

“Everyone wants to pull us to heaven by our hair”: Caritas Pirckheimer’s Perception of Martin Luther

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The free imperial city of Nuremberg accepted the religious reforms of Lutheranism on March 14, 1524. In a year’s time, the reform reached a violent pinnacle in the chapel of the convent of St. Clare. Three mothers, along with a few of their children and soldiers who were sent by the city council, arrived at St. Clare’s on June 14, 1525, demanding that Abbess Caritas Pirckheimer release their daughters, Sisters Margaret Tetzl, Katharina Ebner, and Clara Nützel. After much deliberation and resistance from the young nuns, Caritas brought the girls out of the cloister and into the open chapel, the exact place where the young women had entered the convent years before. A large crowd gathered to watch the proceedings. The nuns refused to depart quietly; they wanted to remain within the “pious, holy” convent. In the face of their defiance, their mothers threatened to “tie their hands and feet together and drag them out like dogs.”¹ The nuns felt their souls in immortal danger, as they did not believe their mothers’ Lutheran faith would offer them salvation. They railed against the idea of having to shed their vows. Katharina Ebner in a long speech to the crowd declared, “Here I stand and will not yield. No one shall be able to force me out. If I am removed by force, however, it shall never be my will in eternity. I will appeal to God in heaven and to all the world on earth.”² As she spoke, one of the men grabbed her and dragged her away. Sounds of the women’s screaming and crying filled the chapel as they were violently forced into the streets and into a new Lutheran world.

We receive this vivid account from a journal begun by Caritas Pirckheimer in 1524, which chronicles the convent’s experience of the Reformation until 1528. Pirckheimer’s journal reflects the immense impact of Martin Luther’s teachings and the strong opposition his schismatic ideas incurred. What is quite remarkable, within the journal, is Pirckheimer’s retelling of Katharina Ebner’s final speech in the chapel with Ebner using the phrase: “Here I stand.” Whether or not Ebner actually uttered these words is unknown, but it is likely that Caritas chose to fashion Ebner’s final words in this divisive moment after Martin Luther’s alleged declaration at the 1521 Diet of Worms: “Here I stand, I can do no other...” Just like Luther in Worms, the St. Clare’s nuns had reached a point of no return; the authorities had decided their fate, and the women had to publicly declare their intent for their future dealings with the religious schism now at hand. In Caritas’ mirroring of Luther’s phrase, we catch a glimpse of her complex vision of the man and his ideology. This paper will assert that as a supporter of Catholic reform, Caritas agreed with Luther’s early teachings, yet over time and with the conversion of those teachings into laws, the abbess began to see Luther as an intruder who brought physical and spiritual danger to her convent.

¹ Caritas Pirckheimer, *Caritas Pirckheimer: A Journal of the Reformation Years, 1524-1528*, trans. Paul A. MacKenzie (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 90-1. Print. MacKenzie’s translations come from: Caritas Pirckheimer, *Die “Denkwürdigkeiten” der Caritas Pirckheimer (aus Jahren 1524-1528)*, ed. Josef Pfanner (Landshut: Solanus-Druck, 1962). I will refer to MacKenzie’s version as *A Journal of the Reformation Years* from here. [Title of paper comes from: Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 138.]

² Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 92.

Why did this abbess become one of the major symbols of female opposition to the Reformation? Was she even always as rebellious as many depict her or was her character more nuanced? Most importantly, was there something unique in the way she perceived of Luther and his teachings that shaped her response to the Reformation? There has been no research on Caritas’ perception of Luther as an individual, yet the majority of work written about her focuses on the way in which she led her convent into confrontation with the Reformation. Caritas rarely mentioned the man Luther directly and had no personal contact with him, despite the fact that she had increasingly more and more interactions with his followers within her political, familial, and intellectual circles over the course of her lifetime. The lack of obvious source material most likely attests to the lack of research on Caritas and Luther; however, I believe that within this woman’s writings, we can see a unique religious and gendered understanding of Luther.

Caritas was born Barbara Pirckheimer on 21 March 1467 (d. 1532) in Eichstatt, Germany. She was the oldest of twelve children born to a patrician family. Her father, Hans Pirckheimer held a doctorate degree and worked for the archbishop of Eichstatt at the time of her birth. He later became a councilor to Duke Albrecht IV of Bavaria. Hans and her brother Willibald (1470-1530), who was to become a renowned humanist, shaped Barbara’s formative years by tutoring her and training her in Latin. At twelve years of age, Barbara was sent to further her education at the St. Clare’s convent school in Nuremberg, which had an excellent reputation for educating their sisters and young female students. Given her young age, she had to receive permission from the Franciscan provincial authority to enter the convent as a novice. This was quickly granted to her based on her high-level of competency in Latin. At the age of sixteen Barbara joined the order and adopted the name Caritas (Charity). Taking on this new name represented her death in the outside world and her bond to Christ as his bride in the spiritual world.³ She was selected to be the head of the girl’s school once she completed her novitiate, and in 1503, she was unanimously elected to the role of abbess, where she remained until her death in 1532. Without her privileged background, Caritas would not have been able to accomplish so much without such a level of education and familial connections that permitted her entrance to the circles of humanist and theological discourses. Within these

³ Conrad Celtis in 1518 described the ceremony that women underwent to become sisters at St. Clare’s in Nuremberg. The ritual was called “bridal day” and it represented both the woman’s social death and her marriage to Christ. Celtis’ description of the ceremony focused on the symbolical death of the women: “Thus indeed they are removed from sight and cloistered; neither can they meet with their kin nor with their parents; nor do they enjoy visibility, but rather they live life as if they were dead. Therefore, when the priest consecrates a woman the image of death is all around her, prostrated before the altar she is clothed with a white shroud, and as if the tomb were already prepared the priest sprinkles her with holy water, then she is revered by incense and other ceremonies for the dead and prayers, which things are performed in the sight of the people. The priest carries a candle in his hand as far as the entrance (through which according to the rule only virgins may enter) and he stands there where the other virgins with song, prayers, and a kiss, receive the one who enters, praising and extolling her for having condemned the delights of urban luxuries and pride, she has vowed herself to a perpetual yoke and to chastity and the servitude of the saints of God than which no liberty is truer.” Conradus Celtis, “*Descriptio Urbis Norimbergae (de orignie, situa, moribus, et institutis)*.” This is cited in both: Gerta Krabbel, *Caritas Pirckheimer: Ein Lebensbild aus der Zeit der Reformation*, 5th ed. (Munster: Aschendorff, 1982), 15; Ulrike Strasser, “Brides of Christ, Daughters of Men: Nuremberg Poor Clares in Defense of their Identity (1524-1528),” *Magistra* 1 (2): 193. Translation is Strasser’s.

prominent circles, Caritas became an authoritative figure and was eventually able to gain some protection from the onslaught of changes brought to her door by the Reformation.

