

MANAGING CRISES: INSTITUTIONAL RE-STABILISATION OF THE RELIGIOUS ORDERS IN ENGLAND AFTER THE BLACK DEATH (1347-1350)

par

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This paper aims to illustrate the ability of religious orders and communities to resist and overcome crises *. As the focus of this study an agent of fundamental change in medieval society and in the church was chosen: the Black Death which swept through Europe between 1347 and 1350 and took a death toll of up to two thirds of the population ¹. As early as 1350 chroniclers recognised both the geographical extension and the transformative power of this complex crisis ². They recorded that the plague killed indifferently among the rich and poor, villagers and townsfolk, laymen and clerics alike. Monks, absorbed in prayers behind the walls of their monasteries, were as threatened as friars preaching to the people in the marketplaces of Assisi, Paris, or on the fringes of the British Isles.

For both the religious orders and communities the Black Death has often been regarded as the major watershed in their history. At the same time, however, various sources suggest that continuing efforts were taken by the religious orders to respond actively to depopulation, decay of the physical settings, and the change in religious attitudes caused by the plague. Therefore the Black Death offers an instructive and illuminating example for examining some specific aspects of crisis management in religious orders in

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1. A solid synthesis on the spread of the Black Death in Europe and its effects on medieval society is found in Philip ZIEGLER, *The Black Death*, New York, 1969 (repr. Stroud, 2000). The social and transformative impacts of plague (and leprosy) were recently discussed in *The regulation of evil. Social and cultural attitudes to epidemics in the late middle ages*, Agostino PARAVICINI BAGLIANI, Francesco SANTI eds., Firenze, 1998.

2. See, for example, the account given by the Irish Franciscan friar John Clyn, who wondered whether there would be a continuation of mankind after the *pestilencia* at all. Under the year 1348, the chronicler recorded the course of the epidemic *ab oriente* and the devastation of Irish towns and religious houses. 25 *fratres* died in the Franciscan convent in Drogheda, 23 in Dublin. According to a later addition in the manuscript John Clyn himself had fallen victim to the Black Death in the Kilkenny convent; cf. *The Annals of Ireland by friar John Clyn and Thady Dowling, together with the Annals of Ross*, ed. Richard BUTLER, Dublin, 1849 (Irish Archaeological Society), pp. 36f.

greater detail. The present study is concerned with the mechanisms of institutional re-stabilisations in religious orders. It will pay particular attention to the capacities and the means that religious orders possessed to overcome one of the most serious crises in their history, and it will look more closely at the flexibility of the orders' administrative and constitutional networks in the years during and immediately following the period of the plague.

Because the more extensively available source material is for England, the present study will largely, but not exclusively, concentrate on this area. However, this essay does not aim to consider the impact of the Black Death's on individual religious houses or communities in England. A vertical rather than a local approach will be taken, which analyses how mediating functions between micro- and macro-structural levels of the orders became activated at times of widespread crisis. In particular, the essay addresses the phenomenon of institutional re-stabilisation in terms of a theory of institutions which at present is gaining prominence among German historians. The theory of institutions was developed in order to explain how social institutions take shape and maintain their stability through time and over the course of generations³. Therefore, before turning to the source material, some general remarks on the dialectic of indented continuity and factual change in religious orders will be – briefly – given here.

Seen from our long-term perspective, the religious orders have without question been the most striking phenomena of successful institutional continuity. As in every social formation, however, uniformity, stability, and enduring existence as communities would not have occurred as a matter of course. In the development of the orders these were rather unexpected outcomes. Therefore, the religious orders developed complex networks of stabilising structures (for example the General Chapter) to maintain concepts of order and enduring internal uniformity, which, however, were continually put to the test. In fact, in the course of their history many diverse factors threatened, and also transformed the regular way of life within the religious orders. Crises resulted from the geographic and cultural distance between the centre of the order and its periphery, like the militant riots of the Irish

3. On the formal criteria and the practical application of the theory of institutions for the historical sciences see Gert MELVILLE, "Institutionen als geschichtswissenschaftliches Thema. Eine Einleitung", in *Institutionen und Geschichte. Theoretische Aspekte und mittelalterliche Befunde*, Id. ed., Köln-Weimar-Wien, 1992 (Norm und Struktur, 1), pp. 1-24; Id., "L'institutionnalité médiévale dans sa pluridimensionnalité", in *Les tendances actuelles de l'histoire du Moyen Âge en France et en Allemagne*, Jean-Claude SCHMITT, Otto Gerhard OEXLE eds., Paris, 2002, pp. 243-264. On the concept of this theory of institutions – which was actually the result of a rediscovery of older theories of scholars such as Arnold Gehlen, Bronislaw Malinowski and Max Weber at the so called "Bielefelder Schule" in the 1970s – see Karl Siegbert REHBERG, "Institutionen als symbolische Ordnungen. Leitfragen zur Theorie und Analyse institutioneller Mechanismen (TAIM)", in *Die Eigenart der Institutionen. Zum Profil politischer Institutionentheorie*, Gerhard GÖHLER ed., Baden-Baden, 1994, pp. 47-84. On the aspects and advantage of studying the history of the religious orders in terms of a theory of institutionalisation see Florent CYGLER, Gert MELVILLE, "Nouvelles approches historiographiques des ordres religieux en Allemagne. Le groupe de recherche de Dresde sur les structures institutionnelles des ordres religieux au Moyen Âge", *Revue Mabillon*, n.s., t. 12 (t. 73), 2001, pp. 314-321.

Cistercians during the *conspiratio Mellifontis* ⁴. Internal declines in moral standards, which were frequently caused by material wealth, provoked controversies; and there were crises originating from the ever-growing temporal distance separating the first generations of the orders from the generations to come. The disastrous and at times divisive debates over the correct way of life after their founders' deaths were usually the earliest documented examples of this kind of conflict ⁵. Such crises could indeed challenge the order's claims of validity, and in consequence they could lead to new functional orientations of the community, to new organisational structures, or to the creation of new reforming groups that set the tone for the future ⁶.

