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The Challenge of Stigmatics

The Local Clergy as Guardians of Orthodoxy, c. 1800–1950

Abstract: Der Beitrag konzentriert sich auf die Rolle des lokalen Klerus als Hüter der Orthodoxie angesichts der Herausforderungen, die sich aus neuen religiösen Bewegungen, inspiriert von mystischen Erfahrungen von Stigmatiker, ergeben. Er bezieht sich auf die Studien von Peter Jan Margry (2019) und Joseph Laycock (2014) über Marienerscheinungsbewegungen und religiöse Abweichung, die gezeigt haben, dass die Grenzen zwischen Abweichung und Orthodoxie regelmäßig und auf praktischer Ebene ausgehandelt werden mussten. Der Fokus liegt auf dem europäischen Katholizismus des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts und insbesondere auf der Rolle des lokalen Klerus als Vermittler zwischen den Gläubigen und den Mystikern auf der einen Seite und den kirchlichen Behörden auf diözesaner und römischer Ebene auf der anderen Seite. Für die Ortsgeistlichen bedeutete die Anwesenheit eines Mystikers in der Pfarrei immer eine Abwägung. Sie hatten die Aufgabe, einen Mittelweg zwischen dem Willen ihrer Vorgesetzten, denen sie gehorchen mussten, und den Gefühlen ihrer Gemeindemitglieder, denen sie ihre geistliche Betreuung anboten, zu finden.

1 Religious Deviance and the Local Clergy

1.1 The Boundaries of Catholicism

On 17 January 1927, the Bishop of Trier, Mgr Franz Rudolf Bornewasser, wrote to Dechant (Dean) Faber in Bickendorf, asking him to leave the parish voluntarily. He claimed that he had made his decision because of the “severe damage that a continuing stay of Your Honour in the Bickendorf parish would do to the pastoral care and the interests of the Church”.¹ In his statement, the Bishop also referred to the fact that Dean Faber had not accepted this decision concerning Anna Maria Göbel, who allegedly bore the wounds of Christ and had been reproached for

¹ “Die Gründe für diese meine Aufforderung beruhen auf den schweren Schäden, die ein weiteres Verbleiben Euer Hochwürden in der Pfarrei Bickendorf für die Seelsorge und die Interessen der Kirche nach sich ziehen müsste”. Bistumsarchiv Trier (BT), BIII.12, 10 Bd. 3a, Causa Göbel-Faber, Bickendorf (Göbel), letter from Mgr Bornewasser to Faber, 17.1.1927.

causing public alarm and endangering religious and moral life.² Faber continued to support the stigmatic, despite being obliged “to show in all your conduct that you completely submit to the Bishop’s decision and refrain from all that could damage the authority of the bishop in the eyes of the faithful”.³ The Bishop further argued that Faber’s continued support of the stigmatic in spite of his decision “confuses the conscience of the children of your parish, produces a strong aversion in many against your management and brings strife and enmity into Your parish”.⁴ The Bishop also feared that Faber might cause damage to “the Church and souls” in other matters and considered the preconditions of Canon Laws 2147 and 2148 applied in this case. As such, he claimed that a “useful and efficient sacerdotal ministerium” (*utile et efficax ministerium sacerdotale*) could no longer be hoped for and the necessary steps needed to be taken. Faber had to go.

A few months later, on 1 May, the Bishop addressed the Bickendorf parishioners in a letter that was read aloud during early and high mass. In this letter, he told the faithful that he had asked Pastor Faber to leave and that when Faber refused to do so he had ordered a formal investigation (in fact, two examinations had taken place) which had confirmed that it would be better for the parishioners and the pastor if someone else took over. Faber had been offered “three beautiful parishes”⁵ but had refused to move. In fact, Faber had appealed to Rome, and as long as the Sacred Congregation of the Council (S. Congregatio Concilii)⁶ had not communicated its decision, he could not be in charge of the parish.⁷ A few weeks later, on 22 May 1927, the Bishop sent a new letter informing the parishioners that Rome had rejected Faber’s appeal and he had to leave the parish.⁸

² See the letter from Faber to the vicar general, BT, BIII.12, 10 Bd. 3a, Göbel, Hauptakten I, April 1924-April 1927, 18.6.1925.

³ “... hätten Sie die Pflicht gehabt, durch Ihr gesamtes Verhalten zu zeigen, dass Sie sich der Entscheidung Ihres Bischofs vollständig unterwerfen und alles unterlassen, was die Autorität des Bischofs in den Augen der Gläubigen gefährden konnte”. BT, BIII.12, 10 Bd. 3a, Göbel, Hauptakten I, letter from Mgr Bornewasser to Faber, 17.1.1927.

⁴ “... verwirrt die Gewissen Ihrer Pfarrkinder, erzeugt in viele eine starke aversio gegen Ihre Amtsführung, bringt schweren Unfrieden und Feindschaft in Ihre Pfarrei zum Schaden der Kirche und Seelen der endliche Ausgang der Sache sein könnte”. BT, BIII.12, 10 Bd. 3a, Göbel, Hauptakten I, letter from Mgr Bornewasser to Faber, 17.1.1927.

⁵ “... drei schöne Pfarreien” BT, BIII.12, 10 Bd.3a, Göbel, Hauptakten I, letter to the parishioners in Trier, 1.5.1927.

⁶ Now the Dicastery for the Clergy: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_pro_31051999_en.html (9.6.2022).

⁷ BT, BIII.12, 10 Bd. 3a, Göbel, Hauptakten I, letter to the parishioners in Trier, 1.5.1927.

⁸ Ibid., letter to the parishioners in Trier, 22.5.1927.

As this short summary of the letters shows, the Bishop was very clear about the role the pastor was expected to play in the affair: he was to confirm through his actions the findings of the hospital medical commission that had examined the stigmatic, which had led to her being disapproved of by the diocesan authorities. Even more importantly, Faber had to function as the diocese's voice in controlling mystical (epi-)phenomena⁹ and religious deviance. In refusing to do so, his actions created a bad impression. Faber's case provides a good example of how the misconduct of priests was considered damaging to the reputation of the bishop, the Church and their pastoral care.

This article discusses the central role of the local clergy in safeguarding the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the Catholic Church. It explores their interactions with the faithful and with the ecclesiastical authorities. However, as the focus on the clergy already indicates, it does not build on a difference between a popular audience and those who were theologically trained, or between an elite and popular Catholicism. Instead, it examines what John Laycock, in his study of one modern Marian apparition movement, called the "imagined boundaries of Catholicism" – the lines between what was regarded as deviant and what was not. Referring to the work of Meredith McGuire, Laycock notes: "[c]ategories such as "mainstream Catholic" and "cult" are not objective realities but the result of a series of battles over legitimacy". Whenever they appear, there is an exertion of power at play. He further argues that as historians we need to "historicise these definitional boundaries and pay attention to their contested nature".¹⁰ In the Catholic Church, we see this boundary-setting at work in "encyclicals, letters and

9 While "Mystik" ("misticismo") and "mystisch" ("mistico/a") are used in our sources (i.e. ADDE, S.O., *Devotiones Variæ*, 1926, Cosenza, Aiello Elena, *affettata santità [ex monaca del Preziosissimo Sangue] e circa un certo ordine di suore*, 64r and 79r), "mystical epiphenomena" and "paramystical" are not. These terms have been adopted from scholars such as Lawrence Cunningham (Evelyn Underhill's "Mysticism: An Appreciation", *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 12.1/2012, 106–112, p. 109) and Luigi Borriello/Raffaele Di Muro (*Dizionario dei fenomeni mistici Cristiani*, ed. Luigi Borriello / Raffaele Di Muro, Milan: Ancora 2014, 42–43 ("mystical epiphenomena"), 105 ("paramysticism")). Whenever a term from our sources is used, it will be put in quotation marks. For "religious deviance" see the reflection on the next page.

10 Laycock, Joseph: *The Seer of Bayside. Veronica Lueken and the struggle to define Catholicism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015, 11. Or, as Peter Jan Margry has shown in his work on modern grassroots Marian apparition movements, "deviancy" is related to the "mainstream", which some people see as the norm or normal. He stressed that norms change over time and what was once seen as deviancy might lose this status over time. Margry, Peter Jan: *The Global Network of Deviant Revelatory Marian Movements*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, 664–685, p. 668.

proclamations”.¹¹ In the following, the focus is on how this played out at the local level – the level of the parish clergy.