Her brother Willibald was a key figure in linking the cloistered Caritas to the circle of humanists in Germany. Willibald's large network of humanist acquaintances and friends often received news of Caritas' exemplary learning and her inspiring piety due to her studies of the Bible, the Church Fathers, and the classics. In addition to corresponding with Caritas through letters and sending her books, several humanists dedicated their works to her. For instance, Conrad Celtis, named *poeta laureatus* in Nuremberg by Emperor Frederick III in 1487, dedicated his poem "Noremburgia" to her and kept in close contact for many years until she admonished him for straying into literature that was too far from the Holy Scripture. In a letter thanking him for his dedication to her, she wrote, "Encouraged through the true friendship that binds us both, I want to warn you to release yourself from the wicked fables of Jupiter and of Diana, Venus and the other damned ones, whose souls are currently burning in the flames of Hell."⁴ This chastisement, in fact, seems more in line with Martin Luther's *sola Scriptura* sentiments, and thus, reveals some of the similarities between the nun and the reformer.

Willibald also spoke of her with his close friend, Erasmus of Rotterdam. In 1516, Willibald reported to his fellow humanist how delighted Caritas and her sister were with Erasmus' translation of the New Testament. Willibald claimed that the two women constantly read Erasmus' works but, specifically, were "wonderfully taken (*mirè afficiuntur mulieres*)" with his work on the Gospel.⁵ Not only did Willibald present these two religious women as particularly well learned, but he also showed their intense piety and joy in reading Scripture. Another of Willibald's closest friends, Albrecht Dürer, also took note of Caritas' enduring piety and impressive intellect. He dedicated his collection of works entitled *Mariensleben* to the abbess as a symbol of respect.⁶

Caritas' relationship with these men seemed to dwindle over time, especially when the humanists began dividing amongst themselves on Luther's teachings. Many of these men saw the ailments of the Catholic Church, but they differed with Luther on how those ailments should be cured. While much of the debate between the humanist theologians centered on doctrinal interpretations, the key dividing factor was whether or not the Catholic Church should reform itself or whether it should break apart. Caritas' bond with her brother even had to weather this storm. Willibald's attitude to the Reformation shifted over time, but initially he was in favor of the Augustinian friar's ideas. Willibald's early adherence to Luther's teachings led to some tension between brother and sister as the Reformation forced its way into the Abbess' community. Yet, in

⁴ "Caritas Pirckheimer and Konrad Celtis," 25 April 1502, in *Briefe: von, an und über Caritas Pirckheimer (aus den Jaren 1498-1530)*, ed. Josef Pfanner (Landshut: 1966), 108. "Deshalb will ich, ermutigt durch die vertraute Freundschaft, welche uns beide verbindet, Euch ermahnet haben, abzulassen von den ruchlosen Fabeln des Jupiter und der Diana, Venus und anderer Verdammten, deren Seelen gegewärtig in den höllischen Flammen brennen." My translation.

⁵ "Willibald Pirckheimer to Erasmus von Rotterdam," in *Briefe: von, an und über Caritas Pirckheimer (aus den Jaren 1498-1530)*, ed. Josef Pfanner (Landshut: 1966), 259. In the German translation: "die Frauen wunderbar ergriffen werden."

⁶ For further information on Willibald and Dürer's friendship, consult Gerald Strauss, *Nuremberg in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Wiley, 1966), 248. Dürer's dedication to Caritas is mentioned in Paul MacKenzie, "Piety and Patronage: Aspects of Nürnberg Cultural and Religious Life 1477-1526. Anton (II) Tucher and Veit Stoss," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 24, no. 1 (1993).

1524 Willibald, along with Erasmus, condemned Luther’s writings on the rejection of free will and the assertion that Christians did not have the ultimate ability to choose between good and evil. By rejecting free will, Luther implied that God alone decided whether or not a person would gain salvation, and this went against the Catholic theology of good works. For Catholics, Christians could choose to do good deeds in order to absolve their sins, and earn a spot in heaven. This division with Catholic doctrine went too far for Willibald, and he eventually rejected Luther’s ideas entirely. In time, the abbess and her brother mended their relationship, as they both felt the disappointment of a missed opportunity—Willibald, too, hoped that Luther’s teachings would extinguish the misdeeds of Rome, but soon, he believed the Protestants had outdone the Catholic Church.⁷ The Reformation brought even more sin and spiritual endangerment than the old faith ever had.

Similar tensions existed on a larger scale as cities throughout the German-speaking lands began accepting the Reformation. Caritas’ home, Nuremberg, is a lucrative case study in the process of confessionalization, or conversion to Protestantism. Historian Gerald Strauss asserts that by 1500, the imperial city had already gained control over the convents, churches, and two town parishes.⁸ Nuremberg managed the revenues and expenditures of these institutions as the city council conceived of its role as a “vigilant guardian of Christian life.”⁹ Thus, when Lutheran concepts came to Nuremberg, the city was already well on its way to reform.

Yet, Nuremberg’s transition to Luther’s teachings was not an altogether easy one. Even while the city was a center for humanist thinkers and artists, such as Hans Sachs and Willibald Pirckheimer, the city’s only loyalty lay with the emperor, who remained staunchly Catholic. The city council navigated these partisan waters up until 1525 when it declared itself Lutheran. R. W. Scribner’s analysis of Reformation propaganda in Nuremberg points to the city’s attempted balancing act between modest Lutheran support and dangerously anti-Catholic claims. The city council controlled print production of offensive or indiscreet material. For instance, from 1521-1555, on eight different occasions Nuremberg banned visual propaganda that was clearly pro-Luther.¹⁰ In 1524, Charles V declared that Nuremberg must follow the Edict of Worms, which likely influenced the city’s ban on images of Luther.¹¹ In a seemingly counter-intuitive act, in 1524 the council removed mendicants from administering sacraments and preaching in the convents.¹² This act prompted Caritas to begin chronicling the convent’s experiences with the Reformation.

The biographies and articles that feature Caritas generally identify her as either an important woman in the humanist circles or as an active agent as a prominent religious

⁷ Strauss, *Nuremberg*, 172.

⁸ Strauss, *Nuremberg*, 47.

⁹ Strauss, *Nuremberg*, 112.

¹⁰ R.W. Scribner, *For the Sake of the Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 73-4. Paul A. Mackenzie presents a similar argument in “Piety and Patronage: Aspects of Nürnberg Cultural and Religious Life 1477-1526.”

¹¹ Paula S. Datsko Barker, “‘A Mirror of Piety and Learning’: Caritas Pirckheimer Against the Reformation” (Ph.d. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1990), 197.

¹² For further discussion of this see: Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, Ch. 1-5, pp. 11-23.

figure.¹³ Paula Barker intertwined the two and explained how Caritas' humanist background enabled her to alter her identity from a symbol of an erudite but cloistered woman, to a politically active public figure fighting against Protestant laws.¹⁴ Others have argued that Caritas constructed a sense of identity in a desire for agency through her confrontation with male authorities.¹⁵ Historian Ulrike Strasser believes that Caritas was only able to weather the Reformation through her strong sense of communal identity. The fact that only one nun chose to willingly leave St. Clare's and fifty remained in the convent until the end of their lives is evidence of the validity in Strasser's theory.¹⁶ The nuns' desire to endure despite the efforts of their family, the city, and the new church to remove them from their convent reveals how desperately these women felt the need to stay together. Throughout my work, I will draw upon Strasser's definition of identity: "The sisters of St. Clare saw their individual identities as inextricably bound to their community; their self-definition was essentially relational."¹⁷ Many of these works treat Caritas' response to the Reformation as practical rather than theological.¹⁸ However, based on my own reading of the surviving record, I argue that she drew on both theological and practical reasons, and both motivations emerged in separate phases of her reaction to Luther.