Apart from these intrinsic crises, institutional decline could further be compounded by external conditions. However hard religious communities strove for seclusion from the secular world, they could not escape the contingencies of their environments. In fact, scarcely a medieval chronicler failed to report that the religious communities were continually exposed to external disturbances, such as natural disasters, epidemics, and warfare. As a result, economic, social, and demographic declines frequently ruined the monastic organisation and forced the religious to adopt a way of life that stood in marked contrast to their rules ⁷.

Thus it seems that in the long history of the religious orders instability and disorder appear to be the norm whereas stability and constancy might be called a fictitious but fruitful construction ⁸. However, the term "crisis",

4. For an account of the history of this rebellion see Barry W. O'DWYER, "The crisis in the Cistercian monasteries in Ireland in the early thirteenth century", *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis*, t. 31, 1975, pp. 267-304 (pt. 1), and t. 32, 1976, pp. 3-112 (pt. 2). The national conflict within the province *Hibernia* found its continuation within the Irish Franciscans a century later; see Anne MÜLLER, "Internal Conflicts – External Control. The Franciscan Order between English Church and Irish Crown", in *I Francescani e la politica. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Palermo, 10-14 dicembre 2002*; soon due to be printed.

5. The conflicts and transformations resulting from the replacement of charismatic rule by formal organisations of medieval religious life are discussed for various religious orders and communities in *Charisma und 'Vita Religiosa'*, Giancarlo ANDENNA, Mirko BREITENSTEIN, Gert MELVILLE eds., Münster-Hamburg-London, 2005 (*Vita regularis*, 26).

6. For the dialectic of crises and renovation in the medieval religious Orders see Kaspar ELM, "Verfall und Erneuerung des Ordenswesens im Spätmittelalter", in *Untersuchungen zu Kloster und Stift*, Göttingen, 1980 (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte, 68. Studien zur Germania Sacra, 14), pp. 188-238, and Klaus SCHREINER, "Dauer, Niedergang und Erneuerung klösterlicher Observanz im Hoch- und spätmittelalterlichen Mönchtum", in *Institutionen und Geschichte* (cit. note 3), pp. 295-341.

7. For the destructive impacts of famine and natural crises on social communities see William Ch. JORDAN, *The Great Famine. Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century*, Princeton, 1996 – for the effects on religious life and for some "creative ways" of facing the problems see esp. pp. 61-86; see also Jacques BERLIOZ, *Catastrophes naturelles et calamités au Moyen Age*, Florence, 1998 (Micrologus' Library, 1), and Kay P. JANKRIFT, *Brände, Stürme, Hungersnöte. Katastrophen in der mittelalterlichen Lebenswelt*, Ostfildern, 2003.

8. This conclusion is also reached by Peter von Moos, "Krise und Kritik der Institutionalität. Die mittelalterliche Kirche als 'Anstalt' und 'Himmelreich' auf Erden", in *Institutionalität und Symbolisierung. Verfestigung kultureller Ordnungsmuster in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, Gert MELVILLE ed., Köln-Weimar-Wien, 2001, pp. 293-340. The author made a case for shifting the focus of attention away from the *observantia regula* towards disorder and crises. He argued that rules are revealed only by exceptions or infractions of the rules, and that only

which became a fashionable catchword in the discipline of history to describe symptoms of dissolution, implies not simply division and disorder in an exclusively destructive sense⁹. In fact, the meaning of the original Greek word *krisis*, which entered the study of history from medicine, is far more complex. In its basic meaning the term refers to a turning point, a critical moment of indecisiveness when only two options exist – either life or death, or, expanding this meaning to social institutions, the survival or the ultimate end of the respective institution¹⁰.

From this view, it can indeed be argued that crises can have vital dimensions as well. In the ongoing interplay of *deformatio* and *reformatio*, which marks the development of each institutional formation, crises can also function as catalysts for change, either in a backward-looking sense (as renaissance or restoration), or as a forwards-looking renovation. A crisis can thus be a starting point to form new models of stability – provided that at the moment of transition the institution proved strong enough either to re-activate former standards or to adjust itself to the conditions, needs, and expectations of changed times and generations¹¹. In the following pages this broad sense of crisis shall be considered. Rather than discuss the Black Death within a narrow understanding of disorder and disruption, this paper considers the various institutional potentials for re-stabilisations using case studies (as the evidence will allow) from various orders within the range of organised religious life.

Medieval women and men had no doubt that the *pestilentia magna* was a divine punishment for sin. In their eyes the world around 1350 was indeed shaken to its foundations¹². The sources leave no doubt that the Black Death was perceived by those who experienced it as a period of transition from which not even the monasteries, the earthly representations of paradise, were

incorrectly transformed norms permit conclusions about the normal course of action. For von Moos institutionality is best explained by a crisis of institutionality and by the possible reactions to such a crisis: anomic collapse, re-stabilisation by transformation or by ‘self-cementation’ (p. 301).

9. It is in this sense that the term is perceived by economists. The polyvalent meaning of “crisis” is discussed by Hans Michael Baumgartner, who suggests a differentiated use of this term; see his essay “Institution und Krise”, in *Institutionen und Geschichte* (cit. note 3), pp. 97-114, esp. 98-106.

10. The case for using the term in the sense of a ‘dysfunctionality’ was made by Ferdinand SEIBT, “Zu einem neuen Begriff von der Krise des Spätmittelalters”, in *Europa 1400. Die Krise des Spätmittelalters*, Id., Winfried EBERHARD eds., Stuttgart, 1984, pp. 7-23, at 12-15; Giles CONSTABLE, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge, 1996, p. 2, referred to the fact that the word “crisis” was rarely used in the Middle Ages and never to describe historical conditions.

11. For the dialectic relationship between change and stability in social systems and on the re-stabilizing function of crises see G. MELVILLE, “Institutionen” (cit. note 3), pp. 18-21. The limits of institutional reform are exemplified by Annette KEHNEL, “Reform als institutionelle Krise. Überlegungen zur irischen Kirchenreform des 12. Jahrhunderts am Beispiel des Klosters Clonmacnois”, *Historisches Jahrbuch der Görres-Gesellschaft*, t. 119, 1999, pp. 84-119. On the multi-purpose word *reformatio* see G. CONSTABLE, *Reformation* (cit. note 10), p. 3.

