



AD How are you, you must have been busy baking today?

SR [Laughter] Oh, yes, today I was busy, but not baking.

JZ What have you been up to today?

SR First of all, I wrote letters for our oblates, but not for the baked ones. There is a group of people who join the monastery spiritually and they are also called oblates. The term *oblatus* is actually the one who is offered, which can be said for the bread offered in the service, but also for the people who dedicate themselves, so to speak.

AD Schwester Ruth, could you introduce yourself for our readers?

SR I was born in 1960 in Berlin, in East Berlin, and if you want to know my age, I am now exactly 60 years old. I grew up in a Catholic family, which is why I also grew up in the church, and attended a normal school in the German Democratic Republic up to the 10th grade. While I was training to be a kindergarten teacher, I took my Abitur (Baccalaureate) at the Volkshochschule (Adult Education Center) and worked in a Catholic kindergarten for four years. In 1983, at the age of 23, I entered the convent. I thought that was the end of life, so to speak, and that apart from praying and working, there wouldn't be much more. But life here is more eventful and colourful than I thought. In the monastery I studied theology for five years, graduating with a diploma, and completed two additional training courses — for spiritual guidance and for retreat guidance.

In the convent, I am now responsible for public relations [laughter], which came naturally to me because I was the first person to use a computer during my studies. I look after the oblate community. I am the convent librarian [laughter], where I expand the collection beyond the spiritual for the general education of the sisters, and I am a cellarer — the keeper of the cellars; that's the one who has the administration in the convent. I am the administrator of the money transactions in the convent [laughter]. For that I took an additional crash course in business administration, which was also fun. Of course, the subject matter is far removed

from theology. I have held that office since 2018, but am still learning. But, you can imagine, my day is well filled.

JZ You are something like the manager of the monastery.

SR Yes, if you like, but in very different areas, which I like very much.

AD And then there is the host bakery in the Alexanderdorf monastery. How was that established?

SR The communion bakery has existed since the first years of the monastery. The sisters who came to Alexanderdorf from Berlin in 1934 from the nursing field founded something like a Christian commune here and discovered the ideal of Benedictine life. Half of the sisters decided against their learned profession and thus decided to found the convent. From the initial accounts, the sisters were very poor as they no longer had an income as nurses. There was an existing garden, but in the state of Brandenburg there is really only sand and thus no fertile soil. So, they could not live off the yield from the garden and the convent was so poor that the bishop wanted to abolish it twice. Therefore, the diocese, the administrative unit of the church, initiated the bakery of hosts in the Alexanderdorf monastery. By selling the hosts, the sisters had a secure source of income.

JZ What equipment is used to bake the hosts?

SR In the early days, there was some kind of a waffle iron for making waffles, not an ordinary table waffle iron, but a really solid, cast-iron one that was anchored to the floor. It was difficult to open and close the lids again and again. Four irons could be used at the same time by two people with hard physical labour. Shortly after the fall of the Wall, we were able to buy a machine with twelve integrated irons — a retrofitted waffle machine, so to speak. Hosts are smooth and waffles are always ridged, but the waffle irons in our machine are smooth and fully automatic, so now only one person has to sit in front of it. The batter is automatically sucked in and sprayed onto the iron, and this iron then closes automatically. Everything then rotates continuously and when the iron





reaches the sister again, so to speak, it opens automatically and all she has to do is take the baked plate out and examine it. So, the plate is good or it’s not good — then it’s put in a rack for further processing and moistened overnight and so on.

JZ Are the hosts then cut out individually from the baking plate?

SR We used to have a so-called hand iron and the hosts had to be cut out manually. That was very exhausting. But with the new machine we also got cutters and a drill, which made the work easier.

AD Very artisanal.

SR Yes, exactly, they are artisanal machines that are converted for the host bakeries.

JZ Especially for host production?

