

1275: *To Pope Pius IX*

[December 9, 1852]

J! M!

Most Holy Father!

The Sacred Congregation sent Archbishop Carl August Count von Reisach's plan with regard to the rule and constitutions of the Poor School Sisters to the respectfully undersigned with the directive to comment on it and then to present these remarks to the Holy See.

Since I considered this responsibility too serious and too extensive for me to handle alone, I felt obliged to share the plan with my companions, the professed sisters, in order to hear their opinions and advice, because this would involve all of us for time and eternity. The sisters also need to know about this plan, because if it is accepted, they would have to profess their vows and live according to it.

After consultation with the sisters, I now submit the following remarks regarding the plan graciously shared with us:

1. The archbishop drew up this plan and presented it to the Holy See in order to provide the Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters with a canonical form and foundation—that is, statutes approved by the Church—a caring endeavor which we recognize with respect and gratitude.

2. The Society of the Poor School Sisters does not want to evade Church prescripts. The Poor School Sisters desire absolutely nothing other than to live in accordance with the mind and spirit of the Holy Catholic Church so that it can follow its calling on a secure path and count on God's blessing and help.

3. Just as every order has its own statutes and rules corresponding to the purpose designated by its founders, the Poor School Sisters also desire and require a constitution and rules that provide for their main purpose, that is, the education and character formation of girls and young women. Rather than hindering this purpose, the canonical form makes its greater achievement that much easier.

4. Therefore, the founders of the Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters laid the foundation by using the rules and statutes which Peter Fourier drew up for the *Congrégation Notre-Dame* and which the Church approved. They were

applied to the extent that they were compatible with the purpose and the number of the Poor School Sisters, as well as with other relative conditions. The religious institute was adapted to our times so that the Poor School Sisters could establish smaller mission houses with fewer personnel wherever Divine Providence calls them (if they are allowed to work in these places). Since they do this in order to provide the blessings of a church-related school and educational institute for girls and young women, especially in those places where a lack of funds and buildings make them inaccessible to other religious institutes, the Poor School Sisters are meeting a need in our times.

5. With reverence, joy, and consolation, we have kept the essentials of the rule of the *Congrégation Notre-Dame* until now. Some changes to this constitution were necessary, however, so that the Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters could fulfill its true purpose in accordance with the spirit and will of the founders. The constitution of the old rule is suitable only for large houses—actually convents that form a self-contained whole. As far as schools are concerned, this constitution has a structure that is completely at variance with our times.

6. I allowed changes in the rule only if they were in accordance with the spirit of the founders, if they were necessary for the successful fulfillment of the most important task of the religious institute, and if they did not pose a threat or were not detrimental to the sisters' virtue and religious commitment. These changes were never allowed without the knowledge and consent of the respective bishop. I have always been very careful about not infringing on the character of a religious society, and I believe I can rest assured that, up to now, we did not violate any Church precepts through the manner in which we have fulfilled our main purpose. Otherwise, the bishops would not have accepted the religious institute into their respective dioceses, tolerated it for so long, or even less, approved of it.

7. It is true that, until now, these changes in the old rule and constitution had only episcopal approval and lacked the sanction of Your Holiness. The founders entrusted that responsibility entirely to me and firmly bound me to test first the need and appropriateness of these changes. The very nature of this task required that we prove the worth of these

changes through sufficient experience before seeking permanent approval so that we would not bind ourselves prematurely to something from which we would later need to be released because it was unsuitable.

8. The Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters expanded only gradually and, scarcely a decade ago, obtained a suitable motherhouse in Munich through the generosity of His Majesty, King Louis I.¹ Since the religious institute was only then able to develop fully and gather necessary experience, it was neither possible nor advisable to apply earlier for apostolic sanction.

We still must leave it up to your wise decision as to whether this religious institute is ready for a definitive form; whether its structure up to now, as formulated in the order's statutes and rule, is approved by the Church; whether it must be modified; and if so, what points must be modified.

