The Nuns of Sant' Ambrogio: the True Story of a Convent in Scandal

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In 1859, after decades of religious turmoil in Europe, the Vatican was faced with shocking allegations against one of its convents in Rome. Princess Katharina Von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, a German princess, claimed that the convent she had entered, Sant' Ambrogio, practised a forbidden cult, and that the novice mistress, Maria Luisa had tried to kill her by poisoning. Katharina had denounced the convent to the Vatican for the continued worshipping of the founder, Maria Agnese Firrao, who had been condemned of false holiness by the Inquisition in 1816, and claimed that the current *madre vicaria*, Maria Luisa, was guilty of feigned holiness. These were charges of the utmost severity in 19th-century Rome, and Hubert Wolf, Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Münster, retells the events of this scandalous trial and the threat it posed to the church's reputation in a time of political instability.

The book itself is a thoroughly compelling, meticulously researched and coherent account of a fascinating course of events. Somewhat unnecessarily, the book has been marketed as a Hollywood-style blockbuster, with the blurb giving it a sensationalist feel, describing it thus:

'a tale of poison, murder, and lesbian initiation rites in the nineteenth-century convent of Sant' Ambrogio, it stars a German princess, the Pope, the Inquisition - and the real-life fantasies of the convent's beautiful mistress'.

The genre is further exploited with a list of 'Dramatis Personae' at the beginning, ascribing the individuals involved in the trial with theatrical characteristics such as the nun 'with heavenly handwriting', the confessor who 'is more than he seems', and even a description of the Virgin Mary, which seems rather superfluous. The author himself seems to have fallen into another genre of writing, at times presenting the story as crime fiction. The styles may have been employed to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, but both pose the danger of trivialisation; and are also unnecessary, as Wolf's general writing style and presentation of the facts is extremely clear. His methodology throughout the book is highly organised; each chapter is structured with subheadings, and he introduces each significant character throughout the book separately with a short

biography. The unravelling of the trial is presented in block-like chunks, building up each section at a time. Photographs and tables are also utilised to further explain what can be at times a very complex legal case. Although the style of 'Dramatis Personae' is somewhat extravagant, this section is necessary, as there are many people relevant to this story, often with very similar names. To give an idea of how many people are referenced throughout the book, the index consists of names only and it still takes up seven pages.

The prologue begins with a dramatic account of the removal of Princess Katharina from the convent due to the intervention of her cousin, Archbishop Gustav Adolf zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, told in Katharina's own words. Wolf begins the first chapter with an outline of the state of the Catholic Church in the 19th century, shaken after Napoleon's annexing of the papal lands, but starting to experience something of a resurgence, particularly among German Catholics. Rome found itself with two political factions, the *Zealanti*, Jesuit hardliners who were against any kind of reform and believed the pope to be infallible, and the *Politici*, who were more liberal and believed that for the Church to survive it needed 'a more open, pluralistic model of piety and theology' (p. 10). This division in Rome is a theme that Wolf returns to throughout this book, and his analysis of the political climate and motives of the religious figures involved is extremely well expressed. He also taps into the psyche of the times, with many learned and senior figures willing to believe in mysticism, which may seem incredulous to our enlightened judgement, but was certainly a key feature of 19th-century Catholicism, and largely played a part in the events at the convent of Sant' Ambrogio. As an ordained priest himself, Wolf is well immersed in the intricacies of the Church, yet does not hold back in his criticism of his ecclesiastical predecessors, and clearly comes down on the side of the liberal *Politici*, who favoured a program 'of reconciliation between Church and the world' rather than 'absolutizing the pope as the infallible sacred monarch' (p. 9).

After expanding on the disproportionate wealth amassed by the Church, and the weakness of popes to listen to whatever political faction had their ear, Wolf introduces Princess Katharina, a woman strongly influenced by her male confessor, Cardinal Reisach and possessed of a deep desperation to enter cloistered life. Wolf paints her a rather fanciful, sickly woman; she tried various convents to little success, as her privileged background did not lend well to the discomforts of a humble convent. However, her determination to become a nun eventually led to her entering the convent of Sant' Ambrogio della Massima, an establishment within half an hour's walk of the Vatican. Yet within 15 months, Katharina had sent a desperate plea for help to her cousin, Archbishop Hohenlohe, and shortly after issued a denunciation of the convent to the Inquisition. Accusations of attempted murder would normally have been a case for the civil courts, but because Katharina also brought charges of the worshipping of a forbidden cult and the feigned holiness of the novice mistress Maria Luisa, the Inquisition were forced to investigate. However, Wolf does question the political motives of those around Katharina who persuaded her to issue a denouncement, and calls into question the reliability of Katharina herself.