12. For the meaning of the pestilence to contemporaries see Robert E. LERNER, “The Black Death and Western European eschatological mentalities”, in *The Black Death: The Impact of the Fourteenth-Century Plague*, Daniel WILLIMAN ed., Binghampton (NY), 1982, pp. 77-105.

spared. Consequently, the need for and the function of the religious communities were seriously questioned at this time. For England, these developments are exceptionally well documented; the Patent Rolls and the Close Rolls in particular are full of petitions from religious appealing to the king for assistance¹³. These records show that the monasteries suddenly faced severe poverty which went far beyond the level they typically submitted to voluntarily. Many convents, some of them consisting of but a single monk, faced acute administrative problems. The fate of the Cistercian monastery of Melsa provides a striking example: After the death of the abbot, the prior, the *cellarius*, the treasurer *et alii senes et officiales*, no one was left to look after the monks; the administration of the monastery broke down, and the community nearly ceased to exist¹⁴. Melsa's fate was certainly not exceptional. "The whole word is placed in the midst of evil", recorded the Irish friar John Clyn when he reflected on the universality of this crisis¹⁵.

From an administrative perspective, the religious orders had doubtless to master their greatest challenge since the days of their foundation. There is considerable evidence in the contemporary sources to suggest that during crises as severe as the Black Death the mediating functions emerged between the macro- and the micro-structural levels, or rather in this case between the administrative centres of the orders and the singular convents at the geographical peripheries¹⁶. Additionally, during crises the system of government

13. *Calendar of Close Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office*, see in particular the entries in vol. 8 (1346-1349), 9 (1348-1354), 10 (1354-1360), London, 1905, 1906, 1908, and in the *Calendar of Patent Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office*, vol. 8 (1348-1350), 9 (1350-1354), 10 (1354-1358), London, 1905, 1907, 1909. A first attempt to provide the entries in the royal chancery records in form of statistical returns – a fruitful undertaking which, however, would need a greater methodological specification – was the subject of a dissertation by Peter George MODE, *The influence of the Black Death on the English monasteries*, Chicago, 1916. For the rise of petitions during the epidemic see the statistic at p. 38. There is a list on the context of the appeals to the king in the appendix 1, pp. 74-88. Another empirical investigation, which is based on episcopal lists and the acts of the general and provincial chapters, was undertaken by Bernd Ingolf ZADDACH, *Die Folgen des Schwarzen Todes (1347-51) für den Klerus Mitteleuropas*, Stuttgart, 1971 (Forschungen zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, 17). The data for the regular clergy are set out at pp. 104-107. For the business conducted in the royal court during the years of the Black Death see Mark ORMROD, "The Politics of Pestilence. Government in England after the Black Death", in *The Black Death in England*, Id., Philip LINDLEY eds., Stamford, 1996, pp. 147-181.

14. THOMAS DE BURTON, *Chronica monasterii de Melsa a fundatione usque ad annum 1396*, ed. Edward A. BOND, 3 vols., London, 1863-1868 (Rolls Series, 43), in vol. 3, p. 37.

15. *Annals of Ireland* (cit. note 3), p. 37. Opinions are still divided as to the extent of changes caused by the Black Death. For the demographic effects see the much discussed contributions by Michael M. POSTAN, "Some Agrarian Evidence of Declining Population in the Later Middle Ages", in *Essays on medieval agriculture and general problems of the medieval economy*, Id. ed., Cambridge, 1973, pp. 186-213, who argues for a pre-plague population decline. See also Mark BAILEY, "Demographic decline in late medieval England: Some Thoughts on Recent Research", *The Economic History Review*, t. 49/1, 1996, pp. 1-19. For the social and economic impacts on English society see John HATCHER, *Plague, Population, and the English Economy, 1348-1530*, London, 1977, and Colin PLATT, *King Death: The Black Death and its Aftermath in Late Medieval England*, London-Toronto, 1996.

16. Stephan Lexington's mission illustrates this point. In order to settle a crisis caused by national conflicts, he was granted authority by the Cistercian general chapter to remove Irish abbots, to break up the traditional structures of affiliations and to introduce trustworthy foreign monks into suspect convents, thus re-establishing the old order and conformity at the geogra-

of the orders was tested. In fact, the administrative and legislative arrangements of the religious orders, which evolved over the course of the twelfth century, allowed a fairly high degree of flexibility, even allowing for the modification of constitutions, provided it was *ex necessitate* – that the circumstances called for it. From the beginning of the thirteenth century the Dominican Order, above all other orders, used its right of dispensation *pro ratione causarum et temporum* with great frequency, and often to its fullest extent during critical periods. Their normative texts make clear, however, that all the measures taken aimed at the preservation of the *status quo* – the functioning of the order in every day life ¹⁷.

In any case, universal crises such as the Black Death called for complex crisis management. Since during the epidemic the personnel – by far the most essential resource of any social institution – was seriously threatened, every effort had to be made at the administrative centres of the orders to regain physical stability within its own ranks. It was with this issue in particular that the administrative and constitutional structures had to be most efficient.

An initial examination of the records of the provincial and the general chapters of the Cluniacs, the Cistercians, the Augustinian Canons, the Dominicans, the Franciscans, and the Austin Friars ¹⁸ reveals that the main policy of the governments of the orders was indeed focused on the reestablishment of the full numerical strength of the communities. Already by 1348, the Dominican general chapter urged the surviving *fratres universos* to do all they could to attract new members to the religious life. Moreover, it allowed the most seriously affected priories to receive any postulant irrespective of his origin and of his primary affiliation ¹⁹. Thus, in

phical fringe of Europe; see B. W. O'Dwyer, "Crisis" (cit. note 4). The measures taken during the complex visitation are also handed down by Stephen's letters, see "*Registrum epistolarum Stephani de Lexington abbatis de Stanlegia et de Savigniaci*", ed. Bruno GRIESSER, *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis*, t. 2, 1946, pp. 1-118, and t. 8, 1952, pp. 181-378. On the mediation of universal concepts into local actualities see the habilitation thesis by Annette KEHNEL, *Regionale Ordnungen universaler Konzepte. Die Franziskaner auf den Britischen Inseln (13.-16. Jh.)*. Historische Fallstudie zu einer europäischen Gemeinschaft des Mittelalters (Dresden, 2003; due to be published in the series 'Vita regularis'), who, however, argues for a narrative rather than an administrative construction of institutional identity between centre and periphery. For further case studies on bridging distances see also *Mendicants, Military Orders, and Regionalism in Medieval Europe*, Jürgen SARNOWSKY ed., Aldershot, 1999, and in particular the editor's introductory essay "Regional Problems in the History of the Mendicant and Military Orders", pp. 1-15.