Given the contested nature of this boundary-setting, we find most information in documents that deal with conflict. The sources inform us about the moments the clergy either stepped out of line and were reprimanded, or when their parishioners did so and the parish priests, father confessors and spiritual guides were supposed to intervene. The source material, therefore, primarily documents moments of tension rather than smooth interactions between the Church, the clergy and the faithful.

It is important to note that “orthodoxy”, “orthopraxy” and “deviancy” are not terms that can be found in the sources, even when the opinion of religious men, bishops or the highest ranking members of the clergy are reported. There is no substantial difference between the vocabulary used at the intra-diocesan level – or in the correspondence among bishops – and the Vatican curia. For example, in the diocesan sources, boundary-setting is expressed in terms such as “overexcited religiosity” (“überspannte Religiosität”), “petty devotion” (“Andächteley”),¹² “religious enthusiasm” (“Schwärmerei”),¹³ “grievances” (“Misständen”),¹⁴ “nonsense” (“Unfug”),¹⁵ “superstition” (“Aberglauben”) and “superstitious practice” (“abergläubische Übung”).¹⁶ At the Roman level, and more specifically in the files on the disputed cases that ended up under the lens of the congregation of the Holy Of-

11 Laycock: *The Seer of Bayside*, 197.

12 Archiv des Erzbistums München und Freising (AEMF), *Realia* 923, *Erscheinungen-Einzelfälle* 1839–1845, 1840 (*Erscheinungen*), *Ausserordentlicher Zustand der Elisabeth Bartenhauser aus der Pfarrey Gaisach*, report by the dean of Osterwarngau to the ordinary, 13.12.1842. It is interesting to note that the archives of the archdiocese of Cologne group the files on such discussions under “Frömmeleien”: Archiv Erzbistum Köln (AEK), *Generalia* I. 31. *Religiöse Umtriebe und Misbräuche* (*Religiöse Umtriebe*), 31.6.1. *Sog. Wunderbare Erscheinungen, Frömmeleien*, etc. (1852–1935).

13 BT, BIII.12, 10. Bd. 3a. Göbel, letters Dechant Faber, 20.4.1924. In documentation by medical experts in the ecclesiastical files: “Religionsentweihung”, “theologische Charlatenerie”, “religiöse Schwärmerei”. AEMF, *Realia* 923, *Erscheinungen*, *Auffallende Erscheinungen an der Bauerntochter Perschl zu Tyrlbrunn betr.* Ad.18, 21 April 1840, dr. Kelin to dr. Klaus.

14 AEK, *Generalia* I. 31. *Religiöse Umtriebe*, 31.6.1. *Sog. Wunderbare Erscheinungen, Frömmeleien*, etc. (1852–1935), documents on Rosalie Püt, official announcement Vic.gen. Schoolmeister.

15 Ibid., *Verhandlungen betreffend die angeblich stigmatisirte Maria Gertrud Galles zu Giesenkirchen und den Vikar Schrammen*; letter from the Kirchenvorstand of Giesenkirchen, 9.5.1852 to Archbishop Johannes von Geissel.

16 Archiv des Bistums Passau (ABP), *Ordinariatsarchiv*, *Pfarrarchiv Pfarrkirchen*, A, I: *Andachten, kirchliche Feierlichkeiten*, 4: Maria Schuhmann, letter from the episcopal ordinarius to the deanery of Pfarrkirchen, 18.10.1854.

fice, we read expressions such as “false mysticism” (“falso misticismo”),¹⁷ “illicit religious worship” (“illicito culto religioso”) or “illicit public devotion” (“illicita pubblica devozione”),¹⁸ “superstition” (“superstizione”),¹⁹ “popular attendance” (“concorso popolare”²⁰), “external signs of holiness” (“segni esteriori di santità”),²¹ “fanaticism” (“fanatismo”),²² “fraud” (“frode”)²³ or “pious illusion” (“pia illusione”).²⁴ In addition to these terms, we find a more technical “Vatican” lemma of “affettata santità” used by experts to clearly define the crime of “pretended holiness” and simulated supernatural phenomena, or illicit, usually popular, cults condemned by Canon Law.²⁵ It is important to emphasise that the cardinals preferred to adopt juridical rather than theological or doctrinal terms.

17 “Un falso misticismo va dilagando tra le persone laiche e religiose”. Report presented in December 1924 by the Benedictine father Isidoro Donzella to the cardinals of the Holy Office about the mystic Ester Moriconi. Archive of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (from now on ADDF), *Rerum Variarum*, 1924, 4, Di Esterinina Anna Maddalena Moriconi, religiosa conversa nel Monastero dei Sette Dolori. Relazione e Voto del R.mo P. Donzella (Dec. 1924), 54. With the apostolic constitution *Praedicate evangelium* of 19.3.2022, the former Congregation assumed the current denomination of Dicastery and in this article we adapt to this change in the use of the new acronym for the archive.

18 Both expressions are mentioned in the Moriconi trial papers to indicate the worship made by her faithful. ADDF, *Rerum Variarum*, 1924, 4, 37r and 321r.

19 ADDF, S.O., *Devotiones Variae*, 1926, Cosenza, Aiello Elena, affettata santità (ex monaca del Preziosissimo Sangue) e circa un certo ordine di suore, 47r.

20 ADDF, S.O., *Devotiones Variae*, 1926, Cosenza, 42r.

21 The alleged mystical phenomena are also defined as “external signs” – and therefore false signs – of holiness, which differ from the “internal” heroic virtues of the saints. ADDF, *Materiae Diversae*, C 4 i, 1, Fano e Fossombrone no. 16, Contra P. Damianum de Urbana de pretensibus spectantibus. Contra Mariam Tiberini viduam Bordoni aliosque complices. Contra Raphaelmem Mansauta laicum philippinum. Contra Aloisium Bordoni canonicum aliosque. Contra Aloisium Aducci philippinum Fossombronense. Contra Annam Brunetti vulgo Caggaccia. Contra Annam Morosini, no. 173, 1851, 284r.

22 ADDF, *Materiae Diversae*, (C 4) h-i, Mancini-Bordini. Ristretto della censura di affettata santità, quietismo di Marianna Mancini e Maria Bordoni, Foligno e Roma, 4v and 10r.

23 ADDF, *Stanza Storica*, C 3 g, 1729, Brescia, Lucrezia Gambarà, 5r.

24 Both expressions appear in the Lucrezia Gambarà investigation papers. For religious authorities, establishing the nature of the fraud seems decisive. If the stigmatic does not voluntarily simulate her graces (the physical signs are caused by demonic possession or mental illness), we face pious delusion. In contrast, if she does it on purpose, she intends to commit religious fraud. ADDF, *Stanza Storica*, C 3 g, 1729, Brescia, Lucrezia Gambarà, 3r and 5r.

25 In the Vatican sources, there are also expressions such as “false”, “pretense”, “simulated” holiness. On the crime of pretensions to holiness: Jacobson Schutte, Anne: Finzione di santità, in: *Dizionario storico dell’Inquisizione*, ed. Adriano Prosperi et al., Pisa: Edizioni della Normale 2007–2010, 2, 601–604 and Jacobson Schutte, Anne: Aspiring Saints. Pretense of Holiness, Inquisition, and Gender in the Republic of Venice, 1618–1750, Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins Uni-

Terms similar to those used by religious authorities can be found in the correspondence of public authorities and in public discussions. They include “false devotion” (“valsche devotie”),²⁶ “religious-mystical enthusiasm” (“religiös-mystische Schwärmerei”), “mystical cult” (“mystischer Cultus”) and “religious enthusiasm” (“religiöse Schwärmerei”).²⁷ Furthermore, apart from labelling the religious innovations on the basis of their content, new religious practices and ideas were also rejected with reference to the poor health of those who introduced or practised them (e.g. diagnosis of hysteria). This plethora of terms indicates that there were different ways to frame the boundary-setting; that is, the distinction between what was in accord with Catholicism and what was not.

As noted, we are interested in the actions of the local clergy in setting boundaries between orthodoxy and deviancy and their role and responsibility as “mediators” between ecclesiastical leaders and parishioners. The priest is a consecrated member of the clergy and therefore separate from the lay community. He is a member of the priesthood, the *sacerdotium*, a term combining two Latin words: *sacer*, “sacred”, in the sense of separate and not profane, and *dotium*, “power”, understood as governance, or conduct.²⁸ As the term’s etymology suggests, a priest has the authority to administer God’s affairs (charism of office). According to Canon Law, a superior religious leader, in this case the bishop, grants power to the local clergy that he himself received from the vicar of Christ, the Pope. The charism of office is of divine descent; it does not come from the people. Therefore, its authority does not require recognition or acceptance by the laity. Canon 519 of the Canonical Code states:

The parish priest (*parochus*) is the pastor of a parish. He exercises the pastoral care of the community through the mandate of the diocesan bishop, who gives him the authority and power to teach, confer the sacraments, assist the lay members spiritually.²⁹

versity Press 2001, *passim*. For an example of the Holy Office’s condemnation of a case of a false saint with stigmata, see: ADDE, Stanza Storica, B 7a (50 B 7 a 1) 1, Notificazione di affettata santità (Suora Maria Agnese Firrao, 14.2.1816), 1r.

