https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_14

Openness in Medieval Europe, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, Cultural Inquiry, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 271–88

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The Openness of the Enclosed Convent

Evidence from the Lüne Letter Collection

CITE AS:

Edmund Wareham, 'The Openness of the Enclosed Convent: Evidence from the Lüne Letter Collection', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, Cultural Inquiry, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 271–88 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_14>

ABSTRACT: This article draws on the nearly 1800 letters which survive from the Benedictine convent of Lüne, near Lüneburg in northern Germany, and were written between *c*. 1460 and 1555. It explores the textual and visual strategies which nuns in the later Middle Ages used to negotiate their enclosed status. It suggests that the language and imagery of openness were a means for the nuns to remind those outside the convent wall of their presence and purpose in life.

KEYWORDS: convents; nuns; enclosure; letters; reform; Reformation; Lüne

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In an undated letter from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, a nun in the northern German Benedictine convent of Lüne greets another nun from the nearby Benedictine convent of Ebstorf in the name of Jesus, the living water. The letter is one of almost 1800 letters which survive from Lüne between *c.* 1460 and 1555.[1] The writer informs the recipient that she is well and hopes the same for her fellow-nun. She is thankful that the Ebstorf nun has found comfort in her letters and recognized the constancy of their bond. Even if the Lüne nun knew that her writings were childish and unpolished, she notes that she would not cease from sending material. In the hope that the Ebstorf nun will recognize the intention behind the letter, the Lüne nun, switching back and forth between Latin and German, writes:

> Karissima, ik sende juw nunc pro presenti Jesum Christum, probaticam piscinam, dat gy dar pro deductione temporis et ob dulcedinem consolationis tho ghan, quando et quam sepe vobis libet. Habet enim quinque porticus, de alle tyd open stad omnibus langwidis aridis et tribulatione pressis motionem

1 'Netzwerke der Nonnen: Edition und Erschließung der Briefsammlung aus Kloster Lüne (ca. 1460–1555)', ed. by Eva Schlotheuber and others with Philipp Stenzig and others <http://diglib.hab.de/edoc/ed000248/start.htm> [accessed 26 October 2020].

> aque gratie et pietatis salutem et sanitatem anime et corporis largiter fundentibus, unde den aqueductum konne gy ubique myd juw hebben, tam diebus quam noctibus, in omnibus locis et angulis, wor gy trostes unde vrolicheyt behoven.[2]
>
> (Dearest, I send you now for the time being in the present Jesus Christ, the sheep pool, so that you can approach it to while away the time and for the sweetness of consolation whenever and however often it pleases you. For it has five porches, which at all times stand open for all those who are weak, withered, and subdued by tribulation, pouring out in abundance the movement of water of mercy and piety, giving salvation and health to the soul and body. And you can have this aqueduct with you wherever you are, at day and night, in every place and corner, when you are in need of comfort and gladness.)

The letter concludes with the writer passing on greetings to the prioress of Ebstorf, as well as the subprioress (referred to by the initials 'EL'), and with a commendation in the name of Christ, in the hope that he may open a fountain of water for them.[3]

The letter draws on a passage in the Gospel of John:

> Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.[4]

Medieval commentaries on the passage noted the significance of the number five. Aquinas, for example, drawing on John Chrysostom, observed how the five porches signified in the mystical sense the five wounds on the body of Christ.[5] Other authors established a connection between the pool and the cross. For the twelfth-century anchorite

2 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 24, fols 6^{v}–7^{r}.

3 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 24, fol. 7^{v}: 'E cum hoc valeatis in salute ac sanitate hominis, virtusque in Christo Jesu sponso nostro, qui vobis fontis venas aperiat'. See the antiphon for the Feast of St Clement: 'Oremus omnes ad dominum Jesum Christum dixit beatus Clemens ut confessoribus suis fontis venas aperiat' (Cantus ID 004191).

4 John 5. 2–4 (King James Version).

5 St Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 1–5*, trans. by Fabian Larcher and James A. Weisheipl (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), p. xxiv.

Frau Ava from Melk, the wood for the cross of Christ lay waiting in the well before its eventual construction. In the iconographical tradition, such as a book of hours made for Catherine of Cleves between 1442 and 1445 depicting the Legend of the Wood of the Cross, the 'Piscina Probatica' appeared as a small round pool.[6] When the Lüne nun writes that she is sending the nun in Ebstorf 'Jesus Christ, the sheep pool', we can assume, based on other evidence from the Lüne letter collection, that she may well have been sending a depiction of the scene or of Christ's wounds.