An array of studies of German convents during the Reformation provides the much-needed context for this study. Amy Leonard's work on the convents in Strassburg argues that the female religious orders that were able to remain open only managed to do so by relying on the strength of their communal identity that was fostered within the convent. With a strong foundation in their community, the women found a means to negotiate the new religious landscape by redefining their roles and functions within the new Protestant society. Some historians believe that regardless of the strength of the religious community, women had no real control over what happened to them during the

¹³ Barker's work argues for Caritas's importance in humanist circles. I primarily used this widely read biography: Gerta Krabbel, *Caritas Pirckheimer: Ein Lebensbild aus der Zeit der Reformation*, 5th ed. (Munster: Aschendorff, 1982). Some other biographies include: Paula S. Datsko Barker, "A Mirror of Piety and Learning: Caritas Pirckheimer Against the Reformation" (Ph.d. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1990); Geor Deichstetter, ed., *Caritas Pirckheimer: Ordensfrau und Humanistin—ein Vorbild für Ökumene*. Festschrift sum 450. Todestag (Cologne: Wienand, 1982); Cristoph von Imhoff and Georg Deichstetter, *Caritas Pirckheimer und die Reformation in Nürnberg* (Nuremberg: Albert Hoffman, 1982); Wilhelm Loose. *Aus dem Leben der Charitas Pirckheimer, Abtissin zu St. Clara in Nürnberg. Nach Briefen* (Dresden: C. Heinrich, 1870).

¹⁴ Paula Barker, "Caritas Pirckheimer: A Female Humanist Confronts the Reformation," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 36, no. 2 (1995). Barker, "A Mirror of Piety."

¹⁵ Ulrike Weithaus, "Female Authority and Religiosity in the Letters of Katharina Zell and Caritas Pirckheimer," *Mystics Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1993).

¹⁶ In Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, pp. 153-6, we see that Anna Schwarz was the only nun to choose to leave the St. Clare convent. When Anna first adopted Lutheran teachings within the convent, she claimed that she wanted to stay and "torment" her sisters by doing everything exactly the opposite as they did, and eventually she admitted that she did not want to leave because her family did not want her to come home since they could not afford to have her there. Anna's mother quietly took her out of the convent in 1527. Therefore, only four nuns (three forcibly removed) left the convent, leaving behind fifty sisters.

¹⁷ Ulrike Strasser, "Brides of Christ, Daughters of Men: Nuremberg Poor Clares in Defense of their Identity (1524-1528)," *Magistra* 1 (2): 196.

¹⁸ Gwendolyn Bryant, "The Nuremberg Abbess: Caritas Pirckheimer," in *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 291.

Reformation. Lyndal Roper’s *Holy Household* explains the Reformation as leading to a “renewed patriarchalism.”¹⁹ In respect to women religious, reformers shaped their goals around controlling nuns’ sexuality, whether it was to protect the women’s bodies or to protect others from them.²⁰ Heidi Wunder pushes back on this thesis somewhat and argues that, in fact, women were able to shape their own destiny, but only within certain limits allowed by the patriarchal society.²¹ Drawing from research that looks at how women played a role in shaping the Reformation, rather than simply as being affected by it, works toward placing Caritas in an active role as both a theological and political force.

Strasser posits that convents had political importance, and were not representative of the pre-modern era, because the convents were in fact active agents in governmental centralization and political expansion—developments that are traditionally associated with modernity. Strasser also sees the nuns’ homogeneity as a marker of modernity, despite the fact that religious sameness is also generally tied to concepts of pre-modernity, because their homogeneity provided a foundation to gain agency. In the case of Caritas and the convent of St. Clare, the demand for obedience and uniformity within the cloister provided a basis to defy male authorities: family, church, and state.²² Merry Wiesner-Hanks also argues that abbesses were able to overcome both gender and religious ideology during the Reformation. She claims that abbesses employed strategic gendered responses to male authorities and, given their economic status, convents were able to exploit various people within their networks of patronage to retain power.²³ Elsewhere, Wiesner-Hanks argues that outside the convents, women could not constitute a coherent group so they were unable to join forces and act against the Reformation. With no official voice in society, individual women were forced to challenge male authorities alone; and, in doing so, they also had to challenge “the most basic assumptions about gender roles.”²⁴ This curtailed women’s options for acting as agents in shaping the Reformation. Therefore, Caritas Pirckheimer offers an exceptional look into how a woman, supported by her cloistered community, was able to effect the Reformation and leave behind a unique vision of Martin Luther.

One of the richest surviving sources we have that narrated the effect of the Reformation on convents is Caritas’ *Denkwürdigkeiten*, a journal chronicling the St. Clare nuns’ experiences from 1524-1528.²⁵ The journal remained relatively unknown, however, until Bamberg archivist Constantin Höfler rediscovered and published it, and subsequently gave it the title “Things Worth Thinking About,” in 1852. We cannot assume that Caritas intended for the chronicle to remain hidden. The journal documents

¹⁹ Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 3.

²⁰ Roper, *The Holy Household*, 230.

²¹ Heidi Wunder, *He is the Sun, She is the Moon: Women in Early Modern Germany*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²² Ulrike Strasser, “Early Modern Nuns and the Feminist Politics of Religion,” *The Journal of Religion*, 84, no. 4 (2004): 553-4.

²³ Merry E. Wiesner, “Ideology Meets the Empire: Reformed Convents and the Reformation,” in *Germania Illustrata: Essays on Early Modern Germany Presented to Gerald Strauss*, ed. Andrew C. Fix and Susan C. Karant-Nunn (Kirkville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), 181-196.

²⁴ Merry E. Wiesner, “Women’s Response to the Reformation,” in *The German People and the Reformation*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 148-172.

²⁵ The full title is *Der hochberühmten Charitas Pirckheimer, Äbtissin von S. Clara zu Nürnberg, Denkwürdigkeiten aus dem Reformationzeitalter*.

letters and interactions Caritas had with the Nuremberg city council, prominent theological figures, and the families of her fellow nuns. It almost reads as a handbook for other convents that may need direction once they find themselves in similar battles, which suggests that Caritas intended for the text to be disseminated. But, it also reads as a document that was created to serve as a witness to the nuns' acts of accommodation, and sometimes to their acts of resistance. Therefore, the document is colored with propagandistic language and images.

