

Convent chatter, daring decisions follow 1875 Edict

Otto von Bismarck, known as the father of modern Germany, united 39 independent states into the German Empire in 1871. As its first imperial Chancellor, he expected citizens to put allegiance to the empire above all else in their lives. Catholics composed one-third of the population. Bismarck saw how loyal this political minority was to the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy. He sought absolute control not only of the government, but also of the Catholic Church in Germany. So, the Chancellor engineered a church-state confrontation.



Otto von Bismarck, a Prussian Protestant, became the first Chancellor of the German Empire in 1871. He impelled legislators to create the Kulturkampf (Falk and May) laws (1871-about 1887).

The Edict of 1875 resulted in a series of harsh anti-Catholic laws modeled after the May Laws (1873-1874) of the Prussian state and the German Empire. The Reichstag (the empire's legislative body in Berlin) passed laws that gave the state the authority to (1) dissolve religious orders and confiscate their property, (2) suspend financial subsidies to dioceses whose clergy refused to sign the government's loyalty pledge, (3) diminish the influence of the clerical hierarchy by transferring the ownership of church property to lay trustees, and (4) declare the state's authority to imprison or exile bishops and priests who resisted obeying the new laws. Thus began the Kulturkampf—the "cultural struggle."

February 5, 1875, became a significant date in the church-state struggle for German Catholics. Prussia's May Laws blueprint for the German 1875 Edict-officially went into full effect. The next day the empire enacted its Civil Marriage Law removing the traditional authority of the Church over matrimony. And on the very same day, relations between the German Empire and the Vatican reached an all-time low. The Vatican published Pope Pius IX's encyclical declaring the Kulturkampf laws invalid and non-binding on Catholic priests. It also threatened to excommunicate any Catholic who accepted the legality of these statutes.

The 1875 Edict required the government to pass so many laws that news of each one was slow in reaching the public. Soon enough though, each active sister and cloistered nun across Germany realized she only had one of two choices: (1) remain in her homeland and clandestinely perform works of mercy for the sick in their homes and hospitals or (2) emigrate/immigrate to another country and establish their community all over again. Whichever decision the religious made, it was gut-wrenching. It affected her family, her religious community, and her vocation. No decision guaranteed it was the right decision. Every decision posed serious risks.

On February 23, 1876, a message arrived for the sixty women of the "...Community of Tretenhof, Seelbach..." to hear. The government demanded absolute obedience of its Kulturkampf laws.

Failure to obey was punishable under the law. The sisters understood that on March 31, 1876, they had to hand over all their property to the German Empire "...and not again be in residence there." A Prussian state government official, ironically named Jolly, signed the disbandment edict. Even though Father Berger appealed the mandate, the government would not budge. No exceptions were allowed, even for Father Berger. So, each sister, novice, and postulant had 37 days to make her decision, create an actionable plan, and "leave all things" once she was evicted from the group's property.

The church-state battle resolved itself with the death of Pope Pius IX and the election of Pope Leo XIII on February 18, 1878. Ultimately, Bismarck's Kulturkampf laws backfired on him politically. The Catholic

Church and Catholic Center Party became a unified, powerful, and formidable opposition party in the Reichstag. Germany also recognized it lacked the capability to administer and enforce the anti-Catholic laws. The formal church-state conflict ended around 1887; however, some restrictions on the Church were not repealed until 1917.

A clever politician, Bismarck, abandoned his hostility toward the Catholic Church. He then built alliances with the German Catholic Church and the Catholic Center Party. Although diplomatic in foreign affairs, he continued his iron-fisted control of the German Empire's citizens.

Four intrepid FSSH pioneers plant roots in America

Given the impact of the German Empire's anti-Catholic laws, Sister M. Anastasia Bischler, 42, announced her intention to leave her homeland for America on or before May 31, 1876. If she remained in her country past this Kulturkampf deadline, she would be forced to give up too much: the Secular Franciscan Rule of Life as well as her religious name, habit, community of sisters, and Father Berger, the group's founder. He served as the spiritual director and confessor of the rapidly growing group of tertiaries in Seelbach, Baden, Germany.