Berndt Hamm has emphasized an impulse in the later Middle Ages to make the treasures of the mercy of Christ, Mary, and the saints open to as many people as possible and to make them more easily accessible. This impulse was not new but given a fresh accent in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, as a newfound emphasis on Christ's humanity went hand in hand with his approachability.[7] The letter from Lüne in many respects confirms such a trend. The nun evokes a language of fluidity, emphasizing that 'the movement of the water of mercy and piety' pours out 'in abundance'. The recipient can turn to the image at any time and at any place whenever she is in need, for the porches 'at all times stand open for all'. In her study of spiritual practice in late medieval northern Germany, Caroline Walker Bynum argues, similarly to Hamm, that the question of how to access God's mercy was a leading concern of the fifteenth century. 'How', Bynum asks, 'if Christ has gone away in resurrection and ascension […] do Christians find him present here on earth?'[8] Answers to that question resulted in a proliferation of visual material in the period, in particular imagery connected to Christ's wounds, which Bynum interprets less in terms of violence and violation, and more 'as doorway and access, refuge

6 Barbara Baert, 'The Pool of Bethsaïda: The Cultural History of a Holy Place in Jerusalem', *Viator*, 36 (2005), pp. 1–22 (pp. 7, 11–15).

7 Berndt Hamm, 'Die "nahe Gnade" — innovative Züge der spätmittelalterlichen Theologie und Frömmigkeit', in *'Herbst des Mittelalters'? Fragen zur Bewertung des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Jan A. Aertsen and Martin Pickavé (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), pp. 541–57 (pp. 545, 555).

8 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 7; Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety: Fifteenth Annual Lecture of the GHI, November 8, 2001', *GHI Bulletin*, 30 (2002), pp. 3–36 (p. 23).

and consolation'.[9] The imagery of the open, flowing wounds was not new and was common in thirteenth-century women's writing.[10] What seems to have changed in the fifteenth century was the frequency in its use, in both textual and visual sources.[11] In the Cistercian convent of Medingen, for example, twenty-five kilometres south-east of Lüne, the nuns produced a tapestry in the fifteenth century, the *Wichmannsburg Antependium*, where a woman climbs up a ladder to reach the side wound of Christ.[12]

This article reflects on what openness meant for a group of enclosed nuns by examining an exceptionally large corpus of letters which survive from the convent of Lüne. Older studies on convents had a tendency to look at these institutions from the outside in, often on the basis of male-authored sources such as rules or visitation protocols.[13] A major shift in the historiography has been to reverse this by looking at the convents from the inside out, by turning to sources produced by the nuns themselves, such as chronicles, notebooks, or letters.[14] Much writing in these pragmatic forms was often written for the community itself and not intended for a wider readership.[15]

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9 Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, p. 14. See also Caroline Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2020).

10 Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998), pp. 270–71.

11 Racha Kirakosian, *From the Material to the Mystical in Late Medieval Piety: The Vernacular Transmission of Gertrude of Helfta's Visions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Rosalynn Voaden, 'All Girls Together: Community, Gender and Vision at Helfta', in *Medieval Women in their Communities*, ed. by Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 72–91.

12 Henrike Lähnemann, '"An dessen bom wil ik stigen": Die Ikonographie des Wichmannsburger Antependiums im Kontext der Medinger Handschriften', *Oxford German Studies*, 34 (2005), pp. 19–46.

13 Heike Uffmann, 'Inside and Outside the Convent Walls: The Norm and Practice of Enclosure in the Reformed Nunneries of Late Medieval Germany', *Medieval History Journal*, 4 (2001), pp. 83–108 (p. 86); Eva Schlotheuber, *'Gelehrte Bräute Christi': Geistliche Frauen in der mittelalterlichen Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), p. 2.

14 Heike Uffmann, *Wie in einem Rosengarten: Monastische Reformen des späten Mittelalters in den Vorstellungen von Klosterfrauen* (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2008); Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing about Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); Eva Schlotheuber, *Klostereintritt und Bildung: Die Lebenswelt der Nonnen im späten Mittelalter; Mit einer Edition des 'Konventstagebuchs' einer Zisterzienserin von Heilig-Kreuz bei Braunschweig (1484–1507)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

15 Schlotheuber, *Klostereintritt*, pp. 321–27.

By contrast, convent letter writing acted as a bridge with the outside world, one of the many ways in which the convent wall could become permeable and pervious and for nuns to be part of a wider network of exchange.[16] For nuns, like monks, used correspondence for all manner of reasons, from defending their interests to organizing economic affairs. In particular they sought to maintain contact with friends and family in other convents or lay society. In so doing they often reminded them of their function, especially their prayers.[17] It is this latter point which forms the focus of this article, which considers the specific textual and visual practices by which these brides of Christ sought to make their bridegroom's mercy open and accessible to those beyond the convent wall. The Lüne letter collection sheds new light on the practice of enclosure, on the nature of both practical and symbolic communication from and to an enclosed community, and on the nuns' own perspective and reflections of their enclosed status and role in society. Convent letters were a way of creating and sustaining enclosure, as the nuns sought to close themselves both externally and internally from the influence of the outside world whilst simultaneously opening themselves and others up to Christ's grace and mercy.[18]

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No original letters survive, but copies are preserved in three letter books in the convent archive, two of which (Kloster Lüne, Hss. 15 and 31) were most likely compiled in the 1530s, when the convent was threatened with closure by attempts to introduce the Lutheran

16 Claire Walker, '"Doe not supose ma well mortifyed Nun dead to the world": Letter-Writing in Early Modern English Convents', in *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450–1700*, ed. by James Daybell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 159–76; Bronagh Ann McShane, 'Visualising the Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Nuns' Letters', *Journal of Historical Network Research*, 2 (2018), pp. 1–25.

