

## The Margaret Chapel at Maria Medingen as a *Theatrum Sacrum*: The Baroque Concept of Medieval Holiness

LEONARD P. HINDSLEY

Immediately after the death of the mystic writer Margaret Ebner on June 20, 1351, the Dominican nuns of the monastery of Maria Medingen had a stone effigy erected over her tomb in the monastic chapter room. Striking in its mendicant simplicity and medieval severity, the carved representation portrays the body of the mystic nun in repose, her finger pointing to a crucifix placed on her chest with the accompanying words "Jesus Christus" carved in high relief. The crucifix symbolizes Margaret's imitation of Christ's sufferings. The Sacred Name, as the text of her favorite mantric prayer, symbolized her joyful contact with Christ the Beloved. This artistically simple and symbolic carving of a holy woman contrasts remarkably with the setting created for the tomb effigy when the monastery was completely rebuilt beginning in 1718. The prioress, Maria Magdalena vom Stein zum Rechtenstein, gave charge of the reconstruction of the entire monastery to Dominikus Zimmermann (1685–1766).<sup>1</sup> The new construction transformed the Margaret Chapel into a *Theatrum Sacrum* suitable to glorify Margaret Ebner by displaying her holiness of life in a series of ceiling frescoes and in the painting above the altar.

The startling contrast between the simplicity of the medieval tomb effigy and the Baroque splendor of the renovated chapel leads one to wonder if these two differing artistic portrayals of Margaret Ebner signify different concepts of holiness. I believe that any answer to this question will require a detailed comparison of the artistic representations as they appear to us. The theological intent behind them is revealed by a contrast between the literary works that shaped the artistic expressions. Eyewitness testimony and a close reading of the autobiography entitled *Revelations (Offenbarungen)* written by Margaret Ebner from 1344–1348 produced the tomb effigy.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the frescoes display not only a knowledge of events reported in the *Revelations*, but also their interpretation through a later biography written by Sebastian

---

<sup>1</sup> Dominikus Zimmermann directed activities for the rebuilding and decoration of the Monastery of Maria Medingen from 1716–1729.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard P. Hindsley, ed. and trans., *Margaret Ebner: Major Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 85.

Schlettstetter. I shall show that the redecoration of the chapel expresses the theological intent and interpretations of Margaret's holiness according to Sebastian Schlettstetter, who wrote the first biography of the blessed in 1662—*Dass Wunderbarliche Leben, Hoche und unerhorte Wunderwerck der Seeligen Gottgeweihten Jungfrau Margarethae von Maria Medingen*.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence of the holiness of Margaret Ebner abounds. The very fact that the nuns of Maria Medingen buried her in the chapter room of the monastery shows her unique status. Normally, Dominican nuns buried their deceased sisters beneath the floor of the cloister walkway, called the "De Profundis" corridor because the nuns always recited Psalm 130 (*De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine*) as a prayer for their departed sisters as they walked over the graves. With this psalm they petitioned God for their sisters' release from the sufferings of purgatory. That they buried Margaret Ebner in a separated place by herself broke with this tradition, signifying the esteem in which the nuns held Margaret for the holiness of her life. The carving of the almost life-size stone effigy would likewise be unique. The transformation of the chapter room by the presence of this grave in the middle of the floor invited pilgrimage and public veneration of the holy nun of Medingen. The inscription carved around the effigy proclaimed Margaret's holiness and special status: "*Anno Domini MCCCLI—Proxima Die post Festum Sanctorum Gervasii et Protasii—Beata Margareta Ebnerin obiit.*"<sup>4</sup> The use of the word "beata" (blessed) as her title signified what everyone thought of her—from the nuns of Medingen and her spiritual director, Henry of Nördlingen, to the numerous men and women, high and low, who as Friends of God, knew of the extraordinary holiness and ecstatic mystical experiences of Margaret Ebner.<sup>5</sup> The use of the title "beata" on the tomb effigy and a pattern of consistent veneration by the people finally bore fruit in the confirmation of her official ecclesial recognition as "Blessed" by a decree of Pope John Paul II, dated February 23, 1979.

