

Bishop Michael Sailer¹

CONTROVERSY AND RECOGNITION

During his entire career as a teacher, Sailer experienced attacks, slander, police surveillance even of his correspondence, his travels, and his visits; at the same time he received confidence, high esteem respect, and love from his friends. How highly Sailer was regarded as a teacher may be seen from the fact that between 1802 and 1812 he received offers of a teaching position from Klagenfurt, Heidelberg, Wuerttemberg, Muenster/Westphalia, Lucerne, and Breslau, with annual salaries between three and four thousand talers. He refused all these offers, as he wrote a friend, "Simply so that I could work myself to death for the education of the youth of my fatherland."

SAILER, WITTMANN AND SUPPORTERS OF THERESA GERHARDINGER

"Ah, my dearest friend! Into what times we have fallen! Who can rescue the good and the friends of the good from the confusion and the rubbish among which the good is lying! Who else, but the all-knowing mercy of our Lord?"

"In this truly serious and soon to be decisive situation, a situation that is becoming still more critical through the activity of the most terrible revolution in the greatest Kingdom [France and the French Revolution] and through its world-wide consequences is becoming more critical, more inflammatory, more animated by all the tricks of the Evil One – in this situation, my noble friend, what more can we do than suffer, sigh, pray, here and there rescue a brand from Hell, unite ourselves daily more closely with the Lord, keep our eyes open for any sign from him and wait – until his mercy flows in streams and he lets His Church shine forth once again in light and beauty, to the joy of all the angels and the comfort of all good men. Naturally, uncountable wishes arise in every person who has become conscious of his own existence; naturally the busy hands of Martha are working to prepare a feast for the Lord; naturally our eyes look around the countryside to see whether help is coming from the hills; naturally every farmer does what he can to uproot the weeds, to dry up the puddles, to plant the wilderness, to harvest the wheat – but the enemy no longer sows his seed only at night; he sows his weeds in broad daylight, and there is hardly anyone who can control him or prevent him. The watchmen sleep by day and see not by night.

"I thank God that here and there he lets a soul like you work effectively without one or the other party being able to bind your two hands. For this grace may you be alert. The whole spirit-world is enduring the pains of labor, and oh, that the child of God, the Kingdom of God, were very soon to be born in its loveliness and its beauty."

Thus wrote Michael Sailer during his exile in Ebersbert in December, 1796, to Wittmann, Rector of the seminary in Regensburg. The friendship between these two men had already lasted a long time, and now they were to spend their last years, rich in blessing, together in Regensburg. These two priests were completely different characters, the one (Sailer) always happy, loving companionship, and ready for a joke, the child of God, "big, pious, jolly, playful,

¹ *Light, Life, Love (Motto of Bishop Sailer) Bishop Sailer and His Friends: Their Significance for the School Sisters of Notre Dame*, by Sister Appolinaris Joergens, SSND, 1953. Trans. by Sister Anne Winkelmann, SSND.

tender, frisky, dashing, praying and hugging everybody,” as Clemens Brentano described him in a letter to Louise Hensel, and the quiet, retiring, serious, stern confessor, the “Hermit,” as the same Brentano wrote to Margarete Verflassen at the Brede; and both valued each other with mutual respect. Both strove with great good will for the same goal: the honor of God and the salvation of souls. However different these two priests seem to us, still there are astonishingly many similarities between them.

Wittmann was able to study with the Jesuits only until his thirteenth year, for the order was suppressed by the Pope in 1773.

SAILER’S TEACHING AND MOTHER THERESA

As the 18th century turned the corner to the 19th, the entire educational system in the German countries suffered a sad decline. The elementary schools were particularly affected. In areas under the control of bishops the schools had for decades been the responsibility of the parishes. After the secularization, however, it was no longer possible for the parishes to carry out this task, and what kind of teachers were found in the schools? “Day laborers, tradesmen, corrupt students, invalids whose courage disguised their appearance, a courage that had to substitute for other advantages; men, some of them without knowledge, some without moral uprightness, some without either, everywhere wielded the scepter in the schools – and this was identical with the rod, the bell rope, the horse whip, the mule goad, and other instruments of torture which were in charge of education.”