On one hand, Germany's Catholic "sisters" were allowed by law to nurse the sick, the elderly, and the hospitalized. On the other, they risked punishment if caught meeting secretly with Fr. Berger, their founder, for instruction in Franciscan Spirituality. Dissatisfied with this-and-that Kulturkampf law, Sister M. Anastasia refused to buy what the Chancellor was selling. Instead, she began inviting sisters to come with her to America. She believed Father Berger's vision and mission for the Seelbach sisters would find fertile ground there. The sisters would continue to nurse the sick in their homes, care for orphans and the elderly, as well as teach the children. In the spirit of Saints Francis of Assisi and Vincent de Paul, the sisters' lives in America would mirror the lives of sisters who were determined to weather the Kulturkampf storms in Germany.

Correspondence between Fort Wayne Diocese's Bishop Joseph Dwenger (1872-1893) and bilingual Reverend Dominic Duehmig (1842-1908) planned to set a meeting with Sister M. Anastasia. Divine Providence brought together the Franciscan sister and the parish priest. Each became the answer to the other's prayer.



Fr. Dominick Duehmig, the "American Father Berger," advised the sisters in matters spiritual and temporal. He helped Mother buy the Thomas Storey farm for \$12,000 in 1876, or \$374,300 in 2025.

While home visiting his family in the Black Forest area of Baden, Germany, during the summer of 1875, Father Dominick Duehmig met with Sister M. Anastasia. He knew that many German congregations of women religious were seeking opportunities to relocate in the 100-year-old nation. Father Duehmig, pastor of St. Mary of the Assumption Church in Avilla, had to strike while the proverbial iron was hot telling her about America's need for German-speaking sisters to care for the German-speaking elderly, the orphans, and the sick. In addition, Duehmig's parish, St. Mary's in Avilla, Indiana, needed to open a school for its German-speaking children in need of education. Speaking in his mother tongue, he described the serious needs and struggles of his German-speaking, immigrant parishioners. Sister M. Anastasia shared Duehmig's proposal and nearly half of the Seelbach group's sixty members decided to join her venture to America.

Father Duehmig indicated that the pioneer sisters would find Avilla a place where they could openly practice their Catholic faith, nurture Franciscan community, retain their religious names, wear their

habits, and breathe life into Father Berger's vision of sisters "merciful...joyous and poor...doing works of neighborly love" in the spirit of SS. Francis of Assisi and Vincent de Paul.

Minister Jolly's February 23, 1876, edict ordered "...the community of Tretenhof, Seelbach..." to disband and surrender all its properties to the German Empire by March 31, 1876. For 37 days, all 60 sisters, novices, and postulants planned and packed. About thirty-three arranged a semi-secular life in or near Seelbach. However, 27 eventually left their homeland to reestablish the group in the USA.

Living their vocations clandestinely in Germany required workarounds. It was risky. The "sisters" would be under the scrutiny by imperial authorities, neighbors, and acquaintances. Any large gathering of the "sisters" could draw too much attention. Communal prayer, days of reflection, as well as Father Berger's sessions on Franciscan spirituality and the Rule of the Third Order Regular could be viewed by someone—anyone—as breaking the law.

On the European Continent, the Seelbach Franciscans prayed that one day they would be approved by Rome as a congregation of vowed women religious. On the North American Continent, the Avilla Franciscans whispered the same intention. Whether it was or was not God's will, the sisters trusted Divine Providence to guide them. Each day the sisters stepped into an unknown future. Our Mother of Perpetual Help (Maria Hilf) served as the Sisters' model of humility. And the sisters echoed Mary's faith-filled response to the Angel Gabriel, "Be it done unto me according to your word..."

EMIGRATE (leaving)	= <u>move from</u> one's home country to permanently live somewhere else
IMMIGRATE (arriving)	= <u>move to</u> a new country in order to settle there permanently

The first four early adopters expressed their willingness to emigrate and relocate putting down congregational roots in a United States. These three first had to create a step-by-step plan not only for themselves, but also for those who would follow them.



