



Volume 1. From the Reformation to the Thirty Years' War, 1500-1648 Defending Women's Communal Life – Dominican Nuns at Strasbourg (1526)

In the Empire's larger cities there was a large number of communities of the principal mendicant orders, especially Franciscans and Dominicans, and particularly of women. The women's communities were cloistered – the men's were not – and they had stronger local identities, since they enjoyed great favor among well-to-do patrician and merchant families. A single city might have housed up to nine or ten houses of female mendicants. All of this helps explain why, of all the urban religious communities, female mendicants resisted the evangelicals' anti-monastic agenda more consistently and stalwartly than any other group. In Strasbourg three of the city's five Dominican women's communities long survived the introduction of the Protestant faith as the city's official religion. The nuns' struggle against the pressure to secularize and disperse is well illustrated by the convent of St. Margaret. Beginning in the mid-1520s, Protestant preachers were repeatedly sent to convert the nuns, while their own priests, on the other hand, were forbidden to minister to them – though, in fact, they did. The question arises as to why the civic magistrates, all of whom adhered to the established religion, tolerated St. Margaret's and the other two convents. One possible explanation is the presence of crypto-Catholicism among some of the city's leading families. It might have also been that Strasbourg's Protestant elite appreciated the Dominican convents as educators of young women.

[2^r] In the year of our Lord 1524, as a punishment from God, a widespread error about the true Christian faith appeared all over the German lands. In this same year, Lutheranism also began to appear in Strasbourg in the form of public sermons and the teaching of ministers, who were led by Doctor Martin Bucer.¹ The city's magistrates ordered him to convert the nuns, especially those of St. Margaret's,² to the [that is, his] true faith. For this purpose he was to preach thrice weekly to the nuns, explaining and clarifying with all diligence the clear word of God. At first he told the nuns in friendly words that he wanted to help them, and they should not be afraid, for he had full authority and powers from Rome.³ He said, too, that he had already brought to other convents the freedom to leave if they pleased and to ignore the fast days, and they would no longer be obliged to arise at midnight to sing Matins. His words did not please the prioress, who was named Ursula Bock. She and her nuns replied that they did not want to hear his sermon. Forced by the magistrates to listen to Doctor Bucer, however, they stopped their ears, because his words would cause the good, spiritual children great sadness, for he had abandoned their own order.

¹ Martin Bucer (d. 1551), a former Dominican friar, was a leading evangelical at Strasbourg from 1523 to 1549. Though he is referred to as "Doctor Bucer" throughout, he did not hold that degree – trans.

² A convent of Dominican women founded in 1224 – trans.

³ At another place Bucer claims to have authority from the Dominicans' General – trans.

[2^v] Now – as though to promote the flourishing of the Observants and all the clergy!⁴ – all the nuns were forced to listen to the sermon, for otherwise the civic magistrates would destroy their convent. The next day the senior custodian of convents⁵ arrived with written orders from the honorable City Council.

First, they must get rid of their father confessor, Michael Lebentorff, a teacher of the Holy Scriptures. This truly pious priest who vehemently opposed Doctor Bucer was ungraciously exiled to the city and the prioress was forbidden from ever seeing him again or letting him back into the convent. The council further ordered that no other priest or friar could be admitted, either secretly or openly, into the cloister. On the contrary, the highly learned Doctor Bucer was to be their true pastor, appointed by the magistrates for their improvement. This the nuns had to accept, and three times a week they had to listen to his horrible sermons against their will. He began at first with sweet words, giving them his poison hidden in honey. He continued to preach but moved no one to change her religion. All the nuns wanted to remain in their holy orders, for among them reigned great love and unity. None would abandon either the order or the faith, all said they wished to keep true to their vows. Then he began using many more harsh words in his sermons. [3^r] Oh, such contempt and desecration of the order cannot even be described!

The prioress was greatly distressed, and she worried that the younger sisters might be swayed by his false teachings and decide to leave. She told them not to listen to the perverse sermons anymore. She also warned the nuns not to stand alone at the choir screen, in case Bucer was wandering around the convent and tried to speak with them.⁶ Some sisters wanted to dress the large angels that stood next to the [high] altar, dress them in habit and veil, and place them at the screen. She ordered a couple of nuns to stand watch and, when the sermon ended, pull the clothed angels back from the screen.⁷ The charade well impressed this perverse preacher, who thought that the motionless nuns were always listening to his sermons. Then, in a fit of malicious zeal, he nearly overturned the pulpit.⁸ He thus finally noticed the truth and became hateful and angry to the prioress. He attacked her in words so evil, they should not be repeated.