SR No, we got our wafer machine from the firm Franz Haas Waffelmaschinen. But to make the hosts completely smooth, we had it converted by the company Heinrich Kissing. This company is actually specialised in the production of medals, but they reworked our machine to meet our needs. The main aim was to make the inner surface of the twelve baking irons completely smooth. The machine makes the baking process easier, but manual labour is still necessary. All the hosts are quality controlled. There are different sizes, the normal small ones that are distributed in the service for the faithful and the large ones for the priests. The small ones all have to be drilled. After drilling, the small hosts go into a basket. The basket is made of plastic, like the kind you take shopping. When it is full, the hosts are thrown onto a table. The table looks like a changing table with ridges on the side so that nothing rolls off. There is a drawer on this table, but the bottom of this drawer is made of wire mesh. Like with Cinderella, the good and the bad are sorted out. The good ones go into the drawer and the crumbs sometimes fall off when you jiggle the drawer a little. The bad ones are sorted out to the side and if you are well-trained, a basket like this takes three quarters of an hour to check.

JZ And then it’s about the form, or what does good or bad mean in that case?

SR It may be that bubbles or oil stains have appeared during the baking process, because the plates of the irons must always have a certain layer of oil. These hosts are sorted out and also those that are poorly punched and drilled. Yes, and the difference between punching and drilling — the thicker bread hosts are drilled in the stack. The thinner white hosts are punched out plate by plate. And when drilling, about 15 hosts are placed on top of each other and if you put the machine too close, half-

moons can appear. We make sure that every single host is really smooth and perfectly round. No mistakes, so to speak.

AD So, the process requires some practice?

SR Yes, but it is a simple job that can be learned quickly. All sisters who are new to the convent are first assigned to the host bakery. It is a simple job, but important and meaningful for our livelihood.

JZ You said that the soil in Brandenburg is very sandy — what about the agricultural culture, where do you get your flour from and what is in the host? I assume water and flour?

SR Wheat does not grow at all in our area, so we could not be self-sufficient. Nevertheless, there is a mill in the neighbouring village of Kummersdorf and we get our flour from them. The hosts consist of wheat flour type 405 and water. Nothing more. No salt, no yeast, no flavouring or anything else, just flour and water.

JZ Who buys your hosts, and how has the customer base expanded since the fall of communism?

SR So, the customers are the congregations that celebrate church services and, from a historical point of view, of course the Catholic congregations. There were also other monasteries in East Germany that baked hosts, for example the Cistercian nuns in Lusatia, or the Franciscan nuns in Erfurt. Due to a lack of staff, because there was no one left to do the job, these host bakeries have closed down in recent decades and we have taken over their clientele. At least 90% of all Catholic parishes in Eastern Germany order from us. But demand is still declining because fewer services are being celebrated and fewer people go to church. There are also Protestant host bakeries. In Dresden, for example, there is one run by the deaconesses. However, these tend to produce on a smaller scale for their own use and for the congregations in the surrounding area. In the Protestant church, communion is not celebrated as often as in the Catholic church, so the demand for hosts is smaller than here. Protestant congregations are also our customers, but they don’t order as much, and so how has that changed with the clientele? Of course, there are also monasteries in West Germany with host bakeries, and I know of one business that produces on a global scale. People there have discovered this and are also doing it professionally. I don’t want to talk about competition here, but for monasteries the sale of hosts is often a question of existence and a source of income.

There are other monasteries west of the Elbe that bake hosts,

but there is still a number of customers there who order our hosts. The large monastery of Eibingen on the Rhine, with St. Hildegard, ordered hosts from us after the fall of the Wall, as a kind of Aufbau Ost Hilfe (Reconstruction East Aid), in order to support us. A large inner-city congregation in Frankfurt am Main also did this for the same reason. In the time since, though, they have changed their orientation in order to support their local host bakeries.

AD I noticed from your website that you also have international deliveries.

SR The international orders come from German priests and bishops working on missions in the former countries of the Soviet Union, since church life has been possible again there after 1989. We deliver to this area, but it is only small quantities of hosts, which are often donated by German priests on the basis of patronage. The costs for shipping and customs are expensive; usually the postage is more expensive than the contents. We have three or four other buyers in the former Eastern Bloc, but these are relationships that already come from the former GDR and have continued since then. We also supply the Catholic military chaplaincy with hosts for missions abroad.

JZ Since the monastery mainly earns its income from the production of hosts, I wanted to ask about the quantity they produce and distribute.

