, we have been called upon to **recognize the will of God in the signs of the times and the mission for our time today**, in order to be able to fulfil them in a determined and unconditional manner.

Our Testimony in this World

Although there are parallels, in many respects the socio-cultural conditions in which we live differ from the time of Mother Theresa and the first School Sisters, and yet they are by no means any less problematical. The comparably limited horizons people had at the time of the foundation have not least of all been widened by today's modern means of communication; this has resulted in a universal and, even for spiritual life, dangerous-looking type of globalism. We are faced with problems and deprivation that very often look to be apocalyptic, thereby tempting us to resign, as if paralyzing ourselves. We feel helpless when confronted with all the natural catastrophes that occur, the uninhibited increase in military weapons, the senselessness of war, the desperate fanaticism behind terrorism, the rise in unemployment in industrial countries, starvation and destitution of whole peoples and social injustice as it spreads throughout the world.

No less seldom, we are confused by the plurality of opinions and values; scared, resigned and depressed, we are in danger of withdrawing into the apparently safe little world of an individualized, at times even fundamentalistic type of piety – or, something that is possibly even worse, to wear ourselves down by resorting to short-term actionism without seriously thinking beforehand.

We only have our faith to set against such temptations, and the conscious memory of what we once determined, whose call we once followed, and that no more, but also no less, is expected of us than of Mother Theresa,

- namely, to **give testimony of the living and incomprehensible God**, wherever we live,
- creatively, using all means at our disposal,
- through everything we do,
- from "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1, verse 3), the God of salvation, the "God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1, verse 3), the God of absolute love.

Therefore, in Mother Theresa, God has abundantly given us the charism, in unlimited confidence in Him, the God of life, **to venture in magnanimity to do everything in order to make His kingdom apparent on this earth.**

The objective is, therefore, to **live consciously in this time** according to **our spiritual heritage in "creative fidelity"**, with boldness, in unselfish love and dedication to the Work of God, **and to carry it into the future.**

Three Main Points Seem Particularly Important in this Connection:

1. Faith Community

Mother Theresa has shown us what wonderful results can be achieved by **creatively applying** all means and talents at one's disposal within a **community**. She has shown us how the **identity of the human being**, founded in his or her distinctive individuality, is of crucial importance in the education and training of people, identity being, after all, the precondition for a person not to fall prey to the disastrous aberrations of today's world, the trend towards uninhibited individualism.

For this very reason, especially in cultures such as those of western society, the **testimony of our life in a community of faith** is of utmost importance. In actual fact, if people, in their isolation, have lost their orientation by only circling round their ego, a genuine religious community can demonstrate how the **individual**, simply because he or she is unique and only ever occurs once, **cannot develop his or her full human dignity until in a community**, thereby achieving happiness in life.

Religious life in a community stands as a symbol for the **unity of the church**, proving in a world torn apart by egoism that it is possible and necessary to live as a **"unity in diversity"**, that a feeling of safety and security can only exist in a community in which each individual entity makes his or her unique and indispensable contribution in love, freedom and responsibility.

We must therefore meet the challenge of developing up-to-date, convincing forms of religious life in a community. Whether and to what extent we succeed will most probably be a decisive factor in whether we have a future. For this reason, we should constantly be aware of the fact that **mutual social responsibility** and **permanent, open-hearted dialog** are essential parts of a credible community life.

2. Faith

There are probably hardly any great differences between the religious situation in most countries in which we live and work and the one our foundress had to cope with. In many cases, it is characterized by **scepticism, uncertainty and mistrust of authority**.

Of course, the causes of this require more detailed an analysis, and the repercussions are certainly even much more dangerous and serious than at the time of Mother Theresa. In much the same way that, in the light of faith, only a few people¹³ managed to come to terms with the ideology of the Enlightenment in order to make it fertile for religious life at the time, the church today is faced with the challenge and the threat of **pluralism** and a general **“crisis regarding God”**; this is not least of all a belated result of the failure to come to terms with the Enlightenment.