Charlotte Woodford's *Nuns as Historians in Early Modern Europe* speaks to the centrality of reading and writing in cloistered life, and how these practices helped nuns better understand the theological texts that they read and copied. By becoming deeply acquainted with these texts, nuns were able to compose their own meditations and prayers.²⁶ Woodford argues against the idea that *Denkwürdigkeiten* was constructed as an autobiographical text, even though the authorial "I (*ich*)" is often used.²⁷ Woodford believes that the text served as *memoria*, because it seems that the chronicle was written to gain sympathy from its readers. She asserts that the journal was meant to serve as a unifying project that would destroy any latent Lutheran sentiments in the convent by acting as means to help the nuns work through and process the spiritual and physical crises at hand.²⁸ As a humanist, Caritas would have had an understanding of how historical material functioned in "edifying examples of correct behavior."²⁹ This purposeful use of the chronicle is evidenced in the fact that the nuns were not "telling it as it really was" but presenting the material and the events in a certain, partial manner.³⁰ Both of functions that I see the chronicle serving, as a potential guidebook and as a witness to the cloistered community's confrontation with the Reformation, help to provide the modern reader with Caritas' complex perception of Luther, his theology, and the effects of the "wild rabble (*wildem gesynd*)" on the abbess' life.³¹

Caritas' perception of young Luther came from her steadfast adherence to Catholic reforms. In the thirteenth century, the Regensburg St. Clare's created the *Klarissenregel*, or rule of the Poor Clares, which acted as a rulebook for pious, communal living.³² Every sister who entered the convent had to agree to the "Rule," whose purpose was to shape the nun's identity: "so that you may see yourselves in your Rule or form just like in a mirror."³³ The Rule consisted of laws governing religious duties and customs, and was used again in the fifteenth century as a guidebook for reforming the convents. A few years before Caritas entered the St. Clare convent, the cloister had undergone reform

²⁶ Charlotte Woodford, *Nuns as Historians in Early Modern Germany* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 30.

²⁷ Woodford, *Nuns as Historians*, 84-5.

²⁸ Woodford, *Nuns as Historians*, 92.

²⁹ Woodford, *Nuns as Historians*, 94.

³⁰ Woodford, *Nuns and Historians*, 101 & 105.

³¹ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 48. For the German: Josef Pfanner, *Die "Denkwürdigkeiten," der Caritas Pirckheimer (aus den Jaren 1524-1528)*, (Landshut: Solanus-Druck, 1962), 39.

³² A.E. Schönbach, "Mitteilungen aus altdeutschen Handschriften. Zehntes Stück: Die Klarissenregel" (Holdesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1976), 2.

³³ Schönbach, "Die Klarissenregel," 27. "Daz ir uch aber. in dirre regel. order forme als in einem spigel muget ersehen."

and re-adhered to the thirteenth-century Rule.³⁴ The convent became strictly enclosed and the observances of daily routines of silence and prayers were enforced. This reform was meant to put stronger controls on female religious, and ensure that they followed their vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty. Caritas, thus, lived her life in a reformed Catholic convent, and from this perspective, “[did] not deny that there [had] been abuse” in the Church.³⁵ While she believed Luther’s plan “to drop everything all at once [went] against [her] conscience,” she recognized that he was not all wrong. She wondered, “How many people have written against Luther and condemned him? Not just papists, but also members of his own sect have called him evil, self-seeking and a heretic. If he were therefore considered a heretic, that would not please everybody. *He could thus be the victim of injustice too.*”³⁶ As a reformed Poor Clare, Caritas often found herself in agreement with Luther’s early concepts, which mirrored many of her complaints about fellow monasteries who did not undergo Catholic reform as her convent did, and she was able to see Luther as both a man with valuable beliefs and as a heretic.

Kaspar Nützel, the superintendent assigned to St. Clare’s as a liaison for the council, was a supporter of Luther and translated and published the *95 Theses* in 1518. Nützel desired to peacefully convert Caritas and her convent, and to that end, he frequently connected her with fellow reformers. In 1525, he requested that Wenzel Linck write to Caritas and instruct her on Protestant teachings. This chain of letters between the Abbess and reformer resulted in a lengthy theological argument. Linck was formerly an Augustinian prior, professor of theology, and colleague of Luther’s in Wittenberg before Johannes Staupitz sent him to preach and spread Luther’s teachings in Nuremberg in 1517.³⁷ From this interchange, we are able to see how Caritas systematically formulated her theology, and how she adhered to Luther’s teachings on idolatry and justification through faith.

One of Linck’s major accusations against the abbess was that she was not satisfied with Christ alone, but equally worshipped “Francis and others who not only do not appear in Scripture, but are supposedly saints as is proved by [her] prayer books and what [she] consider[ed] divine service.”³⁸ Caritas countered his accusation:

We are well aware what we think of St. Francis or how we should have hope in him. He is no god for us. We worship neither him nor any other saint. Our prayer books will not contain such things either, and if perhaps we mistakenly attribute too much significance to the saints, one should not hold that against us simple women, when after all, great doctors have done the same and doubtless Dr. Wenzel formerly though much of St. Augustine.³⁹

Caritas believed that Lutheran teachings were in line with her own concepts of reform, regardless of the fact that she still prayed to the saints. She repeatedly made the claim that

³⁴ Paul Mackenzie, “Introduction: The Life and Times of Caritas Pirckheimer,” *Caritas Pirckheimer: A Journal of the Reformation Years, 1524-1528* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 2.

³⁵ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 136.

³⁶ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 136.

³⁷ Strauss, *Nuremberg*, 160-1.

³⁸ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 115.

³⁹ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 120.

“all [her] sisters know that between God and men there is no mediator than the man Christ.”⁴⁰ Even if Linck was unable to see the fact that the Poor Clares adhered to this aspect of reform, Caritas requested that he overlook their transgressions of praying to the saints, since they were only women. She utilized the subordinate station of her gender as a defense mechanism against the new religion. In a last effort to deter Linck, Caritas explained, “If he [God] wants me to be different, then he can make me different without the help of all men, for man’s handiwork is always in vain.”⁴¹ In this, she essentially renounced any further desire for contact with Linck: he did not believe that any man could instruct her to change—only through God’s works would she be altered. Man’s works were not righteous without God’s support. This is not far from Luther’s belief that one could only do good works through God; yet, against Catholic doctrine, he believed that those works had no intrinsic value for salvation.

Thus, a central theme in Luther’s writings against monasticism was that men and women religious believed in justification through works rather than through faith only. Caritas would most likely have been acquainted with Luther’s 1519 “Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness,” where he argued that one type of righteousness was alien, in which Christ justifies others through faith. Luther claimed that through baptism and repentance, one would be given this type of righteousness. The second type of righteousness is “our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness.” Thus, the works are the “fruit” of the first type of righteousness given to Christians through faith. These good works consist of “mortifying the flesh and crucifying self-centered desires,” loving one’s neighbors, and being humble and fearful toward God.⁴²

Over the course of the journal, we see a slight shift in the way Caritas spoke of these two types of righteousness. In Chapter 5 of *Denkwürdigkeiten*, Caritas implored members of the city council to discontinue removing the Franciscans from their service to the convent. She appealed to her theology in order to make it clear that she did not fit the character the Lutherans had applied to the nuns; she, in fact, believed that one could only be justified through faith, even though she also believed in good works. She wrote that while many claimed the nuns believed they would be saved from their works, they “fully realize[d]—whatever people may say—that no man, as St. Paul says, can be justified by works alone,” but only by faith in Christ. She acknowledged that Christ taught that even if one only performed good works, they would still only be “useless servants.” Yet, she admitted belief in the fact that “good, true faith cannot exist without good works, as little as a good tree without good fruit, and that God will reward everyone according to his merits....”⁴³ Within a year, she shifted the way in which she described the “fruits” of good works, rather than good works attributing to true faith, she saw good works as a result of faith:

If we could find salvation by our works, then Christ would have died for us in vain. We also know, however, that man is justified by the Grace of God

⁴⁰ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 136-137.