17. This grade of rationality is exemplified for the Dominican Order by Florent CYGLER, Gert MELVILLE, "Augustinusregel und dominikanische Konstitutionen aus der Sicht Humberts de Romanis", in *Regula Sancti Augustini. Normative Grundlage differenter Verbände im Mittelalter*, G. MELVILLE, Anne MÜLLER eds., Paring, 2002 (Publikationen der Akademie der Augustiner-Chorherren von Windesheim, 3), pp. 419-454, esp. 430-437.

18. This investigation is primarily concentrated on England. A systematic comparative study on the base of a more detailed exploration of records of different types has still to follow.

19. *Cum bona consistencia nostri ordinis in personis ydoneis consistat [...], numerus fratrum nostrorum per communem pestilenciam sit in diversis partibus diminutus, rogamus fratres universos et eis imponimus quod in attrahendo bonos et aptos iuvenes ad ordinem sollicitudinem exhibeant diligentem, et recipiantur ad presens in quibuscumque conventibus, eciam si*

order to refill those priories suffering most acutely from a shortage of members, the general chapter lifted the former rule of admission into the order which said that novices were only to affiliate with the province in which they had been born ²⁰.

There is no explicit mention of the *pestilencia* in the Dominican *acta capituli* for the year 1349. Another important enactment was promulgated, however, in 1350, when the general chapter again took into consideration the high mortality within the order and declared that those convents whose numbers had fallen below the obligatory twelve *fratres* were allowed to keep their constitutional rights as a convent, until the *defectus* could be repaired by new receptions into the order ²¹.

The principle of transferring members of religious communities to houses depleted by the plague seems to have been a common measure used to maintain religious life even in the most affected areas. There is, for example, evidence for the English Cluniacs and the province of the English Augustinian Canons who, no doubt fearing the plague, postponed their chapter meeting from 1349 to the following year. Having listed the names of the houses most affected and the number of *fratres* lost there, both chapters named a prior obliged to remedy the shortage of religious from his own ranks ²².

In order to refill vacancies, the governments of the orders tried repeatedly to reinforce the recruitment of novices after the outbreak of the epidemic. Thus the Cistercian *definitores* decided to release their novices from their usual probationary period. Cistercian novices were now allowed to make their religious profession as soon as they were familiar with the *psalterium* and all the customs of the order ²³.

sint de terminis aliensis sic tamen, quod iuvenes sic recepti ad illos conventus perpetuo pertineant, in quibus et pro quibus fuerunt recepti : in *Acta Capitulum Generalium ordinis Praedicatorum*, ed. Andreas FRÜHWIRTH, 2 vols., Rom-Stuttgart, 1899 (*Monumenta ordinis fratrum Praedicatorum Historica*, 6), vol. 2 (*ab anno 1304 usque ad annum 1378*), p. 322. In 1365, a similar modification was made in the order of the Austin Friars, allowing that from now on a candidate could join a convent outside his hometown district; see Francis ROTH, *The English Austin Friars, 1249-1538*, 2 vols., New York, 1965-1966 (*Cassiciacum*, 6), here vol. 1 (*History*), p. 138, n. 247.

20. Cf. *Acta Capitulum Generalium* (cit. note 19), vol. 1 (*ab anno 1220 usque ad annum 1303*), p. 13. For the rules of affiliation in the Dominican Order see William A. HINNEBUSCH, *The History of the Dominican Order*, 2 vols., New York, 1966-1973, vol. 1 (*Origin and Growth to 1500*), p. 281f.

21. *In capitulo de domibus construendis, ubi dicitur: nisi forte illo anno propter fratrum obitum dictus numerus fuerit diminutus etc., intelligitur ille annus propter pestilenciam communem preteritam, quousque per fratrum ad ordinem receptorum multitudinem sufficientem tantus possit reparari defectus, ad quod provinciales dare volumus operam efficacem* : in *Acta Capitulum Generalium* (cit. note 19), vol. 2, p. 335.

22. *Chapters of the Augustinian Canons*, ed. Herbert E. SALTER, Oxford, 1922 (*Oxford Historical Society*, 74), p. 58, and *Statuts, chapitres généraux et visites de l'ordre de Cluny*, ed. Gaston CHARVIN, 9 vols., Paris, 1965-1982, vol. 3 (*1325-1559*), pp. 434-436, no. 305, regarding the houses of Wangford, Slevesholm and Rupe [1349].

23. ... *generale Capitulum [...] statuit [...] abbates Ordinis novitios suos [...] beneficio probationis renuntiare, dum tamen psalterium suum et alia consueta in Ordine sciverint integre et perfecte, ad professionem expresse ac solemniter emittendam infra probationis annum, admittere valeant ipsique novitii libere profiteri, statuto huiusmodi per biennium in*

Other religious communities lowered the age when postulants could join their order after the Black Death. Both the constant calls for observance by the governments of the orders as well as by external critics show that in general the reception of applicants below the statutory age was at this time no longer an exception in the everyday life of many religious orders²⁴. Under the pressures resulting from the plague, however, even the general chapters were compelled to give orders for a more liberal dispensation from the former rules of admission into the orders. In some cases this led even to the recruitment of members below fourteen years – the age which according to canon law was required for entering religious life²⁵. Thus, by decree of their general prior Thomas of Strasbourg in 1350, the Austin hermits were – in contrast to their *Constitutiones Ratisponenses* – allowed to lower the age of admission from fourteen to even eleven years²⁶.

From the normative texts it can reasonably be assumed that the drop in membership within the religious houses was felt more than ever during the generation following the Black Death. Again and again the chapters faced the vital problem of acquiring new recruits. The Austin Friars had to revise and further extend their former dispensation, and in 1385 and the following years – with the difficulties added by the second waves of the plague – the provincial of the *Anglia* had to make further allowance for receiving boys even younger than eleven years²⁷!