The tomb effigy (fig. 1) clearly plots the coordinates of her holiness by medieval standards. Her habit reveals the importance of her vowed status as a nun or "Bride of Christ." The crucifix, placed across Margaret's chest, symbolizes her compassion with the sufferings of Christ. The prayer, "Jesus Christus," to which she points, shows her unity with the Beloved, her possession of the sacred Name signifying her possession of Christ himself.

---

<sup>3</sup> The biography written by the Dominican priest Eustachius Eysenhuet in 1688 is less extensive than Schlettstetter's work and depends upon it.

<sup>4</sup> "In the year of our Lord 1351 on the day after the feast of SS. Gervase and Protase—Blessed Margaret Ebner died."

<sup>5</sup> The Friends of God were a group of believers from all walks of life and levels of society. Margaret and Henry seem to have been at the center of the group, known to all. Unlike other groups known by the same name, these Friends of God remained orthodox.



Figure 1: Tomb Effigy (detail)

Margaret wears the habit of the Dominican Order, representing her vowed status in religious life. Entrance into the religious life of the monastery began a deeper conversion to Christ. Margaret writes of this process, traditionally conceived in terms of making a pilgrimage or climbing a ladder to heaven, in the *Revelations*. For Margaret, the process of conversion in holiness deepened her compassion in relationships with others and her compassion for the sufferings of Christ crucified.

First she had to be purified of earthly attachments. The ever-changing relationships with her sisters, especially with the various laysisters who were reputed to care for Margaret during the thirteen years of her severe illness, demonstrate this process. At the death of the first laysister of those who cared for her, Margaret mourned inconsolably for her. Because of her severe depression, a well known spiritual director, Henry of Nördlingen, had to be summoned to help her overcome this profound grief. Even dreams of assurance from this deceased sister that she enjoyed happiness in heaven did nothing to alleviate Margaret's sorrow. However, with the help of Henry she overcame her intense depression and began to lead a new life. With the death of a second laysister companion she grieved, but recovered much more rapidly. After the death of yet a third sister, named Adelheid, Margaret was able to retain a certain amount of equanimity that signified not a diminishment of affection for the deceased sister, but rather a certain acceptance of the providence of God.

Her compassion for others contained no ingredient of selfishness. She showed compassion and concern for all—for Emperor Louis IV, the Bavarian, in his defeat, for other sisters of the monastery in their pettiness, for an uncouth vagabond who came to die at the monastery, and even for the sufferings of cattle ready to be slaughtered.

Above all, her compassion extended to the sufferings of Christ himself. Meditation upon his passion led her to mystical experience of the passion. She received the invisible stigmata. She swooned in suffering while witnessing the horrors of the passion of Christ as if present before her very eyes. Her commiseration with him deepened with the constant and then uncontrollable repetitions of the sacred Name—*Jesus Christus*. Beholding the crucified Christ in a vision, she cried out "Oh no! Oh no! My beloved Lord Jesus Christ!"<sup>6</sup> She understood no other way of growth in holiness than the path of suffering and compassion for Christ in his martyrdom. Thus the crucifix displayed on the tomb effigy not only referred to her testimony that she always wore a cross around her neck, but also struck deeply at the symbolic core of her compassion with the passion of Christ.

The Margaret Chapel as a unique place of burial did become a place of pilgrimage and veneration of "Blessed" Margaret Ebner. The pictorial evidence

---

<sup>6</sup> This mystical experience occurred frequently. Margaret had no control over it. It seems to have been the mystical intensification of using the name of Jesus as a prayer. She wrote that the "impression" of the sacred Name occurred four times: on Easter; on a Friday after visiting the graves; on the Feast of Corpus Christi; and once while sleeping. She experienced the *minnegriff*, the "exchange of hearts" with Christ.

of the numerous votive tablets that decorated the walls (as shown in a drawing of the interior of the chapel at the end of the sixteenth century) offers proof of popular veneration. This drawing also shows paintings of Margaret Ebner and the Virgin Mary, as well as relics and Margaret Ebner's personal objects of devotion—her crucifix and her statue of the Infant Jesus. Thus, the chapel served as a burial place containing various objects and inscriptions to memorialize and proclaim the blessedness of the nun, who had spent her life in that place.

