

THE VOW

...AND THE 'FOUNDING
DOCUMENT' OF THE
OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY



“The Lord is with me;
I will not be afraid”

(Ps 118.6)

Bestünde



ERZDIOZESE MÜNCHEN
UND FREISING

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Dorffort

DEAR READER...

Hemmed in by mountains lies the village of Oberammergau, home to 5000 people. It is dominated not only by the rocky peak of the Kofel, which towers above it, but also by the sign of the cross. The cross even appears in the village coat of arms, a mark of the close association between Oberammergau and its Passion Play, for which this small village is known all over the world. This is what draws hundreds of thousands of people here every ten years. And it's this that sets the rhythm of life in Oberammergau itself.

Just as significant as the Passion Play itself is the memory of its origin. "How do you know there's a God?" a nine-year old girl asked me, just after we'd talked about the Passion Play vow in an RE lesson. "Because he made the plague stop when the people promised to put on the Passion Play", came the immediate answer from another pupil. Well, proof of God's existence it is not, at least in the way this pupil meant it. It's clear that His existence cannot be indisputably proved – but there are hints and signs which point in that direction.

And the experience which underlies the Oberammergau play certainly provides at least one of those signs: the crucial significance of the Biblical events portrayed on stage. All those years ago, the people of the village, who were undergoing their own terrible suffering, decided to put their trust in One who had experienced suffering in his own body, but through whom God showed that He can transform even the deepest suffering. That trust was not disappointed; and the vow by which the villagers confirmed their trust was the start of a tradition which has been upheld for almost 400 years.

The aim of this booklet is to provide a fuller introduction to the origin and lasting significance of this tradition.

Dr. Angelika Winterer
Pastoral Care Leader, Oberammergau parish church

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THE “FOUNDING DOCUMENT”

