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Aemiliana Löhr and
Herstelle Abbey's *Jahresbriefe*

A Remarkable Contribution
to the Liturgical Movement

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Abstract

This article makes a case for the rediscovery of a unique corpus of texts related to a crucial stage in the Liturgical Movement in Germany. The nuns of Herstelle Abbey, whose spiritual director had been Dom Odo Casel, published seventeen volumes of *Jahresbriefe* from 1948 till 1966. The issues of this journal can be rightly interpreted as an experiment of sorts in liturgical theology between World War II and Vatican II. Many of the topics and concerns of the day were addressed in the contributions to the *Jahresbriefe*. Yet they did a lot more than spreading information or explaining things. They creatively interacted with the core question of what the paschal mystery means and how it is manifested in the world and in history through the celebration of the liturgy. In addition to writing their own essays and reflections, the nuns of Herstelle Abbey, among whom Aemiliana Löhr is arguably the most famous, translated works from the Church Fathers, expressed themselves in a variety of literary genres, and dealt with theological topics that mattered then and now. The major goal of the present article is to demonstrate the extraordinary thematic richness of the *Jahresbriefe*, and to thereby lay a firm foundation for future studies of this truly remarkable collection of texts.

Keywords

Jahresbriefe | Herstelle Abbey | Aemiliana Löhr | Liturgical Movement | Liturgical Theology | Odo Casel

Aemiliana Löhr and Herstelle Abbey's *Jahresbriefe*

A Remarkable Contribution to the Liturgical Movement

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1 Introduction

For no less than eighteen years after Dom Odo Casel's death in 1948, the nuns of Herstelle Abbey published the so-called *Jahresbriefe*, a kind of collection of circular letters, for their network. However, they did much more than simply share information about the abbey's vicissitudes. In fact, they extended and developed a liturgical theology in its own right. Their theological work was evidently inspired by the work and teachings of Odo Casel, who had accompanied them in his capacity as spiritual director and confessor for many years, but it also went significantly beyond that. In this article, convinced by the unique contribution which the *Jahresbriefe* made and can still, or again, make, we argue for a rediscovery of these texts. In particular, we intend to demonstrate the profound theological value of the contributions that were made to the journal by highlighting some of the emphatic themes that were addressed. We also show that the work of the nuns of Herstelle Abbey was not the sum total of individual texts but truly a common project. In that sense, the research presented here helps underpin the standing call for a rewriting of the Liturgical Movement, which was by no means an affair of male clergy only.¹

¹ Cf. Teresa BERGER, *Liturgie und Frauenseele. Die Liturgische Bewegung aus der Sicht der Frauenforschung* (PTh 10), Stuttgart et al. 1993; EAD.,

Arguably, the most famous member of the monastic community of Herstelle Abbey was Aemiliana Löhr (1896–1972).² She is widely counted as one of the most prolific students of the master, Odo Casel. However, incisive questions can and probably ought to be posed with respect to the categories of master and student, for surely Löhr was a master of liturgical theological scholarship herself. It would undo the real value of her own work if, as is done most frequently, it were interpreted as a mere continuation of Caselian language and intuitions. Löhr's acclaimed study and presentation of the liturgical year in *Das Herrenjahr*,³ of which there have been translations into several languages evincing a wide international reception,⁴ are and remain an achievement that stands on its own. It is not just applied Caselianism. In what follows, our focus is not on *Das Herrenjahr*, but on Löhr's contributions to the *Jahresbriefe*. Our intention is to show that the research she had done in view of the book extends into other, much lesser-known publications, and that these later texts testify to a

Women's Ways of Worship. Gender Analysis and Liturgical History (A Pueblo Book), Collegeville 1999; EAD., Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History. Lifting a Veil on Liturgy's Past (Liturgy, Worship, and Society), Farnham – Burlington/VT 2011; Katharine E. HARMON, There Were also Many Women There. Lay Women in the Liturgical Movement in the United States 1926–59 (A Pueblo Book), Collegeville 2012.

² Cf. Helen H. McCONNELL, Aemiliana Löhr's Theology of Liturgical Worship [unpubl. dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington/DC], 2001.

³ Cf. Aemiliana LÖHR, *Jahr des Herrn. Das Mysterium Christi im Jahreskreis der Kirche*, Regensburg 1934. The title of this work slightly changed by the time of the fifth edition: EAD., *Das Herrenjahr. Das Mysterium Christi im Jahreskreis der Kirche*, 2 vols., Regensburg 1951. We will henceforth refer to this work with the title by which it is most commonly known, *Das Herrenjahr*, not *Jahr des Herrn*.

⁴ Cf. Aemiliana LÖHR, *The Year of Our Lord. The Mystery of Christ in the Liturgical Year* [trans. by Michael DUCEY], New York 1937; EAD., *De tijdkrans van het kerkelijk jaar. Het mysterium Christi in den kring van het kerkelijk jaar*, Brugge 1942; EAD., *L'année du Seigneur. Le mystère du Christ au cours de l'année liturgique*, 2 vols., Bruges 1945; EAD., *El año del Señor. El misterio de Cristo en el año Eclesiástico*, 2 vols., Madrid 1955; EAD., *L'anno del Signore. Meditazioni teologiche sull'anno liturgico*, Padova 1956.

genuine originality, deeply rooted in a familiarity with the liturgical tradition of the Roman rite and the Scriptures.

We will proceed in three steps. First, we will introduce the literary production of the *Jahresbriefe* by shedding light on the material documents as they have been preserved in the archives of Herstelle Abbey, on the authors who contributed to them, as well as on the particularities of the context in which they appeared. Second, we will highlight some salient but representative themes that run through the *Jahresbriefe*. We are fully aware that more research could and should be done about the topic, for the *Jahresbriefe*, as we intend to argue, undoubtedly constitute a formidably rich resource that can be used for many purposes. That is exactly what we will lay out in the third part of this paper. There we will suggest how the *Jahresbriefe* can be further explored, not only for academic or historical reasons, but also with a view to developing creative liturgical theologies and spiritualities, accompanied by their catechetical and homiletical counterparts, today. Our hope is, however, first and foremost, that more scholars will be attracted to study and unpack the riches of the *Jahresbriefe* written by the nuns of Herstelle Abbey.

2 *The Jahresbriefe: A Peculiar Corpus of Texts in a Peculiar Context*

The first issue of *Jahresbriefe* was prepared in 1948, the year of Odo Casel's death. In the early years of their appearance (1948–1955), the issues were published with references to the cosmic and liturgical seasons. For example, in 1948, there were three issues: the *Osterbrief* which appeared around Easter, the *Herbstbrief* in the autumn, and the *Weihnachtsbrief* on the occasion of Christmas. Starting in 1957, all the issues were published under a single title, *Jahresbriefe*, and thus the explicit references to seasons disappeared. Each year, three issues were released, still, however, thematically aligned with the seasons of the liturgical year. Each issue contained three or more substantial articles, all of which were written by the sisters, with the exception of a few contributions by Thomas Merton

and Demetrias von Nagel in the later issues.⁵ The names of the sisters who regularly contributed to the *Jahresbriefe* are, in alphabetical order, Corona Bamberg, Bonifatia Brügge, Sophronia Feldhohn, Synkletika Grün, Oda Hagemeyer, Judith Krahe, Aemiliana Löhr, Photina Rech, Theophora Schneider, Eulogia Wurz, and Sybilla Zenker. With the exception of Aemiliana Löhr, none of these names is particularly known in the canon of (German) liturgical scholars. In addition to the sisters' contributions, the journal also contains several previously unpublished papers by Odo Casel.

In total there were 43 issues of the *Jahresbriefe*, appearing between 1948 and 1966. The full collection is carefully kept in the library of Herstelle Abbey. The size of the issues, A5, can be called modest, as they have not been conceived of as a magazine but rather as a brochure; every issue contains 35 to 45 pages. Materially, they are made of printed paper, and the font is typescript. They were produced in the abbey itself. The fact that they did not seek an external publisher underscores the common endeavor and commitment of the monastic community.