²⁶ Archives of the deanery Geraardsbergen, 227. E.C.3.1 letter from Pastor O. Duerinck to Minister G. Sap, late June 1939.

²⁷ Berlin, Geheimes Staatsarchiv, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, I.HA.Rep.77. Tit.500, no. 44 Bd. 1 die Maasnahmen gegen die durch die angeblichen Wundererscheinungen eingetretenen Ruhestörungen, St. Johanner Zeitung, 12.9.1877 (no. 212), “Zum Wunderschwindel”.

²⁸ Romeo, Antonio: Sacerdozio, in: *Enciclopedia cattolica*, Florence: Sansoni 1953, 1532–40, 1535–36.

²⁹ Code of Canon Law, Can.519: https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann460-572_en.html (19.6.2022).

Rather than a simple “pawn” of the ecclesiastical hierarchy or an official with the right to impose his authority on the people, the parish priest should be seen as a mediator between the Church and the lay faithful; a figure with his own power, but who had to both report to his superiors and win and keep the trust of the parishioners, especially when issues of orthodoxy and orthopraxy were at stake.

1.2 The Challenge to Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy: The Devotion to Stigmatics

Of particular interest here are those cases in which the Church’s teachings were challenged by phenomena of alleged mysticism and, more specifically, cases of alleged stigmatisation and the movements that developed in these contexts. The database of cases that we compiled with our colleagues over the previous years



Fig. 1: Map of cases of stigmatisation reported in present-day Belgium, Germany, Italy, France and Spain © Alexis Vermeylen.

will be the starting point.³⁰ The map (Fig. 1) reveals the number and spread of cases that we were able to record.

Two caveats should be mentioned: (1) the focus is solely on the “golden era” of stigmatisation, the 19th and early 20th centuries; and (2) the study primarily looks at the “top” countries – those countries with many cases of stigmatics, as revealed in the secondary literature – Italy, Spain, France, Germany and Belgium. This article focuses on regions that are currently part of Italy, Germany and Belgium, as the cases found there allow us to address the complexity of the phenomenon.

Why focus specifically on stigmatics? Firstly, stigmatisation is a predominantly Catholic phenomenon (although not exclusively), with the Stigmatics database currently recording 276 cases, of which 260 are listed as Catholic.³¹ Secondly, among all the categories of mystics who tried to publicly demonstrate their direct contact with God, or at least their exceptionality (as prophets, visionaries, ecstasies, healers, etc.), stigmatics had a significant advantage: the visibility of the signs. Even if the visible wounds of stigmatisation were invisible in some cases the mystic showed other signs of participating in the spiritual suffering of the Passion, while many of them did display stigmata on their hands and feet, the crown of thorns on the head and a deep wound on their chest.³² In many contexts studied, the impression of the wounds on the bodies of young women was popularly considered to be “proof” – a guarantee that the divine had chosen to operate and reveal itself to the world through that specific person. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of faithful flocked to the stigmatics to see the wounds with their own eyes.

However, it should be stressed that there were different “profiles” that this type of stigmatic could adopt. On the one hand, there was the “mute icon”, as Elke Pahud de Mortanges called stigmatics such as Maria von Mörl (1812–1868), who did not use their voices and thus could be claimed for different causes. On the other hand, there were stigmatics who functioned as “visionary seers” who claimed to communicate divine messages (e.g. Anna Katharina Emmerick, 1774–1824).³³ Their ideas and messages were not always in opposition to the ecclesiastical authorities, and they did not necessarily try to break away from Catholicism. As Monique Scheer has pointed out, female mediums often expressed ultraconservative ideas

30 <https://mediahaven-stigmatics.uantwerpen.be/> (9.6.2022).

31 This number includes stigmatics traced in the British Empire and Austria.

32 On the development of this new type of stigmatic, see: Van Osselaer, Tine et al.: *The Devotion and Promotion of Stigmatics in Europe, c.1800–1950*, Leiden: Brill 2020, 27–45.

33 Pahud de Mortanges, Elke: *Irre – Gauklerin – Heilige? Inszenierung und Instrumentalisierung frommer Frauen im Katholizismus des 19. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte* 100/2006, 203–225, pp. 208–209.

rather than rebellious emancipatory discourses (such as pleading for women to be admitted to the priesthood).³⁴

In some cases, members of the clergy used the voice of these women to fuel their strategic campaign in favour of the Roman Church. For example, the prophecies of Anna Maria Taigi (1769–1837) and Elisabetta Canori Mora (1774–1825), famous Italian mystics who were very influential in the 19th century (even after their deaths), were powerful “weapons” with which the Holy See tried to mobilise the faithful, especially in more conservative Roman circles.³⁵ Luca Sandoni has argued that even in intransigent and legitimist France at the end of the 19th century, the mystical experiences of these women assumed the function of “political mobilisations”.³⁶ At the same time, according to Hilaire Multon, mystics were not solely used as an ultramontanist tool by those above. They were “first and foremost the result of popular aspirations in favour of a cult that stripped the rigours of the post-Tridentine era, often carrying violent charges against the clergy”.³⁷ It is not uncommon to find radical and anti-clerical elements in the prophecies and visions from those years.

However, what they believed to be part of Catholic teachings and practices did not always coincide with the beliefs of the ecclesiastical authorities and local clergy. The following will first address the local clergy’s independent response to mystical challenges and then examine how differences between the behaviour expected of the clergy and their actual response could strain their relationship with the Church hierarchy.

34 Scheer, Monique: *Das Medium hat ein Geschlecht*, in: “Wahre” und “falsche” Heiligkeit. Mystik, Macht und Geschlechterrollen im Katholizismus des 19. Jahrhunderts, ed. Hubert Wolf, München: Oldenbourg 2013, 169–192, p. 181.

35 De Palma, Francesco: *Il modello laicale di Anna Maria Taigi*, in: *Santi, culti, simboli nell’età della secolarizzazione (1815–1915)*, ed. Emma Fattorini, Turin: Rosenberg 1997, 529–546, pp. 532–533.

36 Sandoni, Luca: *Political mobilizations of ecstatic experiences in late nineteenth-century Catholic France: the Case of Doctor Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre and his “stigmatisées” (1868–1873)*, in: *Disputatio Philosophica. International Journal of Philosophy and Religion*, 16/2015, 18–41, p. 22.

37 Multon, Hilaire: *Prophétesses et prophéties dans la seconde moitié du pontificat de Pie IX (1859–78). Entre défense du pouvoir temporel et Apocalypse hétérodoxe*, in: *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica*, 1/2003, 131–159, p. 132.

2 Independent Response: The Clergy Act on Their Own

In 1930, Friedrich Ritter von Lama,³⁸ a Catholic author with a special interest in mystical epiphenomena and particularly known for his involvement in the promotion of the famous German stigmatic Therese Neumann, started corresponding with one of the followers of a certain Johanna Schnelle. A fervent devotee of Neumann, Schnelle had, according to her followers, been blessed with mystical gifts herself (she also bore the wounds of Christ) and started her own devotional movement in Birkungen (Eichsfeld/Dortmund). She functioned as a “spiritual mother”, had started some sort of cloister (comprising two houses and the stations of the Cross) and her followers all took the names of apostles and holy women. Von Lama’s correspondent was, however, not happy with the way the parish priest had responded to this religious enthusiasm.³⁹ The writer complained that “only last week” Schnelle had been denounced as a “fraud” (“Schwindlerin”) and “cheat” (“Betrügerin”) by a Franciscan friar, and from different pulpits in the region. It was also noted that this friar had probably been put up to it by the parish priest, who had been forbidden from doing so by the prelate. Moreover, the parish priest had apparently also said that Johanna Schnelle belonged in a mental asylum; he had denounced her group of followers from the pulpit and had forbidden them to pray the stations of the Cross and the rosary. According to von Lama’s correspondent, the parish priest had no affinity with mysticism, but rather was focused solely on the material world.⁴⁰

There is no better way to show how the local clergy was actively involved in safeguarding the orthodoxy of the faith of their parishioners and in putting a stop to dangerous deviations than to look at this moment of conflict between this group and their parish priest. The parish priest felt responsible and warned his parishioners about the group, as well as hindering the latter from participating in and influencing local religious practices. To the followers of Schnelle, this intervention seemed to be “dreadful ridicule and mockery” that was due to the parish priest’s hurt feelings. According to the letter writer, he could not cope with Schnelle receiving visitors from elsewhere. However, the local priest must have

³⁸ Catholic author and journalist (1876–1944), victim of persecution by the Nazis. Died in prison in Munich. Berger, Manfred: Lama, Friedrich Georg Ritter von und zu Büchsenhausen, in: Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon (BBKL), Bd. 23, ed. Wilhelm Bautz / Traugott Bautz, Nordhausen: Bautz 2004, col. 883–893.