9. The respectfully undersigned is convinced that this could have happened only now because:

a. Through 20 years of experience, the structure up to now proved that it corresponds completely to the specific purpose of the order. This is already confirmed by the testimonials submitted to Your Holiness. Our merciful God looked favorably upon the work of the Poor School Sisters that was carried out within this structure and visibly blessed it. Praise and thanks be to God, the religious institute has gained complete trust in all the places where its 47 houses are established and in all its diverse branches of education. We now have more than 40 applications from schools, parishes, and bishops for the establishment of new houses, both at home and abroad.

b. If the royal government had not helped us by withdrawing male teachers from elementary schools for girls so that these schools could be transferred to the Poor School Sisters, the new religious order would never have had the opportunity to develop its effective work. The government never gave so much as an admonition to our structure up to now. On the contrary, in a royal decree to all the district governments and city councils in the land, the reigning king of Bavaria, Maximilian II, in whose country our main motherhouse is located, expressly declared that, wherever possible, the Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters be given charge of

all the schools for girls in Bavaria. The state was to use all available means to further the introduction and expansion of the religious institute because this institute had proved itself capable of vigorously curbing immorality and the resulting poverty.

c. Up to now, the bishops of those dioceses where our houses have been established have never voiced any reservations from the Church's standpoint about the structure but approved it instead and, with good reason, expressed their fear that the institute that has been so blessed by God would be destroyed and disband if it would be essentially changed.

d. Finally, all my companion sisters who professed perpetual vows and lived within the structure up to now unanimously asked me to submit our petition that, through apostolic approbation, Your Holiness would grant canonical sanction to our constitution (an outline of which we respectfully presented to you).

10. Since the archbishop's plan relative to our religious institute is not based on experience and does not consider specifically our vocation of education and character formation of girls and young women, it is not meant for a religious institute with our chief purpose. The archbishop's plan is completely contrary to the spirit and the will of our founders and provides for essential changes, a complete reorganization, and an entirely different structure. There is absolutely no reason for this.

Furthermore, it is entirely new to all of us. It was unknown to us during the 20 years of our existence and we have not experienced it, practiced it, tested it, or professed our vows according to it. When I asked the professed sisters for their opinion and advice, they all stated in writing for the reasons given above: "We respectfully but solemnly protest against this new plan because, if, contrary to our stated will, we are forced to live according to this plan and we would cease to be Poor School Sisters according to the spirit and will of our founders. We would be willing to go to the dioceses where the respective bishops approved the constitution we had up to now and where we would be allowed to live as Poor School Sisters according to the spirit and will of our founders."

Under these circumstances, I am very sorry to have to say that I find myself in the sad situation of having to submit to Your Holiness our reservations concerning the archbishop's plan

that disturbed us from the very beginning. Without wanting to violate the respect owed to my bishop, I now venture to express my reservations in the order of the main points covered by the plan.²

Missions

Although the archbishop's plan proposes a corporation or community, new motherhouses should be independent, and the sisters who are sent to establish these new houses would eventually return to their former motherhouse.

This is the old constitution of the *Congrégation Notre-Dame*. According to this constitution, new missions were just so many offshoots that separated themselves from the root and trunk, were independent isolated plants, and therefore were not under a central government.

According to our new constitution called to life by our founders 20 years ago,³ even if new missions are seen as future governing houses with novitiates, they are not merely offshoots but living branches from one and the same root. All of these branches are directly connected with the original motherhouse and dependent on it, which the new structure of our religious institute requires. It is precisely through this living and unifying bond that these new branches, protected and supported by God, grew strong, flourished, and produced fruit in their own way.

According to the archbishop's plan, this new structure for all the motherhouses would revert to the old concept whereby unity and stability, the living organism of the entire religious institute, would be dissolved. In the future, the large, beautiful, and flourishing common ground of the religious institute would be split up into as many small parcels of land as there are motherhouses, each one separate from the other and no longer constituting a corporation or community.

With this separation of houses, the intent of our founders would be thwarted, and with this change back to the old constitution, the institute would cease to be the Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters.

General Superior

Before continuing, I declare before God that I am very willing at any time to place on the shoulders of a stronger sister the great burden and responsibility of central government, which, with the approval of the respective bishop, the founders entrusted to me.

With regard to the archbishop's plan, I venture to express myself very openly and respectfully and to state how I perceive the matter before God, keeping in mind both the present and the future and basing my remarks on many years of experience.

1. According to the archbishop's plan, there should be a superior who governs the entire corporation. Although she has the name *general superior*, she does not have the rights that are entitled to a general superior by the very nature of things because, without the permission of the respective bishop (who could easily deny it), she may not (a) conduct visitation in the religious institute, (b) transfer the sisters, (c) appoint or depose any superior in houses that are not branches of her house,⁴ (d) establish new houses or prevent their foundation, (e) put an end to abuses, (f) settle conflicts, (g) raise any objection regarding internal discipline, (h) communicate with the individual sisters, or (i) appeal to the Holy See.

The general superior is only *informed* about all of the above. On the other hand, she *must* confirm all choices of superiors, which often can and will be against her innermost conviction. In such cases, she must act contrary to her conscience, and therefore her assistants and their counsel also appear to be superfluous.