17 Lena Vosding, 'Klösterliche Briefkunst: Die ars dictaminis im Kloster', in *Ars dictaminis: Handbuch der mittelalterlichen Briefstillehre*, ed. by Florian Hartmann and Benoît Grévin (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 2019), pp. 493–517 (p. 496).

18 Lena Vosding, 'Die Überwindung der Klausur: Briefkultur der Frauenklöster im Spätmittelalter', in *Zwischen Klausur und Welt: Autonomie und Interaktion spätmittelalterlicher Frauengemeinschaften*, ed. by Sigrid Hirbodian and Eva Schlotheuber (Ostfildern: Thorbecke, in press); Felix Heinzer, '*Claustrum non manufactum* — Innenräume normativer Schriftlichkeit', in *Schriftkultur und religiöse Zentren im norddeutschen Raum*, ed. by Patrizia Carmassi, Eva Schlotheuber, and Almut Breitenbach (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), pp. 141–65 (p. 142).

Reformation, and the final book (Hs. 30) in the 1550s. Hs. 15, which this article will draw evidence from, contains material largely from the pre-Reformation period and seems to have acted primarily as a model-letter collection. Comprised of thirty-four quires and written by a number of hands, the manuscript is marked by a high frequency of undated and anonymized letters or letters which use only initials. Hs. 15 contains both outgoing and incoming correspondence and was not as systematically organized as the two other letter books. Nevertheless, certain quires were thematically structured, such as a group of condolence letters (quire 14) or a series of congratulatory letters to relatives on marriage (quires 20 and 27). It is important to be constantly aware of the two possible levels of analysis: the information imparted by the letter at, first, the point of transmission and, second, the moment of collection. The character of an individual letter reflected and was to a degree dependent on the collection as a whole.[19]

The corpus is significant for a number of reasons. In terms of extent, the number of letters from Lüne is far greater than collections from other German convents, such as the fifty-four German letters from the Poor Clares of Söflingen near Ulm,[20] the fifty-three German letters which Katerina Lemmel wrote in the Birgittine convent of Maihingen at the start of the sixteenth century,[21] the forty-one original Low German letters from the Westphalian canonical foundation of Langenhorst written between 1470 and 1495,[22] the twenty-one letters from the Benedictine convent of Oberwerth,[23] or the letters which

19 Lena Vosding, 'Gifts from the Convent: The Letters of the Benedictine Nuns at Lüne as the Material Manifestation of Spiritual Care', in *Was ist ein Brief? Aufsätze zu epistolarer Theorie und Kultur/What Is a Letter? Essays on Epistolary Theory and Culture*, ed. by Marie Isabel Matthews-Schlinzig and Caroline Socha (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2018), pp. 211–33 (p. 214); Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976), p. 60.

20 Max Miller, *Die Söflinger Briefe und das Klarissenkloster Söflingen bei Ulm a.D. im Spätmittelalter* (Würzburg-Aumühle: Triltsch, 1940).

21 *Pepper for Prayer: The Correspondence of the Birgittine Nun Katerina Lemmel (1516–1525); Edition and Translation*, ed. and trans. by Volker Schier, Corine Schleif, and Anne Simon (Stockholm: Runica & Mediaevalia, 2019).

22 Albert Wormstall, 'Eine westfälische Briefsammlung des ausgehenden Mittelalters', *Zeitschrift für vaterländische Geschichte und Altertumskunde*, 53 (1895), pp. 149–81.

23 Anja Ostrowitzki, 'Klösterliche Lebenswelt im Spiegel von Briefen des 16. Jahrhunderts aus dem Benediktinerinnenkloster Oberwerth bei Koblenz', *Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktinerordens und seiner Zweige*, 124 (2013), pp. 167–206.

members of the Pirckheimer family sent to their brother Willibald from various convents.[24] The sheer number of letters from Lüne reflects the diversity of interactions which a convent would engage in, from the organization of benefices to managing orders of cement. In contrast to other convent letter collections, it does not simply include correspondence of officeholders, such as the abbess or prioress, but ordinary nuns as well, writings both individually and in groups.[25]

A further significance of the letter collection lies in the nuns' use of language. Just over 250 letters which were recorded were written in Latin, around 650 in Low German, and just shy of 900 in a hybrid mixture of the two languages, as in the example at the beginning of this article. The letters demonstrate the importance of language in processes of inclusion and exclusion. A defining feature of the Lüne letter collection as a whole is that nuns wrote in different languages depending on the recipient: the hybrid mixture of the two languages for communication with female convents of the region; German for communication with layfolk, notably family members and the Lüneburg town council; and Latin for male clerics and the provosts, secular officials who held jurisdiction over the convents. The linguistic, verbal, and rhetorical dexterity and creativity of the nuns was marked by high standards of education in Latin, a key feature of the northern German convent landscape when compared to the south.[26] The application of this knowledge allowed the nuns to develop different communication strategies for different audiences.

