Benedicta Riepp: An Analysis of Structural Elements in Her Life

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ABSTRACT:
Mother Benedicta Riepp struggled at a great personal cost for autonomy on behalf of North American Benedictine women. Her efforts ultimately led to the reshaping of the Benedictine tradition for women in the United States. This paper analyzes some of the most significant structural elements in Mother Benedicta’s life.
Mother Benedicta Riepp was born in Waal, Bavaria in 1825 and is known for establishing the first North American Benedictine community of women: St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys, Pennsylvania. By the time she died in 1862, at just 36 years old, four additional convents had been founded from her original convent in Pennsylvania (including what would become St. Benedict’s Convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota, in 1857). Mother Benedicta struggled at a great personal cost for autonomy on behalf of North American Benedictine women, resulting in the reshaping of the Benedictine tradition for women in the United States. This paper will analyze some of the most significant structural elements in Mother Benedicta’s life.

CAUSAL POWERS

Sociologist Christian Smith describes seven factors that contribute to a social structure’s durability. Smith explains that one such factor is the way human structures influence individual actions through “causal powers”:

1 Image used with permission of artist - Sister Mary Charles McGough, OSB of Saint Scholastica Monastery
Social structures possess causal powers to promote cooperation and conformity and oppose resistance and opposition...this causal capacity propels people in similar directions engaging in patterned behaviors that align in common motion. In whatever form it takes, this fact of compliance generates mental-behavior momentum, flows of action, and configurations of activity that become difficult to resist...Few people ever sustain that for long. The normal result is either eventual cooperation with or exit from the social structure.³

One of the most significant causal powers present in Mother Benedicta’s life was the patriarchal nature of Western culture in the 19th century. As soon as she joined St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt, Bavaria, Benedicta displayed leadership qualities: “Benedicta matured quickly in the community. From the time of her entrance into the convent she was being prepared to teach in the girls’ school of Eichstätt. In addition to this work, she was appointed novice mistress shortly after her solemn profession, at the age of twenty–four.”⁴ Mother Benedicta was also one of the first to step forward when volunteers were sought to instruct the children of German Catholic immigrants in America, and at age 27, she was appointed superior of the first missionary group sent from St. Walburg Convent to America.

Despite her accomplishments, and because she was female, Mother Benedicta was subject to the authority of male members of the church hierarchy. This is demonstrated primarily by the way Abbot Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B., assumed the right to govern the American Benedictine women when he was named as his own community’s first abbot in the United States.⁵ As Hollerman explains in Like a Mustard Seed: A History of the First Benedictine Women’s Monastery in North America: “Because he had been instrumental in first bringing them to America, he behaved as if he alone were financially and spiritually responsible for them...”⁶

⁵ Saint Vincent Archabbey, Latrobe, Pennsylvania.
⁶ Hollermann, *Like a Mustard Seed*, 62.
He assumed authority over the women even though they had received support from other sources, contributed their own significant effort, and were still under the authority of St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt.

Mother Benedicta resisted Abbot Wimmer’s assumption of authority, and her resistance created friction within the structure. As Smith explains, such resistance to causal power “generates a hot relational ‘friction’ by abrasively rasping against the grain of the directional surface of social structures.”7 Mother Benedicta, as a female, went against the grain when she resisted assumed male authority, and Abbot Wimmer judged her actions as “acts of disobedience and defiance.”8

PERSONAL INVESTMENT IN THE STATUS QUO

If Mother Benedicta created friction when she refused to acknowledge Abbot Wimmer’s authority, she further contributed to that friction by travelling to Europe for clarity on the matter. Her trip to Europe also demonstrates another factor contributing to structural durability: the way individuals invest in the status quo. According to Smith, “At least some if not most of the people implicated in a social structure are invested in it operating in certain ways as it does. So, they regulate and reinforce it with positive and negative sanctions.”9

Mother Benedicta had been told by the bishop of Eichstätt not to come to Europe. Willing to risk alienation for her convictions, she went to Europe without permission. When she arrived at St. Walburg’s, according to Grace McDonald, O.S.B., Mother Benedicta was “placed in an isolated part of the convent and throughout her ten-month stay she was ‘seldom permitted communication with its members.’”10 Furthermore, the prioress of St. Walburg’s encouraged Benedicta to “beg pardon” from Abbot Wimmer.11 The bishop of Eichstätt refused to see Mother Benedicta and even wrote a letter to prevent her from meeting with other important

