

[After March 21, 1852]

J! M!

Most Holy Father!<sup>1</sup>

Twenty years ago, Bishop Michael Wittmann of Regensburg gathered a group of several young women with the intention of entrusting the elementary schools for girls to a religious teaching order at a time in Bavaria when secular male teachers usually taught the girls just as they taught the boys. As a result of the extraordinary concern and efforts of this bishop and his friend,<sup>2</sup> this goal was finally reached in a small, little-known town in Bavaria,<sup>3</sup> where the first school for girls was entrusted to these young women who later became a religious family with the name, *Poor School Sisters*.

Amid countless adversities, the all-gracious and all-powerful God helped this institute so wonderfully that the family flourished. Through the efforts of King Louis I of Bavaria and the financial assistance of five Bavarian bishops,<sup>4</sup> the motherhouse was later transferred from that small town to the city of Munich. Today, after almost 20 years, the Society of the Poor School Sisters has spread throughout Germany and has even taken root in North America so that there are now 42 mission houses with 208 professed members teaching 12,000 girls. We trust that this number will increase daily for the benefit of the Church.

His Majesty, King Maximilian II of Bavaria, visited our schools repeatedly. A few days ago, he issued a mandate by virtue of which the district governments and city councils of the entire kingdom were urged to make every possible effort to entrust all the schools for girls to our sisters.

In this decree, our king expressed his great concern about countering and mitigating the terrible and alarming impoverishment of the people. This endeavor could find the greatest success if children in the elementary schools would be thoroughly instructed in Christian teachings and proper morals. Based on long experience, it is certain “that the Poor School Sisters are the most qualified for the attainment of this goal.”

Anyone who is intent on the advancement and salvation of souls, especially in our times, cannot help but rejoice greatly

over this. Recently however, actions have been taken by Church personnel that present a serious obstacle to the zealous endeavors of those who strive to reach this goal.

Ever since this religious institute began, our sisters professed their holy vows and lived as religious according to the *Notre Dame Rule* approved by Pope Innocent X. Those rules were compiled for the direction of only one house, however, and contain several points that must be changed in accordance with the circumstances of our times. It was the intention of the founders that we would first walk the path of experience, then revise the old rule in accordance with that experience, and finally submit the revised rule to the Holy See.

During the past three months, just as we were drawing up those constitutions in accordance with our experience of the past 20 years, the archbishop of Munich<sup>5</sup> ordered us to do things that are completely contrary to our previous practice. These things cannot help but undermine the existence of our society—which certainly did not spread as it did in such a short time through human efforts alone—and tear apart the wonderful unity that until now bound together all the missions, even those across the ocean.

This same archbishop wants to separate from the motherhouse all the branch houses located outside Bavaria and sever them from their original trunk. He issued an order regarding the mission in Rottenburg in the kingdom of Württemberg whereby:

1. “The superior of the society<sup>6</sup> will not interfere in any way in the discipline of the sisters, or in things pertaining to the convent, or in the education of the children.

2. “The sisters’ confessor in Rottenburg must be considered as the archbishop’s personal appointee.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the superior of the society must solemnly order the sisters to inform the confessor or ‘inspector’ of all that is happening in the convent and to obey him.

3. “The Rottenburg mission must be made independent as soon as possible because the situation demands it.”

To confirm this, we are enclosing a copy of the archbishop’s order.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, according to this order, a certain sister, whom the superior of the society had placed in charge of the Rottenburg house, was to be recalled.<sup>9</sup> A certain other sister,<sup>10</sup>

whom both the superior and the entire chapter, which was called especially for this purpose, did not consider suitable, was to take the place of the former “by virtue of the obedience owed to the archbishop.”

The superior did this, but only under pressure of moral constraint in order to avoid punishment for “disobedience.” In consideration of the misgivings of her conscience and the well-being of the society, she protested against all the consequences.