Oh, how humiliating it all was for her! With terrible threats he went to the City Council and complained of the nuns' sly trickery. The magistrates then commanded that the nuns must attend all sermons and must sit in the nave with the lay folk, directly next to the pulpit.

Oh, what a great hardship for the prioress and all her dear spiritual children! The sorrow that

⁴ Almost certainly a sarcastic comment by the anonymous writer. In interjecting this phrase, she unmasks the civic regime's claim to assume the power to reform the religious communities of the Observance (a fifteenth-century reform movement among the mendicant orders – Franciscans, Dominicans, etc.) to imply that it is purely a power play – trans.

⁵ The custodians [*Klosterherren*] were magistrates appointed for this purpose – trans.

⁶ The choir screen separated the chapel's choir from its crossing and nave and thus the cloistered from the uncloistered part of the establishment – trans.

⁷ The text is ambiguous as to whether there was one or several angels – trans.

⁸ And, apparently, the choir screen – trans.

everyone had to suffer through listening to the false and embarrassing sermons nearly broke her heart, for the perverse preaching, which was so painful to hear, lasted from Palm Sunday to St. John the Baptist's Day.⁹ Three times each week he sowed his evil seed, none of which sprouted. At the end of his sermons, he always spoke sharply and severely. If they refused to accept his teaching and preaching, [he told the nuns] their community would be destroyed, their hearts would break.

In secret the prioress had many prayers said to God. She also wrote many letters, to which she daily awaited responses, to the Emperor¹⁰ and to the [Dominican] General¹¹ about what a perverted man Martin Bucer was. Meanwhile, Bucer asked the prioress and the nuns what they thought of his sermons, and whether they still wanted to maintain their stubbornness. In the past month alone, he boasted, he had converted more than thirty doctors to the true religion.

The Prioress responded, "That may be, because there is a common saying: the more learned, the more perverted. Also, rarely does a great and wise orator commit a merely minor folly.¹² We want to remain with what we have received from our learned forebears. You should therefore no longer bother us [4'] with your sermons."

Angered by this speech, the Doctor responded, "You blind nuns! You should not believe everything your ignorant Prioress Bock says! I'll make her jump all right, for you should know that I have great authority from the General." To this the prioress replied, "I am not afraid of that. Don't you know that your behavior will soon result in your losing your authority? Your behavior tells us that your power over us is stolen and will soon fade. Doctor Bucer, why this? Is it because you no longer wish to be a spiritual father or teacher of truth? For this reason we no longer recognize you as our superior, and your heedlessness rouses in me an especially heartfelt sorrow. For with all your 'freedom' you lure our sister communities into worldliness.¹³ How can anyone regard you as a good shepherd, when you lead so many spiritual children into perdition? Oh, how badly you will one day rue your acts! Out of sisterly love I cannot but regard with bitterness and can only weep heartfelt tears for your perverse deeds."

Now Doctor Bucer grew even angrier at the prioress. "You wicked fiend," he said, "do not worry yourself over me. Your depravity does not allow you to accept how good and true are my attempts to help you out of your bondage." [4'] To this the prioress responded, "That which we have freely promised and faithfully pledged to Christ, our heavenly bridegroom, comes from love. Our Holy Mother makes it neither heavy nor difficult for us to bear. We therefore do not doubt that we will receive eternal crowns of victory, because from God's own mouth are those made holy, who persevere until the end."

⁹ April 1 to June 24, 1526 – trans.

¹⁰ Emperor Charles V (b. 1500, r. 1519-56) – trans.

¹¹ The General was the highest officer of the Dominican Order – trans.

¹² "The more learned, the more perverse." "A great and wise speaker seldom commits a small folly" – trans.

¹³ That is, in several of the city's other Dominican women's communities – trans.