24 *Caritas Pirckheimer — Quellensammlung*, ed. by Josef Pfanner, 4 vols (Landshut: Caritas Pirckheimer Forschung, 1966–67), II: *Briefe von, an und über Caritas Pirckheimer (aus den Jahren 1498–1530)* (1966); Eva Schlotheuber, 'Willibald und die Klosterfrauen von Sankt Klara — eine wechselhafte Beziehung', *Pirckheimer Jahrbuch für Renaissance und Humanismusforschung*, 28 (2014), pp. 57–75.

25 Vosding, 'Gifts', p. 212.

26 Eva Schlotheuber, 'Intellectual Horizons: Letters from a Northern German Convent', in *Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. by Elizabeth Andersen, Henrike Lähnemann, and Anne Simon (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 343–72; Henrike Lähnemann, 'Bilingual Devotion: The Relationship of Latin and Low German in Prayer Books from the Lüneburg Convents', in *Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany*, ed. by Andersen, Lähnemann, and Simon, pp. 317–41; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Eva Schlotheuber, and Susan Marti, *Liturgical Life and Latin Learning at Paradies bei Soest, 1300–1425: Inscription and Illumination in the Choir Books of a North German Dominican Convent*, 2 vols (Münster: Aschendorff, 2016), I, pp. 67–75.

Finally, the timespan of the correspondence covers two significant episodes and processes in the history of the convent, namely the introduction of a monastic reform in 1481 and the onset of the Protestant Reformation in the 1520s and beyond. The letters offer a unique insight into the first-hand reaction of a group of women to the often quite dramatic changes which the convent experienced as a result of these attempts at reform.[27] In 1481 a group of seven nuns from Ebstorf came to Lüne in order to enact a reform, referred to by the nuns as the 'reformatio'. Bertha Hoyer, the prioress of Lüne from 1468, was forced to resign her office and was replaced by one of the Ebstorf sisters, Sophia von Bodenteich. The reform movement sought a return to the idealized state of the monastic life by encouraging strict observation of the rules, the abolition of private property, the reintroduction of the common life, and a tightening of enclosure. This resulted in a number of changes to the convent, including an increase in the number of sisters, changes in the social makeup, and alterations and additions to the convent's buildings.[28] Many of these changes were recorded in a convent chronicle which was begun at this time, part of an expanding body of internal sources from this period which, alongside the letter books, included a new copy of the statutes and instructions on the election of the provost.[29]

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Silvia Evangelisti has remarked how 'enclosure, when enforced, did not necessarily imply the isolation of convents or the breaking-off of all contact with the world'.[30] The Lüne letters offer a particularly rich example of this process in action: many letters written after the introduction of the reform are an expression of the nuns' discipline and commitment to the religious life. Indeed, the term 'open convent'

27 Johannes Meyer, 'Zur Reformationsgeschichte des Klosters Lüne', *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für niedersächsische Kirchengeschichte*, 14 (1909), pp. 162–221.

28 June L. Mecham, *Sacred Communities, Sacred Devotions: Gender, Material Culture, and Monasticism in Late Medieval Germany* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 5–6.

29 *Die Chronik des Klosters Lüne über die Jahre 1481–1530: Hs. Lüne 13*, ed. by Philipp Stenzig (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019). The statutes and instructions for the election of the provost are currently being edited by Philipp Stenzig and Philipp Trettin.

30 Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life, 1450–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 7.

(*ein offens closter*) was employed to refer to a convent's state before its reform and when enclosure was not strictly observed.[31] This had parallels to the situation in Italy, where the designations 'open' and 'closed' were adopted in lists of female communities in Rome, whereby 'closed' meant that members observed rules of enclosure and 'open' referred to houses which did not follow a widely recognized rule.[32] Such open monasteries (*monasteri aperti*) included a wide variety of female communities, including groups of nuns who had sworn solemn vows but did not observe strict enclosure, or houses of tertiaries.[33]

In their letters the nuns showed a high degree of self-awareness of their enclosed status. Whilst in southern Germany the heart was employed as a popular metaphor of the enclosed convent, in northern Germany the nuns drew on the allegory of the vineyard to describe their existence.[34] In an original piece of Latin verse composition addressed to Provost Nikolaus Graurock on the Feast of Palm Sunday, for example, two young Lüne nuns refer to 'the vineyard of this enclosed paradise'.[35] Nuns were one of the few groups in the Middle Ages who could not participate in the *Präsenzkultur*, a culture of presence, which influenced political and social communication. Visibility was of vital importance for this *Präsenzkultur* and was played out in ritual settings such as the diet or Church festivals.[36] By contrast, nuns sought to create another form of presence, in which they simultaneously employed

31 Uffmann, 'Inside and Outside', p. 105. See, for example, an open letter from Geiler of Kayserberg to the Penitential Sisters of the Magdalena convent in Freiburg in 1499: *Die aeltesten Schriften Geilers von Kaysersberg: XXI Artikel — Briefe — Todtenbüchlein — Beichtspiegel — Seelenheil — Sendtbrieff — Bilger*, ed. by Léon Dacheux (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1882), pp. 216–17: 'Ich kåme darhinder das ich meyn / das wolche vnware Obseruantzen / die auff eüsserlichen glitz / vnd eüsserliche ůbungen vnd verderblicher feind weder die offnen clőster / vrsach ist / wann in die offnen clőster kumpt niemands der seiner seele heil sůcht / er sicht offentlich dz es ein verfårlicher stadt ist / darumb so verfart da kein gůtwilliger mensch / wann er wag sich nit darein / aber in einem glastcloster / da der schein der Obseruantz ist / da ernert manich gůt frumm menschen.'