However, with the renovation of the chapel in the eighteenth century, the artists made a conscious effort to glorify the saint, and not simply to portray symbolic elements of her life. When one enters the chapel, the altar immediately attracts the eye and then draws the gaze upward to the ceiling frescoes. Only later does one notice the tomb effigy, and its immemorial message of "Beata Margareta" can only be read upon closer inspection. As with the ideal of the Baroque church, the painting above the altar draws attention to itself and portrays the theme of the chapel decoration. The altar painting (fig. 2) shows the *minnegriff* ("exchange of hearts") experience of 1344, in which Christ and Margaret exchanged hearts. This experience represents a unity of the two, so that in 1347 Margaret applied the words of St. Paul to herself: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who saved me and gave himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20).<sup>7</sup> Johann Anwander, a local artist from Lauingen, finished this painting of the mystical experience in 1758. Its inscription, "*Gloria haec est omnibus ejus*" ("This glory is for all his saints"), taken from the conclusion of Psalm 149, clearly makes the claim that all believers may attain the same experience or glory as had Margaret Ebner. Any believer may know the same love shared between Margaret Ebner and Christ. By implication any believer may also receive the same mystical experiences and proclaim with Margaret and St. Paul: "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

The artifacts and meditative means of Margaret's experience—namely her crucifix and statue of the Child Jesus—are displayed at the center of the altar. The Sacred Monogram I H S rises above the painting of the *minnegriff* in an aureole of golden splendor surmounted by the all-seeing eye of God. While the decoration of the altar preserves the symbolic elements of the tomb effigy, the focus of the *Theatrum Sacrum* is clearly the mystical experience of Margaret, now available to all.

---

<sup>7</sup> Philip Strauch, *Margaretha Ebner und Heinrich von Nördlingen* (Akademische Verlagshandlung von J.C.B. Mohr: Freiburg and Tübingen, 1882). Margaret wrote: "Ich lebe. Nit leb ich, Jhesus Christus lebt in mir." ("If I live, it is not I who live, Jesus Christ lives in me"), Strauch, 137:15.



Figure 2: *minnegriff*

Vitus Felix Rigi painted the ceiling frescos in 1755 and with them he emphasized the mystical. I believe he shifted the emphasis from the medieval chapel decoration to the Baroque intentionally to highlight the mystical. Why the artist should choose to accent the mystical has to do with a change in the times and outlook—by the Protestant Reformations and the Catholic Renewal, by a revival in mysticism, and by the Baroque penchant for the dramatic and the extraordinary. More directly, I believe this shift in emphasis was inspired by the use of the first biography of Margaret Ebner.

Sebastian Schlettstetter, a Dominican priest, using the *Revelations* as his source text, composed a new biography and dedicated it to the prioress of Medingen on January 1, 1662. It seems evident that this biography by Schlettstetter, rather than Margaret's own *Revelations*, serves as the source of information for decorating the new chapel. By that time the Middle High German (Swabian dialect) text of the *Revelations* would have been virtually incomprehensible to anyone not trained to read the script and text. In addition, the text of the *Revelations* was arranged in chronological order with no attempt to organize the material of Margaret's life into a coherent theological statement. Schlettstetter, by contrast, took the data gleaned from the *Revelations* and arranged it into nineteen chapters using symbolic qualities of various precious gems, the meaning of which he took from the writings of Pliny, to write of Margaret's virtues. He compared Margaret to the biblical pearl of great price, a play of words on her name, "Margaret" meaning "pearl." He attributed the symbolic quality of chrysalis to her—patient, long-suffering.<sup>8</sup> Chaldeonian carbuncle symbolized that her love shines both by day and night. This he interpreted to mean that she loved both God and neighbor.

Aside from the linguistic difficulties presented by the original text and the desire to arrange the data of Margaret's life into a coherent theological interpretation, it is more important to note that Schlettstetter's chapter titles match the events portrayed in the ceiling frescos. Every chapter that reported and made theological sense of events from Margaret's life and mystical experiences recorded in her *Revelations* appears in a ceiling fresco.