Doctor Bucer responded, "You are totally deaf and foolish. Had you listened to my sermon, you would have already heard well enough that God did not ordain the nuns' estate. You should all attend my sermon tomorrow at St. Mark's, where I will serve you up a good dinner, and afterward I will explain correctly the Scriptures and interpret for you – for the consolation of your souls – God's ordination of the marital estate."

The prioress looked with pity on her nuns, of whom forty-six were gathered in the convent's hall. Then Bucer said, "the old Bock has you fooled into believing that you should not do my bidding." But when all the nuns protested, Bucer again grew very angry and said that from then on they would have no prioress; all should be equal, and each might live as she pleased. This speech greatly troubled the nuns, who declared that they would in no way accept [5'] this command, first of all, because they were satisfied with the convent's meals and did not want to dine in a convent not their own. They already understood sufficiently the true Word of God, they said, which is plenty for a simple nun. And for God's sake they surrendered their own wills, which they did not want to recover, and they would recognize Sister Ursula Bock as their Mother-Prioress forever.

Now Doctor Bucer grew angry and said that they should not speak with the prioress; she has despised all of his commands and always opposed his good teachings. She is therefore now under the ban.¹⁴ But the prioress intervened, "Who condemns me to banishment?" "I do through my powers," Bucer replied, "because you so boldly reject the word of God." The prioress responded, "I reject not the authority but rather your words and your teaching, which have no basis in truth. The greatest Teacher taught His Divine Word through the holy Church Fathers long ago, before the heretics perversely advanced [their own teachings] from under the church benches."

This speech so angered Dr. Bucer that he gave the prioress the fig.¹⁵ The nuns then withdrew and stood around her. With a fiery face he assured her that he would surely complain of her to the city. [5'] He also showered her with much disgrace. He would report her wickedness to the magistrates, he said, and they would turn her arrogance into humility. "For I possess great favor and honor with the entire magistracy," he boasted, "and I can get from them anything I want, for they greatly esteem my teachings and believe my words as of God's apostle."

To this the prioress replied, "Forgive me if my words have angered you, for I said them only with good will and did not mean insult you. You are truly to be pitied, for you are a highly learned and well-spoken scholar, known to everyone, who has fallen into terrible error. Even a blind man can understand that your teaching comes not from the Holy Spirit, because it is not conducive to holiness but only to the carnality of the flesh. Had you preached about living in fasting, prayer, and penance, also other good works, many fewer persons would have followed your teaching." Bucer then stamped his feet on the floor and raged up and down in the refectory.

¹⁴ It is unclear what kind of "ban" Bucer meant. Ecclesiastical ban or banishment was excommunication. Bucer had no authority to declare the civil ban, that is, outlawry – trans.

¹⁵ *jemandem die Feige zeigen* = a gesture of a clenched fist with the thumb protruding between the first two fingers. It aimed to protect against all possible evils – trans.

Mother Anastasia Mieg¹⁶ now told the prioress that she should leave and not answer Bucer's words anymore. She also then secretly sent word to St. John's¹⁷ and Old St. Peter for aid.¹⁸

After a while, Doctor Bucer once again came to the beleaguered prioress and spoke ugly words to her. "You stupid, useless nun!" he said, "how could you possibly dare to speak of Holy Scriptures and stupidly say that I don't interpret them correctly? You crude, ignorant folk should know that there are many books that have not been correctly interpreted, for not all of them have been inspired by God."

The prioress replied, "We have no doubts about whether our old books are inspired by the Holy Spirit. We desire no other interpretation and want to keep these."

Doctor Bucer spoke, "I have never in my entire life seen such a stubborn nun as you dragons of Margaret!¹⁹ My spiritual children at St. Mark's and St. Catherine's are much more obedient.²⁰ They accept my teaching, as though it comes from the heavens. They read my new books daily. I will send you some of them on the Bible and on the apostle Paul."

The prioress thanked him but said they already had enough books.

Then he asked, "Don't you have any faith in me?" The nuns responded that all their faith is in the Bible and the holy Epistles of Paul. "We reject the new prophets and apostles because they pervert the Holy Scriptures.

Doctor Bucer: "You are completely blinded by wickedness, for the entire city takes my teachings for the clear truth and believes my sermons as the words of an apostle."