32 Katherine Gill, 'Open Monasteries for Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy: Two Roman Examples', in *The Crannied Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Craig A. Monson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 15–47 (pp. 35–36).

33 Gill, 'Open Monasteries', p. 16.

34 Schlotheuber, 'Intellectual Horizons', p. 359.

35 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 2, fol. 10^{r}: 'in vinea paradisi claustralis'.

36 Gerd Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter: Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt: Primus, 1997), pp. 229–57.

their letters in order to break down the spatial and temporal distance between writer and recipient, whilst at the same time using their special access and openness to Christ to make him known and present to recipients beyond the convent wall.[37] This is more in line with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's use of the term, in which pre-Reformation eucharistic piety as practised by the nuns can be regarded emphatically as participation in a culture of presence.[38] In a particularly striking example, a nun in Lüne congratulates a nun in another convent on her coronation, the final stage in the entry process into a convent, at which she was handed a consecrated veil, ring, and crown. Quoting the words of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, the recipient is encouraged to lift the eyes of her heart and her body to the mountains of Christ's wounds and the rivers of his blood. Even if Christ is not physically present, he is united with them in the consumption of the Eucharist, when she will gaze upon him with joyful eyes and without her veil:

> 'Ecce ego vobiscum sum, etc.' [Matthew 28. 20] und wol dat we des nicht sen konnet foris per presentiam corporalem, so love we doch indubitanter, dat he sik omni tempore mit us uniert per sumptionem sacramentalem, unde denjennen, den we nu entfanget cum omni desiderio in venerabili sacramento, den scolle we sine fine seen gaudentibus oculis absque velamente.[39]
>
> ('Lo, I am with you always, etc.' And even if we cannot see this by his physical presence, we still believe beyond all doubt that he is united with us at all times in the consumption of the Eucharist. And we should see him, whom we now receive with all our desire in the venerable sacrament, without end with joyful eyes and our veils removed.)

The choice of language in each letter acted as a marker of a particular relationship, and in this instance the use of code-switching was characteristic of correspondence between nuns and a further way of facilitating presence. In another letter to a nun in Ebstorf from Lüne, for example, written after 1484, the writer notes in a mixture of both Latin and German that although 'we are physically separated, we are

37 Vosding, 'Gifts', p. 217; Constable, *Letters*, pp. 13–14.

38 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

39 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 19, fol. 5^{v}.

all bound together inseparably in the bond of sisterly love'.[40] The combination of the two languages signalled, reinforced, and verbalized the unity between these two women, bound together as sisters in Christ who had vowed to live chaste, secluded lives.[41] It created a language of intimacy between nuns which could only work for those who had the same frames of reference as each other, including biblical allusions, monastic terminology, and neologisms, such as the word 'uniert'. In contrast, in letters to relatives, such as those to celebrate family marriages, the nuns would write only in German. Nuns would note that as relatives they would expect to be invited to the marriage celebration but, because of their commitment to enclosure, they could not attend.[42] Instead, they sent a letter and a whole host of saints to stand in for them, including, in one instance from the nun 'GT' to her brother Melchior, 'all the inhabitants of the heavenly city of Jerusalem'.[43] In employing the language of sisterhood, the nuns were making clear that they understood the convent as another family, one that superseded their previous family relationships.

A further means of helping to create this sense of presence was achieved by the nuns attaching devotional images (*Andachtsbilder*) to their letters. With the letter to Ebstorf the Lüne nun sends a 'small painted sheet as a sign of sisterly love', without specifying what is depicted.[44] More detail is provided in the letter sent to the nun to celebrate her coronation. In this instance the Lüne nun, as a sign of her affection, sends the newly crowned nun a devotional image depicting the Holy Face of Jesus in the hope she will receive it with as much love as it was sent. She hopes that, whenever the recipient gazes upon the depiction of the Veil of Veronica with her physical eyes, she will

40 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 26, fol. 12^{v}: 'wente wy allen samen verbunden synt in vinculo sororie karitatis indissolubiliter, wol dat we corporaliter separati sint'.

41 Kat Hill, 'Brotherhood, Sisterhood, and the Language of Gender in the German Reformation', *Reformation & Renaissance Review*, 17 (2015), pp. 181–95 (p. 182).

42 See e.g. Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 20, fol. 2^{v}: 'nu borde my wol van susterke leve weghen, dat ik ok scholde jedghenwardich wesen to dyner koste na dem male, dat ik dyn ynege suster byn; doch so westu wol, dat dat nicht wesen kan efte mach'.