³⁹ Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München (BSM), Nachlass Friedrich von Lama (1876–1944) (von Lama), Ana 445, file 6, letters to von Lama from Preker, 1930 and 25.4.1931.

⁴⁰ Ibid., letter to von Lama from Preker, 1930.

felt obliged to intervene, as he thought it was his duty to protect his parishioners and the orthodoxy of their faith.⁴¹ It is interesting to note that he and his confrater intervened in this religious enthusiasm where their authority, as clergymen, and their expertise in Christian orthodoxy was best recognised – on the pulpit.

In the Birkungen-Schnelle example, we see how complicated the matter became. A case of stigmatisation could upset the social and religious balance of a parish and involve various agents: the local parishioners, the authorities (both secular⁴² and religious) and a variety of local clergy. The bishop was the leader of the diocesan curia and the priest was the head of the parish, but in addition to these two most eminent local figures, there were many others involved, such as deacons, vicars, canons of the cathedral and members of the regular clergy (monks, friars, new religious congregations) – all figures with specific functions (confessors, spiritual fathers, chancellors). Each of them could have different feelings and opinions about the stigmatics, both for and against. When a rift was created between members of the parish clergy, these cases became even more complicated.

Having a stigmatic in your parish (or cloister) could not only be a challenge to the clerical authority of office (as these mystics claimed a direct link to the divine), but often also tested the hierarchical relationship between the diocese and the clergy. Thus, while the parish priest of Birkungen seems to have acted against the will of his superior, it is apparent that the diocesan and state authorities actually often regarded the local priest as the guardian of orthodoxy and as their representative. The local clergy acted as their soldiers in the field and ideally functioned as their voices. In turn, we can see how the local clergy, uneasy about the ways in which enthusiasm for mystical figures in their parish evolved, made contact with the ecclesiastical authorities and asked them for advice.

⁴¹ “furchtbaren Spott und Hohn” Ibid.

⁴² The response of the secular authorities is not addressed here, as they (e.g. forced medical examination and even arrest) were not driven by an attempt to guarantee religious orthodoxy or orthopraxis but by fear of public upheaval.

3 Alerting the Authorities and the Local Clergy's Role in This

There could be various reasons for the local clergy to contact the authorities. Some merely wanted to inform them,⁴³ motivated by pride about something so exceptional happening in their parish or cloister and hoping that it would be more extensively documented and approved of by the authorities.⁴⁴ Others asked the authorities to intervene because they did not know how to deal with the phenomena. This might happen immediately, when the events began, even before the case of stigmatisation became public knowledge. In such cases, the local clergy asked the religious authorities whether they should warn their parishioners or support the stigmatic, or if they should have her examined by a physician.⁴⁵ In other cases, the clergy saw the negative effect that the popular enthusiasm for the stigmatic had on the local population, and they feared that because the number of visitors was so high the public authorities and the police would intervene.⁴⁶ Concerned about the impression their parish (and faith) was making on others, they indicated that the mere presence of such a case of Catholic supernaturalism endangered the good relationship with Protestant neighbours.⁴⁷ Fi-

43 For example, Enrico Roberti, the father confessor of the mystic Maria Luisa Biagini, informed his religious superiors (the bishop of Lucca) of the miraculous healing of his spiritual penitent and the Marian apparition that she claimed to see. Two years later, when stigmata appeared on Biagini's body, he did the same by contacting the bishop. Mezzetti, Raffaele: *Vita di Suor Maria Luisa Biagini Lucchese, religiosa conversa del second'Ordine di S. Francesco*. Cenni storici del canonico Raffaele Mezzetti tratti dalle memorie del March. Cesare Lucchesini e da altri documenti, Lucca: Tipografia G. Giusti 1864, 38.

44 Antonio Sechin Nin informed the highest Sardinian religious authorities about the prodigious phenomena of the newly elected abbess, Maria Rosa Serra, who showed the stigmata for the first time on 1 May 1801. BUCa, Cagliari, Biblioteca Universitaria di Cagliari, Ms. 10.30, *Copia della Lettera del R.do D. Gavino Secchi Nin che come Delegato informa l'occorso nell'elezione di Suora Maria Rosa Serra in Badessa della Cappuccine di Ozieri*, 3–4.

45 In the case of Maria Domenica Lazzeri, the parish priest Michelangelo Santuari wrote to Mgr Johann Nepomuk von Tschiderer and his vicar Mgr Giacomo Freinadimetz asking them what he should do. The correspondence of the clergy with their superiors concerned questions of whether or not it would be wise to make the case public. Leonardi Vesely, Ludmila: *La santità nel Tirolo*. Domenica Lazzeri da Capriana, Rovereto: Longo Editore 1991, 79–80.

46 This was the case when the city pastor of Ravensburg, Karl Stempfle, asked the diocesan authorities of Rottenburg to intervene in 1874 in the case of Victoria Hecht from German Wolpertswende. Pappelau, Stefan: *Viktoria Hecht. Stigmatisierte Dulderin von Wolpertswende 1840–1890*, Lindenberg: Kunstverlag Josef Fink 2010, 12.

47 In the case of Barbara Pfister, for example, Pastor Franz Weber contacted the Speyer bishop because the local protestant vicar had used the case to stir commotion (1890). Archiv Bistum

nally, they might also call for help when they believed that people were being duped by the promoters of the stigmatic or by the stigmatic themselves. This was the case when self-declared mystic, Bertha Mrazek, seemed to fascinate a group of followers who were also willing to sponsor her financially. She claimed to be able to free them of their illnesses and ailments, and she also made prophecies (especially concerning the coming purification of society and a warning against the dangers of bolshevism). After being contacted by a concerned father (c. 1922), the local priest informed the archbishop.⁴⁸

However, some of the clergy were completely convinced of the authenticity and divine origins of the paramystical phenomena and made contact with higher authorities only after they became active promoters of the stigmatic. In the case of Palma Mattarelli, for example, the Canon Vincenzo de Angelis sent his manuscript about Palma's life to the Holy See to obtain the ecclesiastical *imprimatur* (the permission to print).⁴⁹ However, by writing to them, he triggered the suspicion of the Holy Office, which started an investigation.⁵⁰ The cardinals did not believe in Palma's graces and also accused the Canon of being unfamiliar with Catholic doctrine and the appropriate spiritual guidance of a penitent. De Angelis had to formally admit that he had been mistaken about Palma's phenomena, abjure his old opinions and promise that he would no longer feed her "illicit cult".⁵¹ A member of the clergy too much in favour of a stigmatic risked irreparable damage to his career.

Speyer, Bischöfliches Ordinariat, Älteres Archiv, no. 197, letter from Pfarrer F. Weber of Wattenhem, 9.12.1890.

48 Paul Vrancken, pastor of the church of the Holy Cross in Elsene to Mercier, Archives Archdiocese of Mechelen, Mercier, VII, 125 bis, s.d. On the story of Bertha Mrazek, see: Van Osselaer, Tine: The Many Lives of Bertha, Georges and Jean: a Transgender Mystic in Interwar Belgium, in: *Women's History Review* 29.1/2020, 142–163.

49 Castelli, Francesco: Per una definizione del modello di processo penale del Sant'Uffizio: il procedimento inquisitoriale per affettata santità nei confronti di Palma Mattarelli di Oria (1869–1878), in: *Suavis laborum memoria. Chiesa, Papato, e Curia romana tra storia e teologia: scritti in onore di Marcel Chappin SJ per il suo 70° compleanno*, Vatican City: Archivio Segreto Vaticano 2013, 25–50, pp. 32–33 and Klaniczay, Gábor: The stigmatized Italian Visionary and the Devout French Physician: Palma Mattarelli d'Oria and Docteur Imbert Gourbeyre, in: *Women's History Review*, 29.1/2020, 109–124, p. 114.