In terms of the material that was published in the *Jahresbriefe*, one should note that an important initiative of the abbey was a weekly liturgical conference. During Casel's 26 years of service at the abbey (1922–1948), it was held every Thursday.⁶ This practice continued after his death, as evidenced not only by the *Jahresbriefe* themselves but also by a collection of lectures entitled *Mysteriengegenwart* by Aemiliana Löhr, which she delivered in 1963–1964 and are preserved in the abbey's archives.⁷

The last liturgical conference took place in 1966. While Odo Casel's death in 1948 marked the beginning of the journal, its final issue in 1966

⁵ Sister Demetrias von Nagel was a nun of Herstelle Abbey who was sent to the monastery of Engelthal in 1962, which became an independent abbey in 1965. In other words, Engelthal was founded by Herstelle, so there were and remained close connections between Engelthal and the abbey of origin. At Engelthal, Demetrias von Nagel occupied several leadership positions. She specialized in meditation.

⁶ Cf. Eulogia Wurz, *Der Mitbegründer von Hl. Kreuz*, in: *Herbstbrief* 2 (1948) 5–29, here: 10.

⁷ Aemiliana LÖHR, *Mysteriengegenwart*. Photocopies of thirty-two typewritten lectures, Herstelle, 21 March 1963–4 December 1964 [Archives of the Abbey of the Holy Cross, Herstelle; no shelfmark].

happens to be linked to two nearly simultaneous events that, in hindsight, may have mutually reinforced each other. The first one is Aemiliana Löhr's illness and gradual loss of vision, through which she reached almost complete blindness in 1969. This is referenced in the abbey's *Totenchronik*,⁸ which mentions her illness and the cessation of work, including that on the conference and journal. As Löhr can be considered one of the journal's most significant contributors and even the driving force behind it, this obviously had a great impact. The second event is the resignation of Abbess Theresia Jackisch (1895–1972) in 1969. She had overseen the abbey's liturgical work after Casel's death, but it is not illogical to assume that her powers and energy had somewhat waned in the last years of her mandate.

Even at first glance, the breadth of the sisters' interests and their involvement in contemporary theological discussions is striking. Each issue had a strong thematic focus and probably reflected the contents of the liturgical conferences held at the abbey, which, according to Sister Andria Grabl,⁹ continued under the leadership of Aemiliana Löhr. On the one hand, the sisters continued to develop teachings on mystery, symbol, and the "biblical-patristic" style, thereby unmistakably following Casel's legacy. On the other hand, the journal reveals a broader interest in diverse theological aspects. We moreover observe that the *Jahresbriefe*, among other things, even engaged with some of the criticisms directed at Odo Casel by his contemporaries, such as the absence of references to social realities exacerbated by a certain political apathy, insufficient attention to the Jewish roots of Christian liturgy, etc.¹⁰ One could add that the sisters thereby actively tried to fill some of the gaps in their teacher's doctrine.

⁸ Cf. Eulogia WURZ, *Totenchronik aus der Abtei Hl. Kreuz. Herstelle: Schw. Aemiliana Löhr* (d. 28 July 1972). Printed as a manuscript, St. Joseph Press, Bigge, n. d., p. 14 [Archives of the Abbey of the Holy Cross, Herstelle; no shelfmark].

⁹ Cf. Andria GRABL, Interview with Olga Gasselblat from 24 November 2024, Herstelle, Germany.

¹⁰ For a discussion of different criticisms of Casel, especially by Louis Bouyer, see Joost VAN ROSSUM, *The Reception of Dom Odo Casel's *Mysterienlehre* in the Liturgical Movement and in the Orthodox Church*, in: SVTQ 66 (2022) 105–141.

The years during which the *Jahresbriefe* appeared, coincided with a groundbreaking period of 20th century developments within the Roman Catholic Church. It has been noted that the time span between World War II and Vatican II was the prime of the Liturgical Movement.¹¹ Hence, it comes as no surprise that the swift developments related to the liturgical renewal of the Church play a prominent role in the *Jahresbriefe*. Some of the adjustments to the liturgy were even integrated into the community's liturgical life before official recognition and implementation. Sister Hilara Coen recalls that, long before the reform of the Easter Vigil under Pope Pius XII in 1951, the Vigil had been celebrated in the abbey since 1935,¹² as it was in other places where there was enthusiasm for the Liturgical Movement.¹³

An excellent illustration of the nuns of Herstelle's being at the forefront of liturgical thought is the article entitled *Nacht der Nächte* ("Night of Nights"), authored by Corona Bamberg, which appeared in the Easter Letter of 1952. Bamberg enthusiastically writes:

A wave of deep joy swept over Christianity when the holy Easter Vigil was restored last year. Those who were moved by the liturgy of this most sublime of all vigils, those who saw the light shining in the middle of the night and heard the jubilant Alleluia, felt, at the very least, the conviction that, thanks to Pius XII's action, the innermost depths of ecclesial and spiritual life – the heart chamber of the holy *Ecclesia* – were once again accessible to many. Indeed, the Church's life might have

¹¹ Cf. Keith F. PECKLERS, *Liturgy. The Illustrated History*, Mahwah/NJ 2012, 158 f.

¹² "Lange vor der Erneuerung der Liturgie der Heiligen Woche (1951 bzw. 1955) hatte er 1935 begonnen, mit uns die Osternacht zu feiern." Sr. Hilara COEN, *Lebensbild Pater Odo Casel (1886–1948)*, p. 5. 

¹³ Cf. Robert AMIET, *La veillée pascale dans l'Église latine* Tome, vol. 1: *Le rite romain: histoire et liturgie* (Liturgie 11), Paris 1999. For a survey of important figures and centers of the Liturgical Movement, see Winfried HAUNERLAND, *Liturgische Bewegung in der katholischen Kirche im 20. Jahrhundert*, in: Jürgen BÄRSCH – Benedikt KRANEMANN (eds.) with collaboration by Winfried HAUNERLAND – Martin KLÖCKENER, *Geschichte der Liturgie in den Kirchen des Westens. Rituelle Entwicklungen, theologische Konzepte und kulturelle Kontexte*, vol. 2: *Moderne und Gegenwart*, Münster 2018, 165–207.

withered and died without such a revival, renewed each year from the womb of this night of nights.¹⁴

In this sense, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus's sermon on Holy Easter – translated by Odo Casel and included by the sisters as an introduction to the 1950 Easter Letter – takes on additional significance in the context of the anticipated liturgical reforms of 1951–1955. It is as if the sisters are emphasizing that the restoration of the Easter Vigil is eagerly awaited by the entire Catholic Church. One reads: "We shall share in the Passover, for the time being in a symbolic manner, albeit more clearly than in the old type ..., but a little later in a more perfect and purer way"¹⁵

Furthermore, the 21st issue of the *Jahresbriefe* includes articles discussing aspects of the 1955 reforms of Holy Week. Photina Rech writes about the *Vater der Lichter* ("Father of Lights") while Sybilla Zenker equally discusses the symbolism of light in her text *Das Licht leuchtet in der Finsternis* ("Light shines in the darkness").¹⁶ In the same issue, an article by Odo Casel, *Das Fest der Lichter* ("The Festival of Lights"¹⁷), and two translations, one from Gregory of Nazianzus (*Aus der 40. Rede des hl. Gregor v. Nazianz*) and one from Origen (*Die Erleuchteten*, In Gen. hom. 1.7), appeared. They are thematically linked by a common emphasis on light.

The attention of the *Herstelle* nuns to developments, scholarly as well as ecclesial, leading up to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), is additionally reflected in their remarkable adoption of theological language and, through it, theological intuitions and ideas. One finds in the

¹⁴ Corona BAMBERG, *Nacht der Nächte*, in: *Osterbrief* 11 (1952) 9–17, here: 8 f. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the *Jahresbriefe* are originally ours. We did make use, however, of translation software to help us with this demanding task.

¹⁵ "Wir werden an dem Pascha teilhaben, jetzt noch in typischer Weise, wenn auch offener als bei dem alten Typus ..., etwas später aber in vollenderer und reinerer Weise ..." *Aus der 2. Rede des heiligen Gregor von Nazianz "Über das heilige Pascha"* [trans. by Odo CASEL], in: *Osterbrief* 7 (1950) 2.