In reality, the so-called general superior is only a shadow, a distorted image, and a blind instrument of all the male directors. She is at the mercy of all the motherhouse superiors whose arbitrariness and defiance can victimize her, especially if they are in league with the directors. We learned this from experience when the first attempt was made to carry out the archbishop's plan, contrary to our will and to the structure of our institute, which resulted in the separation from us of the house in Rottenburg—to say nothing of similar examples in other religious institutes of this kind.

2. According to the new plan, the corporation would have as many heads as there are directors and motherhouse

superiors. The natural consequence would be a great variety in the way of doing things, which would bring about internal differences in the houses and external differences in the schools because, in reality, there would be no unified central government.

3. This kind of *women's* institute would be like a large family *without a mother*. What is it like for daughters in a family without a mother, or for a mother whose hands are tied, who may not even talk with her children, and who really has no authority over them when they need it? It would not be any better for a religious institute of the kind described in this plan.

4. If, in the secular world, it is a generally recognized principle that “women should be trained by women,” then, in my opinion, this principle is all the more reason why *internal* jurisdiction in the Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters should not be withdrawn from a general superior and assigned to the male director. The purpose of this religious institute is the education of *girls and young women* in schools, academies, and boarding schools. When it involves the governing of internal affairs of a house, male directors, no matter how many there are, can never take the place of a general superior—a mother to the daughters of Mary.

5. By having smaller mission houses, not only in rural areas but also in larger cities, the Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters attends to the needs of our times. (Everything is sacrificed now for business purposes, but little or nothing for the things of God). In external matters regarding the schools, the few sisters in these houses are subject to the parish priests and school inspectors. In internal affairs, they are subject only to the superior of the house. If this position is filled well, the sisters work quietly in their profession, and as our experience of 20 years confirms, their work is blessed by God.

6. The intent of the archbishop's plan contradicts the expressed will of our founders who stated that a mother superior is at the head of the house (the first house in Neunburg vorm Wald) and of the association. She is the mother of the house and the mother of the family. Since she is the soul and head of the body, she guides and rules everything in the spirit of love. She does not thirst for power, and she portrays in her area the valiant woman whose image the Holy Spirit has drawn for us in Sacred Scripture with such heavenly beauty.⁵

She watches over the entire house and all its members. She watches so that the whole body and all its members, each in her assigned area, move in harmony with God's law according to the rule of the society and the statutes and observances of the house. She instructs, admonishes, cautions, reproaches, punishes, encourages, consoles, and heals. She does all of this just as a mother would.

On the other hand, she also cares for the sisters' physical and spiritual needs and, when possible, even provides for their relaxation and recreation. She alone accepts and administers the property and income of the society. Therefore, she alone should bear the name, *Mother Superior*.⁶

Since the beginning of the Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters, this is what we have observed without any objection on the part of any bishop in whose diocese we are. When approving our new constitution, the bishops even stated that this should remain as it is because it is necessary for the Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters to have a general superior who not only knows all her personnel, but can also make necessary decisions for the benefit of all the houses, all the schools, and all the sisters, as well as for the favorable expansion of the religious institute.

This central government was precisely the bond that united all the sisters, all their hearts, and all their houses. With God's grace and blessing, the entire religious institute continued to be united in mind, in the formation of the sisters, in education, in constancy and strength, in purity and success, for 20 years.

If the religious institute expands further, the superiors of the houses with novitiates would support and help the general superior, as our outline explains in detail.

Accounts

According to the archbishop's plan, there would be as many separate accounts as there are motherhouses. This is also stated in the old constitution of the *Congrégation Notre-Dame*.

Just as many independent heads of the congregation would shatter its unity, many separate accounts would shatter the congregation's material strength, which is even more necessary

in our times when the willingness to give for the benefit of convents is not what it was formerly.

This separation of accounts would result in bitter poverty and long lasting hardship for one motherhouse and its area of jurisdiction, while at the same time, abundance and arrogance in another.

This principle in the archbishop's plan contradicts our practice up to now, which was and is in accordance with the will of our founders. This practice has already proved its reliability, as our outline thoroughly explains, because the original motherhouse can help all the poor candidates and poor houses. This help continues to be very advantageous, both for the beginning of our religious institute and for its continued existence, precisely because the property held in common was not divided up into small portions.

All of our poor houses at home and abroad solemnly protest this principle of fragmentation as stated in the archbishop's plan.

Directors

According to the archbishop's plan, the male directors of the motherhouses are granted not only priestly jurisdiction but also jurisdiction over the internal affairs of these houses.