50 The contested volume was entitled: "Unione dell'anima con Dio spiegata nella vita, miracoli e meraviglie di Palma Matarrelli" (Union of the soul with God, explained in the life, miracles, and marvels of Palma Matarrelli). It is kept in: ADDF, *Censurae Librorum*, 1875 P. II CL 1875 5 vol II. The investigation into Palma Matarrelli is present in another folder of the Holy Office: ADDF, C.L. 1875 no. 5, Oria.

51 ADDF, C.L. 1875 no. 5, Oria, 10v.

There could be many reasons for the local clergy to inform the higher religious authorities about alleged mysticism and stigmata, but this did not always happen. Sometimes the parish priests and confessors were not aware of the prodigious phenomena of their spiritual penitents, as the latter kept these hidden even from their family and closest friends.⁵² In other cases, the clergy members were not concerned about the stories of their penitents, or they believed that such signs would vanish quickly if they were ignored. In other cases, the spiritual directors tried to protect the stigmatic by remaining silent, fearing that fame could attract suspicion and investigations, endangering the life of the mystic.⁵³

However, the ecclesiastical authorities were not only informed through the reports of the local clergy. Rumours about alleged stigmatisation could reach the doors of the curia or the Vatican congregations in different ways. Faithful and lay citizens, members of the secular or regular clergy, and medical experts, even if they were not formally responsible, felt a duty to alert the religious authorities, denouncing the supernatural phenomena occurring in their diocese and commenting on the behaviour of the clergy.

This occurred, for example, on 25 August 1801, when the first of a long series of letters arrived at the Holy Office.⁵⁴ Two laywomen from Ceccano, a small village not far from Rome, had denounced the mystic Giovanna Marella. Their accusations were directed at her illicit relationship with the parish priest, her sinful life and especially her strong alliance with the clergymen of the village. According to these two women, the priest and the father confessors would not grant communion and other sacraments to those who did not believe in the “holiness” of Marella.⁵⁵ The Vatican congregation contacted the local bishop and managed to resolve the matter quickly – with the local clergy members reprimanded for their conduct. They justified themselves by providing proof of their good faith and claiming to have naively believed in the supernatural origin of Giovanna’s prodigious

52 For example, this was the case for Maria Teresa Carloni (1919–1983), who from 11 April 1952 experienced the wounds of the passion without communicating this news to anyone except her diary (found posthumously). Speziale, Vincenzo: *Maria Teresa Carloni. Stigmatizzata*, Udine: Edizioni Segno 2014, 37.

53 The strategy of silence was chosen by confessor Germano Ruoppolo towards Gemma Galgani. He preferred not to divulge the news of Galgani’s stigmatisation and supernatural phenomena, nor to contact doctors to investigate her case, hoping in this way to protect the penitent mystic. Rossi, Leonardo: *Stigmatized Blood in the Vatican Courts. Religious Response and Strategy to Stigmata/ics*, in: *The Devotion and Promotion of Stigmatics in Europe, c. 1800–1950*, Leiden: Brill 2020, 183–184.

54 ADDF, St St C 4 – e, *Processo contro Giovanna Marella per affettata santità (1799–1807)*, 7r.

55 “[They] say that for some women in the village it is now impossible to confess because either they have opposed her or because they do not believe in her holiness”. *Ibid.*, 9r.

gies. Because of their repentance and the promise not to encourage the deviant cult anymore, the clergymen were forgiven, and their careers spared.⁵⁶ As we will see, the response of the higher religious authorities to the local clergy was not always so merciful.

4 Interventions of the Authorities

4.1 Which Authorities?

Parish priests and father confessors were among the first ecclesiastical figures to come into contact with the phenomenon of stigmatisation. In some cases, they could find a solution on their own and avoid conflict with, and among, their parishioners. At other times, however, they did not know how to deal with the problem and for this reason other authorities intervened. However, which authorities were they? The examples mentioned above show that different types of authorities, secular and religious, dealt with mystics and their phenomena. In Belgium and Germany, the bishops also intervened in cases of stigmatisation within their dioceses. As we will discuss further below, the civil authorities might also take part in the debate and convene medical commissions and investigations. In Italy, the Holy Office intervened as well. We have to take a step back 500 years to understand the historical reasons for these national differences.

In 1542, with the *Licet ab initio* bull, Pope Paul III created the Congregation of the Sacred, Roman and Universal Inquisition of the Holy Office.⁵⁷ The primary purpose was to fight the Protestant heresy in Catholic Europe, but more specifically to prevent the spread of Lutheranism throughout the Italian peninsula. It can be said that from the very beginning, the Congregation had a more privileged connection with the Italian territories than other European countries. Through the centuries, the Holy Office expanded its range of acts against faith crimes, such as witchcraft and heresies, as well as claims of miracles and alleged holiness. For this reason, in the 19th and 20th centuries in Italy, three levels of ecclesiastical authority (local clergy, bishops, Holy Office) could intervene in the event of supernatural phenomena.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 115r–119v.

⁵⁷ Borromeo, Agostino: La congregazione cardinalizia dell'Inquisizione (XVI-XVIII secolo), in: L'Inquisizione: atti del simposio internazionale, ed. Agostino Borromeo, Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana 2003, 323–344, p. 328.

The Holy Office also dealt with non-Italian stigmatics. In the archive of the dicastery, we can find, for example, sources on the Belgian stigmatic Louise Lateau and the German mystic Therese Neumann.⁵⁸ However, it appears that the cardinals were more interested in gathering information on these cases and contacting local authorities than instigating investigations or issuing verdicts. Moreover, the Vatican did not always intervene in the Italian cases – sometimes it was only the diocesan authorities who responded. In Italy, the Holy Office intervened in 28 out of 100 cases, the bishops in 35. Nevertheless, the Holy Office and bishops also cooperated in many investigations.

The diocesan response is also to be seen in Belgian and German dioceses. Interestingly, however, in these two countries, the public authorities also intervened. In the regions now lying in Germany there were 46 cases. There is one case in which four women were examined together.⁵⁹ If that cluster is considered one case, it means that the public authorities intervened 13 times.⁶⁰ The ecclesiastical authorities were involved in seven of these – in two we can speak of a collaboration between the authorities. Apart from the cases where there was collaboration between the authorities, the ecclesiastical authorities examined and/or intervened in six more cases. In total, there was an intervention by public and/or ecclesiastical authorities in 19 cases. In regions now in Belgium, nine out of 22 attested cases drew the attention of the ecclesiastical authorities, and the public authorities also became involved in one of them.

One caveat needs to be mentioned here: in some cases the diocesan authorities ordered an examination because they wanted to document the case as thoroughly as possible, not because they deemed the phenomena and events problematic. However, here, we focus on those times when the ecclesiastical authorities tried to intervene because the cases were seen as problematic, and we will see how they relied on the local clergy to do so.

⁵⁸ ADDF, Dev.Variae, 1927 no. 7 Neumann, I (1–9), II, Stanza Storica, Lateau (C4f)1, (C4g).

⁵⁹ This was the Waakirchen case that concerned Pfarrer Weinzierl and his female followers. For an introduction to this case, see: Gißibl, Bernhard: *Frömmigkeit, Hysterie und Schwärmerei*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2004, passim.

⁶⁰ The state authorities intervened in cases of financial misconduct, slander, sexual abuse (or a combination of all of them in the case of Chaplain Nicolaus Kickertz and “die Blutschwitzerin” Elisabeth Flesch in 1877 – Saarbrückener Landgericht). Berlin, Geheimes Staatsarchiv, Preussischer Kultur Besitz, I.HA.Rep. 77. Tit. 500, no. 44 Bd. 1 die Maßnahmen gegen die durch die angeblichen Wundererscheinungen eingetretenen Ruhestörungen.

4.2 Mobilising the Clergy (Or Trying To)

If the top-down structure of the Catholic Church was to function properly, the decisions taken from above needed to be enforced from below. For the Vatican and the bishops, it was crucial that the local clergy actively collaborated, communicating their verdict to the community and convincing the faithful to obey their directives. In the ideal scenario, parish priests, spiritual directors and confessors accepted the decisions of the higher authorities and committed themselves in chorus to enforce them. The practical management, however, was far more complex. The local clergy were not merely subordinate spokespeople for others but had their own opinions on the mystical events that had occurred in their own parish. As such, they often felt entitled to take part in the debate. Furthermore, the higher ecclesiastical authorities (such as the bishops and/or the Holy Office) only decided on the fate of a mystic after investigating, sometimes opening a formal process. This could take months, if not years, before a judgement was made. In the meantime, the local clergy had a decisive influence on hampering or perpetuating mystical phenomena and curtailing the stigmatic's fame.