43 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 20, fol. 3^{r}: 'Wy senden dy in unse stede alle de inwoner der hemmelschen stat Jerusalem, de wy ghebeden hebben to unsen kerkmissen.'

44 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 26, fols 15$^{r–v}$: 'Item honoranda domina nostra S[ophia] B[odenteich] et ego transmittimus dilectionis vestre unaqueque parvum depictum folium insignum sororie karitatis.'

be enlightened both internally and externally.[45] This desire for a face-to-face meeting with Christ was embodied by Veronica, a witness to his Passion, and depictions of the sudarium 'lent life to a face the viewer longed to see, but had in fact never seen'.[46] In 1953 a number of devotional images were discovered when the floorboards of the choir of the Cistercian convent of Wienhausen, one hundred kilometres south of Lüne, were literally opened up. This included eight parchment miniatures depicting the Holy Face painted in two rows, which could have been cut apart and are presumed to have been produced by the Wienhausen nuns themselves to aid their devotion and to be sent as gifts to other nuns.[47]

As Gumbrecht suggests, 'something that is present is supposed to be tangible for human hands',[48] and the value of such images for private devotion lay not just in their visual qualities, but their tactile ones as well. In the desire to make Christ's presence manifest and open to all, medieval artists, including nuns, 'created images for those who wanted above all to touch, who wanted to have the scenes of their salvation tangibly present before them'.[49] The Apostle Thomas proved particularly popular in the northern German convents as a figure who represented this impulse towards the tangibility of the divine, as he was the only person after Christ's resurrection to be allowed to touch his body.[50] On 4 June 1489, for example, a Lüne nun sent Mechthild von Ingersleve in Ebstorf, soon to be crowned a

45 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 19, fols 5^{r-v}: 'so sende we juk amabilem et sanctissimam faciem eiusdem sponsi nostri depictam in folio in signum vere dilectionis, et licet pulcheritudo illius sit inscrutabilis et inscriptibilis ac omni creature incomprehensibilis, so sint we doch begherende dat willen tali amore entfanghen, quali affectu we juk dat sendet, et ipse, qui ob signum amoris reliquit nobis hanc effigiem in panniculo veronice, de mote juk lumine gratie sue illustreren intus ac foris, quotiens oculis corporalibus hanc intuetis.'

46 Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), p. 320.

47 Ibid., pp. 323–26.

48 Gumbrecht, *Production*, p. xiii.

49 Henk van Os, 'The Monastery as a Centre of Devotion', in *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe 1300–1500*, ed. by Henk van Os, trans. by Michael Hoyle (London: Merrell Holberton, 1994), pp. 50–59 (p. 54).

50 Henrike Lähnemann, '*Saluta apostolum tuum*: Apostelvereherung im Kloster Medingen', in *Weltbild und Lebenswirklichkeit in den Lüneburger Klöstern: IX. Ebstorfer Kolloquium vom 23. bis 26. März 2011*, ed. by Wolfgang Brandis and Hans-Walter Stork (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2015), pp. 41–64 (pp. 52–55).

nun, an image of the Holy Face. In the letter the Lüne nun hopes that Christ will look upon Mechthild with the same eyes of mercy as he did with his Apostle Thomas when he commanded him to place his fingers in his side, and that her heart will be filled with the same light of mercy as when Christ enlightened and touched Thomas's heart.[51] The link between presence and openness becomes even clearer in a devotional image which survives from Wienhausen, depicting the doubting apostle placing his fingers into Christ's open side wounds.[52] Written and drawn by their own hands, the letters and the images which the nuns produced were a visible and tactile sign of the nuns' devotion and their desire to be both physically absent yet spiritually present.

*

The letters from Lüne and the surviving images from Wienhausen formed just one part of a much wider trend to seek closer access to Christ's grace and mercy through the commemoration of his Passion.[53] Christ's open, flowing heart proved particularly attractive in this regard, including for the Lüne nuns, and verbal and adjectival forms of 'open' in both Middle Low German (*open*) and Latin (*aperire*) occur most frequently in relation to this image. The attractiveness of devotion to Christ's heart and his open wounds lay to some extent in the flexibility of the image. On the one hand, influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux, it could encourage internal, mystical devotion by using the heart to find spiritual unity with Christ. On the other hand, it could allow less mystical and more popular forms of piety to develop around it, by seeing in the wounds the sacrificial, saving, and protecting power of Christ's Passion.[54] The

51 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 16, fols 2^{r-v}: 'et idcirco pro inditio intime dilectionis erga vos transmittimus vobis unum folium depictum et licet sit parvum in materia, tamen continet in se effigiatam faciem nostri salvatoris, qui magnitudine splendoris sui replet altitudinem celi ac latitudinem terre, unde de mote oculo pietatis sue juk so lefliken ansen alze he ansach beatissimum discipulum Thomam, dilectum apostulum vestrum, do he to eme sprak: "Infer digitum tuum huc et vide", unde ok in juwe herteken schinen laten illud lumen gratie et cognitionis, dar he ene mede vorluchtede do he sprak unde syn herte berorde, dum dixit: "Dominus meus et deus meus."'