Of the nineteen chapters in Schlettstetter's biography of Margaret Ebner, the events reported in twelve of them correspond to the theme of a ceiling fresco and to the painting above the altar. Altogether nine frescoes adorn the Margaret Chapel. Schlettstetter did not arrange them according to the chronology of events reported in the *Revelations*. The arrangement of frescoes seems to be based upon a chronology of Margaret's spiritual life according to the symbolic pattern of conversion. The first fresco (fig. 3) at the back of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Schlettstetter, *Dass Wunderbarliche Leben, Hoche und unerhorte Wunderwerck der Seeligen Gott gewichten Jungfraw Margaretae von Maria Medingen*. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Schlettstetter, 70: "Ein solcher Costlicher Carfunckelstein war Margareta, der nit allein glanzet und geschinen bym tag, der nit allein angezint gewesen in der Lieb gegen Ihren Gott und Herrn, sonder dise Lieb hat sich erstreckht gegen ihrem nechsten."





Figure 3: Sickbed

chapel on the left shows Margaret in her sickbed meditating upon Christ's passion. This initial illness began in 1311 and inaugurated Margaret's deeper conversion to Christ. Of this experience she wrote in her *Revelations*, "How I had lived during the previous twenty years I cannot describe because I had not been attentive to myself."<sup>10</sup> This fresco corresponds to Chapter Three in Schlettstetter's biography—"How the most blessed Margaret strove for the highest perfection by her illness."<sup>11</sup> Schlettstetter was careful to dwell on Margaret's suffering in her sickbed and the consolation received from meditation upon the passion of Christ. This experience awakened her to spiritual reality and signifies the beginning of her spiritual progress.

The next fresco (fig. 4) portrays Margaret worshiping the Eucharist exposed in a monstrance on the altar. Her great devotion to the Eucharist in holy communion and in adoration is evident throughout her text. However, one particular incident demonstrates the importance of adoration for her. She described this event: "It happened that the sacred regalia of the Empire were brought into our monastery. I had a strong desire to go see them. Then I perceived that God was saying to me: 'They are nothing to you. Go instead, to

<sup>10</sup> Hindsley, 85.

<sup>11</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Three: "Wie die Seeligste Margareta durch Kranckheit zu der höchsten Vollkommenhiet gelanget."



the tabernacle in the choir! There and nowhere else will you find my Holy Body as truly as in heaven."<sup>12</sup> She learned to prefer the things of God rather than the symbols of earthly power—the crown, orb, scepter, and mantel of the emperor. Her great devotion to the Blessed Sacrament is retold by Schlettstetter in Chapter Seven—"Concerning her meditation and unending desire, thirst and longing for the Most Blessed Sacrament of the altar."<sup>13</sup>



Figure 4: Eucharist

The third fresco (fig. 5) on the left side of the chapel shows Margaret holding a crucifix pressed against her chest. This signifies her desire to share in the passion of Christ. "Every cross I came upon I kissed ardently and as frequently as possible. I pressed it forcefully against my heart constantly, so that I often thought I could not separate myself from it and remain alive."<sup>14</sup> This corresponds to Chapter Four—"Concerning the fiery, burning love that she bore for Christ Jesus."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Hindsley, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Seven: "Von Ihrer Andacht und unentlicher Begirdt Durst und verlangen, so Sie zum Hochwirdigen Sacrament dess Altars gehabt."

<sup>14</sup> Hindsley, 96.

<sup>15</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Four: "Von ihrer Fewrigen Brinnenden Lieb so Sie getragen zu Christo JESU."