And from Bavaria in 1803 we hear: “A sullen face, a loud voice, a litany of abusive words, a strong fist and a tough hazel stick – these are the foundation of school discipline.

“No explanation, no exercise of the thinking powers, only mechanical daily cramming, repetition of prayers that are not understood, monotonous reading of material that is not grasped, copying from the catechism, not a trace of stylistic practice; here and there, in a really good school, a little reckoning,”

The “upper classes” frankly feared education for the broad masses, as one learns from a letter of Voltaire: “I thank you for refusing education to the working class. I, who cultivate only one farm, need day-laborers, not tonsured secretaries.” Thus Voltaire to the French Procurator-General.

At the same time there could be found men who endeavored to improve the situation. With great determination Professor Sailer of Dillingen and later of Landshut followed up the various efforts being made in the field of pedagogy. He became familiar with the attempts of Basedow and Salzmann, studied the work of Rousseau, and exchanged letters with Pestalozzi.

Highly as Sailer regarded the efforts of these pedagogues, he missed one important point in them all: an education growing from the root of Christian faith. Already as a young tutor in Ingolstadt he had written a prize essay in which he declared: “The education of children is the greatest need of mankind, the most pressing concern of the state, the most worth-while business of religion.” According to Sailer, education included instruction and character formation. Already in this early work Sailer called readiness for service the “noblest branch of

love of neighbor” and saw a tolerant attitude as the “most beautiful feature in the character of a member of society.”

He summarized: “All disturbances in society that arise from trifles (and do not most of them thus arise?) are the fruit of idleness, of a lack of tolerance, are failures of education.”

In 1807, when Sailer published his work, Education for Educators he was in communication with other like-minded educators, above all with Wittmann and Overberg. The mutual influence of these three great teachers cannot be estimated.

It is clear that Rector Wittmann handed on to his students the teachings of Sailer, for of course the priests in their parishes had to support the teachers by word and deed, often, indeed, had to educate them. It is equally to be assumed that during the years 1809-1812 and even later during their further training, Wittmann, the cathedral pastor and local school inspector, had acquainted his three beginning teachers with Sailer’s ideas. If the young Caroline Gerhardinger learned to overcome her distaste for the teaching profession and to look upon her work as God-given, then, next to the teaching and example of Wittmann, Sailer’s pedagogy must be accorded a substantial share of credit. In Caroline’s work, life, and teaching, as well as in that of the future General Superior, Mother Theresa, Sailer’s teaching stands out clearly.

DIEPENBROCK AND SAILER²

In her Journal Ludowine von Haxghausen has given an exact account of “Papa Diepenbrock.” She wrote: “In 1817 [Ludowine wrote “1818” –at that time Sailer’s friends hoped he would receive the bishop’s throne in Cologne.] Michael Sailer arrived, coming from Cologne where he had been surrounded by Catholic and Protestant friends, and stopped at Bocholt to visit Diepenbrock, and from there to go to Muenster, to Stolberg. [According to Schiel Sailer’s visits occurred the other way round.] From the lips of dear Papa Diepenbrock I myself heard of Michael Sailer’s visit in the year 1818. His son Melchior’s frame of mind at this period was causing him much worry, he said, he had become despondent, so irritable, so moody, moreover he himself had no idea what he wanted to make of his life. Sometimes he would say he wanted to go to America, sometimes he’d go hunting with other young men, going wherever he would meet with other young people, and always he was the leader of the group, usually in pursuit of foolishness. Then the good God caused Michael Sailer, on a visit to Stolberg, and his circle of friends there, to visit at the Diepenbrocks as well. The whole house was filled with joy; Apollonia was busy setting out fruit for dessert, her older brother Bernhard, too, was busy in the house; then this brother (Melchior) came in from a walk and asked in amazement, ‘Well, now, what’s going on here?’ Apollonia: ‘Haven’t you heard? Papa is just delighted because Sailer is coming for dinner.’ ‘Well, then, there’ll probably be a half-dozen black skirts here; I’m going out riding.’ Apollonia now used all her affection, all her persuasive powers, to induce Melchior at least to come to the table, for their parents, she said, would be distressed if he were not there. To this he finally agreed, on condition that he could sit next to her at the foot of the table very quietly and unnoticed. That was promised him and he remained in the background when Sailer arrived soon afterwards and was immediately surrounded by the family. After the first