The Franciscans and Dominicans also lowered the age for taking the habit. In England, there were vehement complaints against the aggressive recruiting policies of the mendicant orders among the younger university students. Having been accused by their fiercest critic, the archbishop Richard Fitzralph

suo robore duraturo: in *Statuta capitulorum generalium ordinis Cisterciensis ab anno 1116 ad annum 1786*, ed. Joseph M. CANIVEZ, 8 vols., Louvain, 1933-1941 (Bibliothèque de la Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique, 9-14b), vol. 3 (1262-1400), p. 514.

24. In the course of their development some orders had to adapt their procedures of reception to changed conditions; thus, for example the Dominicans, who, at their General chapter in 1265, decided to lower the age of admission into the order from eighteen to sixteen years. For the enactments in the thirteenth century see W. A. HINNEBUSCH, *History of the Dominican Order* (cit. note 20), vol. 1, p. 283f. For the age of admission and the dealing with oblates for the Benedictine monasteries see Ursmer BERLIÈRE, *Le recrutement dans les monastères bénédictins aux XIII^e et XIV^e siècles*, Bruxelles, 1924 (Mémoires de l'Académie Royale de Belgique, 18). For Cluny see Giles CONSTABLE, "Entrance to Cluny in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries According to the Cluniac Customaries and Statutes", in *Medievalia Christiana, XI^e-XIII^e siècles. Hommage à Raymonde Foreville*, Coloman É. VIOLA ed., Paris, 1989, pp. 335-354. For the Cistercian Order see Joseph L. LYNCH, "The Cistercians and Under Age Novices", *Cîteaux*, t. 24, 1973, pp. 283-297. For the Franciscan Order see Livarius OLIGER, "*De pueris oblatis in ordine Minorum*", *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, t. 8, 1915, pp. 389-447, and for the Dominican Order Simon TUGWELL, "Dominican Profession in the Thirteenth Century", *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, t. 53, 1983, pp. 5-52.

25. Cf. the decree in the *Liber Sextus*, III, tit. 14, cap. 1 '*De regularibus et transeuntibus ad religionem*': in *Corpus iuris canonici*, ed. Aemilius FRIEDBERG, 2 vols., Graz, 1955, vol. 2, col. 1050f.

26. *Circa sextumdecimum capitulum de tempore et qualitate eorum qui ad ordinem recipiuntur, dispensamus, ut puer annorum undecim recipi possit et non minoris aetatis*: in *Additiones ad Constitutiones Ratisponenses*, fol. 41; quot. in F. ROTH, *English Austin Friars* (cit. note 19), p. 137, n. 238.

27. *Ibid.*, n. 239.

of Armagh, of having kidnapped promising boys at Oxford and elsewhere²⁸, the mendicants quarrelled with the secular clergy in Oxford and Cambridge about whether or not they were allowed to recruit under-age students in the years following the plague²⁹. In 1358, a statute was passed at both universities, which – under penalty of losing their right to give and to attend lectures for a year – forbade the mendicants to admit into their order any matriculate younger than eighteen³⁰. Suffice it to say that, at the friars' instigation, the case was heard at the papal court, and in the king's parliament thereafter, and in 1366 the friars finally succeeded in getting this restrictive statute revoked³¹.

In addition to suffering such pressures of recruitment after the first wave of the Black Death, the religious orders were also faced with the problem of maintaining their former standards of discipline and education. Several chapters admonished the provincials and superiors to select their postulants carefully and to prevent people with physical and mental ailments, or bastards, from entering the communities. Such was, for instance, the explicit warning addressed to the Friars Minor in 1354³². The Dominican Order, too,

28. These charges against the friars, who were, according to the polemic statement of Richard Fitzralph, responsible for the decline of students in Oxford from 30,000 to merely 6,000, were delivered before the pope at Avignon in 1357; see "*Defensio Curatorum*", in *Monarchia sancti Romani imperii*, ed. Melchior GOLDAST VON HAIMINSFELD, 3 vols., Frankfurt, 1610-1614 (repr. Graz, 1960), vol. 2, p. 1397f. For the question of Fitzralph's contribution to the Mendicant controversy see Katharine WALSH, *A Fourteenth-Century Scholar and Primate Richard Fitzralph in Oxford, Avignon and Armagh*, Oxford, 1981, pp. 349-451, and Penn R. SZITTYA, *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature*, Princeton, 1986, pp. 123-151.

29. The university training of the Friars Minor in England and their recruiting policies among students in Oxford and Cambridge are discussed in Andrew G. LITTLE, *The Grey Friars in Oxford*, Oxford, 1892, pp. 79-81, and John R. H. MOORMAN, *The Grey Friars in Cambridge, 1225-1538*, Cambridge, 1952, pp. 105-113. The mendicants controversy with the secular masters in Oxford and Cambridge is dealt with by Bert ROEST, *A History of Franciscan Education (c. 1210-1517)*, Leiden-Boston-Köln, 2000 (Education and Society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, 11), pp. 58-64. For a more detailed discussion of the effects of the Black Death upon both universities see Anna MONTGOMERY CAMPELL, *The Black Death and Men of Learning*, New York, 1966, pp. 151-155, and William J. COURTENEY, "The Effect of the Black Death on English Higher Education", *Speculum*, t. 55, 1980, pp. 696-714.

30. The statute is printed in *Munimenta Academica or Documents Illustrative of Academic Life and Studies at Oxford*, ed. Henry ANSTEY, London, 1868 (Rolls Series, 50), pp. 205f. According to R. H. MOORMAN, *Grey Friars in Cambridge* (cit. note 29), p. 108, a similar statute was enacted at Cambridge, though the record itself is not handed down.

31. For the decision of the parliament and the disputes on the age of admission, which flared up again in the following decades, see R. H. MOORMAN, *Grey Friars in Cambridge* (cit. note 29), pp. 110ff., and Jeremy A. I. CATTO, "Wyclif and Wycliffism at Oxford 1356-1430", in *The History of the University of Oxford*, T. H. ASTON ed., Oxford, 1984-2000, here vol. 2 (*Late Medieval Oxford*), Jeremy A. I. CATTO ed., Oxford, 1992, pp. 175-261. For a general discussion of mendicant recruitment policy, in particular in view of their relation with the secular clergy, see Robert N. SWANSON, "The 'Mendicant Problem' in the Later Middle Ages", in *The Medieval Church: Universities, Heresy, and the Religious Life. Essays in Honour of Gordon Leff*, Peter BILLER, Barrie DOBSON eds., Oxford, 1999 (Studies in Church History, Subsidia 11), pp. 217-238.