Sister M. Anastasia Bischler, at 58 was elected the first Superior General March 19, 1892, at the start of the congregation's first General Chapter. Retired in 1908, Sister Death called her home on November 21, 1917.

From left to right: Srs. Anastasia Bischler, Brigitta Herr, Barbara Kastner, and Zita Beck

Father Berger supplied the sisters' yet-to-be-built Avilla chapel with everything they needed. Curiously, he bought a heavy bell from Gengenbach, a municipality near Seelbach, Germany. Statues of the Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Conception were carefully crated for travel. He sadly bid farewell to those emigrating to America. From Fr. Berger the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul brought together these Pioneer Sisters, but the interior soul of each was the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi.

Every sister sensed the eviction clock's relentless ticking...ticking...ticking.... Human nature must have caused more than a few sisters to second-guess their decisions: "But, what if I chose to...?"

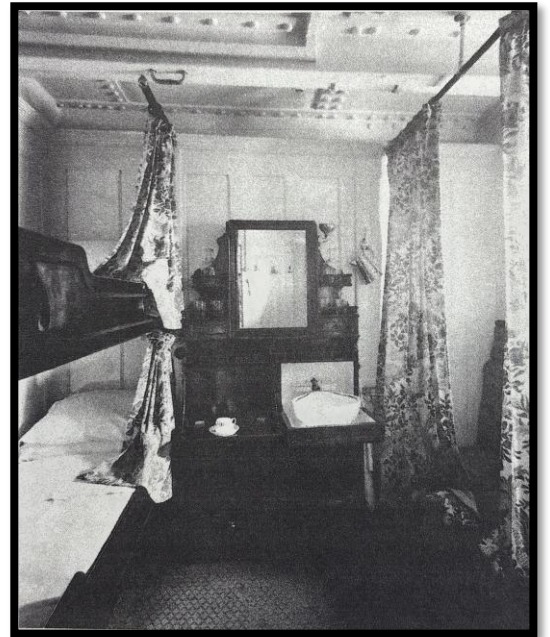
Meanwhile, legislators and officials continue the business of writing mandates, orders, edicts, and laws to make the *Kulturkampf* (Falk and May) laws operational. Approximately thirty-three sisters planned to continue their ministries to the sick, elderly, and poor in and near Seelbach. The Empire needed more nurses and caregivers. To meet that demand, legislators created a special exemption that permitted "former" women religious to remain in the country as long as they worked in hospitals. By law the "sisters" could no longer wear their habits. Instead, they dressed in simple secular attire.

The underground Seelbach Franciscans continued caring for the poor in their homes. A few accepted new roles or continued performing their healthcare jobs in one of the town's eleven hospital wards. Others accepted jobs at a Gengenbach hospital. During these difficult years, the hospital became a "secret motherhouse," according to a biographical article chronicling Father Berger's role during this period.

The sister-quartet began packing supplies after purchasing four second-class cab tickets on the steamship SS Gellert (Fr. Duehmig, having traveled to and from Germany likely advised the sisters to travel second class.). This trans-Atlantic vessel was scheduled to set sail on May 17, 1876. Before sailing out of Hamburg, Germany's harbor, the four Secular Franciscan tertiaries of Seelbach bestowed on Sister M. Anastasia the title of "Mother." Sister M. Anastasia served in this non-elected leadership position for the next 16 years.



Wednesday, May 17, 1876 - The first four FSSH sisters set sail on the SS Gellert shown above from the Port of Hamburg in Germany to the Port of Le Havre in France. Boarding more passengers there, the one-funnel steamship crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 14 days. The sisters disembarked with other immigrants at the Hamburg America Line's terminal in Hoboken, New Jersey.



The SS Gellert, a steamship built at Glasgow, Scotland, in 1874, was designed to accommodate one hundred second-class passengers. The sisters shared one four-passenger cabin. They had access to move from the cabin to communal dining rooms, bathrooms, and designated decks.

Their cabin was equipped with a wash basin. These cabinets could be folded against the wall to drain and save space. Ship stewards manually provided hot and icy water by filling the tank in the cabinet.