² Melchior Diepenbrock later became one of Mother Theresa’s most faithful supporters. See footnote #3 at end of section.

greetings were over Papa Diepenbrock took Sailer with him. Alone and with many tears he complained to the esteemed priest of the unhappy attitude of his son, Melchior. Sailer comforted him, saying: 'It's often a good sign and shows inner strength and fire when the new wine in the cask swells up and bubbles over; when the fermentation is complete you usually have the best and the clearest wine. Pray and have patience; some day you will be very proud of this son of yours.' Now it was time to go to the table. There Sailer was most pleasant, talked about his travels, told stories about his youth, and Melchior, who listened without saying a word, thought that was a different kind of priest from those he had spoken with earlier. After the meal while Papa Dieipenbrock enjoyed his after-dinner nap, Sailer took Melchior by the arm and went walking with him. It was during this walk that Sailer knocked so warmly and insistently on the heart of young Melchior that the youth poured out his whole heart and showed the priest all the dissatisfaction in his soul and how his whole life seemed so useless that he would have like to throw it away. Sailer said, 'Pull yourself loose and begin a new life in good earnest.' They were almost back at the house when Melchior said he didn't know where he should go and how he should begin. Then Sailer said, 'Come to me,' and as Papa Diepenbrock had now come up to them, Sailer said to him, "Dear Papa, you must give me your paternal right in this son of yours and send him to me very soon.' And to Melchior: 'Come to me and I will be a father to you.' Then in tears the two fathers embraced, and afterwards Sailer took Melchior into his arms.'

On the morning after his conversation with Sailer, Melchior von Diepenbrock, not quite 20 years old at that time (born in 1798) and in the opinion of Clemens Brentana "a pot without a handle that no one knew how to take hold of," knelt for the first time in seven years in the confessional and then received Holy Communion. Full of joy he told his mother, "Now I have found what I was looking for a long time. But he had still not come fully to rest. Only long afterwards he expressed his gratitude for what had happened: "After God, I have Clemens to thank that I found Sailer, for to him I owe everything."

After Sailer left, Melchior felt quite alone. Soon Bocholt, the town near his father's estate, could no longer hold him, and he went to Landshut to be near Sailer. At the university he began to study political science but found no satisfaction in it. In 1819 he returned to his parents' home and after a visit with Anna Katherine Emmerich he went to Mainz to enter the seminary there. But still he was drawn to Sailer, and when Sailer was named a canon in Regensburg, Diepenbrock transferred there from Mainz. But there, too, he had to endure many difficulties. For a time the authorities doubted his vocation. During this period he wrote to his sister Apollonia, "Pray hard for me that I may become a good priest or die before [ordination]."

Two years under the guidance of Rector Wittmann and near to his "Father" Sailer brought him to his goal. What a joy it must have been for Sailer when in 1823 he administered the sacrament of Holy Orders to young Diepenbrock. Sailer did not want to part from this young priest, but kept him close to himself as his secretary, his spiritual son and brother. Yes, he even declared that without the assistance of young Diepenbrock he would not have had the courage to accept the duty of bishop. The impetuous Diepenbrock no doubt caused the gentle Sailer some uneasiness; once he remarked of him: "When the horse is riding him, he overthrows everything – even me."