32. "*Statuta generalia Ordinis edita in Capitulo generali an. 1354 Assisii celebrato, communiter Farineriana appellata*" ed. Michael BIHL, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, t. 35, 1942, pp. 35-112, and 177-253, at p. 83. The statute places the age of admission to fourteen years, *nisi fuerit a parentibus oblatis*. A similar admonition was issued during the chapter meeting of the English Benedictines in 1351, see U. BERLIÈRE, *Le recrutement* (cit. note 24), p. 11.

was anxious to ensure that under these extraordinary circumstances the proper education of its novices would not be affected. In 1353, all provincials and their vicars were instructed to choose one from among the elderly and more experienced brethren to be a *magister* whose responsibility it was to teach those novices recently recruited according to the constitutions of the order. Furthermore, other brethren should be appointed to teach the novices grammar, logic and the sciences ³³.

Unfortunately, the Franciscan statutes provide little information about the way the Friars Minor faced the crisis. It is, of course, likely that the Franciscans took measures similar to those of the Dominicans in order to replenish their ranks, and that similar problems arose ³⁴. Luke Waddings' well-known criticism of his own order suggests that irregularities in the recruitment of members were more frequent during these years. He noticed that with the pressures of the Black Death the monastic orders, and in particular the mendicants, who had flourished in virtues and learning up to this date, began to decline – both because of the loss of their most illustrious members and due to the relaxation of their rules which ensued as a result of these calamities. There was, Wadding continued, little hope for reform, since the great number of young men who had been received without the necessary selection and training cared more about refilling the empty houses than about restoring the ruined discipline within the order ³⁵.

To be sure, the Black Death affected the intellectual life within the convents. However, one should not forget that by the first half of the fourteenth century the educational practices of the orders had moved away from the principles that had been established in the normative texts. The *acta capituli* of the Dominicans in particular reveal that *gravamina* against academic activities of the friars preachers had frequently been a cause for concern among the order's government, not just a source for polemic by their secular opponents. In 1357, the *definitores*, assembled for the general chapter in Venice, discussed the defects in the educational network of their order. They insisted, for example, that *studia* had to give adequate preparatory training to the candidates selected for an education in Paris, Oxford and Cambridge, and they admonished that otherwise they would lose their right to send students to the *studia generalia* entirely ³⁶. The complexity and stringency of the measures taken during this chapter demonstrate that

33. *Acta Capitulum Generalium* (cit. note 19), vol. 2, p. 351.

34. Despite the fact that the members of the Franciscan Order in England are exceptionally well researched and documented, namely in Moorman's Index of Franciscans in England, prosopographical studies on actual increases in new members have still to be carried out; cf. Michael ROBINSON, "Notice about Bishop Moorman's Index of Franciscans in England, 1124 [sic]-1539", *Antonianum*, t. 66, 1991, pp. 420-435.

35. *Hinc coeperunt Monastica Sodalitia, praesertim mendicantium, quae eousque virtute et doctrina florebant, tepescere et relaxari, tum deficientibus illustribus viris, tum relaxato miserandis calamitatibus regularis observantiae rigore, qui reparari non potuit ab adolescentibus, et promiscua multitudine, quam absque necessario delectu receperunt, qui magis domos vacuas repleri, quam deperditam disciplinam restaurare curaverunt: in Annales minorum seu trium Ordinum a S. Francisco Institutorum, auctore Luca Waddingo Hiberno*, ed. Joseph M. DA FONSECA, Quaracchi-Rom, 1931ff., vol. 8 [1347-1376], Quaracchi, 1932, p. 25.

36. The catalogue of measures is listed in *Acta Capitulum Generalium* (cit. note 19), vol. 2, pp. 377-379.

the government of the order was concerned not solely with the problems resulting directly from the plague. Exemplifying the vital dimension of a crisis, the evidence suggests that at this time the critical moments of transition involved a re-examination of what was lost in the previous generations, aiming for the return to the original level of learning following a period of extreme decay ³⁷.

In the aftermath of the Black Death, the religious orders not only faced the problem of increasing their numbers but took other measures to re-establish the order's priestly functions. A large number of cases in the papal registers show the heads of English religious houses appealing to the pope for the quick ordination of religious to the priesthood at the early age of twenty years – a demand that stood in marked contrast to the requirements of canon law ³⁸. The fact that the bulk of the petitions date from the years between 1363 and 1365 ³⁹, shows that, despite their loss of personnel, the religious orders – in significant contrast to the secular clergy ⁴⁰ – tried to alter the traditional forms of ordination as little as possible. Only after the second wave of the plague (1361/62) did the crisis assume such horrendous proportions that there was no alternative but to seek absolution even from canon law ⁴¹.

There is some evidence, however, that, in order to fill the ranks of the priesthood, the general chapters exercised their power of dispensation as well. Thus, at the chapter held in Basel in 1351, Thomas of Strasbourg, the General of the Augustinian hermits, allowed his friars – in contrast to the constitutions of the order – to receive even those brothers who had no knowledge of Latin into the priesthood. The dispensation was thought to be valid for three years only, but it was only after 1388 that the order tried to return to the former strict standards ⁴².

37. Significantly, the years after the Black Death saw some fundamental attempts to reform cathedral chapters, and new statutes were promulgated for the military Order of St John in 1362; cf. B. I. ZADDACH, *Die Folgen* (cit. note 13), pp. 94-96.

38. There is a listing given in G. MODE, *Influence* (cit. note 13), pp. 62f., n. 1, which, however, has to be revised by the *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland. Petitions to the Pope*, ed. William H. BLISS, vol. 1 [1342-1419], London, 1896, and the *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland. Papal Letters*, 12 vols., London, 1893-1933, here vol. 4 [1362-1404], ed. William H. BLISS, Jessie A. TREMLOW, Dublin, 1902.