OF THE OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY



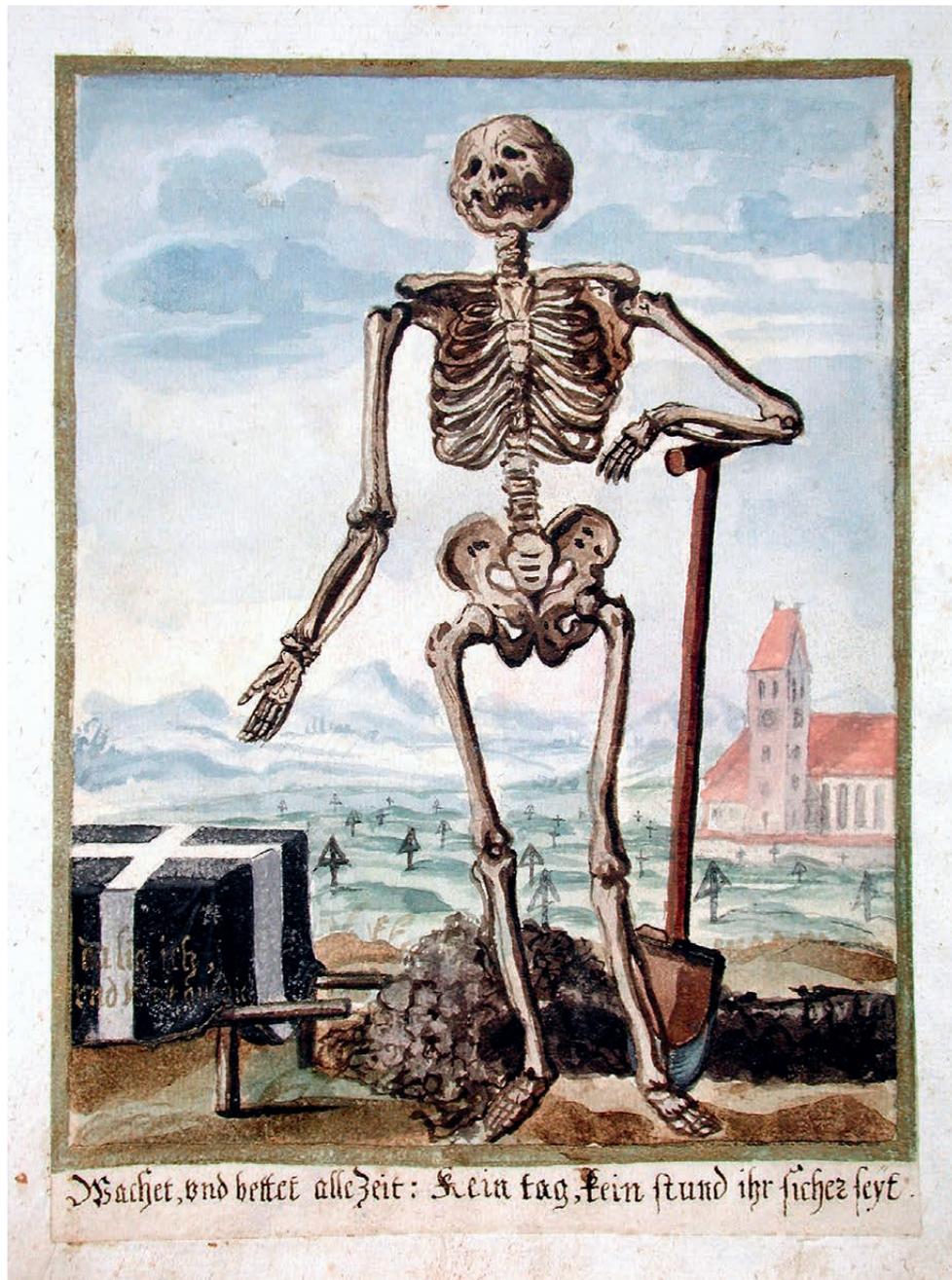
“Mindful of the Vow, and faithful to the solemn promise of our ancestors, Oberammergau will re-enact the Passion Play in the year of Our Lord....” With these words, uttered a year or so before the event, the villagers of Oberammergau renew the promise to tell the story of Christ’s Passion once again – a promise which dates back to a vow made in 1633.

In those dark days, in the turmoil of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), bubonic plague raged across large parts of Bavaria, including Oberammergau. The village chronicle, written in 1730 but sadly since vanished, reported: “In their suffering, the Village Councils of six and twelve met together and gave their solemn oath that they would perform the tragedy of Christ’s Passion every ten years. And from that day on not a single person died.” The exact wording of the vow itself, which can be dated to October 1633, has not been preserved.

The only historical document which relates to these events, and which supports the details of the chronicle, is the Register of Deaths of the parish church, in which are recorded the names of over 80 villagers who fell victim to the plague between September 1632 and October 1633. This “plague register” is regarded as the “foundation document” of the Oberammergau Passion Play.



The Passion Play Vow, 1633
(Fresco by Karl Gries, based on designs by
Hans Heinzeller, on the Heinzeller-House
in Oberammergau, 1959)



Inscription: "Ever watch, ever pray.
Never safe – no hour, no day."

Death – an image in the register of deaths of
the parish of Schönau for the years 1712-1827
(Archive of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising)

THE PARISH RECORDS OF THE ARCHDIOCESE

The register of deaths for the parish of Oberammergau for the years 1621 to 1660, the so-called "plague register", is the only source still preserved which, albeit indirectly, provides us with information on the origins of the Passion Play.

In 1563 the Council of Trent stipulated that official records should be kept in every parish in the Roman Catholic Church. By contrast, state registry offices have only been in existence, in Bavaria at least, since 1876. For three hundred years, local priests were the only ones who maintained a record of births, marriages and deaths in their parish registers. In compiling these records, they created a unique collection of information which today is an important source for research into family histories, into local, regional and social history and folklore, and for answering many other questions. Beside the personal stories contained in them, they refer to historical events – including the plague during the Thirty Years' War.