Chapter two deals with the complex procedure of Inquisition tribunals. Sallua, the investigating judge of the Inquisition, needed to keep the matter as private as possible, to preserve the reputation of the Church. Therefore the pope authorized an initial investigation to explore the truth of Katharina's claims. Wolf's research into the process of the investigation is painstakingly detailed, and he links each testimony back to its original source without fail, whilst still creating an immensely readable version of events. The account given by Agnese Eletta in this chapter, a nun previously expelled from Sant' Ambrogio, reveals the full scale of unholy practices at the convent, including sexual relationships between Maria Luisa and other nuns, flouting of religious observances and the veneration of false saints. Now the Inquisition had no choice but to start a full trial, and Wolf provides a clear analysis of the main points of the charges, and details the complicated procedure of an Inquisition trial, with helpful diagrams. Rather late in the chapter, he reveals the sources for the trial – case files documenting the trial of Sant' Ambrogio found unlabelled in a Vatican archive that had remained secret until 1998, plus confiscated documents and books that took up 'over six feet of shelf space' (p. 76).

Having prepared the reader for the intricacies of the trial, Wolf then backtracks to the history of the convent, its religious practices, and the life of Agnese Firrao, the mother founder of the Sant' Ambrogio convent of

the Regulated Third Order of Holy Saint Francis. Here the author provides a real sense of Catholicism in the 19th century, charting the rise of the cult of Firrao by relating her miracles, such as stigmata and supernatural visions. Although the stories of her visions seem ludicrous to us, it embodies the spirit of the time, where even learned and sophisticated representatives of the Church (including the pope) were willingly taken in. Yet Wolf also reminds us of the deep mistrust the Church had of women, and gives examples of previous religious women, rising to popularity through their mystical experiences, only to be declared heretical after close and often humiliating scrutiny by the Inquisition. This is where Wolf really exposes the juxtaposition in Catholicism; ordinary people who believed in the supernatural and willingly worshipped anyone who claimed mystical powers, against the organised body of the Church, which could not tolerate any threat to its control. This is further demonstrated by the fact that Firrao was condemned of false holiness, yet she continued to be revered in the convent, almost right under the noses of the most senior members of the Catholic Church. Despite an 1816 declaration by the Holy Office that Firrao was guilty of pretending to be a saint, her reputation continued to grow and eventually convinced the new pope, Leo XII, to set up a new convent at Sant' Ambrogio in 1828, reformed by Firrao. This measure indirectly overruled the Inquisition's previous decree, highlighting how susceptible even the most senior Church officials could be to mysticism. However, Leo died shortly afterwards, and as far as the Inquisition was concerned, the accusations against Firrao still stood. This was not observed at Sant' Ambrogio, who kept in contact with Firrao, worshipped her relics, and developed a fierce loyalty to her cult, calling her the 'Holy Mother'. Even the two confessors of the convent, Padre Leziroli and Padre Peters embraced the veneration of Firrao and actively promoted it. The fact that the cult was practised in secret demonstrates the willingness of people to believe in mystical individuals, despite what the senior authority of the Church may have decreed.

This theme is developed further in chapter four, where the behaviour of Maria Luisa, the novice mistress, comes under close scrutiny. Received into a nunnery at the age of 13, she seems to have been adored by everyone around her, and one wonders whether maybe she saw what people wanted to believe, and adapted her behaviour accordingly, feigning religious ecstasies and tussles with the devil to feed a miracle-hungry audience. It's easy to see how a young girl from a poor background could seize on a chance to gain prestige, although Wolf does not spare much sympathy for her as he reveals the extent of her deception over others. His portrayals of her supposed spirituality border on the ridiculous, such as the time she gave a refectory reading to the nuns regarding a virgin saint who emitted a divine fragrance, only to waft through the convent several days later smelling strongly of roses. However, the most successful mechanism by which she sought to exercise control over the convent was the engineering of the appearance of holy letters, supposedly written by the Virgin Mary, but actually written by a young novice, Maria Francesca. The Virgin Mary was extremely popular in the 19th century, proving Maria Luisa's shrewd ability to tap into the zeitgeist. By instructing the novice with beautiful handwriting to write letters under the guise of the Virgin Mary, she managed to manipulate confessor Padre Peters into entering into a sexual relationship with herself. However, it did not take Sallua long to expose the novice mistress's feigned holiness, and through interrogation of the nuns and the convent's lawyer, the blatant deception of Maria Luisa is revealed. This chapter revisits a theme touched on throughout the book but not fully expanded; the fact that many of these visions and supernatural occurrences happened to women. While Wolf strongly highlights the misogyny in the Church, despite the 'feminization of religion' (p. 142) in the 19th century, the book might have benefitted from dwelling more on the reasons why women more than men experienced miraculous happenings, such as the fact that they were exploiting the only voice they could use. More discussion on the psychological effects of living in a nunnery could also have featured, as has recently been explored in an article about suicide and mental health in nunneries in early modern Italy.