39. From England just a single petition seems to have been directed to the pope immediately after the Black Death. The replica by Clement VI (dat. Jan. 13, 1351), which served as a jacket for an Elizabethan code of law up to the 1950s and was only discovered then, allowed the abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Bury St Edmunds the ordination of ten monks below the age of twenty-five years. The bull is printed in CARSON RITCHIE, "The Black Death at St Edmund's Abbey", *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology*, t. 27, 1958, pp. 47-49.

40. G. MODE, *Influence* (cit. note 13), p. 63.

41. It was emphasized that Urban V, who succeeded Clement VI in 1362, could have been expected to be more liberal toward dispensing from the former rules of ordaining clerics than his predecessor. For this discussion see G. MODE, *Influence* (cit. note 13), p. 63, and DAVID KNOWLES, *The Religious Orders in England*, 3 vols., Cambridge 1950-1958, here vol. 2, p. 12.

42. ... *dispensamus quod fratres, qui sunt alias ydonei secundum ordinis instituta, possint ad sacros ordines promoveri, etiam si non noverint loqui latinum* : "Antiquiores quae extant definitiones capitulorum Generalium ordinis, cap. XXVI (*Capitulum Generale Basileense an. 1351*)", ed. in *Analecta Augustiniana*, t. 4, 1912, pp. 276-278, at 277. On the application of the

For a more comprehensive investigation of the function of institutional re-stabilisation after the Black Death two additional structural levels should be more closely considered: the clerical supra-institution, the papacy, and, at the local level, the convents. An illustration of this second level is found at the Benedictine abbey Marienberg, in the Tyrolean Vintschgau, where nearly the entire convent fell victim to the plague. Because the new monks were ignorant of the liturgy, it was decided there and then to compose a new chant which was easy to remember⁴³. This accommodation can be seen as a form of internal crisis management at the lowest level.

Attempts at re-stabilisation at the local level are connected to the important question of how religious communities interacted with their secular environment during the time of crisis. For deeper insight into this relationship and the initiatives taken by the secular authorities the mendicants provide an interesting example. One has to bear in mind, however, that by the mid-fourteenth century the integration process of the mendicant convents into urban communities had already progressed to a point where the friars had to face a totally different set of tasks than their predecessors some 150 years earlier. By the middle of the fourteenth century the mendicants had established a solid economic base; they received royal pensions, and they could interfere and participate freely in the local property market, as Jens Röhrkasten has shown in the case of London⁴⁴. It was due to their interactions with society and their involvement in pastoral work – not least through their willingness to bury the laity in their churches – that during the time when the Black Death hit those communities hardest they were showered with wills and money. That same interaction with society and pastoral work was the primary reason why the critics of the mendicant orders launched their attacks so fiercely in those years. And though the friaries lost a considerable part of their members due to the epidemic, the survivors actually profited from the days of hardship by buying new properties for less money. While the financial situation of monasteries as a whole worsened, surprisingly all four mendicant orders acquired houses and expanded their estates across England during those years! In London, for example, the Carmelites enlarged their monastery in Fleet Street in 1349 and 1350⁴⁵,

statute see F. ROTH, *English Austin Friars* (cit. note 19), p. 141. At the scale of the universities, the increasing ignorance of Latin, which was due to both the Hundred Years' War and the plague, intensified the usage of the native English language; see A. MONTGOMERY CAMPBELL, *Black Death* (cit. note 29), pp. 176-179, and Ph. ZIEGLER, *Black Death* (cit. note 1), p. 204.

43. Cf. *Das Registrum Goswins von Marienberg*, ed. Christine ROULO, transl. Raimund SENONER, with contributions by Josef RIEDMANN and Gustav PFEIFER, Innsbruck, 1996 (Veröffentlichungen des Südtiroler Landesarchivs, 5), p. 226. See also Karl LECHNER, *Das große Sterben in Deutschland in den Jahren 1348 bis 1351 und die folgenden Pestepidemien bis zum Schlusse des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Innsbruck, 1884, p. 54.

44. Jens RÖHRKASTEN, "Mendikantische Armut in der Praxis – Das Beispiel London", in *In proposito paupertatis. Studien zum Armutsverständnis bei den mittelalterlichen Bettelorden*, Gert MELVILLE, Annette KEHNEL eds., Münster-Hamburg-London, 2001 (*Vita regularis*, 13), pp. 135-167. For more details see also the recent monograph by Jens RÖHRKASTEN, *The Mendicant Houses of Medieval London, 1221-1539*, Münster-Hamburg-London, 2004 (*Vita regularis*, 21).

45. J. RÖHRKASTEN, "Mendikantische Armut" (cit. note 44), p. 159.

while at the same time the Austin Friars acquired sixteen tenements, two brew houses, a garden, and other lands⁴⁶. Immediately after the Black Death, the Austin Friars in Winchester tried to acquire the most lucrative properties in the city, meeting vehement opposition from the citizens there⁴⁷. The mendicants' policy of property acquisition within the cities seems to have been so substantial and offensive in the years of the Black Death that already in October 1349 a writ was issued by king Edward III, ordering first the sheriffs of London and then – in April 1350 – all the escheators throughout England to inquire into the mendicants' properties and to seize all buildings that were leased out to laymen – a practice that was contrary to the mendicants' rules, as the king emphasised⁴⁸.

Indications of further erosion of the ideal of poverty in the decades following the Black Death recur frequently in the contemporary sources, and there is simultaneous evidence of a severe lack of discipline within religious houses. There were abbots cited, for example, for beating and even crippling their monks; actions were taken against religious for robbing their neighbouring monastery, for pirating royal ships, and throwing creditors into water barrels⁴⁹. Yet though the scandalous stories handed down to us from the years following the plague could easily be multiplied, one should be careful in invoking the Black Death as the great generator of sin, decadence and destruction of religious life. Other events in the fourteenth century had a lasting impact on both the material and spiritual development of the religious orders, namely the Great Famine, the Agrarian Crisis in England, the Hundred Year's War, and the Schism, all of which caused poverty, depopulation, instability, and a disintegration that stimulated the formation of revivalist factions within the religious landscape⁵⁰. What is more, no matter how much contemporaries attributed deviancy to the effects of the Black Death, one must remember that even the monasteries – which claimed to be the earthly antipode to the sinful world – had in fact never been spared from deviant behaviour, which, as a part of human nature, belongs to any form of community⁵¹.