In other orders such as the Sisters of Charity, a male director seems to be advisable and necessary in order to carry out the purpose of the institute. These women are in charge of urban institutes for the poor, the sick, and the wayward, and care for both men and women in large households. If a director could not help them with advice and protection, they would be at the mercy of the moods and torments of doctors, business administrators, city inspectors, and even male patients and prisoners.

The situation with the Poor School Sisters is altogether different, however, because this religious institute pursues a completely different purpose. As our name already indicates, we work only with children and specifically with girls and young women in schools, academies, and boarding schools. The Poor School Sisters have several years of formation in scientific and ascetic subjects before they are equal to the task of giving the

girls and young women scientific education and physical care. Pastors and confessors provide them with priestly services.

1. In a women's institute, male direction would have a false and even harmful effect, especially on young girls, as we have learned from experience many times. The least order prevailed in those houses where our sisters approached the priests and allowed them to influence the governance of the house in a manner similar to the role which the archbishop's plan gives to a male spiritual director.

2. In our times, therefore, it is highly desirable that all the schools for girls be entrusted to the Poor School Sisters, because when the girls are under male direction, great harm is the result. A man cannot teach the girls feminine virtue and virginity, and a girl cannot and may not grow close to a man and confide in him as she confides in a mother.

If directors would be appointed for every motherhouse, the School Sisters, as well as all their schools, academies, and boarding schools for girls, would be completely under male direction, which would benefit neither the sisters nor their schools.

3. Usually there is a local inspector as well as a district inspector for each school that has Poor School Sisters as teachers. In cities, the schools and the sisters as teachers are subject to a formal school commission in accordance with the laws of the land. As catechist, the pastor teaches religion. As religious, the sisters have their confessors. In accordance with divine law, the respective diocesan bishop has the overall responsibility. The general superior must have jurisdiction over the internal affairs of the entire religious institute.

Therefore, a male director appears to be superfluous and entirely unsuitable precisely because the purpose of the Poor School Sisters is completely different from that of the Sisters of Charity.

4. In these hard times, the Poor School Sisters have scarcely enough to live on, even in the cities. How could they ever cover the additional expense for the many directors and confessors? So as not to impair the reign of God, the sisters are satisfied with little. A single house would require a capital fund of at least 30,000 florin [\$12,000].

5. With so many directors, who often do not have the necessary insight, talent, and experience with regard to

religious life and education and who might not share the same views either, there would be just as many different types of domestic discipline and educational methods as there are directors. When one of these directors is changed, as is often the case in institutes of this kind, everything starts over again. Without the general superior being aware of it, things are often reorganized and changed. According to the directive in the archbishop's plan, she cannot and may not object—a fact that is enough to undermine the necessary unity and the successful continuance of the entire religious institute.⁷

6. As a man, the director can never understand or feel the nature, the language, and the needs of a woman's heart or her weaknesses and afflictions in the same way as the general superior, as a woman, understands and feels them. For these and other reasons, as a man, a father can never be for a daughter what a mother is according to the plan of God. In the same way, a male director can never fill the position of a general superior for the Poor School Sisters as an educational institute for girls and young women.

Despite all of this, however, a statute in the archbishop's plan makes it obligatory "to share everything that happens outside the confessional as well as all convent affairs with the director (who cannot be the confessor at the same time)," whether it refers to persons or things. This puts into great danger with respect to their virginity those sisters with a tendency toward becoming attached to men because, with this plan, they are so dependent on the male director. In any case, restless minds and dispositions have the desired occasion for endless gossiping, which inevitably makes people take sides and brings bad things to light. Unfortunately, this is confirmed daily in religious institutes everywhere that have these spiritual directors.

7. As a man, the director cannot and may not participate in everything the sisters do from morning to night, and therefore he will never see and experience what the general superior can see and experience. As a result, the discipline, which is based on this observation, as well as the welfare and thriving of the entire religious institute, will collapse under a director. Every religious institute with these types of spiritual directors provides actual proof of this.

8. Moreover, intelligent and cautious young women recoil

from this kind of masculine direction. It was precisely the most devout and thoroughly capable sisters of our religious institute who openly and unequivocally stated that they would rather leave the order than be subject to male directors. Intelligent young women will never give their complete confidence to a director whom the respective bishop could remove at any time. These women would become more and more cautious (which according to the archbishop's plan they should not be), because everything that the dismissed director knows about what is going on within the convent walls could be made public to the whole world. This would be a scandal to the world, as well as cause for the dissolution of such institutes, as the current history of religious institutes with this type of spiritual directors likewise confirms.