According to a conversation held with the archbishop of Munich, it is certain that soon he will send back to Württemberg all the young women from there who are now postulants or candidates in our motherhouse in Munich so that the house in Württemberg will achieve his goal of independence. We have no less reason to doubt that this will happen soon, because the archbishop already had us draw up a list of the names of these young women and provide him with other related information, which can be seen from the enclosed document that we had copied from the original.

If this mandate, which has no canonical basis, must be obeyed, then nothing would prevent us at some time or another from being forced to dismiss all the candidates from other countries if the archbishop thinks it expedient. That would certainly cause the downfall of the association whose excellent structure is dependent on missions.

In response to this situation, we submitted the following: If the mission in Württemberg, which is connected with us, has been in existence for only one year, and has only three sisters, demands independence, we would prefer to withdraw the sisters we sent there and make room for another religious institute, because such independence would dissolve the unity of our association.

Therefore, the superior of the association negotiated with the bishop of Rottenburg regarding the recall of the sisters and personally ordered the sisters to return at the end of the semester.

When the archbishop of Munich heard this, however, he ordered “that the superior of the association should not dare to recall any sister unless he has given her instructions to do so. Moreover, without his knowledge, she may not have any contact with the sisters sent to Rottenburg. Therefore, she must write again to the sisters and tell them that they are not

obliged to obey the superior of the association, and that they should stay there as long as the archbishop of Munich determines.”

The archbishop imposed this order on us under the obedience owed to a bishop, just as he did the first one.<sup>11</sup> Without previous notification and under pain of excommunication if she refused to comply, he demanded that the superior write a statement of obedience within an hour. Although the superior was not even allowed to speak for herself in any way, she immediately obeyed in the manner shown in the enclosed copy. With such an order, however, the mission in Rottenburg was actually separated from us. Since a similar order could sever the rest of the missions outside of Bavaria, the superior stated that the only path open to her was that of submitting to the Holy See a plea for help.

In our grief, we also asked the advice of prudent persons, including cardinals,<sup>12</sup> who expressed their deepest regret over this situation. Besides God, we have no other help than the Peter who keeps the entire Church in unity, who endeavors to keep the same unity in all the Church institutes, and who binds to unity many families of women religious, for example, the Religious of the Sacred Heart or the Sisters of Charity, and through this unity preserves their vitality.

It was only because of the urgent necessity that we stated all of this first. Now we ask Your Holiness:

1. Whether, by virtue of his power of jurisdiction, the archbishop of Munich can release sisters who made perpetual profession and are working in another diocese from the vow of obedience which they professed with his consent and placed into the hands of the superior of the association? Furthermore, can he separate them from the motherhouse against their will?

2. Whether any other bishop can do the same thing to the sisters in his diocese?

3. Whether, by virtue of his power of jurisdiction, the archbishop of Munich can appoint an authorized commissary for our sisters who were sent to America and who would then be completely subject to this commissary by virtue of obedience?<sup>13</sup>

4. Whether the general superior, whom the founders appointed and who, with the consent of all her sisters and without any objection on the part of the bishops, has held her

office until the present day, is bound to refrain completely from visiting the branch houses and from interfering in their internal affairs and conventual discipline?

5. Whether the general superior is bound to obey the bishop's order to dismiss the candidates who are not from Bavaria, even if these young women want to remain in the association and have done nothing wrong?

6. Whether the general superior can be prevented from sending, transferring, or recalling a sister whom she wants or ought to send, transfer, or recall (with the consent of the respective bishop), unless she first obtains permission from the archbishop of Munich for every single case, which often would be impossible?

7. Whether the superior may administer and govern the association in the way that has been approved by all the respective bishops until Your Holiness approves the revised constitution, the main points of which have already been compiled and are enclosed?

Our sisters, most of whom receive their education and formation from the motherhouse at great expense, place their vows into the hands of the superior. If the general superior is not free to visit the mission houses, the discipline and unity of the institute cannot be maintained. Moreover, the continued existence of these mission houses depends on mutual help in the areas of personnel and material necessities. After our long experience, therefore, it seems to us that the superior must have the right to govern the personnel and to manage the affairs of the houses of the association.