At times, the collaboration between the lower and higher echelons of the Church hierarchy went smoothly, but this was not always the case. In the following, both scenarios will be addressed. To begin, we will explore a case in which the local clergy was on board with the Church hierarchy. When, in January 1835, Maria Domenica Lazzeri showed her visible stigmata to the parish priest of Capriana, Michelangelo Santuari, he immediately knew what to do. Firstly, Santuari sent a long letter to the Bishop of Trento, in which he explained the phenomena of Maria Domenica.⁶¹ Two months later, the diocesan curia summoned the parish priest so as to learn about the latest developments in the affair and to issue new orders. Santuari was to keep him informed and was assigned two main tasks: discourage the flow of pilgrims who visited Maria Domenica's house; and stop her mystical "flights", during which the young woman disappeared in body and soul and made visits to other Tyrolean stigmatics.⁶² In heeding the orders given by the hierarchy, the priest of Capriana asked for the help of members of the local clergy, the Lazzeri family and the parishioners. He ordered the mother and brothers of Maria Domenica to no longer allow visitors who did not have an ecclesiastical permit. Furthermore, the young woman was not to be permitted to talk to other mystics, much less "transport" herself to see them. Every time the Bishop or

⁶¹ Letter from Santuari to Mgr Johann Nepomuk von Tschiderer. Leonardi, Vesely: *La santità nel Tirolo*, 79–80.

⁶² Brunelli, Giovanni: *Un fiore purpureo tra i monti*, Trento: Scuole Grafiche Artigianelli 1968, 321–326.

the Curia of Trento contacted Santuari with new requests, the latter showed himself to be an obedient “soldier” willing to carry out his task without hesitation, even when this meant opposing his local collaborators and some of the parishioners.

The Bishop also asked Santuari to remove the stigmatic’s father confessor, who was not very cooperative with the ecclesiastical leaders and too much in favour of the mystic and her prodigies.⁶³ Once again, Santuari did not hesitate to comply with the curia’s instructions, and he changed her confessors four times over the course of the following years. When the Bishop and the political authorities invited him to enforce more rigorously the prohibition against pilgrims visiting Lazzeri, as well as further restrict her mystical disappearances, Santuari threatened the Lazzeri family, announcing that Maria Domenica would be taken away from Capriana if they continued to open their house to the curious, or if the young woman disappeared again.

This example of Santuari demonstrates the ideal and collaborative relationship between the local clergy and higher ecclesiastical authority. The leaders gave their orders, and the pastor obeyed them, finding concrete solutions in practice, such as reading their bishop’s messages in church after mass and attempting to persuade the faithful and the mystics themselves that the phenomena were not supernatural. Rather than feed the rumours, the local clergy silenced the stigmatic and made their parishioners obey.

4.3 The Clergy as Part of the Problem (at Least in the Eyes of the Ecclesiastical Authorities)

Having primarily discussed the ideal scenario – those cases where the clergy were in agreement with the authorities and tried to impose their will – it must also be acknowledged that sometimes the clergy was part of the problem. This was the case when the clergy became admirers and promoters of the stigmatics and believed that the mystical epiphenomena and divine messages were genuine. This also implied a need to defend the new mystic, her messages, religious practices and other changes that her experiences presented. In other words, they believed that they were defending religious orthodoxy, albeit their version of it. How did they respond when they were summoned to action by the authorities?

⁶³ Gadaleta, Ludovico Maria: Rosmini e l’Addolorata di Capriana, in: *Rivista Rosminiana di filosofia e di cultura* 108/2014, 79–149, p. 113.

How did they see their own role in the spread of “deviant” ideas? Did they obey once they were criticised?

The most extreme cases were those in which the parish priest not only supported the emergence of a new mystic, but in fact functioned as some sort of nucleus for the development of new cases of mystical epiphenomena. One of the best-known cases is that of Pfarrer Mathias Weinzierl of Waakirchen, who inspired no less than four “mystics” (Elisabeth Bartenhauser [1840], Anna Fiechtner [1839], Theresia Taubenberger [1839] and Therese Schnitzelbauer [1842]) to develop “strange” mystical epiphenomena such as stigmata, Marian apparitions and religious ecstasy. The events were difficult to ignore and did not occur in secrecy. There was an entanglement of “normal” parish life, religious supervision by the priest and the new supernatural phenomena. These women’s weekly reliving of Christ’s Passion usually ended with Pastor Weinzierl “waking” them up – a good example of how prominent a role he played in these events.⁶⁴ Moreover, Pastor Weinzierl seems to have allowed these exceptional phenomena to venture into his parish church. The Tegernsee authorities first learned about the events because, during one of his inspection trips on 28 September 1840, the District head (Regierungspräsident) of Upper Bavaria saw Elisabeth Bartenhauser “on the oratorium” kneeling and praying with her hands folded, her face covered with dried drops of blood, and surrounded by ten to twelve women and girls.⁶⁵

It is important to note that in the Waakirchen case, it was the public authorities who complained about “Schwärmerei” (“religious enthusiasm”), while the diocesan authorities defended Pastor Weinzierl. Priests were also the responsibility of the State (due to the Church-State collaboration) and were considered local state officials. They were civil servants who “obeyed two masters” and provided direct access to the local inhabitants.⁶⁶ “Schwärmerei”, a battle cry of the Enlightenment, was one of the points of interest for the Bavarian authorities. The historian Bernhard Gißibl has described it “as the opposite of religious indifference, an irrational deviation of religiosity towards a sensitive cult of feelings or fanaticism”.⁶⁷ Such religious enthusiasm was problematic for the Bavarian authorities,

⁶⁴ Gißibl: Frömmigkeit, 28.

⁶⁵ “auf dem Oratorium”, *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁶ “Beambter, der zwei Herrn diene”. Two aspects need to be highlighted here: (1) in the case of conflict, the clergy’s loyalty always remained with the Catholic Church; (2) their social position in the village was not based on their approval by the State, or the royal *placet*, but on their charisma of office, *Ibid.*, 112–113 (quotation), 130.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 137: “Schwärmerei bezeichnete das Gegenteil von religiöser Indifferenz, die irrationale Abweichung der Religiosität in einen empfindsamen Gefühlskult oder Fanatismus”.

as they linked it to political and social unrest. For Ludwig I's government, religion was ideally a stabilising factor in society, not a cause of upheaval and tension.⁶⁸

The case of Elisabeth Bartenhauser, the young woman on the oratorium with a bleeding face, was addressed swiftly with Pastor Weinzierl telling her to stop. Waakirchen and Weinzierl, however, once again drew the attention of the public authorities in October 1842, when the husband of Theresia Taubenberger filed a complaint after his wife had gone to live at the house of her brother-in-law. Theresia's husband accused Weinzierl of an overly intimate relationship with his wife and of encouraging an unhealthy religious atmosphere. The village was divided: on one side there was the husband, the male half of Waakirchen and the Landgericht; and on the other, the pastor, the female parishioners and the archdiocese.

According to Taubenberger's husband, Pastor Weinzierl had introduced a new type of piety into his parish when he started there in 1837. His teachings were in stark contrast with those of the previous parish priest: while his predecessor had taught them "Christian love and patience, and confirmed his teachings through his own conduct", Weinzierl preached "hatred and persecution," called them "dogs, pigs and idiots" and declared that he would love "Heaven" to destroy "our fields with hail".⁶⁹ To that grim atmosphere, he added "a sort of piety of a kind that no other pastor had ever taught us and that we thus did not understand". According to the witness, the pastor was primarily trying to win over a female audience for his "pious ideas" – albeit "only young women or girls".⁷⁰ Those who used to be "pious" and had "diligently" attended church, now all of a

68 Ibid., 140. It is worth emphasising that Bernhard Gißibl sees a difference here between this generation of "deviant" priests and the previous one. The older generation, so he stresses, attempted to answer a need of the population when offering cures/healing rituals. The younger generation, on the contrary, minimised its own importance in public but played a major supporting role behind the scenes, Ibid., 109.

69 "Während jener uns christliche Liebe und Duldung predigte, und diese Lehren durch sein Beispiel bekräftigte, predigte uns dieser von Hass und Verfolgung, und er ging in seinem Eifer so weit, dass er uns Hunde, Schweine und Narren auf der Kanzel schimpfte, und dass er erklärte, es würde ihn freuen, wenn der Himmel unsere Felder durch Hagl verwüstete u. dgl. mehr"; Staatsarchiv München (SM), AR 1020/10. Act des königlichen Landgerichts Tegernsee. Umtriebe des Pfarrers Mathias Weinzierl in Waakirchen betr. 1842/44 (Waakirchen 1842/44), Auffallende Erscheinungen an der Elisabeth Birnbaum resp. Bartenhauser zu Waakirchen betr. 1840 (Bartenhauser), fol. 7: testimony of Joseph Taubenberger, 14.10.1842.