52 Inv. Nr. Wie Kc 020. See Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, inside front cover.

53 Hamm, 'Die "nahe Gnade"', p. 542.

54 Ibid., p. 551.

Lüne letters bear witness to the variety of different communicative contexts in which verbal and visual depictions of the heart could be employed and above all how the devotional practices of the nuns flowed out beyond the convent walls into wider society.

Letters evoking the flowing honey from Christ's heart and the blood from his wounds, often sent with an image attached to them, were used in particular to provide consolation about a sorrow and condolence after a death. In 1500, for example, a nun from Lüne wrote in Latin to Prioress Walburga Grawerock of the convent of Walsrode, eighty-five kilometres south-west of Lüne, after news had reached her that the prioress had had to resign her office because of an illness. She mourns the illness which afflicts Walburga but rejoices more strongly as the former prioress is now free from the burden of office. Employing a similar allegory about Walsrode's enclosed status, the Lüne nun remarks how Walburga truly laboured in the vineyard of the Lord during the heat of day, leading by example through word and deed, and living life according to the rule. As a sign of her affection, the Lüne nun sends an image of Christ, which shows the father of mercy with a bowed head, open veins, and flowing wounds, adding that Walburga can run to him when afflicted by tribulation.[55] Both letter and image became a visible and tangible sign of the shared participation in Christ's mercy.

That is also the case in a letter sent to a maternal relative and her children whose husband and father had recently died, but in this case the Lüne nun draws on similar imagery but writes in German. She sends a painted image of Christ's heart which the relative should gaze upon when she is sad. Quoting Matthew 11. 28 in German ('Komet to my alle, de gy bedrouet unde beswaret synt, ik wil juk sulven trosten'; Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest), the Lüne nun sends a 'small, holy little sheet' with an image of the sweet, honey-flowing heart which 'stands wide open for us all'. From this heart 'all holiness, goodness, and mildness has flowed out,

55 Hs. 15, quire 22, fol. 9^{v}: 'Pro inditio ergo dilectionis translego vestre reverentie ymaginem nostri salvatoris, qui quasi pater misericordiarum inclinato capite, apertis venis et effluentibus vulneribus prestolatur adventum sue dilecte sponse, quam paratus est in tribulatione recipere, ad quem in omnibus tribulationibus vestris recurrere debetis'.

and for our sake he had himself wounded and through this opened up the paradise of delight, the apothecary of all kinds of herbs and the treasure-chamber of divine wisdom and eternal sweetness'.[56] It was a common rhetorical strategy for the nuns to contrast the smallness of the image with the expansiveness and openness of the multisensorial space which it evoked.

The letters and images which were sent at moments of distress or sadness served at the same time as a sign of the nuns' spiritual discipline and commitment, particularly within the context of the monastic reform and the tighter enclosure which this entailed. The links between the reform, writing, and visual material connected to the heart can be vividly seen in a letter written around 1484 by two young nuns in Lüne to Elisabeth Bockes. Elisabeth had been one of the original seven Ebstorf sisters who came to Lüne in 1481 to enact its reform, and she returned three years later. In their letter, sent to mark the New Year and, like the majority of letters between convents, switching between Latin and German, the nuns express their thanks for Elisabeth's efforts during the reform:

> [W]e danket juwer leve lefliken unde fruntliken vor alle woldath, truwe unde leve, de gy vaken vnde vele by us heft bewiset van usen junghen iaren wente an dessen dach, sunderken de wile, de gy hir myd us weren pro reformatione, do gy mannighen swaren arbeyt myd us hadden.[57]
>
> (We thank you lovingly and friendlily for all your help, loyalty, and love which you often and very much showed to us from our young years to the present day, especially during the time you were with us for the reform, when you had much hard work to do with us.)

As a sign of their thanks, the two Lüne nuns send Elisabeth an image:

> Alderleveste, sende we juk an rechter leve en luttik hilgen-bladeken, dar vynde gy inne ghemalet dat benediede, sote, gotlike herte uses leven salichmakeres, dat he umme user leue

56 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 27, fol. 14^{r}: 'dar us alle salicheyt ghude unde myldicheyt utherverloten ist unde dar he umme user leve willen heft ghewundet laten unde heft us gheopent den paradys der wollust, de aptheken allerleye krude unde de trezekamer der gotliken wisheit unde der ewighen soticheyt'.

57 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 19, fol. 7^{r}.

> willen openen led myd dem scharpen spere; unde bynnen in dessem herteken syd dat alderschoneste begherlikeste kyndeken Jesus, dat mote juk gheuen dor syne hilgen mynscheyt en nye, vrolick, sunt, salich iar.[58]
>
> (Most dearest, we send you with true love a small devotional image, in which you will find painted the blessed, sweet, divine heart of our dear Saviour which he for our sake had opened with the sharp spear; and inside this little heart sits the most beautiful, beloved child Jesus, who through his holy humanity may grant you a new, happy, healthy, and blessed year.)

