

Le Louvre des Antiquaires
2 Place du Palais-Royal
75001 Paris (France)
tel. +33 (0)1 42 60 15 58 • fax. +33 (0)1 40 15 00 25
info@lesenluminures.com

2970 North Lake Shore Drive
Chicago, IL 60657 (USA)
tel. +773 929 5986
fax. +773 528 3976
chicago@lesenluminures.com

Rules and Homilies accompanying the ceremony for the entrance of postulants at a Dominican Convent

In German, manuscript on paper

Southwestern Germany, likely Baden-Württemberg, 1583-1587

ii + 182 folios on paper, watermark, crowned eagle, with only part of the mark remaining, but similar in type to Piccard, Online Archive, no. 162353, Gengenbach, 1585, no. 162354, Offenburg, 1584, no. 162355, Tübingen, 1594, modern foliation in pencil, top, outer corner recto (collation, i-ii¹⁰ iii¹² xiv¹⁰ v¹² vi-xvii¹⁰ xviii⁸), leaf signatures in Arabic numerals, bottom, outer corner, recto, in the first half of most quires, many now trimmed away, in quires 2, 3 and 5, the second leaves are signed "1," suggesting that the first and last leaves of these quires were added, albeit at a very early date while the manuscript was being written, no catchwords or quire signatures, no discernible ruling (justification 118-112 x 83-78 mm.), written by at least two scribes, ff. 2-8v, written in a skilled formal cursive gothic script by a trained scribe, the remainder of the manuscript copied in a less formal cursive script in sixteen to nineteen long lines, majuscules in text stroked with red, red paragraph marks or angle-brackets at the beginning of new sections of the text, in excellent condition with minor staining from damp especially at the beginning and end of the manuscript. Bound in late sixteenth-century (or early seventeenth-century) brown leather over wooden boards, stamped in blind on the front cover with two sets of triple fillets forming a border, with floral stamps in gilt, now darkened, at each corner, and with a center panel of the crucifixion extending from a IHS monogram in an oval with rays, the H formed by the figures of John and Mary, set into a rectangular panel, with angels at each corner, back cover is similar, but with a center stamp of the Virgin and Child on the crescent moon, surrounded by small stars, rounded spine with four raised bands and head and tail bands, separating five floral stamps, two brass catches, in working condition, closing back to front, edges dyed green, in good condition, with gilding mostly rubbed away, and slight wear on front and back covers, the covering at the very top and bottom of the spine partly worn away and cracked. Dimensions 155 x 105 mm.

Written down and signed by a female scribe, the nun Anna, and intact in an early, likely contemporary binding, this manuscript contains a remarkable series of homilies delivered by the Prioress of a German Dominican Convent between 1583 and 1587, when the Convent accepted new postulants. Almost certainly unpublished, these texts offer a fascinating glimpse into the life of the convent. They reveal the Prioress as a very well educated woman, well equipped to lead the convent spiritually.

PROVENANCE

1. Although many of the texts in the manuscripts are not dated, or are recorded only as "15 —," the dated texts span the years 1583-1587. Anna the scribe signed the manuscript at the end (f. 178v). Two scribes wrote the manuscript: the first copied only the formal

record of the Order's rules for receiving postulants. Anna copied the remainder of the manuscript over a number of years; the letterforms are consistent throughout, but the script varies in ink, size and general appearance. The watermarks as well as content suggest an origin in southeastern Germany. Since all three watermarks point to a relatively confined area in Baden-Württemberg, it is likely the manuscript was made there in a Dominican convent. Further research on existing Dominican convents during these years could lead to the identification of the actual convent. The manuscript's Dominican origin is clear from its content; on f. 177v, mention is made of following the example of "our holy father Dominic"; Dominic is also referred to as "our holy father," on f. 150.

2. Unidentified dealers' annotations, in pencil, inside front cover, "90" (circled), "97" (circled), "999/35" (circled), and "296496."