Bathrooms and lavatories were public and separated by gender. Multiple facilities were located along passenger corridors. Passengers needing to use the toilet or take a full bath had to leave their cabins to use the shared facilities. Second-class passengers had dining salon which became a meeting space outside their tiny, cramped cabin.

The SS Gellert arrived on time May 31, 1876, at the Hamburg American Lines Terminal in Hoboken, New Jersey. First-and-second-class passengers went through customs on board the ship. Steerage or third-class passengers were transferred by ferry to the Castle Gardens Immigration Depot at the south tip of Manhattan. There were long grueling checks to be allowed entrance at the charge of the United States government.

After the Sisters arrived in New York city, they were hosted by Franciscan Sisters of the Poor for a few days before boarding a two-day train from Jersey City, New Jersey, to Fort Wayne, Indiana, followed by a trip to Avilla with Duehmig. Both the ship and train experiences were long, slow (18-22 mph), and wearisome.

First business was to search for housing. Rome City was considered but found not suitable. A parishioner was willing to sell his farm, 200 acres with buildings to the Sisters. In June the first Motherhouse in America, the Thomas Storey Farm in Avilla, Indiana, was purchased. Renovations began adding space for a chapel and those arriving from Germany. On June 15, 1876, four Sisters and Brother Rudolf moved into the new home. The chapel was appreciated because it was a two-mile walking journey for the sisters to attend Mass at St. Mary Parish. The first Holy Mass was celebrated October 20 by Reverend D. Duehmig in a new chapel on the farm. The chapel was dedicated on November 19 to the Sacred Heart and twenty-one of the sisters from Tretenhof were present for the dedication. On August 7 a second group from Germany arrived in Avilla to join Mother Anastasia and companions: twelve Sisters, one postulant, two Secular Third Order Brothers, and three residents. September 30 another group from Germany arrived including four Sisters, one Tertiary Brother, four residents, and recently ordained Reverend Joseph Flack.

When considering ministry outside the Motherhouse in Avilla, it was necessary for the Sisters to learn English. Mary Klotz was hired to teach the Sisters English for six months. St. Mary Parish School was the first school where the Sisters practiced teaching and improved their English.

Just one knot, Sister?

Sister M. Coletta (née Magdalena) Himmelsbach had only one knot on her cord. She had made a public promise—not taken vows—to follow Francis' 1221 Rule for lay Franciscans. Her one knot signified that permanent commitment. Mother M. Anastasia (née Franziska) Bischler also had just one knot. The two sisters had not professed their Final Vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience when three knots would have been appropriate.



On June 21, 1866, Magdalena, 30, was the first person to join Father Berger's fledgling group. Soon, three more entered the little community. The postulant trio helped Magdalena nurse the sick, elderly, and dying in their homes. Two of these were later known in religious life as Sisters M. Angela Seiler and M. Elizabeth Weber. Sister's widowed mother allowed the first Seelbach Franciscan sisters to live in the second story of the family home, the first convent of the Seelbach Franciscans.

Sister M. Coletta Himmelsbach arrived in Avilla, IN, in July 1876. She was missioned as a domestic sister, (cook, housekeeper, gardener, etc.) to the Avilla motherhouse and then to St. Joseph Hospital in Joliet, IL. At age 30, Sister entered the community; at 49, she professed her Final Vows as a FSSH. At 82, Sister suffered a bowel obstruction and the infirmities of old age. Sister Death took her home to God on Saturday, September 21, 1918.

On March 19, 1885, Mother M. Anastasia and Sister M. Coletta processed into the Joliet, Illinois, motherhouse chapel with 19 other FSSH to make their Final Vows. Sister had waited 19 years between entering and making her Final Vows as a FSSH; Mother, 18 years. This ceremony was one of the many steps the Church required to affirm the FSSH was a religious congregation.

Sister M. Coletta (née Magdalena) Himmelsbach is identified as the foundress of the Seelbach Franciscans Sisters in Germany.

Sister M. Anastasia (née Franziska) Bischler is recognized as the foundress of Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Avilla, IN, USA.

FSSH Archives facts...