Nevertheless, we state our willingness to submit to Your Holiness's wise decision in all these matters.

The ominous things that we mentioned have arisen chiefly because we do not have the benefit of a protector appointed by Your Holiness. Danger is imminent, and therefore we submit our plea that Your Holiness would graciously appoint as our protector the newly named Cardinal Morichini<sup>14</sup> as soon as possible. This cardinal is already somewhat acquainted with our religious institute, and his protection would give us great joy and consolation.

We cannot end our petitions without stating that what we mentioned in this letter was not in any way meant to be a

complaint. We only wanted to familiarize Your Holiness with the necessity of our questions first.

*Mary Theresa of Jesus*  
Superior of the Society

*Mary Foreria [Schiesser]*  
*Mary Ludovica [Pfahler]*  
*Mary Sabina [Mayrl]*  
Assistants

*Letters of Mary Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger*, translation and notes by Mary Ann Kuttner, SSND, vol. 3, *Jolted and Joggled, 1849-1852* (Elm Grove, Wisconsin, 2009), 107-113.

- 
1. Giovanni Maria Mastai Ferretti (1792-1878), Pope Pius IX (1846-78)
  2. Fr. Francis Sebastian Job
  3. Neunburg vorm Wald
  4. The cost of remodeling and expanding the motherhouse in Munich was estimated at 96,000 florin (\$38,400). King Louis I asked that two-thirds of this sum (66,000 florin or \$26,400) would come from the surplus revenue of the Catholic Church Foundation. Five Bavarian bishops agreed to this. See Ziegler, *Magd des Herrn*, 155.
  5. Carl August von Reisach (1800-69), Archbishop of Munich and Freising (1846-56)
  6. Mother Theresa
  7. Dr. Joseph Mast, Seminary Regent in Rottenburg
  8. On January 31, 1852, Archbishop Reisach responded with the written order that “within 24 hours,” Mother Theresa was “to present the letter in which she recalls Sister Radegundis Bruder.” Since Mother Theresa stated in her letter of January 15 that she did not have another sister to replace Sister Radegundis in Rottenburg, Archbishop Reisach ordered her to appoint Sister Rosa as provisional superior. He himself would send the letter to Bishop Lipp, consult with him, and settle the affair. (Munich, Autograph) 16854
  9. Sister M. Radegundis Bruder
  10. Sister M. Rosa Franz
  11. In a statement of February 2, 1852, Archbishop Reisach wrote to Mother Theresa (1) that anyone who does not want to obey can always hide behind the pretext of conscience and conviction, and that he did not order anything contrary to the laws of God or the Church, (2) that the order does not have an approved rule prescribing the governance of the mission houses, (3) that where there is no obedience, the spirit of God is not present, and therefore “her work” cannot be called “God’s work,” and (4) that Mother Theresa was to draw up the obedience as he ordered on February 1, “that is, to recall Radegundis without any additional comment, and to appoint Rosa as superior for the time being.” See Ziegler, *Kampf um die Regel*, 57-58.
  12. Prince Frederick von Schwarzenberg (1809-85), Cardinal and Archbishop of Prague (1850-85), and Melchior Joseph von Diepenbrock (1798-1853), Cardinal and Prince Bishop of Breslau (1845-53)
  13. The reference is unclear. One biography of Mother Theresa states: “About the same time he [Archbishop Reisach] suggested to a prominent member of the Redemptorist Order in America that he accept in his stead the

---

direction of all the houses belonging to the School Sisters in America. Thus he wished to take from Mother Teresa all jurisdiction over the American branch houses of the Order. But the Redemptorist declared that he could not accept this office without the consent of his Superiors in Rome; the Archbishop himself might apply there and obtain this faculty for him; but no further steps were taken towards this end.” See Friess, *Life*, 222.

14. Carlo Luigi Morichini (1805-79) was the apostolic nuncio to Germany from 1845 until 1847. He was made cardinal on March 15, 1852. At the time this letter was written, he was a member of the Roman Curia.