Originally, the records were maintained by each parish priest and kept in the parish office or the parish archive. For safe keeping, these volumes, which today are of historical importance, are now kept centrally in diocesan archives. The Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, for instance, preserves over 10,000 volumes of historic parish records from every parish in the diocese. They are available to view on request by anyone who is interested. In 2019, the entire collection was digitised and is now available for study on-line, at any time, anywhere in the world: www.erzbistum-muenchen.de/archiv-und-bibliothek

West

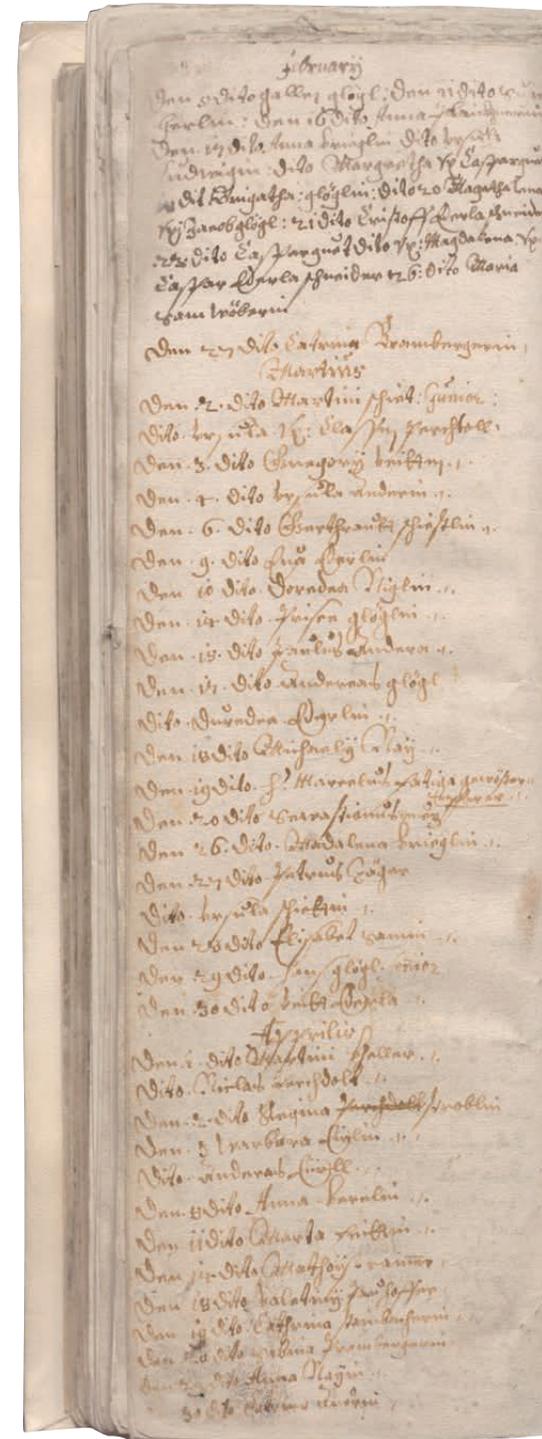
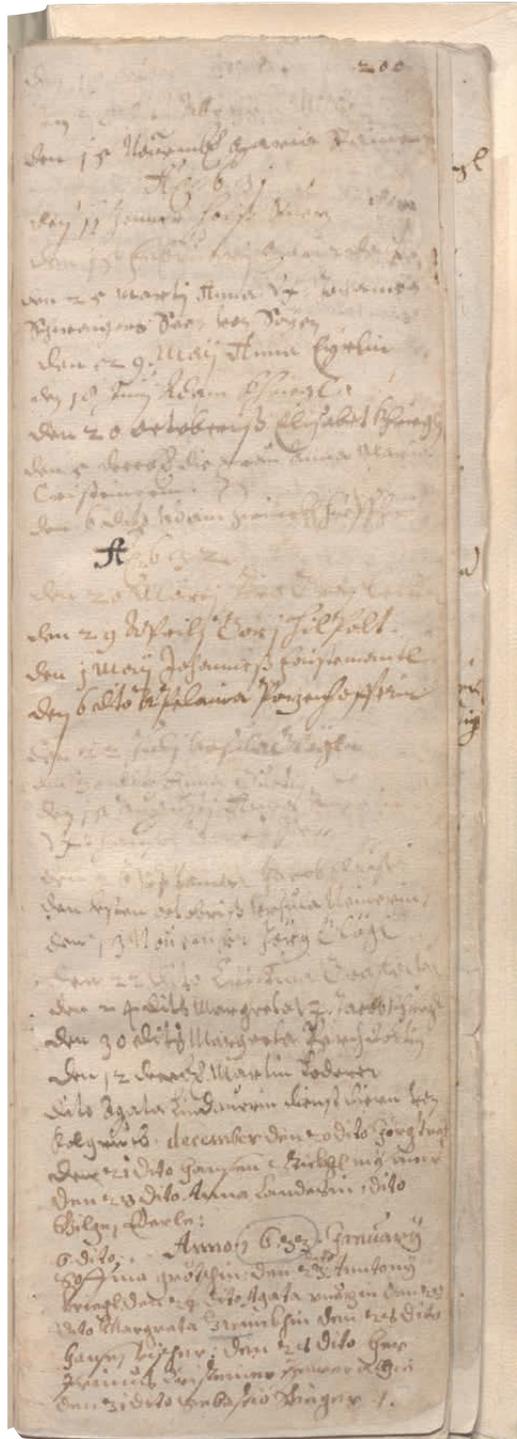
THE PLAGUE DEATHS

