



The Nuns of Sant' Ambrogio: The True Story of a Convent in Scandal

By Hubert Wolf



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A *Washington Post* Notable Book

In 1858, a German princess, recently inducted into the convent of Sant' Ambrogio in Rome, wrote a frantic letter to her cousin, a confidant of the Pope, claiming that she feared for her life. A subsequent investigation by the Church's Inquisition uncovered the shocking secrets of a convent ruled by a beautiful young mistress, who coerced her novices into lesbian initiation rites and heresies, and who entered into an illicit relationship with a young theologian. Drawing upon written testimony and original documents discovered in a secret Vatican archive, *The Nuns of Sant' Ambrogio* is the never-before-told true story of how one woman was able to practice deception, heresy, seduction, and murder in the heart of the Catholic Church.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Astonishing . . . much more than a true-crime thriller about murderous lesbian nuns. It’s also a very serious study of how the church deals with scandal.” —*The Washington Post*

“In 1998, Pope John Paul II opened the secret archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—better known to you as the Inquisition—to outside researchers. The following year, German historian Hubert Wolf found something that, as they say on the Internet, will blow your mind.” —Lev Grossman, *Time*

“Defly balances . . . juicy history with a raft of serious (yet accessible) research into the intricacies of Vatican bureaucracy, the underlying philosophical disputes among various key Roman Catholic figures, and the complex political landscape of mid-nineteenth century Italy.” —*The Boston Globe*

“A learned yet fascinating account. . . . [Wolf] has an enviable handle on the palace intrigues motivating all the players.” —*Salon*

“The scandal that Wolf discovered in a secret Vatican archive, in 1999, would have left a true-crime writer salivating. . . . [He] reconstructs what went on inside the convent based on transcripts from the trial and intercepted letters. . . . There is . . . something remarkable about a poor, uneducated nun who brings the Jesuits to their knees while remaking herself as a goddess.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“A huge story of strange times. . . . Exciting reading.” —*The Columbus Dispatch*

“I learned more about the Catholic Church from this book than anything I had read previously. . . . That the author is also an ordained minister and professor of ecclesiastical history only lends support to his claims. . . . Wolf unravels a tale of religious madness and psycho-sexual power trips that is just waiting to be turned into a film by Milos Forman.” —Shyam K. Sriram, *PopMatters*

“The discovery of the century straight from the Vatican archives. An absorbing story of abuse, murder, and false morals.” —*Kurier* (Germany)

“This sordid tale of sexual indecency, false saints, and murder within a 19th-century convent in Rome has all the trappings of a good thriller. . . . [Wolf] adds detailed historical context and careful explanations to elevate this tale beyond sensationalism into a more serious study of a fascinating real-life melodrama.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred)

“The gloomy intrigue that [Hubert Wolf] reveals in this extraordinary book, in which murders mingle with forbidden love in all the senses of the word, seems to verify the most overstretched commonplaces of the convent literature, from Diderot’s *La Religieuse* to de Sade’s *Juliette*.” —*Le Monde* (France)

“The true story of an Italian nunnery in the nineteenth century contains all the ingredients of a thriller: the Inquisition, sex, poisoning, conspiracy, and hypocrisy.” —*Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag* (Switzerland)

“An eye-opening story. . . . Wolf has expertly recovered and retold this scandalous tale in all its gory, as well as bureaucratic, detail.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“The way Hubert Wolf deduces insightful conclusions from the doubtlessly spectacular incidents in the nunnery is nothing but masterly.” —*Die Zeit* (Germany)

“Mysticism, sex, theology, murders It has all the ingredients of a good whodunit.” —*La Vie* (France)

About the Author

Hubert Wolf, born in 1959, is professor of Medieval and Modern Church History at the University of Muenster, Germany. He was honored with the Leibniz-Prize of the German Research Foundation (DFG), the Communicator Award, and the Gutenberg Prize, and he was fellow at the Historisches Kolleg in Munich.

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Prologue

“Save, Save Me!”

“Shortly after eight o’clock on Monday, July 25, the Archbishop of Edessa—sent by the Lord—finally came to me. There was no time for waiting; this was the one and only time to get saved. To him, I had to reveal everything and had to implore him to help me escape the convent as swiftly as possible. It all went well: my prayers were fulfilled, and I was understood.” These dramatic words were set down by Princess Katharina von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen in a complaint she submitted to the pope in summer 1859. They were written barely five weeks after her escape from the convent of Sant’ Ambrogio in Rome—or rather, after her cousin, Archbishop Gustav Adolf zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, managed to secure her release—and they describe the sensational conclusion to her adventure inside the walls of a Roman Catholic convent. It was an adventure for which she had narrowly avoided paying with her life.

She had been humiliated, isolated from her fellow nuns, cut off from the outside world, and—since she was party to the convent secrets and therefore regarded as a danger—somebody had tried to silence her. They had even made several attempts to poison her. At half past three in the afternoon on July 26, 1859, after almost exactly fifteen months, she finally left Sant’ Ambrogio della Massima. Her life as Sister Luisa Maria of Saint Joseph, a nun in the Regulated Third Order of Holy Saint Francis in Rome, had begun so promisingly. And now here she was, being saved in the nick of time, rescued from imminent danger of death.

In her written complaint, the princess gave her failure as a nun and her thrilling escape from the convent a typically pious interpretation, casting it as salvation by Christ the Lord. This somehow made the experience bearable for her. But the final dramatic episode, and the preceding months she had spent under the constant fear of death, would come to define her whole life. After July 26, 1859, nothing would ever be the same again. Her plight had been genuinely existential: her life really was threatened in Sant’ Ambrogio. Even years later, she was still traumatized by the attempts to poison her. This is all brought vividly to life in her *Erlebnisse* (Experiences), a book written by her close collaborator Christiane Gmeiner in 1870, more than a decade after the terrible events in Rome. According to this auto-biographical source, Katharina had managed to smuggle a letter out of the convent during the night of July 24, 1859. This was handed to Archbishop Hohenlohe in the Vatican.

The princess waited in a state of great anxiety until she was called into the parlor at half past seven in the morning. Fearful and almost breathless, the princess hurried downstairs to the archbishop, to whom she called out in great agitation: “save, save me!” At first, he did not understand her, and was almost afraid his cousin had run mad, but by and by she managed to convince him that she was mistress of her senses, and that her fear was not unfounded. Now he understood her pleas to leave the convent, and he promised to do

everything in his power to arrange this as soon as possible— though the first appointment he was able to make was not until the following day.

The words are Christiane Gmeiner's, recounting in the third person what the princess had told her in her own words.

Katharina von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen's account sounds like a story from the depths of the Middle Ages, and confirms many of the common clichés and prejudices about life in Catholic convents and monasteries. But this story takes place in the modern world of the mid-nineteenth century. And the setting isn't a secluded mountain convent at the world's edge, but the center of the capital city of Christianity, little more than half a mile from the Vatican—home to the representative of Jesus Christ on earth.

What really happened in Sant' Ambrogio? Were these poisonings simply the fantasy of a highly strung aristocrat, or were they genuine attempts on Katharina's life? She was a princess of the house of Hohenzollern and a close relative of Wilhelm I, the man who would later become king of Prussia and the German emperor. So how did Katharina come to take her vows in such a strict religious order in the first place—and why in Rome?

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Users Review

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