⁴¹ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 140.

⁴² WA 2:145-52. *LW* vol. 31, trans. Lowell J. Satre, ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilston C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 297-306.

⁴³ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 20.

and not by good works. Then as a good tree he will bear good fruit. These are a sign of his correct and true faith. By their fruits, says Christ the Lord, you shall recognize them. But where the works of faith and above all brotherly love do not exist and are not revealed, there is no faith either....⁴⁴

The Abbess altered the relationship between the fruit and the tree; no longer were they interdependent on one another. Now the fruits were solely dependent on the goodness of the tree. Faith must come first, and God is the only reason for the production of good works.

Caritas also attempted to explain how the good work of loving one’s neighbor was still attributable to the Clares, even though they were cloistered. While she believed that they offered helpful services to the community, she knew that others, such as Wenzel Linck, believed that they could not possibly do so.⁴⁵ Therefore, she argued that the sisters inside were in need of neighborly care, and that is a service they offered to one another. If they were to leave the convent, the “many old, sick sisters who [were] in need of every care and attention,” would have no one to care for them. Moreover, since these sisters were all members of Christ, any service done to them was done in the service of Christ.⁴⁶ Thus, the cloistered nuns were still able to love their neighbors regardless of their inability to leave their community. They cared for those that would be a burden, and go uncared for on the other side of the convent walls, and by serving Christ they were being useful for the common good.

In 1525, Melanchthon visited the St. Clare convent at the request of Willibald Pirckheimer, who at the time believed that Caritas was still in spiritual, and most likely physical, danger by not following Lutheran reform.⁴⁷ According to Martin H. Jung, there has been almost no work done on her meeting with Melanchthon, because neither historians of Melanchthon nor of Caritas are interested in the other’s perspective. Jung believes their encounter is important because it places Caritas within a higher level of importance. Her account of their meeting gives us a wider understanding of how she perceived Luther’s close friend, and in turn, how she understood the characteristics of the man Luther.

The journal chronicles how Melanchthon was joyously surprised at the fact that Caritas believed that justification only occurred through faith, and that good works would not provide salvation. She wrote:

Only in the matter of vows we could not agree. He felt, of course, they were not binding and we were not obligated to keep them. I, on the other hand, felt that what we had promised to God we were obligated to keep with His help. He [Melanchthon] was more moderate in his speech than any Lutheran I had ever met. He was deeply offended that our people were being subjected to force. He left us on friendly terms.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 104.

⁴⁵ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 122.

⁴⁶ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 122

⁴⁷ “Willibald Pirckheimer an Melanchthon,” 1525, in *Briefe: von, an und über Caritas Pirckheimer (aus den Jaren 1498-1530)*, ed. Josef Pfanner (Landshut: 1966), 269-271.

⁴⁸ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 141.

Caritas explained that her ideas of salvation were not far from Melancthon's. Moreover, she saw as a kind and appeasing Protestant. This gives us some insight into how negatively her other experiences with Lutheran reformers were, as exemplified by her exchanges with Wenzel Linck. This also leads us into a discussion of what was a constant object of debate between her and the reformers: monastic vows.

By the time Caritas began writing *Denkwürdigkeiten*, Luther's "On Monastic Vows" had been published for nearly three years.⁴⁹ It is very likely that the abbess had obtained a copy of it, and at a minimum, she certainly discussed these ideas at length with some of Luther's fellow reformers. In her arguments with superintendent Nützel and with Wenzel Linck, we can see where Caritas mirrored Luther's rhetoric in order to show that they were not so far apart in thought. She wrote to Nützel in response to his concern for her insistence on keeping her vows, and explained that she was aware of the fact that living in the cloister did not assure her salvation, any more than she was sure of the fact that leaving would ensure her salvation.⁵⁰ She saw the cloister as coming from the tradition of the apostles and Church Fathers who "held everything in common" and lived a separated life. She believed that by their example, it was proven that living a communal, cloistered life was not wrong, especially when it was done with "good intentions and no one [was] harmed by it. For in this way, peace, atonement and order [could] be maintained all the better among many people."⁵¹ Caritas argued in support of monastic life in a similar fashion to how Luther spoke of the proper monastic life. In "On Monastic Vows" he wrote, "And so, if you vow to take up the religious life, and if you live with men of like mind, with a clear conscience that in monasticism you seek nothing to your advantage in your relationship with God. . . then in that case you are neither wrong to take vows nor wrong to live in this way."⁵² Luther even harkened back to the apostles as evidence of when vows were still appropriate, before man decided to make them law.⁵³ His argument hinged on vows being taken and kept freely.

Luther claimed that monastic vows were a commandment created by man and not by God, so they were invalid and, in fact, against God.⁵⁴ Caritas, however, argued that while she could absolve her sisters' obligation to her as abbess, she was unable to dissolve their vows to God:

I have been forced [by the city council] to free each one from her oath. I had to do this and I have freed them of the obligation they vowed *to me* The good gentleman [Linck] catches himself when he says this matter does not concern men, but God, *which is the truth*. How could I then free anyone, who was not obligated to me and do something reserved for God alone? . . . Let each person decide to do it or not as he pleases.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Martin Luther, "De votis monasticis," *WA Schriften* 8, pp. 564-669.

⁵⁰ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 111.

⁵¹ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 122.

⁵² "The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows, 1521," *LW*, vol. 44, trans. James Atkinson, 304.

⁵³ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 316.

⁵⁴ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 280.

⁵⁵ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 139

By refusing to free the sisters from their vows, Caritas played right into the Wittenberg theologian’s argument—the obligations the women felt they owed to her were shed, yet because their vows were made to God and not to a man-made law, then the Abbess could do nothing to end them. She mirrored Luther’s argument and used it to her advantage against the council. While the Poor Clare did not believe the vows to be wholly optional to keep once made, she did allow the nuns to leave who chose to do so.

Caritas believed that those who left the monasteries and convents were damned. She observed that they were not enticed out for their salvation, but for personal gain:

But now they are abandoned. No one cares about them and they cannot find their way in this city. When they are outside the cloister, then their body and their soul are not safe. There is nothing more despised than runaway nuns or monks. When we hear of such wailing and despair our heart is touched, but not for the temporal, but for the eternal. Not for the body, but for the soul.⁵⁶

Luther was a known “runaway monk,” and her remark tells us much about how she must have seen this former Augustinian. He was an eternally damned man, biding his time here on earth, unsafe from the torments of the devil. I believe Luther would be hard pressed to disagree with the idea that he was plagued by the devil.

