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George Faithful

THE EVANGELICAL SISTERHOOD OF MARY:
PROFILE OF A PROTESTANT MONASTIC ORDER

It is not self-evident that there should be Protestant nuns. Yet the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary has existed in Germany for over sixty years. Why? How did the Sisterhood come to be? And what are the Sisters' distinctive practices and beliefs? To answer these questions, I will provide a brief historical overview of the sisters' founding, followed by a survey of the teachings of Mother Basilea, their preeminent founder, which I will augment with an analysis of the architecture of the sisters' communities.

The core group of founding sisters formed within a women's Bible study during World War II in Darmstadt, a medium-sized, industrial city one hour south of Frankfurt. Darmstadt was completely destroyed during the war. The Allied bombing on the night of September 11, 1944, flattened most of the city's buildings. During the night of the bombing, the future sisters found themselves vividly confronted with their own mortality. In their prayers that night they committed their lives completely to God. Those prayers were fulfilled in 1947, when the Bible study leaders, Klara Schlink and Erika Madauss, formally founded the sisterhood as Mother Basilea and Mother Martyria. The founding mothers had always fought against the teachings of the *Reichs Church*, emphasizing continuity between the Old and New Testaments, and the special status of the Jews as God's chosen people. They also incorporated intense supernaturalism into their teaching, in contrast to the prevailing rationalism of German theology.

Since the middle of the 19th century, a Lutheran women's movement had created opportunities for increased involvement for women in the state churches. Single women

known as “deaconesses” committed their lives to service of society for the sake of the church. They ran schools, hospitals, and orphanages, and represented an early step in social work in Germany. However, this movement had originated and been led from above by the exclusively male clergy. While the Evangelical Sisters of Mary continued the trend of expanded women’s involvement in the German churches, the sisterhood did not defer to the leadership of any ecclesial body, male or otherwise. The group set a further precedent by pursuing a contemplative life, rather than an active life of social service in the community, as many had expected them to do. Like many groups after World War II, the sisters embodied a greater openness to alternate forms of Christian practice. Rejecting nearly five centuries of Protestant prejudice against monasticism, the Sisters embraced poverty, celibacy, and communal, cloistered life.

Behind all of the planning for the Sisterhood stood Mother Basilea, one of the three original founders. Born in 1904, Klara Schlink worked as a Bible school instructor before earning her doctorate in psychology and serving as a traveling administrator for an ecumenical agency during the war. She was familiar with the theologians of her day, such as Barth and Bonhoeffer. Her brother Edmund Schlink was the leading Lutheran ecumenical theologian of the 20th-century. Klara looked for inspiration from past revivalists such as Georg Mueller and Charles Finney. She also received helpful mentoring from Methodist pastor Paul Redinger, who was the spiritual father of the fledgling sisterhood but died shortly after its founding. Erika Madauss became Mother Martyria, meaning “witness,” and took on the pastoral care and day-to-day running of the sisterhood, while Mother Basilea, meaning “kingdom,” plotted their spiritual course. For her vision of the Sisterhood and for the contents of her over two-hundred published works, she relied primarily on the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of her days – and occasional years – of solitude and contemplation.

Two topics that dominate her thought, repentance and Jewish-Christian reconciliation, go hand in hand. German Protestants had long been so focused on grace, on God's free offer of forgiveness, that they had forgotten their spiritual need. Not only in conversion, but in every day of their lives, Christians had the duty to come before God in sorrow for all the wrong they had done. As valid for Christians as for Jews, The Ten Commandments provided the basis for determining specific areas of need. The German people bore a collective debt to the Jewish people. German Christians were complicit in the Holocaust because of their overwhelming silence. They had a special duty to repent of the war and to seek reconciliation with Jews and with the new nation of Israel. Even when it was near impossible for a German citizen to secure a visa to travel there, Mother Basilea went to Israel, establishing a home to care for Holocaust survivors.

A summary of Basilea's further themes reveals the eclectic nature of her thought. She emphasizes the redemptive role of suffering, both of Christ and of people in general. Times of testing often precede the times of the greatest blessing, for in them people realize their great spiritual need. She taught that prayer should be both individual and collective, formal and spontaneous, and should especially be practiced at the very beginning and very end of the day, an early Jewish practice which she gladly reclaimed for Christianity. She advocated worship in the form of jubilant "heaven celebrations," reminding her listeners that faith is reason enough for dancing. In the midst of such joy, she understood the Christian life as a life of vivid spiritual warfare and of preparation for the end of the world. Nonetheless, she was intent on caring for the natural environment, both in the context of her community and

in society at large. In the midst of such an emphasis on human responsibility, the overarching theme of her thought rests on God's responsibility: God fulfills his promises.