The prioress said, "You may in the end acquire that title from the Strasbourg, but you will thereby neither honor our holy order nor gain your purpose. I fear that you will, alas, fall into a troubled and bad condition, although you could have been the one who, [6^v] through your understanding and sound learning, might well have helped to block and expunge what is damaging in the new faith. In your perverted way, however, you have helped secretly to set alight in all burghers' homes in all [religious] orders a flame that, I fear, will become a great fire in time. Your teacher, our former confessor, said to you, 'Brother Bucer, you will either become a light of the Church or a Lucifer, but I fear that you will sooner be an angel of darkness than one of light.' Now your teaching and sermons give credence to what he said, for from the public pulpit you have said that if Thomas Aquinas's books had been burnt, the whole world would

¹⁶ Sub-prioress Anastasia Mieg (d. 1544), prioress of St. Margaret (1532-44). From an important merchant family, she was kinswoman to Ammeister Claus Kniebis (1479-1552), a committed Evangelical – trans.

¹⁷ The Knights of St. John, a military-religious order, were immune from civic authority; their Strasbourg house survived the Reformation – trans.

¹⁸ Old St. Peter was a collegial church and also a parish. Meant here are the canons – trans.

¹⁹ That is, of St. Margaret's convent – trans.

²⁰ Two other communities of Dominican women – trans.

convert to your new faith. A true Catholic Christian cannot believe that, because the mouth of God Himself has approved this angelic teacher's writings.”²¹

Doctor Bucer responded that Bock should shut her foul mouth; he would bear no more of her insults. At St. Mark's and St. Catherine's, he said, the prioress and all the nuns showed him the greatest honor and friendliness. They all said they were prepared to accept what he said, taught, and pressed upon them. “They listen to my sermons with great zeal and devotion.”

[7r] “Ah, but not all,” the prioress replied, “for I know that some of them are thereby greatly displeased. Why are so many of the old nuns dying, so that every week some have to be buried? It bears reflection that the good little mothers of the convent are dying of pain and sorrow. Happiness is truly to live in these days in the true faith, apart from the perverted world, so that one must no longer witness the miserable shame of the calamities and damages to which the houses of God are now subject.”

Doctor Bucer then said, “Take note, uncouth Bock, what you say; I have achieved something in the convents. Among my confessants are a number of members of St. Mark's and St. Catherine's. Speaking such evil words against me causes them great scruples. I instruct them to the contrary in spiritual matters, so that often a nun requires a whole hour to confess.”

The prioress replied to him, “Your example and your behavior assure that none of those nuns should feel such scruples, either on account of your sermons or your admonitions. In my opinion, where they should have a scruple, they raise none; and where they should not have one, they create one.”²² One must consider that one cannot achieve holiness through such things, and my good friend, the prioress of St. Mark's, ought to reflect especially on this point. I greatly worry and fear that later on a belated scruple – a regret – will arise. May God forbid! [7v] Why do you do this, Doctor Bucer? Have I done you any injustice? You are placed over a convent in which the old nuns reject you, so you favor the young ones, whom you lead away from God's worship, and so at the times appointed for services, you take your recreation with them. How long can this go on? To witness this brings the old nuns to their graves, while the young nuns plunge, soul and body, into misery and eternal damnation.”

The prioress's speech made Bucer rage with anger, and he wanted to hit her with his fist. The sisters, however, hurriedly joined the prioress and took her out the door. Half-dead from shock, she went quickly to the priory office. Some sisters stayed and consoled her. The others left and locked the door, so Doctor Bucer could not enter, for the office was only three steps away from the refectory.

Just a little later, there arrived the prelate of St. John's²³ and Sir Johann Fuchs, pastor at Old St. Peter's and an old benefactor of the convent. He had ordered the glass windows in the chapter house, which the sisters had for years covered only with shutters and grills. As they entered the cloister, Sir Doctor Bucer, his face furious with anger, came up to them to say that he would like

²¹ An allusion to Thomas's epithet, “Angelic Doctor” [*Doctor Angelicus*] – trans.

²² Added in the bottom margin and keyed to the text – trans.