TEXT

f. 1, traces of later document; f. 1v, rubric, *Das send die fragen*, incipit, "Ob sye sich mit kainem man versprochen hab; Ob sye aygen sey vnd mit er geben; Ob sye nichtzs schuldig sey; Ob sye in kainem ander orden profess[ion] gethon hab; Ob sye kain haymliche krack hait hab; Ob sye eelich geboren sey;

The questions to pose a prospective nun, including whether she had ever been promised to a man, Whether she is guilty, Whether she has been professed earlier in another order, and Whether she is of noble birth.

ff. 2-8v, incipit, "Casianus der lerer spricht. Der eingang in ain gaystlichs leben ist ain absterbung im selbs und ain bildung ... Auff das er müg erlange[n] ain ewigs leben. Amen." f. 3, rubric, *Wie man ain novici sol einschlessen*, incipit, "Ain ersten so das Regnum mundi aus[er] ist. Soll die priorin mit dem Co[n]vent ins Cappittel gaun vnd spreche[n], Benedicte, Darnach sprechen, Erwirdige mieteren lieben schwesteren ... und so ist es aus[er]." f. 3v, rubric, *Wie die priorin sol der nouicen profession an neme[n]*, incipit, "Zum ersten jin Cappitel sol sye sprechen, So ir die N ain heilig habendt ... Zum x sol die priorin spreche[n], adiutorium nostrum in nomine domini, und also enden das Capittel." f. 7, rubric, *Item den vers[us] und colect listt man wan man ain schwester einschlest*, incipit, "V. Salvam fac ancillam tuam ..., with prayer, Pretende domine famule tue dexteram celestis auxilii ..."; f. 8rv, incipit, "Das ir meine döchteren kurz mercken Wie ir durch die gehorsame Die Barmhertzigkeit gottes erlangen ... Dadurch euch die Kron des ewigen Lebens wirt mitgetaylt. Amen";

Form for the entry of a postulant, describing ritual of entrance, and the liturgy.

ff. 9-10, incipit, "So wir immer so ..." f. 9v, *Ewirdigen Mütterin in sunder de geliepttin schwesterin ...*; f. 10 is damaged and now repaired by being glued to another leaf, with traces of script in a later seventeenth-century (?) hand; f. 10v, blank;

ff. 11rv, incipit, "Ittem hie nach stand kürzlich verzeichnett ettlliche feine ... zü 8 Einschleffen vnd zü 8 professionen mag ..."; f. 11v, *Erwirdigen Mütterin in sund[er] de geliepten ...*;

ff. 12-19v, incipit, "Ain red de priorin nach dem die jüngen ... anno 1583 jar ..."; "So ir meine geliebe Kindlin nür begerentt vn[d] suche hie Barmh[er]zigkertt gottes ..."; ff. 20-21v, blank;

ff. 22-31, incipit, "Ain kurze red de priorin geschehen zu 2 lai schwesterin ... in dem 1584 jar .. Erstilich nem die priorin sich die red des helligen lerers Cassioni ..."; ff. 31v-32, "Als fil aber andre gaistliche weiss ..."; f. 32v, blank;

ff. 33-42, incipit, "Erwirdigen Mütterin insunder de geliepptin ..."; f. 33v, "An red de priorin nach die jungen ... Diser red ist ... 1585 ..."; ff. 42v-43, blank;

ff. 44-54v, incipit, "Ain red der priorin" f. 53v, "... singen äuch anders me d[ie] vnser vnser [sic] regell vn[d] constitucion aüser weistt zü ... halttin die beschliesüng de h[ie?] obserüanz .. alle ortt des Klosters verschlosen ..."; f. 55, blank;

ff. 55v-63v, incipit, "Me ain red de priorin zü ainen einschlaß geschehin in dem 15-- jar ..., Meine Kind wie süchentt ir hie, ..."; ff. 64rv, blank;

ff. 65-74v, incipit, "Me ain red de priorin so sie ainer od[er] me jüngen ... Doch meine Kind ..."; ends top f. 74v, remainder of folio and top f. 75 blank;

ff. 75-85, incipit, "Me ain red de priorin ..., Meine kind wie süchentt ir hie. So <äü?> ir meine Kind süchen die barmherzigkeit gott ..."; f. 86 blank;

ff. 86v-94v, incipit, "Me ain kürze red de Priorin gesthehin zü ainer profession im 15-- jar ... Nün die ir meine Kind desztter bestendiger beliebin ..."; f. 95, blank;

ff. 95v-104v, Incipit, "Me ain red de priorin zü ain Einschlaß geschehin in der anno 1587 Meine kind wie süchen ir hie..., So <äü?> ir meine liebe Kindlin Begerintt vnd süchen die Barmherzigkett gottes ..."; f. 105 blank;

ff. 105v-116; incipit, "Me ain red de priorin Meine Kindlin ich mag äuch woll sprechen zü eüch als de engel zü Möysen sprach ..."; f. 116v, blank;