Chapter five delves into the third charge of the investigation, the alleged poisoning of Princess Katharina. By Sallua's own admission this did not fall within his normal jurisdiction and would normally be dealt with by a criminal court, and Wolf notes that his summaries are more haphazard than the previous two. Maria Luisa is again cast in a bad light by Wolf; her animosity towards Princess Katharina grew after she showed the shocked princess an erotic letter from an American visitor. It is difficult to know just how the dynamics played out in this relationship, but Wolf hints at the friction between Maria Luisa, a nun of humble origins

who has gained almost complete control of her domain being faced with an educated princess from a privileged background, with powerful contacts in the outside world. Katharina had observed the unconventional practices in the convent, and her knowledge presented a real threat to Maria Luisa's empire. Wolf unpicks the logistics of the poisoning, drawing on the confessions of several nuns and building up the sequence of events. The author often relies directly on the transcribed confessions to relate the story, providing the reader with the original source and thereby transporting the reader right to the heart of the trial. Although some of the nuns seemed suspicious of the motives of Maria Luisa, and even refused to assist anymore (despite more letters from the Virgin Mary), the novice mistress did come very close to killing Katharina. However, when Maria Luisa realised that she might have compromised the trust of her nuns too much, she conveniently blamed the events on the devil having taken her form. Wolf goes on to reveal further atrocities committed by Maria Luisa on other nuns, resulting in the deaths of at least three, and other crimes such as embezzlement (for the purchase of, among other things, rose oil). However, somewhat surprisingly, and somewhat brushed over, is the fact that she (via the Virgin Mary) also gave large sums of money to financially struggling penitents. By the end of 1861, the informative process was over, with Sallua finding the confessors, the abbess, Maria Luisa and several other nuns guilty of the charges. The treatment of the accused at this stage seems frustratingly weak, the confessors were still allowed to remain in their priestly offices, and the abbess and novice mistress were moved to other convents. The next stage of the process was to interrogate the accused.

In chapter six, the background and character of Maria Luisa is explored further in the first half, and her confession to the Inquisition is reported in the second half. The whole chapter makes for uncomfortable reading, including rather graphic details of lesbian initiation rites. Shortly after Maria Luisa became a novice in 1846, she was preyed upon by the abbess of her convent and became a victim of sexual abuse; she then went on to take the role of abuser when she reached a position of authority in Sant' Ambrogio. The manipulative powers of senior figures over young girls under their care was just as shocking to the Inquisition as it is to modern readers, although unfortunately this theme is something the Catholic Church has historically failed to address. The judges were so unable to deal with the lewd offences reported that they excluded their summaries and commentaries, and left it up to the senior judges to read the statements for themselves. The sexual manipulation of Maria Luisa was not just reserved for females, and details of her inappropriate conduct with Padre Peters and an American visitor are laid bare, and finally Maria Luisa confessed to all, including the poisoning of Princess Katharina and murders of other nuns.

The remaining chapters deal with the interrogations of the confessors, Padre Leziroli and Padre Peters. The senior confessor, Leziroli, is portrayed by Wolf as a rather gullible character, not really aware of the machinations at work within the convent, and too ready to believe in the divine powers of Maria Luisa. Through Leziroli's confession, it becomes apparent that the founding mother Firrao openly disliked and disapproved of Maria Luisa, who was rising through the ranks, and this is an interesting point that is not explored. Maria Luisa subsequently took umbrage towards Maria Agostina, a young novice gaining popularity through her visions and ecstasies, so much so that she was responsible for her death. Although Wolf is clear in stating the facts and not digressing from the point, a little speculation on the psychology of female dynamics within a convent would sometimes be welcome, to flesh out the bones of the trial. This chapter also includes the confession of the abbess, Maria Veronica, who previously had not featured significantly in the story despite all the irregular activity in her convent. She too seemed to have been completely under Maria Luisa's control, often encouraging her behaviour, or at least turning a blind eye. Despite being played as a pawn by the novice mistress, she does make a full confession, leaving only the character of Padre Peters to be brought to account.