7 Smith, 347.
8 Hollermann, Like a Mustard Seed, 58.
9 Smith, 347.
11 Hollermann, The Reshaping of a Tradition, 163.
men. Eventually, Rome acted on Mother Benedicta’s concerns by notifying Abbot Wimmer of her charges and seeking input from the bishops of Erie and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Meanwhile, however, Abbot Wimmer had embarked on a letter writing campaign against Mother Benedicta and succeeded in getting many people to turn against her. When she returned to America, “she found the convent doors practically closed to her. During her absence in Europe Abbot Wimmer had appointed another nun as superior in the convent at St. Marys and confirmed Sister Willibalda as superior in far-away Minnesota. Not only had Mother Benedicta lost her place as superior, but no house could invite her to live with them.”

What Mother Benedicta experienced during her trip to Europe and upon her return to America demonstrates how individuals within structures will place negative sanctions on others to protect their own positions. Investment in the status quo is visible in the way the bishop of Eichstätt acted against Mother Benedicta, as well as the way Mother Benedicta was ostracized by members of her own order. When the sisters in Minnesota eventually gave shelter to Mother Benedicta, they, too, experienced a negative sanction: Abbot Wimmer withheld funds sent to them by the king of Bavaria.

FORMATION OF NEW RELATIONSHIPS
As stated above, causal powers and personal investment in the status quo are factors that contribute to structural durability. There are other factors which can contribute to structural change. One such factor is the formation of new relationships. As Smith explains, “Social structures are fundamentally about patterns of human social relations. So when fundamental group relationships change for reasons extrinsic to the structures, those structures also tend to change. This happens, on the one hand, when new social relations are established.”

12 McDonald, 17.
13 McDonald, 18.
14 Hollermann, Like a Mustard Seed, 80-81.
15 McDonald, 19.
16 Hollermann, Like a Mustard Seed, 12.
17 Smith, 369.
Benedicta’s life, German Catholics immigrated to the United States in search of political and religious freedom. These immigrants needed teachers who could instruct their children in the United States. New relationships were formed when sisters from St. Walburg’s Convent in Eichstätt, led by Mother Benedicta, volunteered to meet this need. These new relationships eventually led to structural change through the adaptation of the Benedictine tradition for women in the United States.

RESTRICTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES
The factors addressed so far (causal forces, personal investment in the status quo, and new relationships) help explain some of the reasons structures either stay the same or change. Another important factor to consider in structural analysis is the way structures create restrictions and opportunities for individuals. Daniel Finn explains that such restrictions and opportunities affect the decisions of participants so that both the structure and the individual participants play a causal role. 18

Mother Benedicta faced restrictions due to being female in a patriarchal society, as well as restrictions created by the conditions of living on the wilderness frontier. These restrictions included poor travel and communication infrastructures, lack of material resources, and anti-Catholic sentiment. Despite such restrictions, Mother Benedicta was also presented with several opportunities. For example, she was part of the “new wave” of women entering religious life at the beginning of the 19th century. The number of European monasteries had dropped significantly following the “three traumas of the Catholic Church,” the Protestant Reformation, the Thirty Years’ War, and the French Revolution. Therefore, there were relatively few members when Mother Benedicta entered St. Walburg’s Convent as a young woman, increasing her chances of rising to leadership at an early age. Furthermore, when Mother Benedicta was invited to teach in America, it was an opportunity for her to spread the Benedictine order to new locations. Later, the need for teachers further West in Minnesota presented an opportunity for Mother Benedicta to get away from the meddling and interference of Abbot

Boniface Wimmer. These opportunities meant that Mother Benedicta was not just acted upon by the causal forces of a structure; she was also an agent creating her own influential causal force.

CONCLUSION

There were many factors contributing to the complex social structure Mother Benedicta Riepp lived in, including causal forces, personal investment in the status quo, the formation of new relationships, and restrictions and opportunities. Insight into these structural elements helps us to understand why Mother Benedicta paid a price for creating friction in her society. This insight also helps us to see that Mother Benedicta helped to change that society by forming new relationships and taking advantage of opportunities. Mother Benedicta Riepp set the course for the adaptation of North American Benedictine women to a rugged frontier, a group whose contribution to modern society is impossible to measure.

Bibliography