¹⁶ Cf. Photina RECH, *Vater der Lichter*, in: *Weihnachtsbrief* 21 (1956) 3–13; Sibylla ZENKER, *Das Licht leuchtet in der Finsternis*, in: *Weihnachtsbrief* 21 (1956) 15–22.

¹⁷ Cf. Odo CASEL, *Das Fest der Lichter*, in: *Weihnachtsbrief* 21 (1956) 24–32.

Jahresbriefe striking resonances with innovative tendencies in ecclesiological and sacramental teaching. Characteristic of the nuns' embrace of new theological insights is Aemiliana Löhr's article *Werk des Volkes für das Volk* ("The People's Work for the People"), in which she meticulously analyses key concepts used by the Council. Vatican II famously revived the term "People of God", which had been prominent in many Church Fathers, but which had faded away in the course of time. Sometimes it had been replaced by the concept of the Body of Christ, which also refers to the Church. Löhr comments: "Those of us who have paid more attention to the 'emerging ecclesiology of our day' [...] have pointed to the term 'People of God' as a fuller account of salvation history."¹⁸ She adds that the concepts of People of God and Body of Christ are not mutually exclusive – an idea that resonates with the seminar on "Ecclesiology" that Professor Joseph Ratzinger delivered in Münster during the summer term of 1965.¹⁹ In that context he described the Church as the "People of God from the Body of Christ"²⁰.

The very title of Löhr's article, *Werk des Volkes für das Volk*, deserves some more attention, as it obviously corresponds with the Greek etymology of the word liturgy itself (λειτουργία, *leitourgia*). The term and its etymology were widely used by 20th century liturgists. They emphasized two dimensions: liturgy is (1) the work of the people – understood as the people actively participating in liturgical action, and (2) the work for the people – viewing the people as the recipients of God's saving action. Premier liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemmann employs both meanings of the term to deepen the understanding of liturgical practice, e. g., in an intriguing and well worth rereading paper *Theology and Eucharist*.²¹ Similarly, contemporary liturgical theologian David Fagerberg, in his groundbreak-

¹⁸ Aemiliana LÖHR, *Werk des Volkes für das Volk*, in: *Jahresbriefe* 43 (1966) 9–29, here: 9.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 11.

²⁰ Kurt KOCH, *The Church as Communio in the Theological Vision of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI*. Lecture at the International Conference of the Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI Foundation at the Franciscan University of Steubenville (October 20, 2022). [↗](#)

²¹ Cf. Alexander SCHMEMMANN, *Theology and Eucharist*, in: *SVSQ* 5/4 (1961) 10–23.

ing monograph *Theologia Prima: What Is Liturgical Theology?*, distinguishes between *liturgy* and *leitourgia*, which seems to underscore that liturgy is not merely an external rite but also an internal action.²²

During the period of preparation and implementation of the Council, Löhr did not extensively express her opinions about concrete liturgical reforms, except for the desire to restore the Easter Vigil to its full glory in *Das Herrenjahr*.²³ She additionally voiced some mild critical remarks on the Council in *Mysteriengegenwart*, but these lectures stayed unpublished (cf. *supra*). At the conclusion of the Council, which coincided with the final issue of the *Jahresbriefe*, Löhr shared her historical-critical observations, clarifying and supplementing the Council's liturgical vision. Löhr's text is not merely a repetition of the conciliar teaching on the Christocentric nature of the liturgy, the participation of the faithful, the ecclesial character of worship, or the connection between the liturgy and the Church's life. Löhr succeeds in weaving these ideas together and argues how this vision is rooted in Holy Scripture, just as the liturgy itself.

Whilst the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, states that "Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy" (SC 24), Löhr cites examples of Old Testament events as "liturgical" and "anti-liturgical" (that is, as uniting with or separating from God), ranging from original sin and the apostasy of Israel to the prophets foretelling the coming of the Liturgist ("the Servant").²⁴

Furthermore, as one reads in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the liturgy is a source of grace for God's people (SC 21). According to Löhr, this is above all the "work" of the Great Liturgist, who creates His People.²⁵ Christ is the perfect Liturgist, both priest and sacrifice; His suffering, death on the cross, and resurrection constitute the great primordial liturgy from which the Church is born.

²² Cf. David W. FAGERBERG, *Theologia Prima. What Is Liturgical Theology?*, Chicago 2004, 110–117.

²³ Cf. Aemiliana LÖHR, O wahrhaft selige Nacht, in: *Das Herrenjahr*, vol. 2, 91–97.

²⁴ EAD., *Werk des Volkes für das Volk*, 14–18.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 28.

For he did not bring his work to completion with the cross, death, and resurrection; nor did he leave the new life unprotected in weak hands. No: in word and sign, as sacred action, as sacrament and mystery beyond comprehension, he gave over his “work for the people” – through which it had come to life – into the power of this people, so that it, now as the “work of the people”, might continually bring forth the new creation anew. In countless communities of sacrifice and meal, he united the called and the faithful from all over the world around the sacrifice and meal of his priestly liturgy. With him they offered themselves; with him they died his life-giving death in atonement for the sin of the world.²⁶

One may say that Löhr’s article reconnects the Constitution on the Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) with one of its deepest theological sources of inspiration: Odo Casel’s doctrine of mystery.

The sisters of Herstelle Abbey were very well aware of the dramatic changes in the social and ecclesial landscape of the time in which they lived. With the *Jahresbriefe* they even wanted to explicitly address the surrounding culture. In one issue Photina Rech directed her writing toward Christians living in the world.²⁷ They too, she argued, are called to realize their Christian vocation, albeit outside of a monastic context. She thereby wanted to undermine the commonly held presumption that a vocation is reserved for priests and religious. In another issue, she again addressed the “friends of the abbey”, identifying them as recipients of the letters. This suggests that the journal’s readership included visitors of the abbey as well as ordinary parishioners. The *Jahresbriefe* were distributed in limited quantities to a small, select audience. But what was offered to them was genuine and profound, as we will now show.

3 *The Jahresbriefe: A Wealth of Topics both Timeless and Contemporary*

To rightly situate the broad and rich unfolding of themes in the *Jahresbriefe*, we necessarily have to again refer to the intellectual work of Aemi-

²⁶ Ibid., 28 f.

²⁷ Cf. Photina RECH, An unsere Freunde und Leser! in: Herbstbrief 18 (1955) 2–3.

liana Löhr. She stood out as one of the few women whose works were published within the Liturgical Movement as well as translated into foreign languages. Through her most significant work, *Das Herrenjahr*, Löhr had gained international recognition as a prominent liturgist. Several scholarly reviews of *Das Herrenjahr* are presented in a noteworthy doctoral dissertation, highlighting the positive reception and academic appraisal of it.²⁸ Johannes Pinsk noted that, thanks to Löhr's commentaries on the liturgical year, "the mystical vision of the early Church awakened", and believers are thereby led to "the simplicity of the mystery of Christ and His church"²⁹. Virgil Michel stated:

There is something of the mystic vision of the ancient Church with its *living personal experience* [...]. There is depth of thought and understanding of the new life in Christ. There is also a wealth of allusions to types, such as the Blessed Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, Jerusalem and Sion [...] and [to] much of the *rich spiritual imagery* of the liturgy. Yet, the mysticism is always the same simple mysticism of this liturgy, *permeated by and centered in the Mystery of Christ in His church, the living action of the Redeemer constantly operative in her [the church's] liturgical life*, sharing this life at all times with every true member of Christ's body.³⁰

What Michel observes here in terms of "always the same simple mysticism" is a crucial hermeneutical key for unpacking both topics that were discussed in the *Jahresbriefe* and the way in which they were approached. He rightly understands that it is ultimately nothing but the paschal mystery that is reflected in every liturgy as a whole or in any element of a liturgical celebration. And it is precisely that paschal core of liturgy that the sisters of Herstelle Abbey tirelessly want to reach, lay bare, unpack, comprehend, explain, and live. In doing that, they both embraced and set forth

²⁸ Cf. McCONNELL, Aemiliana Löhr's Theology of Liturgical Worship, 106–114.