Figure 5: Crucifix

Across from the third fresco is a representation of Margaret conversing with a sister who has appeared to her from purgatory. Having accepted a share in the passion of Christ through an understanding of her illness as a participation in the sufferings of Christ, she then became a powerful intercessor for the souls in purgatory. One of many souls who appeared to Margaret to thank her for her prayerful assistance, this one may be her beloved laysister who also spoke of Margaret's spiritual progress. "When the Holy Trinity discloses itself then one sees the transfigured humanity in it.' At these words I felt such a strong force with such great grace that I said, 'Another word and my soul will not be able to stay in my body.'"<sup>16</sup> This episode appears in Chapter Six—entitled "By what visions of souls from purgatory Blessed Margaret was visited in order to ask for her prayers and how many were saved by her."<sup>17</sup>

The next fresco (fig. 6) moving toward the back of the chapel shows Margaret swooning, no longer meditating upon Christ's passion, but mystically participating in it herself. She records one of several such incidents in her *Revelations*. On Palm Sunday (March 21, 1339) she heard the reading of the Passion and wrote that "the greatest lamentation and pain from a present, perceptible suffering pierced my heart and spread to all my members. It overcame me so powerfully that I had to be held up. Then I broke out in a plaintive cry with the words, 'Oh no! Oh no! My Lord Jesus Christ! Oh no! Oh no! My heartfelt beloved Jesus Christ!'"<sup>18</sup> Schlettstetter discusses Margaret's intense compassion with the passion of Christ in Chapter Eleven—"Of the great joy and pleasure she had in meditating upon the sufferings of Christ Jesus."<sup>19</sup> The following fresco shows Margaret at prayer before her statue of the Infant Jesus. This statue functioned as a medium of special revelations concerning the infancy of Christ and Margaret's own growth in holiness. Of this she wrote that "the childhood of our dear Lord, Jesus Christ, is especially close to my heart. And my devotion to it increases more and more in every way. I am granted constant, sweet, powerful grace and true, loving responses by the Infant Jesus Christ."<sup>20</sup> Conversation with the Infant inducts her into the mysteries of his secret life. Schlettstetter writes of the infancy of Christ in Chapter Five—

---

<sup>16</sup> Hindsley, 92.

<sup>17</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Six: "Was gestalt die Seelige Margareta von den Seelen im Fegfewr ersuecht ward, fur sie zu betten, und ihrer viel darauss erlost wurden."

<sup>18</sup> Hindsley, 112.

<sup>19</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Eleven: "Von der grossen Frewd und Wollust, so sie gehabt, in der Betrachtung dess leidens Christi JESU."

<sup>20</sup> Hindsley, 139.

erning her fiery and interior prayer"—in which he tells of her special love  
 the Child Jesus symbolized by the statue of the Infant Christ.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 6: Swooning

Above the choir loft, the fresco (fig. 7) shows the singing of angels  
 and in with the voices of the nuns as they praised God in the daily round of  
 services. She heard the singing of angels as the nuns sang the *Regina Coeli*  
 aster.<sup>22</sup> She had been promised as she reported: "God wanted to draw me up  
 e cherubim and seraphim."<sup>23</sup> Schlettstetter reports these events in Chapter  
 —"What kind of exalted and secret things, visions, ecstasies and wonderful  
 ations Blessed Margaret received."<sup>24</sup> Among many other topics he also

<sup>21</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Five: "Von Ihrem Fewrigen und inbrünstigen gebett."

<sup>22</sup> Hindsley, 137.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Nine: "Wass die Seelige Margareta fur hoche, und  
 ne Ding, was Sie fur unterschiedliche gersichter, verzuckungen, und  
 erbahrliche offenbarung gesehen, und gehabt habe."

mentions this episode in Chapter Ten—“Of the many great and extraordinary graces that God gave to Blessed Margaret.”<sup>25</sup>



Figure 7: Angels Sing

---

<sup>25</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Ten: “von etlichen hohen und sonderbaren gnaden mit dem Gott die Seelige Margaretam begabet.”

The fresco in the middle of the chapel ceiling (fig. 8) portrays the apotheosis of the blessed as she is received into heaven. This represents the culmination of Margaret's spiritual and mystical journey to God. She had been promised in a revelation from Ananias, Azarias, and Misael that she would "go to heaven without delay."<sup>26</sup>



Figure 8: Apotheosis

---

<sup>26</sup> Hindsley, 92.

