

Immediate Reasons for Decrees

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Mother Theresa and the first sisters of the congregation professed their vows and lived according to the Spirit of the Constitutions written for them by Francis Sebastian Job in 1833 and the Notre-Dame Rule compiled by Peter Fourier in the 17th century. The bishop of Regensburg approved this arrangement but with the understanding that a new rule would be drawn up after the sisters had gained experience in religious life.

Although asked repeatedly by church and government authorities for the text of a new rule, the congregation's successful endeavors in the education of girls and young women, which led to its growth in Bavaria and expansion to other countries, convinced these authorities of the merits of this new congregation even if it lacked an approved rule.

In order to make it possible for the sisters to teach poor children in smaller towns and rural areas as well as in large cities, the houses of the congregation were united through central government, common formation, and shared personnel and financial resources. The love and example shown by Mother Theresa and her sisters, however, were at the heart of both this structure and the congregation's widespread acceptance.

Although widespread, this acceptance was not universal. With courage and constancy, Mother Theresa faced objections directed in particular toward the sisters' practice of enclosure and the structure of a congregation that extended beyond diocesan and national boundaries. Although the Holy See had approved a few congregations of women religious with a centralized government earlier, it did not make a clear statement on this issue until 1900. Prior to that, decisions were made on each case as it arose and the bishops were unclear about the status of these congregations in their dioceses. Many bishops felt that their rapid growth was a sign of the Spirit of God at work in the members who were meeting an urgent need in the church. Others did not think the Holy See would ever approve a congregation that gave so much power to a woman in the person of a general superior.

Already as the Bishop of Eichstäett in Bavaria, Karl August Reisach belonged to the second group. He was familiar with the congregation from its earliest years and directed Josefa Friess (later M. Caroline) to Neunburg vorm Wald in 1840. After establishing a mission in his diocese, Mother Theresa asked Bishop Reisach to help her with drawing up the new rule, but a substantial difference in their views soon became evident. Mother Theresa was convinced that the church would recognize the work of the Spirit in a congregation that had been so visibly blessed by God and therefore approve its innovative structure.

Soon after Reisach became the Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Mother Theresa left for America where the lack of an approved rule caused initial problems with bishops. They soon recognized the congregation's merits, however, and allowed Mother Theresa

to establish a foothold in Baltimore. After her return to Bavaria in 1848, the responsibilities of governing a rapidly growing congregation delayed work on the rule. Archbishop Reisach, on the other hand, became increasingly concerned, especially when it was obvious that Mother Theresa enjoyed the support of the royal family with whom he was already in conflict.

Matters came to a head in January 1852 when Archbishop Reisach insisted that Mother Theresa withdraw the superior, M. Radegundis, from the mission in Rottenburg in the Kingdom of Württemberg and assign M. Rosa as the new superior. Mother Theresa was forbidden to interfere in the governance of the house, which was to be made independent of Munich and placed under the direction of Dr. Mast. Moreover, Mother Theresa was to present a copy of the rule within four weeks because Archbishop Reisach “could not tolerate having such a large congregation without a definite rule . . . governed according to the discretion and arbitrary use of power by the superior.”¹ Mother Theresa’s subsequent request to withdraw the sisters from Rottenburg was refused.

Ordered by Archbishop Reisach, Mother Theresa appointed M. Rosa as superior, fully aware that she was not suitable for the position. In a second letter to the archbishop on the same day, Mother Theresa wrote, “A constant and consuming anxiety of conscience tortures me because with deepest pain I issued the obedience in my name, against my better judgment, and against my conscience, which now bitterly reproaches me.” Then “before God, Mary, the Mother of our Order, all the saints, and your Excellency,” she “solemnly revoked this written obedience.”²

Although Archbishop Reisach made it practically impossible for Mother Theresa to exercise her office as general superior, he would not allow her to resign and proceeded to write his own rule for the congregation without consulting her. He was convinced that the Holy See would approve his rule, even if it contradicted the congregation’s life and experience of almost 20 years. Mother Theresa’s sharing of difficulties with her sisters and consultation with them, on the other hand, continued to create a spirit of respect and confidence in their dealings with others.

Archbishop Reisach then ordered that all the professed sisters in the motherhouse assemble for a meeting on April 22, 1852. Two sets of minutes were taken during this meeting – one by the archdiocesan vicar general and the other by an unidentified sister. The difference between these two sets of minutes is striking and the account written by the sister could be used as a one-act play.

Ed. note: two other congregations had received papal approval for a centralized constitution after difficult struggles. They were the Religious of the Sacred Heart

¹ Quoted from a letter from Archbishop Reisach to Mother Theresa, January 9, 1852, cited in *Mutter Theresia im Kampf um die Regel ihres Ordens*, manuscript by M. Leobgid Ziegler, p. 53

² Quoted from Document 1105: Letter of M. Theresa of Gerhardinger to Karl August von Reisach, Archbishop of Munich and Freising (1846-56)

founded by St. Madeleine Sophie Barat who received approval in 1806 and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur founded by Blessed Julie Billiart, whose approval came after the death of the foundress in 1844. It was not until 1900 with *Conditae a Christo* by Leo XIII, that centralized government was part of canon law. Prior to 1900, the approval of a centralized form of government with a woman as general superior depended on the good will of the pope.

On June 21, 1858, S. Margaret of Cortona presented a copy of the directory of the School Sisters of Notre Dame to Pope Pius IX. It showed 120 houses with about 600 sisters.