

Notes on the Bavarian SSND "Nun Study"

The following remarks are an English summary from a paper distributed by Professor Dr. Kurz and Dr. Horst Bickel in March 2004. The Bavarian Nun Study differs from the Nun Study of the United States in method and scientific approach.

Maria Canisia Engl, SSND, 06-01-2006

- 1) The first cross-section study on dementia diseases was started in the fall of 2001 and finished in spring 2003. It was performed by Professors Dr. Alexander Kurz and Dr. H. Förstl from the Technical University in Munich and was sponsored by the "Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft" (German Research Council).
- 2) The object of the research was to find out risk factors in dementia and possible protecting factors against falling ill with dementia. The study was to prove whether and what sort of correlations there are between the special gifts, the education, and the professional demands of a person and the possibility of falling ill with dementia at old age. Therefore, the study had to be made with a sample section of people, living under similar conditions. So the Department for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy of Munich Technical University asked the School Sisters of Notre Dame of Bavaria to participate.
- 3) There were 442 from 529 sisters in the Bavarian Province (aged from 65 to 100 years) who were willing to take part in the research. The average age was 78.4. The research concentrated on the physical and psychological condition of the person, her family and educational background and her biological and professional biography.

The outcome was: 37 sisters were ill with dementia to a slight degree, 27 to rather a medium degree and 40 to a very serious degree. Most cases resulted from Alzheimer's disease. The research team also found out that the cases of dementia increased with the age of the sisters (more than 50 % were persons aged 85 and older.) The study proves (and this seems to be quite an important result) that sisters who had worked in some leadership position showed significant less symptoms of dementia, even than those who had had a much better education but had never been in any sort of leadership.

- 4) Professor Dr. Kurz and Dr. Horst Bickel, the leader of the research team, are convinced that with their study, they are on the right track to find out a certain mechanism in dementia diseases; and that this might be a key to preventive measures. They assume that, above all, the realization of certain influences on the human brain in early childhood might lead to the knowledge of what factors are responsible not only for the full ripening /maturation of the brain but also to a new understanding of cerebral diseases.
- 5) Therefore, they plan to continue the study in order to explore the brain structure and brain functions of about 80 to 100 sisters not suffering from dementia at this time. But they can only do so after having raised enough funds to begin the second step.