Also, her beloved sister in heaven revealed Margaret's eternal destiny to her. Of that experience Margaret wrote: "Then I saw the heavens open, and she showed me a throne near God that was prepared for me and no one was sitting on it."<sup>27</sup> Schlettstetter includes his report of these events in Chapter Eight—"Yet more great and excellent characteristics and virtues that shone forth from the holy virgin, Margareta."<sup>28</sup>

The final fresco above the altar shows the Blessed Virgin Mary, patroness of the Monastery of Maria Medingen and constant advocate and guide for Margaret. This corresponds to Chapter Twelve—"Concerning the fiery, burning love she had for the mother of Jesus and how amicably the Most Blessed Virgin Mary conversed with her."<sup>29</sup> Numerous times Margaret writes of her devotion to Mary in both the *Revelations* and in her prayer, the *Pater Noster*.

The painting above the altar portrays the *minnegriff* ("exchange of hearts") experience as previously discussed. Schlettstetter includes this event in Chapter Ten—"Concerning the many great and special graces Blessed Margaret received from God."<sup>30</sup>

The themes of every ceiling fresco and of the altar painting correspond to major chapter headings from Schlettstetter's spiritual analysis and support his theological purposes. The other chapters not mentioned above simply contain introductory or exhortative material and do not treat of specific events in Margaret's life. All of these episodes portray events from the life of Margaret Ebner recorded in her *Revelations*. But while the artist of the tomb effigy itself sought inspiration from the *Revelations*, the painters took their themes from Schlettstetter's biography. Whereas the tomb effigy fostered veneration of a holy woman, the ceiling frescoes went beyond the veneration and intercession of a saint to portray conspicuously the reality of holiness that can lead to mystical heights. As the inscription of the altar painting clearly states: this holiness and mystical experience are available to all.

One small detail noted in Chapter One proves the use of Schlettstetter's biography as the basis for the frescoes. Schlettstetter was the first to claim that Margaret Ebner was a member of the famous Ebner family of Nuremberg, the same family as that of her contemporary mystic, Dominican nun and

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Eight: "volgen noch andere hohe und flirtreffliche eigenschafften, und Tugenden welche an der Seeligen Jungfrau Margareta glanzten."

<sup>29</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Twelve: "Von ihrer Fewrigen, Brinnenden Lieb so sie getragen zu der Muetter JESU und wie freindtlich die Seeligste Jungfrau Maria mit ihr conversirt, und sie in ihrem Leben getröst habe."

<sup>30</sup> Schlettstetter, Chapter Ten: "Von etlichen hohen und sonderbaren gnaden mit dem Gott die Seelige Margaretam begabet."



correspondent, Christina Ebner (1277-1356). The artist painted the coat of arms of the Ebners of Nuremberg on the exterior of the organ loft directly facing the tomb in the Margaret Chapel. That Margaret did not belong to the Nuremberg Ebners would have been known from oral history, since Margaret's niece and other relatives continued to enter the monastery of Maria Medingen over the years. Certainly with the death of the last nun, Sister Anna Beringer in 1616, if not earlier, any oral tradition concerning Margaret's family would have ceased. At that time, forty-six years before Schlettstetter wrote his work, nuns from the monastery of St. Katharine in Augsburg refounded Maria Medingen. Further, Johannes Traber proved in 1910 that Margaret came from the Ebners of Donauwörth, having no connection with the Nuremberg family.<sup>31</sup> While all the other fresco episodes occur both in the *Revelations* and in Schlettstetter's biography, the inaccurate report of her place of birth as Nuremberg appears first in Schlettstetter.

This detail allows one to assert that the theological vision of Sebastian Schlettstetter somehow inspired the artists of the Margaret Chapel. Perhaps they had read the text; perhaps the prioress related it to them. However it may have occurred, it seems evident that the biography and not Margaret's *Revelations* served as the source of information and inspiration for the redecoration of the Margaret Chapel.