²⁹ Johannes PINSK, Review of LÖHR, *Jahr des Herrn*, found on a promotional flyer for the first edition published by Friedrich Pustet, quoted in McCONNELL, Aemiliana Löhr's Theology of Liturgical Worship, 111.

³⁰ Virgil MICHEL, Review of Aemiliana LÖHR, *Jahr des Herrn*, in: *Orate Fratres* 9 (1935) 141, quoted in: McCONNELL, Aemiliana Löhr's Theology of Liturgical Worship, 110.

the theological ideas of the Liturgical Movement. In what follows, we present a great deal of material from the *Jahresbriefe* through the two mutually reinforcing clusters of "tradition" and "dialogue".

3.1 *Tradition*

The rediscovery of how widely the notion of mystery radiates, unmistakably fostered extensive investigation into the tradition of Christian worship. Scholars such as Odo Casel had shown new ways not only to the extant sources but also to the very wellspring of the Church's liturgical tradition. For the nuns of Herstelle Abbey, unlike Casel himself, this implied taking a careful look at the Jewish roots of Christian liturgy. The sisters rightfully suspected that there was a lot of wisdom to be found in the exploration of the Old Testament with a view to a deeper understanding of the contents and structures of the Christian life of worship.

So, the *Jahresbriefe* are clearly marked by a strong attention to the Old Testament and Judaism. The journal frequently quotes from and reflects on the Old Testament, not as a distant historical source, but as a living and active part of salvation history, directly relevant to the Church and deeply embedded in biblical thinking. In all of this, what the sisters surmised and made explicit shows a great deal of correspondence with what theologians such as Jean Daniélou and Yves Congar did.³¹

Many contributions to the *Jahresbriefe* exhibit a profound respect for the Jewish people, their suffering, and their role in God's redemptive plan. This attitude reflects one of the key theological shifts initiated by the Second Vatican Council and anticipated by *ressourcement* theologians and representatives of the so-called *nouvelle théologie*. The journal often explores the typological relationship between the Synagogue and the Church, not only as a matter of historical continuity, but also through sym-

³¹ Cf. Jean DANIÉLOU, *The Bible and the Liturgy* [trans. by Ernest GRAF] (Liturgical Studies 3), Notre Dame/IN 1956, originally published as *id.*, *Bible et liturgie. La théologie biblique des sacrements et des fêtes d'après les pères de l'Église* (Lex orandi 11), PARIS 1951. Yves CONGAR, *The Meaning of Tradition* [trans. by A. N. WOODROW] (The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism 3/1), New York 1964, originally published as *id.*, *La tradition et la vie de l'Église* (Traditions chrétiennes 18), Paris 1963 [21984].

bolic representations of the faithful and unfaithful bride – whereby, of course, from a contemporary perspective, one can raise questions about the appropriateness of identifying the Jewish people as the unfaithful bride.

Nevertheless, the nuns of Herstelle's approach is deeply theological and resonates with *ressourcement* or *nouvelle* methods of reading Scripture.³² Bonifatia Brügge, e. g., emphasizes the Church's enduring practice of drawing from both Testaments in prayer and worship, with the Old Testament being renewed in Christ.³³ Synkletika Grün highlights the patristic tradition of reading the Hebrew Scriptures typologically, revealing Christ's redemptive presence.³⁴ Photina Rech interprets Mary through Old Testament symbolism, especially Ezekiel's prophecy, presenting her virginity as a sign of spiritual openness to God.³⁵ One gets the distinct impression that the *Jahresbriefe* devote more space to the images and narratives of the Old Testament than to the New, which may well be interpreted as a vivid sign of the theological currents of the time.

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the *Jahresbriefe* produced and provided a mystagogical catechesis of sorts, not only through the way in which it dealt with the Old Testament tradition, but also with the Church Fathers. The nuns' journal appeared during a period of profound transformation in Catholic theology and liturgical practice, and clearly reflected the broader movement of returning to the sources of the Christian tradition in order to renew and revitalize it. The *Jahresbriefe* even include translations of writings by the Church Fathers. Examples include a translation of Melito of Sardis' famous Easter homily and an excerpt from the

³² In addition to the theologians mentioned in the previous footnote, one can of course additionally think of Henri de Lubac, for example, HENRI DE LUBAC, *Medieval Exegesis. The Four Senses of Scripture*, 3 vols. [trans. by Mark SEBANC – Edward M. MACIEROWSKI], Grand Rapids/MI 1998–2009.

³³ Cf. Bonifatia BRÜGGE, Siehe, ich bin da!, in: Weihnachtsbrief 14 (1953) 3–9, here: 9.

³⁴ Cf. Synkletika GRÜN, In der Tiefe und In der Höhe, in: Weihnachtsbrief 14 (1953) 10–16, here: 13.

³⁵ Cf. Photina RECH, Maria im alttestamentlichen Symbol, in: Weihnachtsbrief 16 (1954) 3–12.

homilies of John Chrysostom, both rendered by Sophronia Feldhohn,³⁶ texts by Gregory of Nazianzus and John of Damascus, translated by Odo Casel himself,³⁷ a homily by Origen in the very first issue of the *Jahresbriefe*, translated by Makrina Kloeppel,³⁸ and of several others.

The journal moreover contains more speculative reflections on the Church's tradition. Sophronia Feldhohn and Bonifatia Brügge connect an understanding of tradition with the reality of salvation through (listening to) the Word of God.³⁹ Human history is indeed the place where God's redemptive intervention happens. Similarly, Eulogia Wurz emphasizes that tradition is not composed of rigid dogmas but a living transmission of faith; emphatic is her use of the concept of life in this context.⁴⁰ The concept of tradition as a dynamic and living process is further explored by Theophora Schneider, too.⁴¹

³⁶ Cf. MELITO VON SARDES, Homilie über die Passion, 6–69 [trans. by von Sophronia FELDHOHN], in: Osterbrief 15 (1954) 14–16; JOHANNES CHRYSOSTOMOS, Das Zeichen unseres Heiles (aus der 54. Hom. des Matth. Komm.) [trans. by Sophronia FELDHOHN], in: Herbstbrief 5 (1949) 23–25; AMPHILOCHIOS VON IKONIUM, Auf den Geburtstag des großen Gottes, unseres Erlösers Jesus Christus [trans. by Sophronia FELDHOHN], in: Weihnachtsbrief 8 (1950) 39–43; and others' translations.

³⁷ Cf. Aus der 2. Rede des heiligen Gregor von Nazianz über das Heilige Pascha [trans. by Odo CASEL], in: Osterbrief 7 (1950) 2; Pascha. Aus dem Osterkanon des Johannes von Damaskus [trans. by Odo CASEL], in: Osterbrief 7 (1950) 25–27.

³⁸ Cf. ORIGENES, Über die Worte der Schrift: „Siehe, die Jungfrau wird im Schoße empfangen usw.“ (In vis. Is. hom. II.) [trans. by Makrina KLOEPPPEL], in: Osterbrief 1 (1948) 29–32. This appears to be a translation of the *Second Homily on the Vision of Isaiah* by Origen.

³⁹ Cf. Sophronia FELDHOHN, Tradere. Heilsgeschichte im Spiegel eines biblisch-liturgischen Wortes, in: Jahresbriefe 29 (1959) 3–16; Bonifatia BRÜGGE, In heiliger Überlieferung, in: Jahresbriefe 29 (1959) 16–30, here: 16–24.

⁴⁰ Cf. Eulogia WURZ, Tradition – das ist Leben, in: Jahresbriefe 29 (1959) 30–43.

⁴¹ Cf. Theophora SCHNEIDER, Die Kirche ist überall – aber sie ist eine, in: Jahresbriefe 37 (1963) 28–45.

3.2 *Dialogue*

Aemiliana Löhr's use of the word "dialogue" is significant. A key principle in the relationship between God and humanity, the concept of dialogue was extensively developed in 20th century philosophy and Catholic theology. The concept notably appears in the philosophy of Martin Buber, from whose works Löhr frequently cites.