Regardless of her attempts to accommodate the reformers, the authorities refused to further negotiate with her, because they did not believe vows were theologically sound. If it did not appear in the Gospel, it was manmade and condemnable. The city council soon furthered their actions to dismantle the religious houses left within Nuremberg. In her final comment toward Luther’s good intentions, she wrote, “Luther himself has not yet destroyed a cloister or forced people to leave. In Wittenberg the church’s hourly prayers are still sung and read. It is said that there is also still a Franciscan cloister there.”⁵⁷ This appeal to Luther most likely stemmed from Caritas’ hopes that the Council would stop its crusade, particularly since she pinpointed the Franciscans still existing in Wittenberg. If Luther did not believe all monasteries needed to be closed down, then perhaps St. Clare’s would remain. The sisters followed the Rule, and, in Caritas’ opinion, already adhered to Luther’s reforms for monasticism, and should thus be protected. Melancthon’s visit proved her hopes to be worthy; he too saw that not all religious houses needed to be destroyed.

Just prior to Melancthon’s visit, Nuremberg acted to dissolve the monasteries and convents; the council instituted a five-point program that the convents had to adhere to within four weeks. It included the following: 1) The Abbess was to release the sisters from their oaths. 2) Every sister should be free to leave the cloister, or respectively, her parents had the right to take her from the cloister. The city council would provide for her support. 3) The sisters should wear worldly clothing. 4) A clear window should be installed so that during visits relatives can see the sisters and whether they are alone during the conversation, and could thus ensure others were not dictating to the nun. 5) The sisters should inventory all their possessions.⁵⁸ After his meeting with Caritas,

⁵⁶ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 123.

⁵⁷ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 138-139.

⁵⁸ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 77.

Melanchthon recommended to the city council that it let the convent remain intact. He suggested that the convent should no longer be allowed to receive novices, but that no one should be able to force the sisters to leave the convent or shed their vows.⁵⁹

While Melanchthon was able to intercede on the nuns' behalf and persuaded the city to limit its demands, the reforming population of Nuremberg had already committed much violence against the Poor Clares. The five-point program and the tensions that had been building up to it acted to solidify Caritas' shifting perception of Luther as a physically intrusive and dangerous character. Regardless of Melanchthon's kindness to the Abbess, her image of the Lutheran Reformation was now set. Her language reflects experience with the new religion and its followers. The introduction of Lutheran preachers, the subsequent change in the sacraments, the physical alterations and altercations that occurred with these changes, and the attempt to sever the nuns' sense of communal identity are all factors in Caritas' experiences of Luther as invasive.

Prior to the five-point program, and even before Nuremberg declared itself in favor of the Reformation, the city council began the process of weakening the monastic communities by separating the male confessors from the cloistered women; they did this in order to impose reformed or reform-friendly confessors and preachers on the nuns.⁶⁰ The St. Clare convent felt the loss of their former confessors deeply, since the Franciscans were closely tied to the sisters' understanding of their communal and historical identity. In the face of rumors about the Franciscan confessors and the nuns acting lasciviously, Caritas consistently appealed to the fact that the two institutions had carried on a strong, pious relationship for 250 years and that there was never any evidence of "disgrace, trouble, or scandal" between the two.⁶¹ In a letter to her brother-in-law Martin Geuder, who was on the city council, she sought help to get the council to retract its decision to remove the Franciscans from St. Clare's service by arguing that only further rumors of scandal would emerge since the lay priests were disgraceful and detestable. She wrote:

Moreover it would be most troubling for my cloister and me if we were given lay priests. The way things are going with them now it would be better and more useful to us if you sent an executioner into our cloister who would cut off all our heads rather than sending us fat, drunken, immoral priests.⁶²

She claimed that she would "rather be dead than alive" if she and her fellow sisters were forced to take sacraments from those "who abuse it so disgustingly." These lay priests did not even believe in confession themselves, but still administered the sacrament. She believed that death would be better than "[doing] away with the beautiful divine service and [changing] it according to [the lay priests'] ideas." She refused to receive sacraments from such a disobedient group, who rejected the authority of both the Holy Christian Church and the emperor.⁶³

⁵⁹ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 141.

⁶⁰ Strasser, "Brides of Christ," 194.

⁶¹ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 16.

⁶² Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 16.

⁶³ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 16.

When the city council offered to provide the convent with a confessor from another Catholic order as a replacement for the Franciscan, Caritas reeled. She pointed to Luther as evidence for the infestation of immorality in other orders (especially those that had not conformed to Catholic reform). She specifically targeted the Augustinians, because, as she tells her reader, “Luther had been an Augustinian monk.” The monastery no longer observed order, Lent was ignored, and monks were taking wives. Everyone did as he pleased: “In all the cloisters a wild life ensued.”⁶⁴ Yet, these former monks became reformed priests, endangering the new religion as they had the old. They placed her immortal soul at risk and intruded into her spiritual life. They no longer followed the rituals of the Church and were hostile to the convent’s way of life. As far as the sources tell us, the nuns abstained from taking the sacrament of the Last Supper and from confession until Caritas’ death.

Not only were the women no longer able to participate in confession or the Eucharist, they were subjected to the German mass and Lutheran sermons. One of the many preachers sent to the St. Clare convent was Andreas Osiander, another Wittenberg theologian, of whose sermons Caritas claimed she listened to 111 times, was depicted as particularly harsh.⁶⁵ Caritas wrote of him as preaching in “an unchristian manner,” who “forced a strange meaning onto the Holy Scriptures,” and who “violently overturned the laws of the Church.”⁶⁶ The nuns were hidden from the public during the sermons, which took place in their chapel, but they were not protected from the chastisement of either the preacher or the public. Caritas felt that Osiander, and his fellow preachers, insulted and disgraced the women. The Abbess said that his sermons asserted that the women were worse than prostitutes and incited the public “to wipe out our godless community entirely, tear down the cloisters and drag [the nuns] out of them by force” because the women were “in a state of damnation, heretics, idolatrous, blasphemers, and would belong to the devil forever.”⁶⁷ She described their preaching as being an attempt to poison the women.⁶⁸

This virulent language indicates that despite the theological similarities between Luther and Caritas, the Abbess felt herself and her community to be in physical and spiritual danger. As an act of resistance to these threats, Caritas and her fellow nuns created a small prayer book, which was recently re-discovered by Gerta Krabbel hidden in the archives. The nuns filled the 300-page book with various prayers intended for individual use. Caritas included a confessional prayer, which she likely created to fill the void of the sacraments the sisters refused to take from lay priests.⁶⁹ Even while the Reformation forced its way into the convent, the Abbess found means of protecting her

⁶⁴ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 73-4. Caritas also expresses her distaste for the Augustinian monks when the Council offers her a selection of Catholic confessors on pg. 36: “If we were afraid of the lay priests, then we could choose one of the two Augustinians who were members of an order and monks too. Then I said if you want to give us monks, then leave us the monks whom we know and of whom we know what courage and good morals they have. We also are familiar with the monks you mentioned. We are well aware of what a loose life their order now leads. They said we should not take offense. They would not remain monks, but would cast off their cowls and assume another status.”