²³ The commander of the Knights of St. John at Strasbourg might be meant here – trans.

to kill the wicked, spiteful Bock. In the recent exchange of words she said things to him that no person would tolerate.²⁴ [8^r] He wanted to repay her maliciousness in kind. The lords, however, spoke to him in a friendly manner, “Insults from women should be ignored, and a so learned man should not stoop to fight with them.” They asked him to take a brief walk with them in order to cool his anger. Finally, he was persuaded, and as they were walking, Doctor Bucer said, “We must remove these bad nuns from their convent. May the Evil One snatch them away.”

These events troubled the nuns greatly, and they worried much about their prioress. They did not want her to move around the convent alone, so a pair of brave nuns always accompanied her. They feared that Dr. Bucer might secretly return and throw her into the water, for at that time a large, deep stream of water flowed through the convent. Most of the sisters were afraid of him, for he was a large, powerful man. He had often assured them in sharp words that he would repay their evil words by dunking them, so that they would remember him all their lives.

After a couple of days the gracious lord of St. John’s and Sir Fuchs came again. They consoled the prioress and her nuns, encouraged them to stand fast, for they would continue to suffer a great deal of animosity. They must not give in but put their trust entirely in God and in St. Margaret, [8^v] their dear patron.

Around this time Doctor Bucer staged a major suit before the honorable magistracy against the prioress and nuns of St. Margaret’s. Thereupon the City Council selected eight knowledgeable, well-educated members, to whom the supervision of the convent was entrusted. They were to act according to their own best judgment and were to inform the nuns of their written orders and the ammeister’s will.²⁵ On the same day, these eight men first came to us. They were accompanied by workmen who breached the convent’s claustration²⁶ and destroyed the altars in the churches. After the eight members left, Ursula Bock called the nuns together, all forty-six of them. The senior magistrate then read the City Council’s orders:

First, they shall acknowledge no superior, for the city would admit them to its protection. Otherwise, they would be in danger from the Peasants’ War. But this was only an excuse.

Second, in the future they will have no prioress but will all be of equal rank, and they will be free to change their status and to leave the convent. Each and every one shall be free from all her vows and the rules she has promised to obey. The magistrates order this so that they may live an easier life without burdens.

Third, they shall let no foreign friar or other [9^r] priest enter their convent. Mass shall no longer be said, nor shall bells be rung. All choir duties shall be abolished, and the seven Hours shall be neither sung nor prayed.²⁷ These are the magistrates’ order, violation of which will incur severe punishment.

²⁴ This sentence was added at the foot of the page – trans.

²⁵ The ammeister was the highest officer in Strasbourg’s regime, equivalent to a mayor – trans.

²⁶ Here, interestingly, called its “Reformation,” which refers to its adherence to the Observant reform – trans.

²⁷ The seven hours of the Divine Office, which was sung daily – trans.

Then five of the magistrates left, while the other three remained: Sir Bernhard Wurmser,²⁸ a stettmeister; Sir Caspar Hoffmeister of the large council,²⁹ and Dr. [Caspar] Baldung.³⁰ They announced a visitation. The entire convent objected but had to bow to it against their will. From the youngest to the eldest, each nun was questioned separately. The magistrates said they should no longer obey the prioress, for she burdened them with her desire to preserve her order. Further, marriage is a paradisiacal state. Also, the city gives all the nuns their liberty to leave the convent and to be free in all things. But the nuns said with one voice that they were content with the Mother-Prioress and with one another; they want nothing more from the Gracious Lords than to be permitted to remain in their convent and to live there together and die in love and good peace.

The magistrates marveled at but rejected the nuns' unanimity, and before leaving said that the nuns should accept the preacher appointed by the ammeister and regard him as their pastor, and that they should not allow any other [clergyman] to enter on pain of the city's utmost disfavor and severe punishment.

[9v] "We should thank God," the prioress consoled her sisters, "that this time they didn't get what they wanted; you should not thank me, nor I you, for the fact that we have [at the moment] little to shed tears about. We see with our eyes and hear with our ears the terrible damage that awaits our beloved convent. May God have mercy! It is unjust that authority should be taken from the rightful shepherd and the sheep be given over to the hireling, who will allow the wolves to have them. Then all the nuns joined in to say, "Dear Mother-Prioress, is there none who can advise or help us? Our superiors have written that they cannot help us, because they can do nothing against the great power of the civic regime." The prioress said, "Therefore, dear children, we must beg God to strengthen us and protect our convent from all evil."