According to Löhr, the dialogue between God and the Church, inspired by the very nature of the Holy Trinity, calls Catholics to engage in dialogue with the world and with other Christian communities. In other words, the liturgical dialogue between God and humanity must find its continuation in the world, bringing about the restoration of all creation. This is the work of God and of His Church. Löhr's article discusses the source of this dialogue: the glorification of the Creator (which, according to her, is a foundation of any religion), i. e., the praise that originates within the bosom of the Holy Trinity itself.⁴²

The years leading up to the Second Vatican Council as well as the years of the council, 1962–1965, were also marked by an ecumenical fervor, sometimes including intense discussions. Given Löhr's attentiveness to ecclesiological developments, it is highly likely that her later work was influenced by ecumenical concerns. This is particularly plausible since the issue of ecumenism had been raised earlier by Odo Casel, and Herstelle Abbey was known for its openness to interaction with other Christian denominations.

The same can be said of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, which equally found expression in the journal. As a complement to the *Jahresbriefe's* thorough engagement with the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. *supra*), many of the journal's articles also reflect an engagement with Jewish-Christian relations. Löhr writes:

The dialogue and interaction of the divine Trinity became a dialogue and interaction between God and humanity – a work of God's infinite love, agape [...]. Can the Church resist the pneuma of the Son within her, which constantly urges her to see, love, and glorify God? Will she not draw vitality from this nuptial, loving, prayerful relationship with God, so as to bring all people into the community of the redeemed Body of

⁴² Cf. Aemiliana LÖHR, Virgo Orans, in: *Jahresbriefe* 35 (1962) 9–25, here: 14.

Christ, so that the voice of God's earthly partner may strengthen and grow into a mighty chorus of love?⁴³

As one can see, this quotation goes beyond the scope of dialogue with other Christian communities. A phrase like "a mighty choir of love" points to the glorification of the Creator as the foundation of universal ecumenical dialogue. Although Löhr does not explicitly mention Judaism here, her argument implies Israel and its role in the history of salvation, since Israel is the first bearer of the covenant and God's original interlocutor. The liturgical dialogue between God and humanity, and the praise of the Creator of which Löhr speaks, are rooted in the prayer tradition of Israel – above all in the Psalms, the festive cycles, and temple worship, which constitute the common spiritual foundation of the Jewish and Christian traditions.

Yet another dimension of dialogue pertains to the role of faith and Church in society. The nuns of Herstelle can be said to have been acutely aware of the developments which have steadily been interpreted as secularization and detraditionalization. However, these processes did not discourage them; rather, the nuns advocated for a search for new forms of spirituality within Catholicism, in which dialogue, not judgment, would be key.

The nuns actively engaged in a dialogue about the meaning of monasticism in the contemporary world. They attempted not only to defend it but also, and more profoundly, to show the beauty and relevance of their monastic vocation. There are three articles on monasticism in the 1955 issues, but the majority were written between 1959 and 1965, appearing in issues 29, 35, 38, and 42. In her introduction to issue 18 (1955), Photina Rech discusses the contemplative life and its central role in Christian living, emphasizing that monasticism is a call to create ideal conditions for divine contemplation.

In her piece in the same issue, Aemiliana Löhr offers a detailed explanation of the often-misunderstood goals of monasticism for contemporary readers. On the one hand, Löhr writes about monasticism's growing appeal among successful young people, citing the flourishing of contemplative orders in America as an example. She argues that monas-

⁴³ Ibid.

tic life establishes a person in their highest vocation, but by page nine of the article, on the other hand, she notes the changing attitudes toward contemplative monasticism in her homeland and the decline of societal respect for it.⁴⁴ She highlights and deplores the decreasing material support for monasteries, which makes it increasingly difficult for nuns and monks to focus on contemplation. Löhr directly links the flourishing of monasteries to the well-being of society, suggesting that past generations instinctively understood the necessity of a profession, wholly dedicated to God, within society.

A final aspect of dialogue that is worth drawing some attention to is femininity. While it cannot be said that the nuns of Herstelle were feminists in a sociological sense, their journal did publish articles in which the role of modern women in the Church was discussed. They thereby indicate an awareness of shifting societal expectations. Strikingly, and not avoiding certain stereotypes of the male-female distinction, the *Jahresbriefe* closely associated the nature of women with the capacity to accept suffering, even referring to the female body as the organ of suffering. If Odo Casel presents a classical image of femininity as a symbol of the Church in the pages of his *Mysterium der Ekklesia*,⁴⁵ the women of Herstelle expanded upon and deepened this traditional perspective.

One finds profound reflections grounded in feminine symbolism in Löhr's works. Already in *Das Herrenjahr*, Löhr developed the connection between the symbols of water and femininity in relation to the rite of Baptism. She speaks explicitly about the "feminine component", which she sees as expressing the mystery of Baptism. Water is not only the matter of the sacrament but also an image of receptivity – like the womb – and of the capacity to give new life in Christ. "Mysterious and dual", water shares the ambivalence of the feminine: it signifies both life and death, since in Baptism we die and rise with Christ.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Cf. Aemiliana LÖHR, Mönchtum Heute, in: Herbstbrief 18 (1955) 4–13, here: 8 f.

⁴⁵ Cf. Odo CASEL, *Mysterium der Ekklesia*. Von der Gemeinschaft aller Erlösten in Christus Jesus. Aus Schriften und Vorträgen, Mainz 1961, 62. 328. 406.

⁴⁶ Aemiliana LÖHR, *Das Herrenjahr*, vol. 2, Regensburg 1940, 59.

A subsequent quotation adds yet another dimension: "Out of the heart she [the Church] is born from the dying, and from the breath of the Risen One. She receives His divine life, which they live in a feminine way through their mysteries."⁴⁷ One can interpret the phrase "to live in a feminine way through the mysteries" as a rich liturgical image. The Church communicates the life of Christ, not through domination or violence, but through acceptance, sacrifice, birth, and service. In this mode of being, the Church is Christ-like. The feminine becomes a way of embodying the divine. Here, the image of a woman transcends the traditional roles of bride and Church (including Caselian language) and becomes a symbol of God "Him"self – loving, suffering, begetting, and nurturing. Feminine symbolism reveals the liturgical and theological significance of the feminine principle as a means of divine revelation. It is not merely illustrative; it is a theological language in which the mystery of God's presence is revealed. It was precisely Löhr's vision that was further developed in the *Jahresbriefe* by Sisters Corona Bamberg, Theophora Schneider, Photina Rech, and Synkletika Grün.⁴⁸

4 *The Jahresbriefe: A Poetic Resource for Theology and Spirituality*

As has become clear already, the *Jahresbriefe* offer exceptionally rich theological material. They combine traditional genres of theological writing and classical themes with more contemporary currents such as dialogical and Holocaust theology. This literary and theological mosaic reflects the dynamism of the twentieth-century Liturgical Movement. Each theological genre – liturgical exegesis, poetry, theological essays, letters of suffering and consolation, apologetics, reflections, and spiritual instruction – functions as a distinct mode of expressing the mystery of Christ's presence and encounter in the liturgical act.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁸ Cf. Corona BAMBERG, Die Frau im Leiden als Bild der Ekklesia (Biblische Typen), in: *Jahresbriefe* 26 (1958) 8–21; RECH, Maria im alttestamentlichen Symbol, 3–12; Theophora SCHNEIDER, Mutter Christi, weil Braut Christi, in: Weihnachtsbrief 16 (1954) 21–29; Synkletika GRÜN, Die Jungfrau Israel als Bild der Ekklesia, in: *Jahresbriefe* 27 (1958) 22–32.