ff. 117-125v; incipit, "Me ain red de priorin So nün ir meine liebe Kindlin ..."; f. 126, blank;

ff. 126v-137, incipit, "Me ain red de priorin zü ainer profession geschehin im anno 1586 Neben dem meine Kind hab ich nie noch <Ettw?> wenige fir genommen ..."; f. 137v, blank;

ff. 138-146v, incipit, "Me ain red de priorin anno 15-- So nün ir meine liebe Kindlin süchen en vnd Begerin zü finden die Barmherzigkett gottes hoff ich ir werdens ...";

ff. 147-156, *Zü ainer profession*, incipit, "Me ain red de priorin ... anno 15-- Nün meine Kind sellentt weitter Mercken ..."; f. 156v, blank;

ff. 157- 167, incipit, "Me ain red de priorin ... anno 1587 So nün ir meine liebe Kindlin süchen und Begerin ...";

ff. 167v-178v, incipit, "Me ain red de priorin ... anno 15-- Neben dem meine Kind so ir nün heütt intt den genanden gottes eüch dem ioch christo ... "; ... [scribal colophon] Laus deo omnipotenti, Soror Anna well dist hofferin. Ora pro me ett ora pro peccattis meis. Amen"; ff. 179-182v, blank.

Women played an important role in the Dominican Order from its very earliest years. St. Dominic himself founded the first Dominican convent for Nuns at Prouille in 1206, and the number of convents grew rapidly. In 1267 a papal order secured the place of women within the order. Throughout the medieval period the number of convents was especially notable in Germany, particularly in the southeast; in 1277 there were fifty-three convents in Germany; by 1303 the number had grown to seventy-four, compared with only forty-eight Houses for men.

Although numerous convents were closed in the 1520s as the result of the Protestant Reformation, the attraction of the religious life remained strong throughout the sixteenth century and later in German regions that remained Catholic. The importance of this manuscript, written between 1583 and 1587 in a Dominican Convent in southern Germany, as a new source for historians interested in the religious life of women in this period cannot be over-emphasized.

The study of the history of women in religion in the Middle Ages and the early modern period has flourished in the last decades. Works cited below by Mecham, Leonard, and Woodford, among others set the stage for further research. Yet, as Mecham wrote (2003, p. 109): "In medieval studies, the personal ownership and use of spiritual works by cloistered women as well as their participation in book production remains largely *terra ignota*." A great deal of research remains to be done, and this manuscript, which records the annual homilies given by the Prioress on the occasion of the entrance of new postulants into the Convent, is of particular importance, preserving a type of text that has generally not been available to historians. The homilies were not only given by the Prioress herself, but they were recorded by the scribe Anna, doubtless a nun at the Convent. These texts are thus first-hand records of the life in the Convent, neither influenced nor reinterpreted by any male voice. Mooney cautions us that the recovery of authentic women's voices is impossible, because of the distortion of male influence, be it scribe, translator, or spiritual advisor (see below, Mooney, 1999). However, here is a case where the text's author and scribe are both women.

The content of the homilies is highly interesting. Each entry is set within the framework of the Convent's rules for accepting postulants, and thus begin with similar formulaic statements, and end with the questions posed to each entrant (for example, have you been promised to a man? Have you been professed in any other order? And are you of noble birth?). The Order's rules and the liturgical form for accepting postulants, in fact, are copied in a professional script at the beginning of the manuscript. Within this framework, each homily is unique. The sources cited by the Prioress are impressive indeed: alongside the Bible, she quotes Augustine (f. 45), Jerome (f. 45), Albertus Magnus (f. 58v), Jean Gerson (f. 45), John Cassian (f. 138v), and Humbertus, presumably Humbert of Romans (f. 177v) among others.

The possibility that the homilies are translations from pre-existing sermons is slight, although a more careful textual study would be necessary to back this hypothesis up. They are not "typical" medieval sermons, which open with a biblical theme and proceed systematically from there. Rather, they are more centered on the occasion of the entrance of postulants and are, to this end, general exhortations on leading a holy life. Along with a citation from the Bible, or Jerome, or Augustine, they include extensive passages based on the Order's rules and on the Ordo for receiving postulants. They also repeat material from sermon to sermon. The pattern of repeating texts, along with introducing new ideas, seems to fit the idea that what we have here is the Prioress attending to an annual or biannual duty, using conventional material, material she had used previously, as well as new material. The picture of the prioress that emerges from these texts is of a very well educated woman, well equipped to serve the spiritual needs of the nuns in her convent.

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