The two young nuns continue by expanding on the significance of the image:

> [U]nde allent, wes gy begherende synt, beyde an dem lyve unde an der sele, dat gy sughen moten ute synem honnichvletenden herten den hemmelschen invlote syner gotliken gnade unde soticheyt so vullenkomelken, dat gy dar ghansliken moten inne vordrunken werden.[59]
>
> (And everything which you desire, both in body and in soul, so that you might suck from his honey-flowing heart the heavenly flow of his divine mercy and sweetness in such a complete way that you may get completely drunk by it.)

A pen drawing on parchment of the infant Jesus in a heart, measuring 7.1 × 6.8 cm, survives in Wienhausen, depicting him carrying the rod and cross in his hand.[60] The Lüne letter offers direct evidence of the context in which such an image would have been sent and how its meaning could have been expounded. As Peter Schmidt has observed regarding the exchange of such small-scale images in the context of the reformed Dominican nuns of Nuremberg, the communicative aspects could be multifaceted.[61] In Lüne the text and image served

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Horst Appuhn and Christian von Heusinger, 'Der Fund kleiner Andachtsbilder des 13. bis 17. Jahrhunderts im Kloster Wienhausen', *Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte*, 4 (1965), pp. 157–238 (p. 195).

61 Peter Schmidt, 'Die Rolle der Bilder in der Kommunikation zwischen Frauen und Männern, Kloster und Welt: Schenken und Tauschen bei den Nürnberger Dominikanerinnen', in *Femmes, art et religion au Moyen Âge*, ed. by Jean-Claude Schmitt (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2004), pp. 34–61 (p. 34).

two purposes. First, both at the moment of writing and later at the moment of compilation the letter strengthened the communal bonds between Lüne and Ebstorf which had been reinforced and renewed by the reform. Second, it took a highly common motif, that of the flowing heart, but made it more personalized as the nuns painted it with their own hands and in so doing cemented the strong sense of feeling which existed between the two young Lüne nuns and Elisabeth, whom they evidently looked up to. The emphasis on Christ's humanity was closely linked with the language of fluidity, as Christ's mercy flowed between the nuns in an act which constituted both communal and personal elements.

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In keeping with the model-letter character of Hs. 15 as a whole, the letters which employed the language of openness present a highly idealized picture of convent life. The nuns drew in particular on a common stock of imagery surrounding Christ's heart and his wounds which they could then deploy, in Latin, German, or a mixture of both. The letters were compiled in the 1530s at a time when the convent was under direct threat of closure and the nuns sought to create an archive of correspondence which illustrated their rights, freedoms, and sincere commitment to the common, enclosed life. Indeed, across Germany, there was often a direct parallel between the nuns' reformed status and their levels of resistance to the introduction of the Protestant Reformation, as the view of the convent as an open garden of paradise gave way to new metaphors of the convent as closed-off prison.[62]

A more in-depth study is required of the language of openness in Hss. 30 and 31, which comprise letters from the post-Reformation period, but one letter which survives from Hs. 15 illustrates the new situation vividly. On 26 September 1525 Abbess Margarete Stöterogge of the Cistercian convent of Medingen provided Prioress Mechthild Wilde of Lüne with an account about the recent visit of Duke Ernest I of Brunswick-Lüneburg to Medingen. The territory was under severe financial pressure at this time, and Ernest saw in the convents

62 Barbara Steinke, *Paradiesgarten oder Gefängnis? Das Nürnberger Katharinenkloster zwischen Klosterreform und Reformation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

a potential source of income. Despite an interrogation which lasted several hours, the nuns of Medingen refused to hand over any goods to Ernest but ultimately had to accept that an inventory of goods be given to him. Abbess Margarete wrote in great fear to Mechthild that the community would face repercussions and the potential confiscation of convent property. Margarete sought consolation from Mechthild in her time of need, quoting Thomas à Kempis in Latin that 'in times of necessity friendships prove themselves'.[63] In her distress, she turned to familiar language and imagery and expressed hope that the most pious consoler would open up the treasures of his wounded heart and protect both Medingen and Lüne from all evil during these dark times.[64] The appeal to Christ to open up his wounded heart in this letter was far from idealized; it was made at a time of genuine fear when the nuns were faced with direct threats of violence and closure. As convents sought to collaborate and work together in their resistance to the duke, appeals to the openness and accessibility of Christ's mercy had never been more important.

63 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 2, fol. 3^{v}: 'Et vulgariter: in necessitatibus amici sunt probandi'; the source is chapter 16 of Thomas's *Vallis liliorum*.

64 Kloster Lüne, Hs. 15, quire 2, fol. 3^{v}: 'Ille, qui tribulatorum exstat, consolator piissimus, aperiet vobis theasaurum sui vulnerati cordis et dignetur reddere pro vice consolationem suam divinam, ac ipse hoc tempore malo tuetur vos simul et nos sub alis sue misericordie ab omnibus malis.'

Edmund Wareham, 'The Openness of the Enclosed Convent: Evidence from the Lüne Letter Collection', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, Cultural Inquiry, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 271–88 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_14>

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