9. The old constitution prescribes a father spiritual for all the convents of the *Congrégation Notre-Dame*. He was also necessary for visitation because every convent was separate, isolated, and independent from the others, which is also characteristic of the motherhouses stipulated in the archbishop's plan. In this point, however, the new constitution of the present Religious Institute of the Poor School Sisters, which was written in accordance with the expressed will of our founders, differs completely from the old constitution. Since all the houses of the society are to remain together in living unity, they require a general superior who is entrusted with the responsibility for visitation and the internal jurisdiction of all of the houses.

At the same time, every respective diocesan bishop exercises over all the houses in his diocese the rights that are entitled to him by the Church. If significant events or conflicts arise and help is needed, according to the new constitution there is also a general protector in charge of the religious institute.⁸ Therefore, the former position of the father spiritual is changed, as we respectfully state in our outline.

This is also how the position was filled for 20 years. With episcopal approval, the motherhouse confessor [Matthias Siegert], whom the deceased founders appointed at the beginning of the religious institute,⁹ is assigned to the general superior for the guidance of the religious institute. At the same time, he actually held the position of confessor for the other houses of the order, as our outline explains. The beginning of

the institute was so difficult that we could not have done it any differently.

With regard to temporal affairs, in all our houses we looked for well-disposed, competent experts who also settled our temporal affairs in the civil courts. This was in accordance with the precepts of the old rule, and wherever we were, God allowed us to find these experts. Since this responsibility cannot be expected of a priest, it cannot be expected of a male spiritual director either. Thus, the male director appears to be superfluous in this area as well.

Moreover, in important concerns, superiors of our larger houses turn to the general superior, who can then turn to the order's confessor for advice and help.

I can see that the respectfully submitted remarks, which I felt obligated to make because of our experience in this regard, are very inadequate and will not completely explain the entire situation regarding our religious institute and our previous structure in particular.

Therefore, it is our deepest longing and humble petition that we would have the opportunity to present in person to the Holy See further reasons for the structure that was ours formerly, as well as essential information on what we still need and on what we have experienced and learned from the beginning. The structure that was ours could then be canonically established and sanctioned, and I would be relieved of the serious matter of conscience which the founders entrusted to me. I have committed all my time and energy up to now toward the achievement of the founders' devout intention, and it would then be fulfilled.

In deepest reverence, I now submit the entire cause to Your Holiness for your decision as to whether the archbishop's plan, which does not correspond to the intentions of our founders, to the purpose of the institute, or to the needs of the times, can be laid as a foundation in general for our order. Can the individual proposals contained in the archbishop's plan be assimilated into the statutes of the Poor School Sisters without hampering the effectiveness of the entire order, which has been so blessed and generally recognized until now? Can strange and impractical elements be added to the statutes without paralyzing the spirit that permeates the entire order, its purpose, and its personnel?

We believe we can calmly assume that no weighty reservations from the Church's point of view stand in the way of our respectfully submitted outline. All the bishops who have our sisters in their dioceses have given their approval, and other canonical institutes with a similar constitution and purpose, for example, the Religious of the Sacred Heart, also enjoy Church approval.

Therefore, we confidently trust in God that Your Holiness will graciously accept our outline of the rule and constitutions and that this outline will receive Church approbation.

In deepest respect,

Mary Theresa of Jesus

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), 190-204.

-
1. The motherhouse in Munich was solemnly dedicated on October 16, 1843.
 2. Archbishop Reisach's plan for the Poor School Sisters was divided into four sections: Missions, General Superior, Accounts, and Director. This plan was also considerably shorter than Mother Theresa's outline. (Typescript, Munich) 16409
 3. *Spirit of the Constitutions for the Religious Congregation of the Poor School Sisters of Notre Dame* by Francis Sebastian Job
 4. For example, the missions in North America where a motherhouse was established in 1850
 5. See *Proverbs* 31:10-31.
 6. The concepts of these three paragraphs can be found in the writings of Bishop George Michael Wittmann and Fr. Francis Sebastian Job.
 7. Archbishop Reisach's plan ends with the statement: "N.B. The bishop and the director of the main motherhouse have the same rights with regard to the superior of this house [the general superior] as the other directors have with regard to the superiors of the other motherhouses." (Typescript, Munich) 16409
 8. Later known as a cardinal protector
 9. On August 28, 1833, Bishop Schwäbl appointed Fr. Siegert as confessor and guide of the new religious association in Neunburg vorm Wald. (Transcript, Generalate)