70 "Eine Frömmigkeit, allein auf eine Art, wie sie uns früher noch von keinem Pfarrer gelehrt worden war, und wie wir sie auch gar nicht verstanden. Namentlich suchte er das weibliche Geschlechte für seine frommen Ideen zu gewinnen, jedoch nur die jüngeren Frauen oder Mädchen". SM, AR 1020/10. Waakirchen 1842/44, Bartenhauser, fol. 7: testimony of Joseph Taubenberger, 14.10.1842.

“sudden stayed there for half a day”.⁷¹ The Weinzierl case was, in other words, presented as a typical example of an exaggerated, unhealthy religious atmosphere in which paramystical events could develop. Similar examples of the clergy influencing one or more women can be found in other documented cases of stigmatics.⁷²

However, when Weinzierl was invited to answer questions concerning the religious atmosphere he was nourishing, he fought the accusations that he had inspired overexcited religiosity and petty devotion. He claimed that he had discouraged Taubenberger from going to confession too often and had forbidden her to use the cilice and flogging lash.⁷³ Nonetheless, Pastor Weinzierl had indeed introduced the “living rosary”, a prayer community that primarily consisted of the women of the parish. He had also reintroduced meditation on the Passion and devotion to the Mount of Olives, which focused on Christ’s fear of death each Sunday. Perhaps not completely coincidentally, the weekly Passion experience of the Waakirchen women started with the “ringing of the fear” (“Angstläuten”) by the church bells on Thursday evening, recalling Christ’s fear on the Mount of Olives.⁷⁴

The public authorities were primarily interested in exploring to what extent Weinzierl’s actions had stimulated false representations of religion, and they asked the diocesan authorities to remove him. However, the archdiocese defended Pastor Weinzierl, noting that the phenomena had not yet been examined thoroughly. It thus sent its own investigator,⁷⁵ who collected new testimonies. These led to an image of Weinzierl as an enthusiastic priest who had optimised the religious circumstances of Waakirchen and who was thus rewarded with these exceptional phenomena.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the diocesan investigator did not reject the possibility that this might be a case of animal magnetism. Seeing the original testimonies dismissed, the public authorities gradually became less outspoken in their rejection. This was also due to the fact that the medical examinations indicated that the bleeding was real, even if it was thought that it could be caused by the nervous disposition of the women involved.⁷⁷ Finally, after a new

71 “Alle diese, die früher fromm waren und fleissig in die Kirche gingen, blieben auf einmal halbe Tage darin”. *Ibid.*

72 See the Flesch/Kickertz case referred to in footnote 54: Kickertz had attempted to create a new mystical cult by using the religious imagination of the Catholic population.

73 AEM, Realia 923 a Erscheinungen-Einzelfälle 1839–1845, Bartenhauser, report of the dean of Osterwarngau to the episcopal ordinariat, 13/12/1842.

74 Gießibl: Frömmigkeit, 28.

75 *Ibid.*, 118–119, 130.

76 *Ibid.*, 35.

77 *Ibid.*, 37.

complaint in July 1843, Taubenberger was asked to leave the house of her brother-in-law and the Tegernsee region. She found shelter in cloister Reutberg. Weinyl left for Eichstätt in 1847, and shortly thereafter his devotional movement, the living rosary, was suppressed.⁷⁸

The Waakirchen case informs us about what was at stake for the authorities when they examined religious deviance, with the sources revealing the central role that the public authorities ascribed to the parish pastor (as a civil servant and having direct contact with the parishioners) and the ways in which state and church authorities could differ in their evaluation of religious deviance. What both seemed to have in common, however, is the idea that when phenomena become problematic, it might be wise to remove this central figure, the parish priest, father confessor and/or another person who fulfilled this role. Above all, however, the Waakirchen case reveals that religious deviance did not necessarily develop at the margins of a local community: here we had a parish priest who was thought to be at the centre of the developments and who appeared to allow the phenomena inside his church.

We also have even more extreme examples, in which the clergy allowed the women to preach in church after mass and spread their own doctrines. This occurred in Casletto, where the priest Felice Mariani stubbornly continued to support the two sisters Angela (1827–1895) and Teresa (1831–1890) Isacchi despite the Holy Office, Emperor Franz Joseph I and even Pope Pius IX not recognising the validity of the divine messages they preached.⁷⁹ After mass, he also allowed them to speak to the faithful about their Marian apparitions and prophecies.⁸⁰ Even more contrary to Catholic orthodoxy was the conduct of the priest Angelo Francesconi. Convinced of the holiness of Marianna Mancini (1808–1865), he agreed to celebrate mass in the congregation's chapel, founded by the stigmatised woman, without the permission of the religious authorities. Francesconi also allowed Mancini to preach to the faithful and absolve them through a non-institutionalised confession (she did not have the ecclesiastical authority to do so). Her devotees saw her as a “spiritual mother” and a charismatic figure they could follow.⁸¹ In both cases, the religious leaders had to intervene to restore the compromised local orthodoxy.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁷⁹ Rai, Eleonora: *L'apocalittica come spiegazione ai «mali» del XIX secolo. Il caso di Giacomo Maria Montini (1874)*, in: *Ricerche storiche sulla Chiesa Ambrosiana*, 27/2009, 167–190, pp. 171–172.

⁸⁰ See the biographical entry of the two mystical sisters in: Van Osselaer: *The Devotion and Promotion*, 352–353.

⁸¹ ADDF, (C 4) h-i, Mancini e Bordoni, *Ristretto della censura di affettata santità, quietismo di Marianna Mancini*, Foligno e Roma, 15r.

By now, it is probably clear that, for the clergy, supporting a case of religious deviance could have significant repercussions for their career. In several of the cases, the clergyman was removed by the ecclesiastical authorities. However, the reasons for doing so differed. In cases such as that at Waakirchen, where the public authorities requested the removal of Weinzierl, he had to leave because he was thought to have played a central role in the development and support of the “Schwärmerei”.⁸² In other cases, members of the clergy were removed because they believed the mystics and approved of phenomena that later turned out to be fraudulent (as in the Mancini case mentioned above). In such cases, the religious authorities believed that the authority of the priest was no longer guaranteed among the faithful, and as he would no longer be taken seriously by his parishioners, it was better for him to move elsewhere.

This was the case in 1852, when the vicar of Giesenkirchen, Wilhelm Schrammen, believed the “stigmatic” eighteen-year-old Maria Galles. The vicar allowed her to stay in his own house and did not listen to the local priest, who told him to be patient and wait. Instead, Schrammen had written to the diocesan authorities requesting an examination and invited locals and visitors from elsewhere to see the wonders.

However, Galles’ moment in the spotlight did not last long. A medical examination proved that the stigmata were self-inflicted, and this had repercussions for the reputation of the vicar. The local church council described the impact of this verdict of fraud on the region in a letter to the archdiocese: “Here and in the surrounding area, the wonder story has become a point of mockery of our religion, it has especially caused much laughter and mockery among the large number of Protestants who live in the region. Due to this story, Mr Schrammen has entirely lost the trust of the community, and apart from the question of truth or non-truth, we cannot ignore that he has violated the rights of the pastor”.⁸³ Schram-

82 E.g. in the case of Walburga Zentner from Waalhaupten, October 1830, where Pfarrer Fuchs seemed to inspire the events with his talks and teachings. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv (BayH-StA), MK 719: religiöse Schwärmerei der Walburga Zentner, Waalhaupten, letter to the king, 24.10.1830 by “königliche General, Kommissär und Regierungs Präsidenten”. See also the request for the removal of Kooperator Joseph Hilger in the case of Anna Perschl. AEMF, Realia 923 a, Erscheinungen, 1840 auffallende Erscheinungen an der Bauertochter Perschl, fol. 22: letter dated 31.5.1840 from Fischer (königl. Präsidium) to the ordinarius of the archdiocese.

