

BEGUINES IN ESSEN

Report for the press

(English translation)

The umbrella organization of the Beguines e.V. had a “2nd International conference on Beguines”. 56 participants from 7 nations came to this day-long conference and were welcomed with silk name badges. After a short welcome from Waltraud Pohlen from the Essen Beguinage and the umbrella association board, who handled the entire moderation of the day, she introduced the star speaker Sr. Laura Swan OSB from the USA. Her hour-long lecture was in fast American English, but everyone had a German translation.

On a large book table was also her book “The Wisdom of Beguines across Europe”, which had been translated into German by 3 beguines and had just been published by Herder. There was a nice roll-up on the podium. Often photographed through a colourful “beguinage” in front of it.

After a short coffee break with opportunities to meet other participants, the second lecture of the morning began about the Parisian Beguines of 1250. Beguine Sr. Brita Lieb from Fulda reported on the new translation of a book by Tanya Stabler Miller, Chicago: Robert de Sorbon, the founder of the Sorbonne University, praised the Beguines as role models for candidates for the secular priesthood with the beautiful sentence: “Look at these beguines, how they treat people. You too must do the same if you want to live a lively pastoral ministry in the communities.” Literally: “beguine is love, love is beguine”! Many masters, students and priests preached in the royal beguinage in Paris and faced the criticism and practical suggestions of the theologically educated beguines. The sermons of the “magistras” or “mistresses” of the beguinage are also still available in collections of sermons from this period, such as “remarkable for priests” in the library of the Sorbonne. Sr. Brita took the liberty of interjecting three times for today's beguines; she was the only beguine of this generation who spoke. (For the English-speaking participants, a translation of her talk was available in English).

After a delicious vegetarian buffet with an equally delicious dessert, Dr. Sarah Hoyer from Ulm spoke on the “living habits of the Hamburg beguines from around 1500”. She had studied and listed countless accounting books, explained them with Powerpoint, and reported on how much meat and especially fish had been purchased, how prices fluctuated, how the Hamburg beguines' menu was composed... As a young, radiant archivist, she was also able to show that back then the beguines supported poorer people with food, what we now call “tables”. Sr. Brita was later able to add that the “Blue Sisters” in Hamburg, like the beguines in Ulm, also granted loans and used the interest to support poorer women and children. In any case, the Hamburg beguines were quite wealthy. 15 of their books are still kept in the university library in Hamburg.

There was again a coffee and cake break and plenty of time for contacts and conversations before Dr. Jörg Voigt, senior councillor of the Hanover State Archives, spoke freely for 1 ½ hours, about the papal and episcopal documents in Latin as shown on his Powerpoint. He immediately translated the relevant passages into German, in which he also showed excerpts with the word “begina”. His topic was: Were the Beguines of the Middle Ages persecuted? And the result was that when the Inquisition suspected the beguines, the beguines were wise enough to no longer call themselves beguines, but simply use their first name. 10 years later, when the Inquisitor was gone, the same names appeared again with the title Begine. Without the beguines all social work and nursing in the cities would have collapsed!

Dr. Jörg Voigt had already written his doctoral thesis on “The Beguines in Thuringia and in the Reich” and was able to provide a lot of information in the subsequent plenary session. Several of his books, including those on beguine meetings, were available for viewing.

Also the books by Paul Marchal from Hasselt, Belgium, about the “Beguines in European comparison” in German and Flemish and a lecture by Dr. Siegfried Ringler, Essen about the beguine Gertrud von Ortenberg from 1350 or the book by Gertrud Maria Hofmann: “Transforming time into love” with new parts, republished. In the afternoon the work of Dr Petra Bernicke from Essen was added. All of these books could also be purchased.

With the loudly expressed desire for a 3rd “International Conference on Beguines in 2025” and lots of positive feedback, this day ended “happily”.

The following Sunday a bus drove to two more beguinages and the positive experiences continued on site. Dr. Jörg Voigt said that he had already experienced 30 - 40 conferences, but never such a good atmosphere as at the beguines! He has 35 years of beguine research behind him, but with this conference he experienced live beguines for the first time. He was very happy about that.

Sr. Laura Swan also flew back to Seattle on Monday with thanks for this new experience of living beguines, which does not yet exist in the USA. They took 3 of them to Frankfurt airport. She will have a lot to report, also to her students.