It was Diepenbrock too, who composed Sailer's first pastoral letter. And as he read it aloud to him, the Bishop exclaimed: "How foolish it would be, after all, for an old man like me, if I

were to try to pull my own sword out of its rusty scabbard, when God has girded me with this bright new dagger.” And to Brentano he wrote, “Diepenbrock is a real angel to me. He lends me his pen, his head, and his heart.”

The young priest Diepenbrock felt that he was slowly retracing his steps back to the pleasant valley of faith, although in spite of the sincere approval that the Bishop showed him, he still had to fight through many a personal battle and still saw ‘in the narrow valley many steep, inflexible, and rocky peaks filled with crevasses.’ Still he hoped that the valley would gradually grow wider, the road smoother, more fruitful and homelike. He strove so valiantly to imitate his model and bishop Sailer, that very soon it could be said of him, “His strongest opponents are the first to receive courtesies from him: And there were even people who thought “This Diepenbrock will surely become Pope.” He did not advance quite that far, but died as Cardinal and Prince-Bishop of Breslau....As Bishop Wittmann lay dying, he named Diepenbrock as the one whom he would like to pass on his crozier: “He is still young, and has his human faults, but he is in possession of all the qualities for which a bishop has to pray to God.”

SAILER’S FRIENDS AND THE POOR SCHOOL SISTERS

The poor and difficult beginnings of the “Work of God” in Neunburg found astonishingly many helpers. After the unexpected death of Father Job, Mother Theresa could turn confidently to Bishop Schwaebel, the immediate successor of Sailer and Wittmann as Bishop of Regensburg. This “spiritual kinsman” of Sailer, like his former teacher, recognized the necessity of a thorough-going education for women, above all a religious training. He had taken seriously the teaching of Sailer directed to him personally: “...to rule over one’s self in order to present the image of the highest ruler, that is the supreme art, perfect virtue, perfect religion....In the measure to which egoism is fought, to that extent love is victorious....The death of egoism is the life of love....The divine in the human has been expressed most perfectly and most purely, and it is called Christ....Does my glance become clearer, sharper, each day, my heart better prepared, my goal purer, my will stronger – my interior more like to God and Christ? –Material enough for self-examination!”

With great good will Schwaebel as Bishop of Regensburg gave the required ecclesiastical permissions to begin Mother Theresa’s work.

Support from the side of the government came to her from King Ludwig I, Sailer’s former pupil and devoted admirer. Although he was full of ideas about a state church, ideas that conformed to the movements current at that time, that is, he cherished as a basic principle the belief that the Church must be subordinate to the state, he gave Mother Theresa’s foundation many freedoms that other orders did not receive to the same degree; e.g., he freed her from the necessity of giving proof concerning the capital and property of the order and of its future members. Throughout his life he remained on a well-nigh friendly basis with Mother Theresa.

The King’s personal physician, Professor Ringseis, who together with his friends had in Lundshut “philosophized themselves into a loss of faith and, under the influence of Sailer’s lectures in religion and his personal influence, had emerged again,” was with his wife Emilie,

(Frederica) one of the first and most active benefactors of the small, impoverished community of Mother Theresa's Sisters in Neunburg. As a student he had come under the influence of the "magic of that love and that spirit" that Sailer, this "unusual man" so richly practiced. Emilie von Ringseis was often called "Mother" by Mother Theresa. She outfitted the poor little convent in Neunburg and was never weary of sending boxes and chests to Neunburg. She forgot nothing that was proper to a middle-class household. And, shortly after the foundation of the young Congregation, both Professor and Mrs. Ringseis took pains to obtain School Sisters for Schwarzhofen, the professor's home parish. With deep concern these benefactors of the young community followed up the slanders that very early began to circulate about the foundress and her actions. Emilie was happy indeed when she could refute all the charges in a long newspaper article.

In her very first efforts to establish a cloistered society Mother Theresa found a capable helper in Edward von Schenk, Sailer's student and friend, who at the time was in charge of educational matters in the Ministry of the Interior, Munich. Later, as President of the Government in Regensburg, he knew how to oppose all the ill will that threatened Mother Theresa from the Parliament. He knew how to rebut the demands of members of the government, and he gladly and quickly gave government permission for the establishment of new missions by the young community. He also helped to obtain financial support for the erection of these new daughter houses.