46. F. ROTH, *English Austin Friars* (cit. note 19), p. 57.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 57f., 356, and see also pp. 287 and 339f.

48. The writ, which is enrolled in the Fine Rolls, is printed in Andrew George LITTLE, "A Royal Inquiry into Property Held by the Mendicant Friars in England in 1349 and 1350", in *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait*, John G. EDWARDS, Vivian H. GALBRAITH, Ernest F. JACOB eds., Manchester, 1933, pp. 179-188, here 179f. There were returns to the writs from the sheriffs in London, in Lincolnshire, Kent, Yorkshire, Herefordshire, Devonshire, and Norfolk, indicating, however, that in reality there were few properties leased out by the friars for rent (p. 187).

49. Some illuminating cases of misrule and rebellious insubordination for the years following the Black Death are recorded in the Patent Rolls. Cf. the cases quoted in G. MODE, *Influence* (cit. note 13), pp. 68-73.

50. For the transforming effects of these events see the discussions in the anthology *Before the Black Death: Studies in the 'crisis' of the early fourteenth century*, Bruce M. S. CAMPBELL ed., Manchester-New York, 1991, and here in particular the essays by Barbara HARVEY, "Introduction: the 'crisis' of the early fourteenth century", pp. 1-24, and Richard M. SMITH, "Demographic developments in rural England, 1300-48. A Survey", pp. 25-78. Studies by Mavis Mate and Mark Bailey in the same volume are dealing with the pre-plague economy.

51. Individual disobedience and deviation from the rules are central problems of religious life. As such the phenomenon is dealt with by Gert MELVILLE, "Der Mönch als Rebell gegen

In the opening pages of this essay an attempt was made to outline the history of the religious orders as a process of transformation between times of stabilisation, decay, reform, revival, decline, and so forth. In this development crises could either sweep away weak institutions, or, when the fabric of institutional structures proved strong enough to cope with such a challenge, they could provide opportunities for reform. Viewed from a long-term perspective, the religious orders have been relatively resistant to crises⁵². Without doubt, the Black Death, which has been examined here to demonstrate how crisis management in the religious orders worked in practice, was a great transformative force in their histories. In a 'negative' sense, it accelerated the existing social and economic trends and caused situations where rules of discipline were more easily undermined. Simultaneously, however, the danger of deviation from the norms was more clearly revealed and sensed during this time. Criticism of the religious orders became more severe and persistent, yet reformation and re-stabilisation were stimulated and, in some cases, possibly even more quickly realised. What the philosopher Michael Baumgartner emphasised for institutions in general seems to be perfectly applicable to our phenomenon: "Those who survive crises, have become more essential, they have been reduced to their nucleus in order to develop anew from then on"⁵³.

To conclude, the reactions to the Black Death offer an instructive example of the ability of religious orders to resist and overcome crises. This study indicates that at critical times the religious orders developed a necessary flexibility, which, in this case, found expression in intensified recruiting policies, in the lowering of the age of admission into the orders, in dispensing from the rules of ordination to the priesthood, and even in the acquisition of additional properties. It is relevant to note that in these crisis-prone years, re-stabilisation and continuity were frequently obtained by deviations from the rules. Without question overcoming a crisis required both internal stability and flexibility within the institutional network that – as in the case of the Black Death – successfully counterbalanced such extrinsic challenges and might even have prepared the ground for new phases of revitalisation in

gesetzte Ordnung und religiöse Tugend. Beobachtungen zu Quellen des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts", in *De ordine vitae. Zu Normvorstellungen, Organisationsformen und Schriftgebrauch im mittelalterlichen Ordenswesen*, Id. ed., Münster-Hamburg-London, 1996 (Vita regularis, 1), pp. 153-186, and Thomas FÜSER, *Mönche im Konflikt. Zum Spannungsfeld von Norm, Devianz und Sanktion bei den Cisterziensern und Cluniazensern (12. bis frühes 14. Jahrhundert)*, Münster-Hamburg-London, 2000 (Vita regularis, 9). A volume, which is prepared by the Dresden Research Group (cf. note *), will deal with the problem of 'obediencia' in religious life: *Der Gehorsam im Religiosentum*, Giancarlo ANDENNA, Sébastien BARRET, Gert MELVILLE eds. (due to be published in Vita regularis, Münster-Hamburg-London, 2005).

52. H. M. BAUMGARTNER, "Institution und Krise" (cit. note 9), pp. 111-113. He discusses the conditions under which institutions can run into crises. Baumgartner warns against an inflationary use of the term 'crisis' in connection with social institutions. As to the religious orders, there are, however, cases, in which these institutions did not survive crises. A good example is the Order of the Swordbearers (*Fratres militiae Christi de Livonia*) which in 1236, after entering into in conflict and competition with the Livonian episcopacy, was finally amalgamated with the Teutonic Order. For the history of this order see Friedrich BENNINGHOVEN, *Der Orden der Schwertbrüder*, Köln, 1965.

53. H. M. BAUMGARTNER, "Institution und Krise" (cit. note 9), p. 113 (my translation).

the later Middle Ages ⁵⁴. While at the local level some houses had indeed been reduced almost to the point of extinction, neither the structural nucleus of the religious orders nor their functions or claims of validity were ever been seriously threatened by the effects of the plague. Seen from a long-term perspective, I agree with David Knowles who saw the history of the religious orders as a stream scarcely rippled by the plague ⁵⁵. As terribly as each single convent might have been affected, the illness caused by the Black Death was – at least for the institutions as a complex body – not fatal.

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54. The reform and observant movements which emerged in the second half of the fourteenth century successfully counterbalanced the former crisis of the *vita religiosa*. On this theme see especially the articles in *Reformbemühungen und Observanzbestrebungen im spätmittelalterlichen Ordenswesen*, Kaspar ELM ed., Berlin, 1989 (Berliner Historische Studien, 14. Ordensstudien, 6).

55. D. KNOWLES, *Religious Orders* (cit. note 41), vol. 2, pp. 8-13, and Id., "English Monasteries in the Later Middle Ages", *History. The Journal of the Historical Association*, NS, t. 39, 1954, pp. 26-38, at 26.