Unlike traditional liturgical exegesis, which focuses on commentary and interpretation, the *Jahresbriefe*'s approach leans more toward literature and poetry.⁴⁹ While both forms are rooted in the fundamental conviction that the external elements of worship (material objects, signs, images) hold a spiritual dimension, the *Jahresbriefe* convey this primarily through poetic language rather than analytical explanation. For instance, detailed

⁴⁹ For instance, Jean LECLERCQ, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God. A Study of Monastic Culture* [trans. by Catharine MISRAHI], New York 1982, originally published as *id.*, *L'Amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu. Initiation aux auteurs monastiques du Moyen Âge*, Paris 1957 [1963]. It should be noted at this point that Hans Urs von Balthasar and Romano Guardini were key figures in promoting Catholic literature and poetry in Germany. They were also translators and interpreters of many works by authors associated with the *renouveau catholique* (Paul Claudel, Georges Bernanos, Charles Péguy, François Mauriac, and Léon Bloy). The nuns of Herstelle were well acquainted with these works. Since the sisters' personal correspondence is not available, however, we cannot speak of a closer personal acquaintance with these authors. It is also worth noting that Thomas Merton, some articles of whom were published in the *Jahresbriefe* 29 (1959), was a friend of Jacques Maritain, a prominent figure of the French *renouveau catholique*. Merton also translated some poems by Raïssa Maritain, Jacques Maritain's wife. It is therefore possible that Thomas Merton served as another mediator between the *renouveau catholique* movement and the work of Herstelle Abbey. Moreover, yet another aspect of Maritain's thought – namely, the relationship between *leiturgia* and *diakonia* – finds a parallel in the conception of the German *Leipzig Oratorio*, cf. Andreas POSCHMANN, *Das Leipziger Oratorium. Liturgie als Mitte einer lebendigen Gemeinde* (ETHS 81), Leipzig 2001, 80–82. The articles published in the *Jahresbriefe* contain several references to Claudel. These references form part of a broader theological discourse on the liturgy and the mystery of the Eucharist. A particularly telling example can once again be found in an article by Aemiliana Löhr, which was already mentioned above. In it, Löhr brings together three figures – Paul Claudel, Odo Casel, and Reinhold Schneider – through their shared mystical perception of the Mass, cf. LÖHR, *Virgo Orans*, 10. Reinhold Schneider († 1958) was a German Christian writer who was closely associated with the *renouveau catholique*. Correspondence between Reinhold Schneider and Aemiliana Löhr is preserved in Schneider's archive at the *Badische Landesbibliothek* (Karlsruhe, Germany). URL: <https://kalliope-verbund.info/DE-611-HS-3721099> [accessed May 2, 2026]. 

descriptions of liturgical objects or the historical development of ritual elements are rare in the journal. Instead, its central theological concern is the symbolic unfolding of the Mystery of Presence and the Presence of the Mystery (*Mysteriengegenwart*) in and through liturgical action.

Liturgical worship itself is deeply poetic, and the Bible contains a wealth of poetry, much of which is usually, sadly, obscured in translation. Many Church Fathers, however, frequently expressed their theology through poetry, as seen in the works of, among many others, Ambrose of Milan, Romanos the Melodist, and John of Damascus – a practice that was continued throughout the Middle Ages. As Jean Leclercq notes, “The jewels of the liturgy were born of the medieval monks’ intensely felt need to versify for God.”⁵⁰ It could be said that the *Jahresbriefe* somehow rediscovered or continued this tradition, using primarily poetry to articulate the theology of the mystery. One of its most striking themes is marital and feminine symbolism, which appears vividly on many pages.

4.1 A Poem by Löhr

To illustrate this, we present here a beautiful example of Aemiliana Löhr’s contribution to a poetic theology of mystery, her 1949 poem entitled *Menschwerdung* (literally “Becoming Human,” but the word in German also means “Incarnation”).⁵¹

Ich trage das Kleid aus dem ewigen Schrein.	I am wearing the robe from the eternal shrine.
Es kam mir entgegen, es holte mich ein.	It came to meet me, it caught up with me.
Noch saß ich im Schmutze, nackt und bloß,	Still, I sat in the dirt, naked and bare,
da wurde die Gnade über mir groß.	then grace abounded over me.

⁵⁰ LECLERCQ, *The Love of Learning*, 241.

⁵¹ Aemiliana LÖHR, *Menschwerdung*, in: *Weihnachtsbrief 6* (1949) 10.

Der Sohn, die Weisheit, das himmli- sche Kleid	The Son, Wisdom, the heavenly robe
zog aus seine ewige Herrlichkeit.	put off his eternal glory.
Der Vater sandte ihn nackend aus, da bracht' er als Bettler uns alle nach Haus.	The Father sent him naked, yet, as a beggar, he brought all of us home.
Da deckt' der Entblößte die frierende Welt,	Then the naked one covers the freezing world,
da ward der Enthauste uns Heimat und Zelt.	then the homeless became our home and tent.
Er kam, das lebendige Gottesgewand, uns nahe bis an des Grabes Rand.	He came, the living robe of God, close to us to the edge of the grave.
Er rührte uns an, er ging in uns ein, da wurde er unser, da wurden wir sein.	He touched us, he entered us, then He became us, then we be- came Him.
Er legte auf uns seine eigene Macht und hüllt' sich in unsre geliehene Pracht.	He laid his own power on us and wrapped himself in our bor- rowed splendor.
Er ist unser Leben, wir sind sein Leib –:	He is our life, we are his body –:
Der Ewige kleidet sein irdisches Weib.	the Eternal One clothes his earthly wife.

This poem presents a symbol of clothing as an image of grace, redemption, and deification. The symbol of clothing also points to mystery. The act of dressing carries deep theological significance in both the Bible and liturgical rites. First, there is the nakedness of Adam and Eve and the “garments of skin” given to them by God (Gen 3:21). In the parable of the prodigal son, the father welcomes his lost child by giving him new clothes: “Bring the best robe and put it on him” (Luke 15:22). In the liturgy, clothing plays a role in the rites of Baptism and the preparation of the dead for burial. In both cases, “this liturgical garment symbolizes the nuptial robe to be presented at the feast of the Lamb, without which one cannot enter the heavenly banquet (cf. Matt. 22:11–14: ‘But when the king came in to

see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding garment')"⁵².

There is something special going on in the image of a garment. In an article about the iconographic treasures of the ancient catacombs, Corona Bamberg discusses the symbolic meaning of a garment. She gives the example of a child named Paschasius: "Thus, about the infant Paschasius, who was born on Easter Day and likely received his Easter name because of it – it is said that at the age of six, he *albas suas octabas Paschae ad sepulcrum deposuit* – 'laid his baptismal garment at the tomb on the octave of Easter.'"⁵³

Yet, the symbol of the garment can also function in a different way, namely as a sign of human participation in Christ. One powerful example is found in the life of St. Martin of Tours as described in Jacobus de Voragine's infamous *Golden Legend*, where the passage directly echoes Christ's words in Matthew's Gospel (25:35–40). As a young soldier in the Roman army, Martin was once riding on horseback during a bitterly cold winter day. At the gates of the city of Amiens (in present-day France), he encountered a beggar shivering from the cold. Martin had nothing with him but his military cloak, so he took his sword, cut the cloak in half, and gave one half to the poor man. That night, Christ appeared to Martin in a dream, wrapped in that very same half-cloak, and said to the angels: "Martin, though not yet baptized, has clothed Me."⁵⁴

In Löhr's poem, Christ is represented as the "weak" God: a beggar, naked, and homeless: "As a beggar, home to us all. Then the naked one covers the freezing world, then the homeless became our home and tent." This imagery suggests that the Eternal One has taken on human nature. Sin is depicted as poverty, nakedness, and homelessness, yet this condition, even from a human perspective, evokes more compassion and pity than anger. However, in the poem, more than that, poverty, nakedness, and

⁵² Vincent OWUSU, *Funeral Rites in Rome and the Non-Roman West*, in: *Handbook for Liturgical Studies*, vol. 4: *Sacraments and Sacramentals*, ed. by Anscar J. CHUPUNGCO, Collegeville 2000, 355–380, here: 376, fn. 48.

⁵³ CORONA BAMBERG, *Volk mit dem strahlenden Siegel. Stimmen aus den Katakomben*, in: *Herbstbrief* 9 (1951) 30–41, here: 37.

⁵⁴ JACOBUS DE VORAGINE, *The Golden Legend, or Lives of the Saints*, vol. 6 [trans. by William CAXTON], ed. by Frederick S. ELLIS, London 1931, 1036.

homelessness are shown to become a source of grace. The symbol of the garment reveals the mystery of divine compassion for the deceived and fallen human race.