Schlettstetter's biography did more than organize certain events of Margaret's life into theological topics. The material and events that he chose to treat in his work demonstrate a theological intent in many ways. His theological intention was formed by Reformation polemic and by the desire to promote the cause of Margaret Ebner for official beatification.<sup>32</sup>

The episodes chosen for the text and repeated in the frescoes all display very Catholic themes in opposition to Protestant teachings. After the Thirty Years War, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries religious strife and battle continued theologically, if not militarily. The Monastery of Maria Medingen boasted that no nun had succumbed to the errors of Protestantism. The nuns of Medingen suffered persecution under their Protestant overlord, the Count of Neuburg, as a result of the compromise dictum *cuius regio eius religio*. The

---

<sup>31</sup> Johannes Traber, *Die Herkunft der selig genannten Dominikanerin Margareta Ebner, geboren zirka 1291, gestorben 20 Juni 1351* (Historischer Verein Donauwörth: Donauwörth, 1910), 12.

<sup>32</sup> Various attempts were made to bring about official ecclesial recognition of Margaret Ebner's sanctity. Evidence was gathered by a canonical Inquisition in 1686 and again in 1691. Testimony was admitted from past sources: a book entitled *Das Buch der empteren der swestern Predigerordens* by Johannes Meyer, O. P. in 1455; a letter from Christoph Scheurl to Martin Luther in 1519; an account of the history of the monastery during the Reformation attributing its safety to the protection of Margaret Ebner; a book by Conrad Zittard, *Kurze Chronik, Das ist Historische Beschreibung der Generalmaister Predigerordens* (Dillingen, 1596); plus many other documents relating the testimony of suppliants.

various forces of the Catholic Renewal wished to promote the truths of the Catholic faith in every way possible. The Schlettstetter biography and the subsequent frescoes emphasized Catholic teachings such as the role of the Mother of God in salvation history, the special devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, the use of statues like that of the Infant Jesus as aids in praying, the belief in miraculous occurrences, and the necessity and value of praying for the Poor Souls in a really existent purgatory.

Beyond the assertion of religious devotions and practices directly under attack by Protestant reformers, Schlettstetter and Anwander proclaimed a subtler message, portrayed in the central panel of the ceiling showing the glorification of Margaret as she is taken into heavenly glory accompanied by angels and saints. Here there could be no admission of Luther's teaching on the Christian believer as being *simul justus et peccator* (a sinner yet justified). The Catholic concept viewed Luther's teaching as too static. A more active response to Christ's redemptive work on the cross was necessary on the part of the believer. Each Christian had the freedom to choose God and the things of God, the good things of the earth, and even the handiwork of humans. With each good choice the sinner moved upward on the path to holiness. This made it possible for the sinner to become justified, and not simply to be said to be righteous. Christ's saving work in the shedding of his blood on the cross in perfect obedience to the Father's will to save the world made this justification of a believer possible. In every age grace mediates the power of that sacrifice through the sacraments to believers, transforming them and making it possible for them to advance from glory to glory by means of the constant victory of spirit over flesh. Margaret, as portrayed both in the biography and the frescoes, struggled with her own salvation. Through her victory she became an example to "all nuns and indeed for everyone," as Schlettstetter noted in his introduction, since the glory that she received and achieved is the destiny of all the saints.<sup>33</sup>

Both the biography and the frescoes portray a concept of holiness based upon the patristic and medieval notions of the spiritual life as a journey to finish or a ladder to climb. Both show the possibility of becoming holy and teach that whoever wishes to become holy must undertake to do it. Margaret became a living example of deeper conversion to Christ which ultimately led her to experience a mystical marriage with her Beloved. Yet the emphasis on glory as portrayed seems particularly Baroque. Like all Baroque saints Margaret swirls ever upward into the arms of the Triune God. There is nothing static about the portrayal. It is as dynamic, vigorous, and powerful as the Counter-Reformation ideal of holiness that it sought to portray.

---

<sup>33</sup> Schlettstetter, Preface, 1: "Dises hat mich nun bewegt, dass diser Schatz, dises Ihr hayliges Leben, bay den Ordens Schwestern, und bay den nachvolgendem Closterfrawen nit solte verborgen, sondern ausgebreitet werden, den in ihrem Leben findet ein iede Closterfraw, in ein ieder Mensch, wie Er zu der hochsten und grossten Vollkommenheit khonde undt moge kommen."