It was friends and pupils of Sailer who, as pastors, concerned themselves to see that School Sisters undertook the education of their girls. And it was George von Oetzl, Sailer's student in Landshut; who in 1841 supported Mother Theresa in her search for a suitable motherhouse in Munich. He also supported her against the demands of Archbishop von Gebattel and Ludwig I. As cathedral dean he remained a friend of the order and later, as Bishop of Eichstaett, supported Mother Theresa in her struggle about her rule against Archbishop Count Reisach.

To the bishops who supported and furthered Mother Theresa and her work belongs Bishop Valentin Riedel, Schwaebel's successor in Regensburg, whom Sailer, years before, had recommended to the King as professor of theology for the University of Munich.

Alexander, Prince Hohenlohe, too, for whose first Mass Sailer had given the festive address, together with his relatives, belonged to the circle of bishops and cardinals who took the foundress's side in the controversy about the rule. His relative, Cardinal Gustave, Prince Hohenlohe-Schillingsfuerst, entrusted to the School Sisters the boarding school with advanced classes for girls and the elementary school in Schillingfuerst. It was he, too, who saved the order during the Kulturkampf by his intervention with Bismarck, saved it from dissolution owing to an alleged relationship with the Jesuits!

Not least in this list of names belongs that of Cardinal von Diepenbrock, who already as a young priest had become acquainted with the teacher of the girls' school and the foundress in Stadtamhof, who as cathedral provost in Regensburg had supported Mother Theresa's activities there, and who as Prince-Bishop of Breslau asked for School Sisters for his diocese. The early death of the Cardinal of whom it was once said, "He will be Pope some day" was a hard blow to Mother Theresa. By his death she lost a loyal friend who had supported the erection and spread of convents just as his esteemed "Father-Bishop" Sailer had done.

When Professor Conrad Martin was called to the Bishop's throne in Paderborn, he may well have rejoiced to see School Sisters already at work in his diocese. Of Sailer he had said, "In Bavaria it was especially Sailer who injected a new breath of life into theological learning. He stood precisely at the peak point of his eminence as I was a student in Munich. He was generally respected and this respect extended even to the highest circles; King Ludwig, for example, himself knew no loftier ideal of a Catholic bishop. But his numerous writings...were immediately swallowed with a voracious appetite...so that these writings were a lighthouse to thousands upon thousands of souls whose faith had been endangered and who were thereby enabled once more to find the right path; they were indeed instruments in the hand of divine Providence through which a better theological tendency as been prepared and introduced; this, I think, even the devil would have to admit." ³

³ In 1852, Bishops shared their testimony regarding support of Mother Teresa's version of the Holy Rule and their satisfaction with the education of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. These were sent to Pope Pius IX. Cardinal Melchior Diepenbrock, the Prince-Bishop of Breslau, was the first to sign. He was deathly sick at the time. "After I learned the admirable and wise intentions of the two Reverend Founders of this Congregation and followed the wonderful spread of the latter in Germany and America with great sympathy; after I possessed an affiliated house in my own diocese, which exceeded all my expectations; furthermore, since I know the bonds of love, honor, renunciation and trust, from the bed of suffering on which the Lord has held me stretched for more than a half-year, I venture to present this petition to the Holy Apostolic See: that His Holiness may, in his great wisdom, support the original organization of this Congregation and approve it convinced as I am, that each substantial change and above all the loosening of the bond of unity and sub-regency under a Superior-General will destroy this glorious Institute and assist in its early dissolution, which God forbid." As witness of their agreement with the petition of the Prince-Bishop the following ecclesiastics signed the Outline of the Rule: The Bishops of Regensburg, Eichstaett, Passau, Wuerzburg, Paderborn, Leitmeritz, Budweis; and the Cardinal-Archbishop of Prague. Ziegler, pp.199-200.