83 “Die Wundergeschichte ist hier und in der Umgegend zum Gespötte unserer Religion geworden, besonders hat diese Geschichte unter den hier zahlreich wohnenden Protestanten großes Gelächter und Gespötte hervorgerufen. Herr Schrammen hat durch diese Geschichte sein ganzes Zutrauen in der Gemeinde verloren, und abgesehen von dem Wahr- und Nichtwahrsein der ganzen Wundergeschichte, so können wir doch nicht umhin zu bemerken dass Herr Schrammen in die Rechte des Pfarrers Eingriffe gemacht habe”. AEK, Generalia I. 31. Religiöse Umtriebe und

men also requested his own removal, as collaboration with the local priest was no longer possible.⁸⁴

In some of the Italian cases, we see more extreme punishments, including arrest, a life of isolation or even removal from the priesthood or the loss of a prominent position. On 10 May 1854, the cardinals of the Holy Office issued their verdict on the case of the stigmatic Maria Bordoni and “the proponents and instigators of her alleged holiness”.⁸⁵ The Holy Office not only expressed severe condemnation of the false stigmatic, but also accused eight members of the local clergy of having believed in Bordoni’s oddities and having played an active role in the creation of her fame and in the mobilisation of her followers, thus jeopardising both the spiritual salvation of the sinner and – above all – the parishioners. Her spiritual guide, a Capuchin friar was removed from the convent, temporarily isolated, and for a year he could no longer hear the confessions of other penitents. To regain their position, the other clergy members involved in the affair had to abjure their beliefs about Bordoni under the penalty of ex-communication.⁸⁶

5 The Faithful: Recognising Clerical Authority and Ecclesiastical Hierarchy?

The Giesenkirchen case, in which the local vicar was no longer taken seriously by the faithful, is a good example of how important it was to have the ear of your parishioners. Local pastors and their colleagues could only function as guardians of orthodoxy if their authority, or that of the hierarchy that was ordering them to make a statement, was accepted by the faithful and/or mystic. Functioning as the voice of authority and reason was only possible if you were accepted as such.

Missbräuche; 31.6.1. Sog. Wunderbare Erscheinungen, Frömmeleien, etc. (1852–1935), Verhandlungen betreffend die angeblich stigmatisirte Maria Gertrud Galles zu Giesenkirchen und den Vikar Schrammen; letter from the Kirchenvorstand of Giesenkirchen, 9.5.1852 to Archbishop Johannes von Geissel.

⁸⁴ See also Dechant Faber’s response in the Bickendorf case: he feared that by being condemned his reputation would suffer damage beyond repair. BT, BIII.12, 10 Bd. 3a, Göbel, Hauptakten I, April 1924–April 1927, letter from Faber 25.2.1927 and 1.3.1927.

⁸⁵ ADDF, *Materiae Diversae*, C 4 i, 1, 3r.

⁸⁶ The sentences of the eight religious members ranged from confinement for one year to being removed for a few years (up to five) from imparting the sacraments. However, shortly after the verdict was issued, the cardinals showed themselves magnanimous in forgiving the repentant Capuchins, restoring their previous religious roles. ADDF, *Materiae Diversae*, C 4 i, 1, 27v–38v.

In some cases, this does not appear to have been an issue: miraculous events might suddenly cease after a member of the clergy had a private word with the mystic indicating that she needed to put a stop to the supernatural phenomena.⁸⁷ In other cases, however, the local population actively resisted the decisions of the church authorities concerning their parish priests. Responses even included armed protest, when it was rumoured that a popular clergyman was to be removed due to his involvement with a mystic. This happened in the case of the Franciscan father Heinrich Gossler, who promoted the cult of the stigmatic Theresia Winter in 1844 in Dorsten. In the end, it was Winter who left the town for Haltern, although shortly afterwards Gossler was also removed and sent to Hardenberg.⁸⁸

Other forms of protest against diocesan decisions involved detaining the delegate of the Holy Office who came to examine the stigmatic (as happened in the case of Palma Matarrelli),⁸⁹ and writing and distributing pamphlets against the bishop.⁹⁰ In one particular case, the protest took the form of fits of coughing. On 11 April 1924, a strange “disease” took hold of some of the Bickendorf parishioners while their parish priest was reading a letter from the episcopal authorities about the stigmatic Anna Maria Göbel. One parishioner after the other started to cough, making it impossible for the other parishioners to hear a word the pastor was saying. The other faithful did not dismiss the continuous coughing and other noises to be mere coincidence but interpreted the events as an attempt to stop the bishop’s decision from reaching their fellow parishioners. To be more precise, the coughing was thought to have hindered the bishop’s condemnation of the visits to the allegedly stigmatised Maria Göbel from becoming public knowledge.⁹¹

87 E.g. in the Waakirchen case, Weinzierl claimed in a letter to the archbishop that he had asked Elisabeth Bartenhauser to stop the phenomena if she could. The bleeding stopped, the ecstasies only gradually, but the visions continued. AEMF, Realia 923a, Erscheinungen-Einzelfälle 1839–1845, Bartenhauser, letter from Weinzierl to the archbishop, 6 October 1841.

88 On this case, see: Schulze, Bernward: Die “angeblich” stigmatisierte Theresia Winter. Die Wundmale der Dornenkrone bei einer “Clarissin” im preußischen Westfalen 1845/46, in: *Westfälische Zeitschrift*, 145/1995, 139–170.

89 Castelli: Per una definizione del modello, 35, n. 43.

90 The Sechi Nin Brothers opposed the condemnation of false sanctity of the abbess Maria Rosa Serra proclaimed by Bishop Azzei. They opposed him and mobilised Serra’s faithful and supporters, writing and distributing pamphlets against the monsignor. ASCa, State Archive of Cagliari, Fondo Segreteria di Stato e di Guerra del Regno di Sardegna, Materie Ecclesiastiche, IV. 504, Carte relative alla falsa santità della Monaca cappuccina d’Ozieri Suor Maria Rosa Serra dal 1802 al 1806, 20r.

91 BT, BIII.12, 10 Bd. 3a/Göbel, Hauptakten I, April 1924–April 1927, letter from mayor of Bickendorf to the bishop, 11 April 1927.

6 Conclusion

As shown above, the boundaries of Catholicism were never fixed but had to be continuously redrawn. This occurred through complex dynamics that involved the intervention of several players, not only the ecclesiastical leaders but also their “subordinates” (in the local clergy) and the faithful. In order to demonstrate this complexity, we have focused on problematic moments and the challenges to orthodoxy and orthopraxy posed by a particular category of mystics: the stigmatics. Due to their visible wounds, some alleged stigmatics claimed a direct connection with the divine (charismatic authority), gaining fame and a reputation for holiness within their communities. While we explored the three national contexts most familiar to us, Belgium, Germany and Italy, the phenomenon also occurred in other European states of the 19th and mid-20th centuries.⁹²

The case studies have shown how some stigmatics mobilised groups of supporters and how some members of the clergy were beguiled by the wonders. While everyone pondered whether these phenomena were the sign of divine will or of a different nature (disease, fraud, possession), the local clergy had to deal with specific challenges: they faced a disrupted parish, often divided between supporters and opponents, and they needed to defend their role as guarantors of Catholic orthodoxy insofar as this was threatened by the charismatic authority of a stigmatic. They were torn between appeasing their parish and the obedience they were required to show to their ecclesiastical superiors.

Some parish priests, convinced of the fraudulent nature of these cults, intervened with determination, intending to put an end to these devotions. They stopped the mystic from performing extreme religious practices, they removed spiritual guides and father confessors, and they admonished the parishioners about spreading rumours concerning the phenomena. However, the local clergy were not always able to control the problem, so they turned to the higher authorities such as the bishop of the diocese or the Vatican congregations (the Holy Office). Collaboration developed between the various ecclesiastical levels. The bishop gave orders to the local clergy, and the parish priests had to adopt practical solutions to ensure that their parishioners obeyed the instructions of the diocesan superior.

However, such positive collaboration was not always the case. Sometimes the clergy aligned themselves with the mystic and her devotees rather than respecting the will of their superior. They fuelled a devotional climate that the Church's leaders rejected as “deviant”. In the eyes of the mystics and the parish priests involved, however, the new devotion was in line with Catholic orthodoxy. Some

92 See the Stigmatics database: <https://mediahaven-stigmatics.uantwerpen.be/> (9.6.2022).

members of the diocesan clergy challenged the power of their leaders even at the cost of ruining their careers and losing the respect of some of their parishioners.

Finally, even when the local clergymen listened to their superiors, having a mystic in the parish always entailed a balancing exercise. The local clergy often had the task of finding a middle way between the will of their superiors, whom they had to obey, and the feelings of their parishioners, to whom they offered their spiritual care. As we have shown here, defining the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy was a complex challenge, and one in which the local clergy played a decisive role.

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