How, in this sense, can the symbolism of clothing point to the idea of humanity's participation in Christ? We suggest the answer lies in mercy, which makes human beings into the image of God. For human beings must "put off" their earthly glory and clothe themselves in "the garment of Christ", that is, in His image of mercy (as in the example of St. Martin). The Almighty God seeks human consent to receive the wedding garment.

It is interesting to note two further references to the theme of nakedness by different authors in the same issue of the journal. Photina Rech describes sin as the vision of naked reality from which mystery has been stripped away. She literally quotes from Genesis, where it says: "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they realized that they were naked" (Gen. 3:7). Before the fall, they had lived within the mystery of communion with God and creation, a status in which no shame or nakedness could possibly disturb or interrupt. Yet, the exclusion from or non-participation in the mystery is interpreted as a sin; in the sister's text, this is expressed through the idea of nakedness.⁵⁵

Theophora Schneider clearly echoes this imagery: "The garment of divine glory was taken away from him [i. e., Adam]. Naked, without the garment of grace, Adam and his wife stood beneath the tree, which itself became 'naked' with them."⁵⁶ Sin is here portrayed as the loss of mystery, even as the loss of liturgical being. Its consequences affect not only the human person but all of creation. From this perspective, the liturgy appears as the restoration of creation, a return to the original clothing of divine presence and glory.

4.2 *Lament*

In *Mysterium der Ekklesia*, Odo Casel briefly discusses the genre of lament in liturgical texts, linking it to the image of the woman as a symbol of the Church. In the liturgical tradition, one encounters lament primarily in the

⁵⁵ Cf. Photina RECH, *Inmitten des Paradieses*, in: *Osterbrief* 19 (1955) 13–22.

⁵⁶ Theophora SCHNEIDER, *Gottes Sieg am dürren Baum*, in: *Osterbrief* 19 (1955) 22–31, here: 22.

voices of Jeremiah and Christ weeping over Jerusalem. According to Casel's interpretation, "The Ecclesia is right to sing a lament each year and to mourn for her beloved, lonely like an abandoned woman. But the one who mourns here is already the chosen one. The Easter night brings the Ecclesia to her marriage with Christ."⁵⁷ This symbolic framework is deeply rooted in biblical, liturgical, and patristic traditions.

In *Das Herrenjahr*, Aemiliana Löhr repeatedly draws upon the genre of lament and its liturgical significance as expressed in the Psalms. For example, she reflects on Psalm 54 in the liturgy for the Tuesday after the Fourth Sunday of Lent,⁵⁸ Psalm 21 on Palm Sunday,⁵⁹ Psalm 101 on Wednesday of Holy Week,⁶⁰ and Psalm 136 on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost.⁶¹ In *Heilige Woche (Holy Week: An Explanation of the Liturgy of Holy Week)*, Löhr provides a detailed analysis of the Lamentations of Jeremiah in the first nocturn of Tenebrae (*prima nocturna* is the initial part of the liturgical Tenebrae cycle, which includes prayers, psalms, and readings from the book of Lamentations in the older form of the liturgy).⁶² The genre of lament and its potential within the Church's liturgy remain a recurring focus of her theological reflection.

Fundamentally sharing these insights, Photina Rech refers to the lament for Jerusalem in her article *Die Lamentationen der Kartage*. Although she mentions the first nocturn, Rech particularly focuses on Christ's lament over Jerusalem and His death in the city. These two moments, she suggests, are deeply connected through a typological and symbolic relationship. Rech writes that lamentation, as a cultic form, retains its essential place within the Christian liturgy, especially in the Paschal context. Lament is among the oldest forms of religious experience, rooted in the universal human need to give voice to pain in the face of death's devastation.

⁵⁷ CASEL, *Mysterium der Ekklesia*, 296 [our translation].

⁵⁸ Cf. LÖHR, *Das Herrenjahr*, vol. 1, 371–376.

⁵⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, vol. 2, 15.

⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 38.

⁶¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 365–370.

⁶² Cf. EAD., *Holy Week. An Explanation of the Liturgy of Holy Week*, London et al. 1958, 93–101.

In the ancient religions of the Near East, ritual lamentation – particularly weeping – was central to festivals surrounding dying and rising gods. These cults symbolically attempted to come to terms with death, but, Rech argues, only within the realm of myth. Christian Easter, by contrast, is presented as the true and final answer to this ancient longing: through the death and resurrection of Christ, the mystery of death is decisively confronted and overcome. So, what the ancient world could only anticipate, Christianity fulfills.⁶³

Rech further emphasizes the role of the city as a symbol. The second responsory of the third Mass of the Blessed Virgin addresses the city directly: “Jerusalem... put on sackcloth and ashes, for in you was slain the Savior of Israel! Let your tears flow like a stream, day and night. Give yourself no rest; let your eyes find no relief.”⁶⁴ Here, the guilt, condemnation, and fall of the city are seen alongside its grace, redemption, and resurrection. Christ’s lament becomes, in prayer, a turning point, a passage from the earthly city to the true Ecclesia. Yet this transformation is only possible through the acceptance of suffering.

These reflections are in tune with Löhr’s thoughts, which she shares in the next issue of the *Jahresbriefe* of the same year. Löhr writes: “The symbol of the city is transformed into the Ecclesia when it [i. e., humanity] says ‘yes’ to suffering”, and she continues:

The death of Christ in the city – and the city, the Ecclesia, in the death of Christ! When we touch this sacred center of the drama of redemption, the deepest meaning of the Lamentations is revealed to us. Now, the singer of the Lamentations is shown to be the messenger of the “divine mysteries of Christ”. We enter the hidden place where the human and earthly, the historical and mystical dimensions of the Lamentations intersect, and the powerful currents of human suffering flowing through them are gathered into the chalice of Christ’s Passion. In this Passion, which the Ecclesia – humanity united in Christ – experiences with her Savior, the suffering of the world is brought to redemption.⁶⁵

⁶³ Cf. Photina RECH, Die Lamentationen der Kartage, in: Osterbrief 7 (1950) 16–30, here: 29.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁵ Aemiliana LÖHR, Heilige Spende, in: Weihnachtsbrief 8 (1950) 19–29, here: 27.

Through liturgical lament, especially during Holy Week, the Church does not merely mourn, but enters into the redemptive suffering of Christ. Deeply rooted in Scripture and ritual, lament gives voice to the Church's grief, linking it to the Passion of Christ and the tragedy of history. In particular, the image of the city is used as a symbol of both human failure and divine redemption.

This is vividly illustrated in Scripture, where the prophets address Zion. In Scripture, Zion is presented as a symbol of all the afflicted cities and peoples of the earth, as well as of humanity itself. The prophet addresses Zion and speaks the words of God: "How can I comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion?"⁶⁶ Thus, the symbol of the city is also associated with the genre of consolation.

4.3 Consolation

In *Der Tröster* ("The Comforter"),⁶⁷ Aemiliana Löhr develops the theological genre of consolation by continuing the rich Christian tradition of consolation letters. With a nod to the Gospel of John (14:16–17), she describes the divine-human relationship defined by Christ Himself for His disciples as one rooted in consolation. Löhr explores this relationship as the most intimate connection with God, one that is available to all at all times. Moreover, this relationship is embedded in liturgical action and is reflected in the Roman Missal.

Löhr's liturgical interpretation of *consolatio* further broadens and deepens this tradition. The source of consolation is Christ, yet consolation is enacted in the cultic activity of His Church. "The very mystery, the essence of consolation, is revealed at Easter and saturates our hearts at Pentecost."⁶⁸ And she adds, "All that the Church accomplishes in her liturgy is the work of consolation, which God performs through her."⁶⁹

The fountain of consolation flows to all. Consolation pours forth from the pierced chest of the Crucified One; yet only those lips that, with the

⁶⁶ Cf. Lam. 2:13; 1:2; 1:9; 1:16.