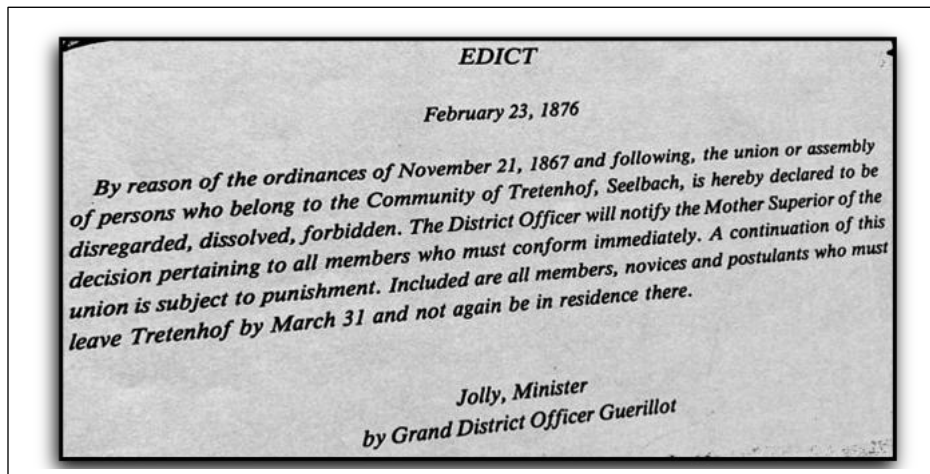
- Sister M. Coletta's German laundry number was 1; Mother M. Anastasia's, 16.
- Sister's FSSH community registration number was 2; Mother's 1.
- Sister's necrology number is 120; Mother's number is 115.
- Both are buried in Section C, Row 2 at John Cemetery, Joliet, IL.
- Mother Anastasia's grave number is 9; Sister Coletta's grave number is 10.

Imagine, ponder, give thanks, remember....

Imagine you are one of the 60 Secular Franciscan tertiaries from 11 convents who are gathering at Maria Hilf Mutterhaus in Seelbach, Baden, Germany, on February 23, 1876. Father Wilhelm Berger (standing in the balcony), our founder, arrives with bad news. He met earlier in the day with a government official. He thought the man might be able to give his fledgling community a reprieve from the government's "eviction notice" that a Sister is about to read. He appealed for leniency on behalf of the sisters. Father's appeal was rejected.



One of the Sisters then explains that the notice she had received is a non-negotiable mandate. A government official named Jolly signed the document. She cautions you to listen carefully because the words you hear will profoundly change the course of your life. Then, she reads the order aloud.



The Chancellor viewed Catholics as a domestic threat to the German Empire's present and future. To this credit, he forged the Empire (1871) out of 25 sovereign states and the North German Confederation (1867-1871) a single economic and military powerhouse. A popular German hero, Bismarck is recognized as the Father of Modern Germany.

You've anticipated the implementation of this law ever since May 31, 1875. That's the day the anti-Catholic Edict of 1875 was first proclaimed. From that moment, you knew that one day the government would outlaw your religious community and seize all its property. Knowing about the impending law feels quite different from being given a no-turning back deadline. It's an expected-unexpected gut punch. It mirrors the emotions you experienced earlier this week when a poor, elderly patient whom you've nursed and grown to love, died. The expected-unexpected shock of both rocked your world.

You must decide whether to stay in Germany OR follow Sister M. Anastasia to the United States. Just 37 days stand between tonight and the March 31, 1876, eviction. German authorities will disband your rapidly growing Franciscan community and confiscate all its property.

Reflection prompts. Select one OR create your own.

- List the pros and the cons of your remaining in Germany OR traveling to the United States with Sister M. Anastasia.
- Who OR what will ultimately influence your final decision?
- Will your vocation grow or wither if you stay in Germany OR if you immigrate to America?
- Who will really support your decision OR who will work hard to convince you to change your decision?
- Recall a time when you were missioned to a new convent OR recall a time when you were assigned to a new ministry. Was it your choice or not? Was it a positive change or negative change?
- How were you called to "leave all things"? Then, share your thoughts with others.