In 1966, the sisterhood completed the construction of their cloister, which remains open for guests from throughout the world. Its name, *Kanaan*, evokes the Sisters' attempt to reorient Christianity toward Judaism. Their experience in the war also shaped their vision for *Kanaan* as a land of love and peace. The sisters shaped their own geography within *Kanaan*, determining the design and interrelationships of all of its physical elements. The landscape and the buildings within its grounds formed both the message and the medium for the sisters' proclamation. In their collective history, an anonymous sister wrote, "everything here should be a reminder of the great Canaan, the Holy Land, and, with it, Jesus." They built *Kanaan* on parcels of land which had all been either gifted to the sisterhood or purchased by means of financial gifts they had received. Their possession of the land, despite their independence from all external ecclesial bodies and lack of public fundraising, was one of the primary examples the sisters gave of God fulfilling his promises.

The Motherhouse was the first building, built with stones from a demolished Nazi army barracks. In those stones God provided an answer to the shortage of building materials in the summer of 1950. Within the Motherhouse, the Chapel of Jesus' Suffering is reminiscent of the gothic style of the Middle Ages, conveying a commitment to pre-Protestant tradition. A large, sculpted crucifix hangs above the altar. Every Friday evening the sisters commemorate Good Friday there.

The sisters' liturgical week climaxes in the *Jesus Proclamation Chapel*, devoted to the Sunday celebration of the resurrection of Christ. The hexagonal structure is contemporary in style, betraying the sisters' commitment to reach the current generation in its own idiom and

to worship in ways unconstrained by the precedents of the past, such as their practice of the gifts of the spirit.

The Father Fountain overflows in the middle of *Kanaan's* grounds, representing the goodness of God in tangible blessings. A small Sea of Galilee stands near a miraculous well, which provided over twenty-times the water yielded by comparable wells dug in Darmstadt. A relief next to the lake portrays the beatitudes. By depicting women and men living as saints, the sculpture conveys the attainability of living in true holiness and in ultimate worship. A small, woman-made hill overlooking the lake serves as Tabor, the Mount of Transfiguration. A cross on top stands as a reminder of Jesus' preparation there for his imminent passion. At the back edge of the grounds lies the entrance to the Garden of Jesus' Suffering. Beginning at Gethsemane, a series of sculptures and reliefs follows Christ's progress toward the cross and the glory of the resurrection. All of these elements combine to create a place that is sacramental in nature, drawing the heart and mind of the visitor to worship by means of visible signs.

The sisters' use of sacred space captures the essence of their spirituality, which is at once contemplative, Lutheran, charismatic, and Trinitarian. Their sacred places are those set aside for worship and prayer, including meditation on Christ's sacrifice, the core of their contemplative focus. But a place is holy because God makes it so, not because of any merit in the place itself, the geographic corollary of Luther's theology of justification. In a practice that might best be described as charismatic, the sisters discern a place's holiness by following the leading of the Holy Spirit, who reveals the promises which God the Father has made for that place. This equal emphasis on God as Father, Son, and Spirit reveals the Trinitarian balance of the sisters' spirituality.

Kanaan conveys the sacramental character of the land itself, a tangible participation in the presence of God. All places, natural and woman-made, are able to embody God's truth. For the sisters, the medium and the message are one, encapsulated in the place of *Kanaan*.

The sisters' history, Mother Basilea's writings, and the geography of *Kanaan* demonstrate the potential of women of faith to live out God's will and to pursue his promises against all odds, flying in the face of every precedent. Why do they exist? They would say that it is because they followed God's call and because he keeps his promises. Historians could also look to the failures of the Protestant churches in Germany during World War II as the impetus for innovation. The immediate past had been a failure. Now it was time for something new to Lutheranism and something far older. Contemplative life rooted in the promises of God offered the German sisters something far more supernatural and communal than anything currently on offer in the state churches. They offer a startling critique of the status quo. We must conclude that, when examining any innovative religious group, be it charismatic and Lutheran or Protestant and monastic, the most appropriate question may not be "why?" but "why not?"