⁶⁷ Cf. Aemiliana LÖHR, *Der Tröster*, in: *Osterbrief 7* (1950) 33–47, here: 33.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

dying Christ, say “yes” to suffering, “yes” to death, “yes” to unconditional, blind faith in the inscrutable God – who loved the freedom of His creatures unto death but also loved life unto resurrection – can drink from it.⁷⁰

Consolation is semantically and theologically linked to Christ’s death, suffering, and resurrection. Through the imitation of Christ, the acceptance of suffering opens the way to consolation. Elsewhere Löhr directly connects participation in this divine relationship – along with the possibility of receiving consolation – to the capacity to accept suffering.

Only those who follow the Comforter into the divine dedication of the cross become partakers of this divine consolation. Those who, with the eye of faith, recognize the inconsolable Comforter-God, take Him by the hand, and make the journey with Him; those who dare to lay down their lives with Him in the hands of the avenging God.⁷¹

The consolation promised by the Lord is Christ Himself in the mystery. For the believer, the liturgy itself is a visible relationship with the invisible God; it is the very act of comfort. Löhr writes that consolation is not only a deeply personal relationship between the individual and God but also God’s relationship with His people.

This divine chest, that is, God’s fatherly love, provides comfort so abundantly that not only the chosen ones, the children of Israel, are filled with it, but also those who are far off – wanderers, outsiders, and the Gentiles – all the peoples of the earth are called to drink and find comfort in the heart of God. [...] God’s love cannot be limited: He desires to embrace the whole earth, all humanity, into the bosom of His comfort through His Messiah.⁷²

In the same article, Löhr describes how the concept of consolation is expressed in the Roman Missal. She presents the classical liturgical and sacramental vocabulary of the Roman tradition – which relates to the Church’s understanding of sacramental action – through the concept of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 35.

consolation, a notion extensively developed in Scripture and readily intelligible to every person.

Both suffering and the search for consolation are enduring features of humanity; in them people are confronted with the limits of what is expressible. However, Löhr thinks that, in and through the experience of these limits, an ardent desire is born for what lies beyond any limitation and what cannot be grasped in language. That, moreover, Löhr continues, is the point where there is a veil of rites through which the inexpressible mystery of God's saving deeds can be surmised. She writes that the Roman Missal represents "loving attempts" to define our relationship with the Lord. Behind words such as *actio* and *oblatio*, *celebratio* and *sollemnitatis*, *hostia* and *devotio*, *munus* and *sacrificium*, inherited from pagan antiquity, lies the reality of the divine presence, finally revealed in Christianity. The language of pagan rites, in which the human soul yearned for God and sought consolation, is fulfilled and imbued by mystery in the Christian liturgy: "A world that suffers and yearns, and God who comforts it."⁷³ Löhr highlights the following terms from the Missal's prayers:

- *Actus* → *Effectus* (Action → Effect). The very ritual of consecration leads to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The sacrament is not merely symbolic but transforms reality. In the sense of "consolation", it becomes solid and tangible. It offers consolation through which people gain confidence. "The root of the German word *Trost* is linked to the root of the word *trauen*. To be comforted means to gain confidence."⁷⁴
- *Fructus* → *Gustus* (Fruit → Foretaste). The Eucharist brings forth the fruit of salvation, and consolation is a foretaste of it. The Eucharist is not only a spiritual gift but also a living experience of consolation: an encounter with God through the physical reception of the Body and Blood of Christ.
- *Salutis Effectus* → *Frequentatio Mysteriorum* (The effect of salvation → Participation in the Mystery). These concepts emphasize the necessity of regular participation in the divine liturgy for the salvation

⁷³ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 36, quoting Friedrich KLUGE, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, n. p. 1915, 460.

of the soul. The reality of the consolation and salvation offered by Christ is strengthened through repeated participation in the mystery. A constant relationship with God through the divine liturgy is essential; thus, we receive true consolation.

- *Hostiae Commemoratio* → *Opus Redemptionis* (The commemoration of the sacrifice → The work of redemption). As it is said in the Mass: *Quoties huius hostiae commemoratio celebratur, opus nostrae redemptionis exercetur* (“Whenever the commemoration of this sacrifice is celebrated, the work of our redemption is accomplished”).⁷⁵ People do not merely recall Christ’s sacrifice in a symbolic or historical sense; His sacrifice is made present in the current moment. The liturgical remembrance of Calvary allows one to participate in it. Löhr writes: “Christ is a great reality and offers consolation – a consolation that is not an empty word, but a full reality, a guarantee of new life.”⁷⁶

Using the example of the sacramental lexicon, Löhr demonstrates that liturgy is not just a collection of prayers and symbols but a real encounter with God. The mysteries change reality; they are not merely “signs” but acts of divine grace. Salvation itself is an ongoing process that requires constant participation in the divine reality. Thus, Löhr argues, the Roman Missal is not merely a book of prayers but a concrete path to the comforting God through the liturgy. “Outer form and inner event, ritual action and divine power come together to describe, however inadequately, the indescribable.”⁷⁷

Whether in poetic reflections or in theological prose, Löhr’s writings consistently point to the transformative power of mystery. In the genre of consolation, she affirms that true comfort is found in intimate communion with God the Father, mediated through the liturgy. Letters on suffering emphasize that human pain acquires meaning only within the mystery of Christ’s sacrifice. Her mystical reflections, in turn, are always anchored in

⁷⁵ Ibid., 34. For the use of these terms Löhr relies on a study by Odo CASEL, *Beiträge zu römischen Orationen*, in: *JLw* 11 (1931) 35–45. A list of Latin terms can be found on page 45 of this article.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 34.

concrete liturgical moments – Christmas, Pentecost – when the divine presence breaks into time and transforms the human person.

5 *Conclusion and Further Prospects*

The *Jahresbriefe* present a wealth of material that reflects the diversity of its authors, each one of them offering a distinct theological and spiritual perspective, yet united by a shared commitment to exploring mystery through liturgical experience and literary form. Despite the variety of approaches and genres, all contributions draw from a common source – the liturgical celebration – and are nourished by its texts, rituals, and signs. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that the journal's formal and thematic diversity embodies a rich and multifaceted theological vision, which ultimately revolves around one simple fundamental insight: mystery is not something obscure or hidden. On the contrary, it acts as an open passage, inasmuch as it creates a space for encounter and communion with God, for participation in the Kingdom, and for shared compassion and transformation. Our contention is that this profound as well as encompassing vision is held together by a common conviction: the primacy of liturgy as the very heart of Christian life and theology.

From a historical perspective, the nuns of Herstelle in their *Jahresbriefe* not only present a remarkable continuation of the doctrine of the mystery, as it was particularly developed by their spiritual director, Odo Casel, but also theological reflections on major ecclesiological developments of the 20th century. These include the liturgical reforms of 1951–1955 and the Second Vatican Council. Having studied the nuns' take on these important events and evolutions, we are convinced that their journal provides us today with a unique opportunity to understand how the Liturgical Movement took shape at the concrete level of a religious community. Clearly, the sisters' liturgical practice and publications did not place them at the forefront of the Liturgical Movement, and what they wrote and published remains largely unknown. However, even if their impact was limited, their ideas reveal a depth of understanding that is truly remarkable.

At the end of this exploration, we dare to suggest that further research into the *Jahresbriefe* is a desideratum for liturgical theological

scholarship today. We think that this goes beyond the need for historical accuracy and reconstruction. The study of the nuns of Herstelle's theology is not only of the kind of something nice to know – that it existed – or of an addendum to the historiography of the Liturgical Movement in Western Europe after World War II. Above and beyond that, an engagement with the theological thinking as it appears in the *Jahresbriefe* offers a much-needed model for creativity in liturgical scholarship where innovation rhymes with loyalty to the tradition, imagination with analysis, mystagogy with academia, and Kingdom with Church. All too often, these realities are seen as binaries. The nuns of Herstelle Abbey, however, convincingly show that there can be harmony in and through these tensions and paradoxes. It is the liturgy itself and the way it carries mystery through history that taught them this.

Abbreviations

EThS	Erfurter Theologische Studien
JLw	Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft
PTHe	Praktische Theologie heute
SC	Sacrosanctum Concilium
SVSQ	St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly
SVTQ	St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly

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