The last of Wolf's mini-biographies launches into the shady life of Peters, revealing his chequered past of sexual misdemeanors and political motivations. By making powerful friends and writing theological tracts supporting papal infallibility, he rose through the ranks of the *zealanti*, going by the name of Kleutgen, whilst leading a double life as confessor at Sant' Ambrogio. Wolf refutes a 'Jekyll and Hyde' persona for Peters, but expresses the opinion that he may have employed a 'double morality' (p. 278), to sidestep the restrictions of the Jesuit's strict military structure. Well-versed in theology and rhetoric, he attempted to

evade any responsibility for the events at the convent, trying to turn the trial into a scholastic debate. However, evidence of Peters' previous sexual conduct with another woman, in addition to the confession from Maria Luisa that they indulged in the ultimate sexual sin – French kissing – ultimately undermined Peters' position. Wolf also draws attention to a nebulous area within the Catholic Church, the blurred lines between sexual and religious experience, and how one can bleed into another. However, Peters' intellectual nitpicking did not impress the judges, and he was found guilty of 13 misdemeanours. Wolf then further delves into the political machinations of Rome, and how the trial of Peters had the potential to remove him from his strategic position as a censor for the Congregation of the Index, thus providing a welcome boost for the more liberal factions in Rome.

The final chapter metes out the punishment for those involved in the trial. After much deliberation by the consultors and the pope, no one suffered unduly, even though the severity of the charges could have resulted in capital punishment. All perpetrators were moved on from their previous positions, with the minimum of fuss, largely for the sake of the reputation of the Church (as Wolf is well aware). It also seems as if the confessors, already belonging to an androcentric collective, get absorbed back into the community, supported by their peers, whilst Maria Luisa fared much worse. Only now does Wolf offer motivations for Maria Luisa's behaviour, and despite her previous crimes, after the trial she is painted as a pitiful creature, moved from monastic jails to mental institutions before eventually being brushed off by the Church, ending up destitute and broken. In contrast, Wolf concludes the chapter with Peters, who remained active within theological circles, drafting the final copy of *De doctrina Catholica* and heavily influencing the dogma of papal infallibility. Wolf remains scathing of Peters throughout the book, clearly irritated that 'just a short time after being convicted of formal heresy by the highest religious doctrine, this man was helping to formulate Church doctrine' (p. 362). Peters is portrayed as a man who manipulated those around him to further his own political agenda, although Wolf does recognise that he was a 'gifted theologian and prolific author' (p. 362).

To summarise, this is an extremely intriguing retelling of events, and Wolf's highly structured narrative unpicks the trial in meticulous detail. He assesses the characters with unbiased opinion and does not stray into speculation or theory, using direct transcriptions from the trial to leave it up to the reader to form their own judgement. However, at times this can be frustrating, and sometimes an analysis of the psychological, rather than the political motivations of the characters would add greater depth. The story unfolds through rigidly divided sections, so it is not until the end that the whole picture can be viewed. Wolf clearly demonstrates that in times of threat, the Catholic Church draws ranks and protects its own, and he doesn't shy away from exposing the misogyny, contradictions and flaws of the Church. It is clear that he is against the zealous instigators of the Church, and comes down heavily on the side of the liberal factions. Furthermore, the author gives a thorough account of the behaviours and beliefs of ecclesiastical Rome in the 19th-century, from the grassroots level of the laity, through to the highest authority in the Vatican. That a convent chose to develop and practise its own brand of religious worship within such a short distance of the highest Church authority is something to be grudgingly admired, and Wolf's skill at representing the facts in such a complex case is to his credit. His language is measured and restrained throughout, refusing to dip into sensationalist tabloid clichés that a topic such as this could easily employ. So much focus is placed on the descriptions of feigned holiness and the process of the trial that emphasis is often shifted away from the actual origin of the case, the poisoning of Princess Katharina. However, the story is told expertly, and Wolf deals with the diverse layers of intrigue in a systematic yet compelling style.

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