

Sister Scholastica, a Benedictine nun,
cannot afford waste at her job

WHEN CONVICTS WORK AT A CONVENT



HEINER VON DER LADEN

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Claus Lintz (45), an aviation expert at Porsche Consulting, has both feet on the ground on this trip. On the tiny island of Frauenchiemsee, he visited a convent for a day, discovering common professional concerns with Sister Scholastica (66). The painting shows Abbess Domitilla (83). She admitted Sister Scholastica into the order 29 years ago, and is now spending her twilight years at the abbey.



For Claus Lintz, a Porsche Consulting aviation specialist with frequent international contracts, this trip had an unusual character. Lintz (45) treated himself to a day at a convent. Setting out from Munich, he drove toward the Bavarian Alps and then boarded the

Ludwig Fessler, an 85-year-old paddle steamer, on the shore of Chiemsee, often called the Bavarian Sea. The steamer's 220-horsepower diesel engine had hardly revved up before the small ferry arrived—in another world. Only five minutes from the mainland, the island of Frauenchiemsee lies barely above water level. Everything here is handled by nuns. They have to run a tight ship to make ends meet—minimizing waste, increasing efficiency, maintaining a clear strategy—all of which is familiar to Lintz. In talking with Sister Scholastica, a Benedictine nun, the consultant discovered yet more parallels to his own work.

“The lake is like a barrier between us and the world,” warns Sister Scholastica (66) immediately on welcoming her guest. “We have Island Time here—or rather, we have all the time in the world.” That may be true, but the 21 nuns and five novices live by precisely the same takt. And if one looks closely, they invest every minute into running the convent. “I’m close to making my first million,” Sister Scholastica whispers to consultant Lintz in the vaulted white gallery of abbesses—lined with large oil portraits of all the convent’s leaders.

But the convent’s money is hard earned. The nuns have entered the seminar business for companies and private individuals. Their hallowed site enjoys such demand that it is booked out at least over the short term, with 560 courses and 22,000 overnight stays. The facilities can accommodate as many as eleven groups on the same day. Ninety rooms are available for the guests—including many regulars—at night. Surgeons, lawyers, and the teaching staff of universities like to hold conferences on the island and are especially loyal.

The business idea actually arose from sheer necessity. For 159 years, the abbey ran a school for girls, and more recently a home economics institute. But as the number of pupils continued to decline, the business side finally collapsed in 1995. “We needed 150 pupils to break even, but had only 80,” says Sister Scholastica, who studied (among other things) English and American literature, philosophy, psychology, and education in England, Austria, and the USA before deciding to enter the convent at the age of 37. The nuns had to close the school. And they were left with a deficit of around one million euros.

Because convents have to be financially self-sufficient, the Church could not be expected to provide assistance. There was no shortage of investors, but they had completely different ideas. The convent itself was nearly closed and converted into a luxury hotel. A hastily established circle of supporters, which also included a few industrialists, succeeded in preventing that fate. Together with their supporters, the nuns managed to right the ship at the last minute. Admittedly not without resistance from within their own ranks. “Our idea of opening the abbey to seminar guests was a cause of great concern,” says Sister Scholastica. “Many sisters feared that the convent’s secluded character would suffer as a result.”

Although their doubts could not be completely overcome, their will to survive was stronger. On a dark day in November, recalls Sister Scholastica, they took stock of what they had to offer. “The run-down pupils’ rooms had pale yellow paint with scribbles on the walls, and the worn-out carpets were not exactly inviting.” The sisters estimated that they would need 500,000 euros to thoroughly renovate the facilities and make the necessary additions. Thanks to generous support from →

“I’M CLOSE TO MAKING MY FIRST MILLION”

Transparency is important to this nun with managerial responsibilities. Her self-developed planning chart, complete with color codes, shows the “booked out” occupancy status of the convent’s guest rooms. “Perfect!” comments consultant Claus Lintz. “The planning chart is an instrument I often like to use with my clients. It’s crucial to have an overview.”



This tranquil island's sole inhabitants are the sisters—and a few fishermen. The *Frauenchiemsee*, or “isle of women,” is just 12 hectares in size and can be walked in twenty minutes. As the sun goes down, day visitors catch the last ferry back to the nearby mainland.

Every two weeks, Sister Scholastica heads for the mainland in the convent's small motorboat. Her destination: the supermarket. Her shopping list is short: a bag of cookies and a pack of coffee.

company sponsors, the starting capital was soon available. It became clear just as quickly, however, that the calculations had fallen short. “I was shocked on seeing the first offer to remove some interior walls—around 32,000 euros just to tear a few things down? I couldn't bring myself to authorize that expenditure,” she recounts.

With a reputation for unusual ideas, however, Sister Scholastica was not about to give up. And the solution was not far off. The correctional institute in the neighboring town of Bernau didn't take long to respond to the pious woman's letter of inquiry. It offered to have the strenuous and dusty job performed by six prisoners at five euros an hour, plus two guards at 3.40 euros an hour. A total price of 1,750 euros—and a real bargain! But Sister

Scholastica saw some flexibility in the offer. Given that the hourly rates for the guards were lower, she replied to the prison director, she would like to have six of them perform the work. Although perhaps not entirely serious, this proposal went a bit too far for the correctional authorities. The guards have a strictly supervisory function, came the reply, and are not authorized to do the actual labor.

But the deal was struck between the abbey and the prison. The members of the demolition gang received generous portions of goulash from the convent's kitchen during their midday breaks, which might have been a factor in the perfection of their work. “The savings enabled me to buy enough floorboards to replace all the carpeting,” explains the nun to the Porsche Consulting expert, who would like nothing bet-

ter than to book her to give a practice-based talk to his clients. As he notes, “Hearing this story from her made it twice as convincing.” But she emphatically declines. “I have to look after our business, check my e-mail!” she says and disappears into her office, located only three meters away from her bedroom.

New ideas are already taking form on her desk. Because this extraordinary event manager has had to turn down 108 seminars this year already, she wants to start a branch location on the mainland. “Our convent has a country house there,” she says, “which would be ideal as a low-budget seminar building.” And there are more than enough clients. “We have to turn down many requests because they don't fit in with the convent's need for quiet. Like drumming seminars, for example. But our guests



can make more noise at our country house. And the lower prices would also accommodate groups with smaller budgets.”

Naturally, this clever manager would never think of undermining the seminar sector with new discount models. “As an abbey, we have a social conscience,” she remarks. Which is why her plans for the country house have two aims: “I would like to create trainee posts for school-leavers who don’t have a good outlook and also offer families with disabled children a low-cost, accessible place to spend their vacation.”

The project could start right up if it didn’t lack two million euros in investment money. But given the track record of this resolute sister, that is clearly less of a hurdle than a challenge.

For she wants to expand—not on account of the profits but to ensure that this beautiful jewel on Frauenchiemsee Island will continue to exist for many generations to come. A jewel that provides a special time to so many people every year. In a word, Island Time.

Sister Scholastica, who keeps her body fit by climbing stairs and her mind fit with Sudoku, is not afraid of physical labor. She knows what strong women can do and indulges in a little sideswipe on this topic. “There may be monks with burnout, but I don’t know a single nun who suffers from it,” she says in farewell, waving to the paddle steamer and then running off to the evening service. Afterwards she wants to treat herself to something special—watching a game of cricket, per livestream on her computer.

Five minutes later consultant Lintz reaches the mainland. He looks back, senses a wish to return soon, perhaps with a client. “There’s more to be learned there,” he says. “It’s both practical and eminently convincing.” ←