SR On a normal baking day, 84 kg of flour are used to make about 80,000 small hosts. However, as I told you before, quite a lot is sorted out, so that only about half of the processed dough becomes a host. Between the baking days there is always a day for further processing and yes, the needs and orders vary of course. Now in corona times, the sales of the hosts have gone down by a quarter, which is quite considerable. In addition, the turnover has also decreased over the years, because the frequency of services is decreasing, fewer believers go to services, and therefore fewer hosts are needed, yes.

AD But then because of the reduced sales caused by corona, you also developed the Knusperbrot (crispy bread). How did that happen?

SR We are a relatively small monastery and have these classic monastic fields of activity, such as the host bakery and the guest house. Because of the first lockdown, we had to close the guesthouse, which meant that we had almost no income and despite state aid it was difficult. Due to the pandemic, the demand for hosts also decreased, because few to no services were celebrated. The congregations that had a host subscription with us then cancelled it for the time being. The question was, can we make ends meet? However, our abbess had this really great idea: if we can’t sell communion wafers but want to bake something, we have to do something different — and then she came up with this monastery crispbread. There are some plates that are unsuitable for further processing, the so-called Hostienbruch. The sisters usually have them for their first morning coffee or tea, very early at half past five, before they start praying, so that they have something light in their stomachs before breakfast. The host is very popular, crispy and tastes really good — you can’t imagine. The baking process for the hosts and the crispy bread is the same, only the further processing differs. For the hosts, the boards are moistened because otherwise they would splinter when punched or drilled. There would be no smooth edges, so they need to be soft and

are moistened before they are drilled and punched. So that the hosts do not become mouldy before packaging, they must of course be dried again. You can taste that the communion wafers were once moist — but it’s not about experiencing a culinary delight. So, for the Knusperbrot, these baking sheets are not moistened, but scored and then broken into smaller pieces. And these wafers are really crispy. That’s an interesting thing about bread — when you chew bread for a long time, you taste a sweetness. I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed that. And it’s the same with the Knusperbrot.

JZ And what feedback have you received for your new product? Who orders it?

SR We get all kinds of feedback from people about why they take the Knusperbrot. For example, an elderly lady wrote to me that she always needs it early when she has to take her pills, before breakfast when her stomach is no longer supposed to be empty. Others top their Knusperbrot like an open sandwich. We have an indulgent customer who regularly tops it with a slice of cheese and thin ham. Around Easter time, where the Lord’s Supper actually originated, there were also Knusperbrot orders from churches. Church services were cancelled because of corona and parishioners were given gifts so that they could also break bread together at home. In Christianity, breaking bread together is fundamental to experiencing community. This is given in the service, or also when one is alone, so that one can connect with the others in thought.

AD And what meaning does the host have for you personally?

SR Yes, that’s a difficult question. I have thought a lot about it. I could of course give you a lecture on Eucharistic doctrine [laughter]... But I can tell you a story. We celebrate Mass every day and Eucharist and Communion every day and we receive the host every day. That’s everyday life for us, it’s natural then that it’s not always a huge thing, you know. For us as Catholics, the host is the...how should I put it, the element with which we can be connected with Christ or become connected. In other words, we have communion with him and at the same time with all the others who are also celebrating this meal in this service. For me personally, I don’t go into raptures every time I celebrate the Eucharist, I would say, but it is this way in which we and I can have communion with Jesus. It’s a more intense experience and a less intense experience. I had an intense experience in 2018 on the Camino de Santiago. There was a Benedictine station and when I entered the church at 10 am, I didn’t know that the service had already started at 9 am and that I was late. The Father was just covering the altar and I thought, what a pity. But then I approached the Father and said “Yes, I am Schwester Ruth from Alexanderdorf”, “Ah, Alexanderdorf” and “Hmm”, so we got to know each other and then he asked “Do you want to receive the communion?” I had to think for a moment whether I wanted to do that outside the service, but then I said, “Yes, with pleasure.” Then the Father offered me a little personal prayer and he gave me communion. It was a great experience. On that day I walked very hard and without any problems, and I managed to cover a difficult distance with ease. I had such an awareness that Jesus was with me. And I like to remember that again and again. But how individual Christians and also the sisters experience communion, I think, is very personal.