⁶⁵ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 112.

⁶⁶ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 63.

⁶⁷ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 63

⁶⁸ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 63.

⁶⁹ Gerta Krabbel, *Caritas Pirckheimer: Ein Lebensbild aus der Zeit der reformation* (Münster Westfalen: Aschendorf, 1982), 217-19.

“lambs” from the “wolves.”⁷⁰ With the prayer book, the sisters were able to continue praying in private according to Catholic rituals, and were able to resist the complete removal of sacramental acts within their walls.

Even the sounds of the rituals changed; the mass was now sung in German and the city limited the ringing of bells. In response to the “Lutheran women along with the Lutheran pastors and the cantor” coming into the St. Clare’s place of worship and singing the German mass, Caritas noted that all the nuns ran from the choir and refused to listen to it.⁷¹ In addition to the implementation of the German mass, the council forbade the Franciscans to “ring the bells and more, to celebrate divine services either by day or by night and also to pray in common.”⁷² Eventually, the Franciscans, and the other male orders in Nuremberg, stopped resisting and defected to singing mass in German. Caritas also noted that St. Katherine’s had stopped ringing its bells for matins nearly six months prior. In an act of defiance, the Poor Clares continued their rituals despite the mob’s threats, and Caritas proudly stated that “not for one night did [they] stop ringing the bells or holding matins.”⁷³ The bells from St. Clare continued to ring throughout the city as an audible declaration of the Abbess’ refusal to adopt these new Protestant laws.

In many ways, the bells were also a signal to the angry mob outside the cloister. It was 1525, and the Peasants’ War had arrived and broken through the city walls. Caritas, along with his other detractors, assigned blame to Luther. Catholics believed that Luther’s concept of Christian freedom spurred on the revolt of the peasants who were tired of living under the immense pressure of taxes, indulgences, and class oppression. This revolt led to a wide-spread war in Germany, despite the fact that Luther’s concept of “freedom” was a declaration of absolution from Catholic doctrine on justification of works, not freedom from governing law. Caritas’ sister, Clara Pirckheimer, wrote to their brother Willibald during this terrifying event, accusing Luther’s concept of Christian freedom as the instigator. She felt that Luther had promised liberty to the peasants, but once they used it, he retaliated and tried to take it from them. In her letter she equated the nuns’ situation to the peasants’: “One treats us exactly as Luther did the peasants. He had long recommended evangelical liberty to them, [but when we claimed our freedom to choose], they accused us of violating our vows [?] and mocked us.”⁷⁴ Despite the fact that the Poor Clares agreed with Luther on the concept of Christian freedom, both the peasants and the reformers attacked the convent. As Luther’s ideas gained steam through individual interpretation, they began instigating chaos amongst the peasants and causing physical damage to the clerical estate. Nuremberg utilized this turmoil to their advantage and wielded the threat of the mob against the Poor Clares.

In the Abbess’ correspondence with the superintendent, Nützel frequently reminded her of the impending attack. He claimed that he did not believe it was the

⁷⁰ In a letter to Hieronymous Ebner in 1524, Caritas refers to her sisters as lambs and the reformers as wolves: “Help protect my dear lambs from the wolves that could divide or harms the vineyard of Christ.” Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 15.

⁷¹ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 72-73.

⁷² Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 73.

⁷³ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 75.

⁷⁴ “Caritas Pirckheimer an Willibald Pirckheimer,” 1525, in *Briefe: von, an und über Caritas Pirckheimer (aus den Jaren 1498-1530)*, ed. Josef Pfanner (Landshut: 1966), 215. “Man thut uns eben als der Luther den pawrn, den hat er lang geratten die ewangelischen freyheit, daz wir maynaydig wurden und daz zeitlich darzu ubergeben, so qurd man dann darzu unßer spoten.” Translation by Dr. Susan C. Karant-Nunn.

convents’ fault that the peasants were upset, but that the cloister “would soon find out whether . . . the attack of the peasants and the cause for it was based solely on serfdom and their not wanting to pay any taxes.”⁷⁵ Soon, when the peasants came to the city, there may be uproar among the population who had been denied evangelical preachers.⁷⁶ There was no certainty around what action the peasants might take and what terror might ensue. The city council also used the threat of “great bloodshed” as leverage: if the convent of St. Clare refused to accept the five-point program, the council would not support the cloister or protect it from the community.⁷⁷ At this point the council determined that the clerical estate was, in fact, to blame for the peasants banding together to fight. The council pleaded with the Abbess, she recalled them claiming that “with our nun’s habits and our peculiarities we might give the community cause to attack us and this might spread out beyond us.”⁷⁸ Only obedience to the council’s plan to dismantle the convent, would, ironically, protect the convent. Caritas was stuck between fear of the peasant hoard, fear of the council, and fear of God.

True to character, Caritas, while afraid, still refused to bend to the Lutheran will. When the peasants approached the city, St. Clare accepted the sisters from Pillenreuth and Engelthal inside their walls, because these sisters could not be protected outside the city walls. At first, the two orders gave their property over to the council, who had forbidden that they return to their convents. Eventually, the Swabian League arranged for the council to return the cloisters and their holdings so that the women could go back. After the women from Pillenreuth and Engelthal left the Poor Clares, Caritas noted that the attacks continued:

And so we were in great fear and distress, and every day we expected even more misfortune. We crouched down and bent down so much that we could hardly hold divine services or ring the bells in the choir. Whenever they heard anything from us, cursing, shouting and abuse would start up in the church. They threw stones into our choir and smashed the windows in the church and sang slanderous songs in the churchyard.⁷⁹

It quickly became obvious that the Luther with whom Caritas had agreed, was a deviant, chaos creator who had brought destruction and profanities to the convent.

The destructive interpretation of Luther’s reforms struck out against the Abbess’ sense of communal identity. The women were no longer allowed to wear the habits that had unified them under one image. In the case of the three sisters whose mothers violently pulled them out of the chapel, they were physically stripped of religious vestments in public.⁸⁰ Even the protection of the windowless walls was destroyed: the

⁷⁵ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 57.

⁷⁶ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 58.

⁷⁷ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 77.

⁷⁸ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 77.

⁷⁹ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 75. Cf. “Caritas Pirckheimer an einen Ordensmann,” 1525, in *Briefe: von, an und über Caritas Pirckheimer (aus den Jaren 1498-1530)*, ed. Josef Pfanner (Landshut: 1966), 125-132.