A few days later, two of the magistrate-custodians came again. They asked whether the nuns remained stubborn in their wicked position that none would leave the convent. Once they were liberated, however, they could marry without scruples or injury to their consciences, for this holy estate is the right way to heaven. Thereupon followed the severe warning that if they would not willingly leave the convent, all the nuns would be driven out. The magistrates would not tolerate these mouse holes at all but would have them torn down.

These words saddened the prioress and all the nuns almost to death. They asked how they could bear the suffering without consolation for their souls from a priest. The prioress told them they should not be so despairing, for they put their hope in God's aid. One evening, a few days later, as the nuns were together, there arrived someone in disguise, though the porter

²⁸ Bernhard Wurmser von Vendenheim (d. 1540), a patrician, a moderate evangelical, and ruling stettmeister six times. The stettmeister was the highest patrician officer in Strasbourg's regime – trans.

²⁹ Caspar Hoffmeister (1466-1532), a native of Weil der Stadt in Swabia; magistrate (1510-32), founder of the civic hospital for syphilitics. He served as custodian of the convents of St. Margaret (1524-26) and St. Nicholas in Undis (1524-25) – trans.

³⁰ Dr. Caspar Baldung (d. 1540), city attorney (1521-32), convent administrator (1526-31), and custodian of the convent St. Mark (1524-25). He was the brother of the artist Hans Baldung Grien (d. 1545) – trans.

recognized him by his speech and took him into the refectory where they were gathered.³¹ Joyfully they came to greet him [10r], eyes red with weeping, fell at his feet and begged to have mercy on them and by their spiritual father. He blessed them and spoke to each individually, giving each his hand and promising that he would not abandon them but care for them as his spiritual children forever. They humbly thanked him for this great grace, told him of the their deep misery and desperation, so much that they might die of despair and broken hearts, asked for his advice and help.

He said, "Dear spiritual children, stop your weeping. Blessed are those who suffer persecution for dear Jesus's sake. Rejoice in this, and if you remain confidently stalwart in faith, hope, and love, Christ the Lord, your heavenly bridegroom, will not abandon you. He will, on the contrary, be your helper and reward all the death and pains of the heart pangs that you daily receive and suffer. They will be recorded in the book of the living and remain therein until His time, when God will wash away the tears from his servants' eyes and transform all their troubles into eternal peace." Then the priest took leave of them and promised either to return soon or to send another, who would secretly nourish and console them with the precious good [of the Eucharist]. This gladdened the hearts of all the nuns, who did not want to abandon their spiritual devotions. For seven days they sang the Divine Office in the cellar, where they could sing unheard.

After several weeks of relative peace, the custodians came again. They brought the nuns from the honorable council a sad notice: the magistrates had decided that in five days they must be out of the convent – the sooner the better. It must be this way and no other. They should pack together their household gear, and their friends would then fetch them. The custodians would support those who had no such friends. All must wear lay clothing. The prioress said, "We have nothing, also no money, to pay for this." The magistrates then took silver from the sexton's chamber, and whatever they took was carried to the Penny Tower by the treasurer.³² This amounted to a mere four hundred gulden for the nuns' lay clothing, which the magistrates had them make for themselves.

Oh, the great yells and cries from the entire convent were indescribable! They stretched up their arms to heaven with sighs and tears. They claimed it was impossible for them to leave the convent and to wear lay clothing. They begged and pleaded with the magistrates, all in vain. Some became senseless; others cried that they might as well be beheaded. They begged highly and humbly for a few days' respite in order to reflect, for the pain hindered them from giving the Gracious Lords an immediate reply. The nuns all knew well that this affair had been plotted by some who had already abandoned their convents. The prioress turned to comfort her nuns. "Dear children," she said "we should pray for mercy to the highest Refuge of those in need. Oh God, who understands the hearts of everyone, You alone know how deeply your poor servants' hearts have been wounded, and in what anxiety and danger they have been placed. Oh dear Lord, have mercy on us and hear the pleas of Your troubled children. For we stand in peril for our lives, our goods, and our honor."

³¹ The context makes clear that this man was priest, perhaps a prelate, well known to them – trans.

³² The Penny Tower [*Pfennigturm*] in the city's center housed the civic treasury – trans.

Source: Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg, call number: MS.1.392

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