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Caritasgeschichte zwischen katholischem Milieu und Wohlfahrtsstaat.

Das Seraphische Liebeswerk (1889–1971), Paderborn [u. a.] 2008.

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For about 15 years now, the development of the Catholic Church and of Catholicism in Germany during the 19th and 20th centuries has attracted increased interest in the realms of social history, the history of mentalities, and – most recently – cultural history. This research has focused on the relationship between Catholicism and modernity, as well as the emergence and development of a Catholic milieu in modern society. This history of the Seraphisches Liebeswerk (Seraphic Charity; literally “Work of Love”) expands on that research and injects into the discussion two topics that have so far received little attention: the history of monastic orders and of *Caritas* (Catholic Charities) as elements of the emerging modern German welfare state.

The Seraphisches Liebeswerk, which derives its name from the life and works of St. Francis of Assisi, was (and still is) a charity of the Capuchin Order for “religiously and morally endangered children.” “Saving children’s souls is the most divine of all work”: this and similar appeals launched the triumphal march, in the 1890s, of a Catholic association that is largely unknown today. In 1889, members of the Franciscan Third Order under the leadership of the Capuchin Father Cyprian Fröhlich founded the Seraphisches Liebeswerk in Ehrenbreitstein near Koblenz, thereby launching the unprecedented success story of a Catholic organization that connected personal religious motivations to charitable donations and children’s welfare. Within one year, over 10,000 Catholic believers joined this association. Even separation into Rhenish-Westphalian and Bavarian regional chapters in 1893 could not slow the upward momentum of its growth. Approximately 400,000 Catholics supported the social concerns of the association by 1914, evidently attracted, at least in part, by its rich “spiritual treasure of grace” (geistlichen Gnadenschatz). The obverse of this upswing consisted of fierce struggles over monetary donations within the Catholic milieu.

By that point, the Rhine-Westphalia chapter had already undergone a remarkable transformation from a charitable collection society to an organization for Catholic education under the direction of Father Cyrillus Reinheimer (1869–1924). Under its new educational orientation, the Rhine-Westphalia chapter did establish its own children’s homes but its main emphasis was on finding foster families for its charges. Above all, the economically turbulent years of the Weimar Republic necessitated permanent financial belt-tightening. Since

educating children in the Liebeswerk's own homes proved extremely difficult to finance, finding foster families for the children in its care assumed even greater importance. Having transformed itself into an educational association, the Liebeswerk also found itself forced to declare its position on state social programs for children and adolescents. That, in turn, produced a variety of tensions and conflicts concerning the compatibility of Catholic identity with the expectations of the welfare state.

Economic difficulties continued to jeopardize the Seraphisches Liebeswerk during the Third Reich. Measures pushed through by Nazi leaders aimed to eliminate Catholic associations as a social factor. In 1939, the association's journal, which had served as the most important link between its leadership and members, was effectively banned, having been refused the necessary allocations of paper.

In 1945, following World War II, the association had declined to only about 50,000 paying members. A temporary post-war upswing in memberships proved short-lived. The erosion of the Catholic social milieu since the 1950s hit the Liebeswerk especially hard; its religious underpinnings dwindled and even its name was no longer understood. Nonetheless, the story of the Liebeswerk's history in the Federal Republic cannot simply be reduced to this decline in importance. As during the Weimar years, the social-market economy of the Federal Republic opened public sources of funding that enabled the association to successfully modernize its homes and renew its pedagogical efforts. The Seraphisches Liebeswerk thus retains an important place among the social organizations helping children and adolescents in the Koblenz district even today.