⁸⁰ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 93. “When they [the mothers] broke into the church amid much cursing and swearing, an incredible screaming, shouting, and weeping began before they *tore*

city council demanded that the grille through which the nuns previously spoke to outsiders and had taken the sacraments was to be removed and a glass window to replace it. The sisters voted in support of installing the glass window in order to accommodate the council, but they would only use it in accordance with their reformed Catholic Rule. They would not speak alone with relatives, who might distort what the nuns said and use it against them.⁸¹ Furthermore, the city council ruled that nuns could leave the cloister to visit their relatives for parties or if they were ill, allowing permeation between the two worlds.⁸² The Catholic reforms left no room to accommodate this rule, and so Caritas recorded the disaster of its implementation in St. Katherine's. A Lutheran preacher began entering the cloister, chastising the young women, and "saying that they should promise to marry him."⁸³ He then spoke ill of the women later in public. The council soon argued that the cloisters should retain their enclosure since the council members had relatives inside whom they wished to protect from sexual assault and scandal: "It will not go on without sin and disgrace and trouble. There will be more open, bad houses [brothels] than cloisters."⁸⁴ This was neither the first nor the last time that the nuns were referred to as prostitutes.

By referring to the nuns as common women, the reformers infringed upon the nuns' communal identity as brides of Christ. The women were now seen as prostitutes who made trade with their flesh, rather than as chaste, obedient, and impoverished nuns.⁸⁵ This aided in the public's turn against the sisters; St. Clare's servants were harassed and found it difficult to obtain necessities for the convent within the city. The community "considered [the Poor Clares] more disgraceful than the poor women behind the wall [prostitutes], for it was preached publicly that we were worse than they were."⁸⁶ Luther's legacy turned these nuns, who saw themselves as reformed within the Catholic Church, into an unholy lot.

Caritas also felt that the Lutheran influence chipped away at her community's self-perception; anyone with Protestant leanings was "unfaithful to her bridegroom," no longer a bride of Christ.⁸⁷ The Abbess did not believe the marital vows taken by the runaway monks and nuns were a replacement for this holy marriage. She argued that "[if] marriage were such a good thing, then Christ could well have taken a wife, since man can decide to marry or not."⁸⁸ Similar to Luther's sermons on the estate of marriage, beginning in 1519, Caritas also referenced St. Paul who claimed that it was better to maintain celibacy than to marry.⁸⁹ Luther supported St. Paul here, because he agreed that celibacy allowed for fewer distractions and one could better serve the Church and its people this way. Both Luther and Caritas also maintained that celibacy only happened through the grace of God. Caritas quoted St. Paul in this regard: "I can do everything

off the holy garments of our order and dressed them with worldly clothes. They did not take the habits along with them." [emphasis mine]

⁸¹ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 83.

⁸² Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 83.

⁸³ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 84.

⁸⁴ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 84.

⁸⁵ These three traits are highlighted as central to nuns' identities throughout Roper, *The Holy Household*.

⁸⁶ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 74.

⁸⁷ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 82.

⁸⁸ Pirckheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 138.

⁸⁹ "A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage," 1919. *LW*, vol. 44, 3-14.

through Him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). Only through God’s grace, would she be able to adhere to and sustain her vows.⁹⁰

Yet, Caritas also did not see any other opportunities for women outside the convent. Merry Wiesner-Hanks aptly argues this was a central issue as to why women resisted the Reformation—while men could shed their vows and enter into the Protestant fold as a reformed preacher or artisan, women had no equivalent option and had to either return home if their families would have them, become a wife, or find another independent means of living (which was quite frowned upon socially).⁹¹ In a reply to Linck, Caritas bitinglly claimed that if she left the convent, she would have to find a husband, yet worried that she was “too old and ugly.” She then stated, “If one remains in the cloister, then it is not right. If one leaves, then she does not know where to go. The distress of the old, feeble woman is not considered. The danger facing a young person is not taken to heart.”⁹² She saw that no matter what, if the cloisters were to be dissolved, the community within would be destroyed and the individual women would face certain destruction outside their protective commune.

Thus, in many ways Luther’s invasive character outweighed his teachings on beneficial Catholic reform. Caritas’s perception of him was complex, teetering between seeing him as an empathetic figure and a perilous menace. The Poor Clares staunchly believed in the fact that they were driven by the Gospel, and that they had purged their house of any abuse of their vows through Catholic reform. In 1524, a fellow Clare wrote to her father, who was urging her to shed her vows and flee the convent, in order to assure him of her choice to stay: “Forgive me for not turning toward a lie. Nothing is done by the spiritual estate, according to our rule, that is opposed to the Gospel, which one had taught and sung and said to us before Luther with all of his following was ever known.”⁹³ Luther was simply a sign of what the women had already agreed to; his early concepts of reform were what shaped the Poor Clares’ communal identity. Ironically, this identity is the very thing that the women fought so hard to protect from Luther’s later teachings, forever altering their image of the reformer.

Caritas’ health began to fail in 1528, at which point *Denkwürdigkeiten* ends. Four years later, on 19 August 1532, Caritas died. In the convent’s death records, an epitaph memorialized the abbess’ exceptionality:

⁹⁰ Prickheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 123.

⁹¹ This argument is found in: Wiesner, “Ideology Meets Empire,” 192 and Wiesner, “Nuns, Wives, and Mothers.” Franz Schrader attributes this (convents rather than monasteries staying open) to their strong spiritual life, economic independence, and banding together, combined with differences in opinion among Protestant authorities about how they should be handled. However, he does not explain the gender difference, which even contemporaries were aware of. Franz Schrader, “Reformatorsche Auffassungen über die Klöster,” in *Ringens, Untergang und überleben der katholischen Klöster in den Hochstiften Magdeburg und Halberstadt von der reformation bis zum Westfälischen frieden*. (Munster: Aschendorf, 1977). 10-23.

⁹² Prickheimer, *A Journal of the Reformation Years*, 140.

⁹³ “Felizitas Grundherr an ihren Vater Leonhard,” 1524, in *Briefe: von, an und über Caritas Pirckheimer (aus den Jaren 1498-1530)*, ed. Josef Pfanner (Landshut: 1966), 252. “Vergib mirs, an welche lüg wir uns nit keren, so doch nichts in geistlichen stant gehandelt wirt, nach unser saczung, das dem heiligen evangelium wider ist, das man uns gelert gesungen und gesagt had, ee Luter mit all seinem anhangt ye bekant ward.” Translated by Dr. Susan C. Karant-Nunn.

In the year 1532, between 10 and 11 o'clock at night in the octave of Saint Clare, the worthy Mother Abbess Caritas Pirckheimer expired: a mirror of all piety and learning and a lover of all virtues. She had a great terror and distress during four years from the Lutherans, but she preserved, comforted, and led us in all motherly faithfulness and love, spiritually and temporally, for which we cannot thank her enough through our whole lives.⁹⁴

Even in death, her fellow nuns recognized her escalated battle with Luther and its spiritual and temporal elements. Nuremberg relented and allowed the St. Clare convent to remain with a few stipulations: the convent was to pay taxes on its goods and land, and that the sisters were no longer allowed to accept novices. In 1596, with the death of the last Poor Clare, the convent closed. While the battle was not wholly won, Caritas managed to mitigate the spiritual and physical threats brought upon her house by the intrusive Luther. Her strong sense of community and her beliefs in the Catholic reformed teachings allowed her the strength to negotiate with the Reformation and the early teachings of Luther.

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⁹⁴ Quoted and translated in: Barker, "Caritas Pirckheimer: Female Humanist," 260.

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