Quite a lot of church officials and the faithful think that they can overcome these existential problems and the ensuing **anxiety in people’s lives**, which finds expression in all possible types of addiction and violent action, by withdrawing into the spiritual world of the 19th century. Hence, by using directives, more or less covert threats, pressure and exclusion, they are trying to enforce what they consider to be an ideal interpretation of church and faith – and yet without success, as can be seen. On the contrary, they are achieving exactly the opposite of what they are trying to bring about: the churches are becoming more and more deserted, and religious misery is gaining supremacy. It is a fact that nobody can be won over to the cause of faith and good by force; this can be achieved instead, though, by following the convincing example of a truly faithful person.¹⁴

¹³ Of these few, mention must be made first and foremost of **Bishop Johann Michael Sailer** (1751-1832; ordination in 1875; professor in Dillingen and Ingolstadt; from 1822 suffragan bishop, from 1829 diocesan bishop of Regensburg). He was an outstanding pastoral theologian and was enthusiastically celebrated by his students. It was because he made a real effort to make a positive analysis of the ideas of the Enlightenment that he was suspected of being an “Illuminat” and bitterly attacked by his opponents. They managed to have him removed for a while from his post as professor, and in 1819 succeeded in preventing him from being nominated as Bishop of Augsburg. – The deep-seated, sound attitude of faith that speaks to us from the letters and religious texts of Mother Theresa can be unambiguously ascribed to Sailer’s influence. After all, Wittmann was his cathedral priest and suffragan bishop, and Matthias Siegert (1804-1879), the first Spiritual Father of the Congregation, was one of Sailer’s students. On his deathbed, Bishop Wittmann had asked Siegert to take care of Karolina Gerhardinger and the young community. As a result, Siegert, highly-gifted as he was, relinquished an academic career and, in unswerving allegiance to Mother Theresa, stood by her through all the perils of her arduous life. He died in 1879, only three weeks after Mother Theresa.

¹⁴ The religious philosopher and emeritus professor Eugen Biser from Munich has stressed the significance of faith for us today in one of his recent books: Eugen Biser, *Die Neuentdeckung des Glaubens* [The Rediscovery of Faith], Stuttgart 2004

Mother Theresa and Mother M. Caroline Friess, the great School Sisters' pioneer in America, were in a very special way **women of faith**. That is why they were convincing, that is why they managed to achieve a great piece of work, despite all the resistance and setbacks they had to face. Because they really believed, they were able, in trusting in God, to venture – and to complete - the almost impossible. We, too, are called on to **venture out in faith**: nowadays of course, especially in the "old world" where we originated, this is usually not to set up new communities and missions, but to give away and pass on our works to others who are in a position to continue them. Hence, we must place the crucial accents of our spiritual life today on **letting go**, on venturing out into a dark, highly uncertain future; the stress is also on faithfully **accepting that the average age of sisters in our communities is increasing** – in the trust that the Lord will fulfil his **prophecy** with us **of the grain of wheat** falling to the ground.¹⁵

It is evident that our times need this testimony of faith: all the people who are suffering from their own uncertainty and lack of success, and suffering under the injustice and abuse of power in the world and in the church need it, and the people who despair of the sense of their lives need it, too.

3. Life

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"¹⁶: this is how Jesus understood his mission.

We who are resolved to follow him have, therefore, ultimately no other task than to live and bear witness to the fullness of life through Christ¹⁷, which means doing so in this world, our world, a world that paradoxically hungers for life and at the same time destroys life to an extent hitherto unknown.

The **fullness of life** – that is the conscious, determined and loving acceptance of the present moment, of its challenge and fulfilment, of its distress and joy, of its freedom and its peace, and ultimately in all of this the confident expectation of everlasting life in God.

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¹⁵ John 12, verse 24

¹⁶ John 10, verse 10

¹⁷ That we must live and testify to the fullness of life is ultimately what we are called upon to do by the "Call to Transformation" of 16 October 2002.

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Appendix: Synoptic Table of Important Dates

Translated by Philip Wade