1633

Note to English readers:
 in the register, the surnames of
 females have the feminine ending
 -in added to the family name,
 as was customary at the time.

Anno 1633 January

- 6th ditto,
- Soffina Grötschin, 23rd ditto Anntony
 Kriegl, 24th ditto Agata Ruezin, 25th
 ditto Margreta Zwinkhin, 28th ditto
 Hansen Vischer, 28th ditto Mr.
 Primus Cristeiner, priest of this place,
 31st ditto Sebastio Rieger.



February

- 5th ditto Gallen Glögl, 11th ditto Susana
 Herlin, 16th ditto Anna Plaikhnerin,
 17th ditto Anna Kriegl, ditto Ursula
 Ludwigin, ditto Margrethe, ux[or] (wife of) Caspar Guet,
 18th ditto Brigatha Glöglin, ditto 20th Magathalena,
 uxor (wife of) Jacob Glögl, 21st ditto Cristoff Ederla,
 tailor, 23rd ditto Caspar Guet, ditto Magdalena,
 wife of Caspar Ederla, tailor, 26th ditto Maria
 Samwöberin,

27th ditto Catrina Brambergerin

Martius (March)

- 2nd ditto Martini Schiet junior,
 ditto Ursula, uxor (wife of) Classen Perchtoll,
 3rd ditto Gregorii Veitten,
 4th ditto Ursula Anderin
 6th ditto Gerthraut Schiestlin,
 9th ditto Eva Ederlin
 10th ditto Dorodea Niglin,
 14th ditto Prisen Glöglin,
 15th ditto Paulus Adera,
 17th ditto Andreas Glögl,
 ditto Duredra Ederlin,
 18th ditto Michaely Nay,
 19th ditto Mr. Marcelus Fatiga, former priest,
 20th ditto Sewastianus Ruez,
 26th ditto Madalena Kriegl, in
 27th ditto Petrus Jäger,
 ditto Ursula Schiettin,
 28th ditto Elisabet Samin,
 29th ditto Hans Glögl senior,
 30th ditto Veitt Ederla.

Aprilis (April)

- 1st ditto Martini Kheller,
 ditto Niclas Perchdolt,
 2nd ditto Regina [deleted: Perchdolt] Stroblin
 3rd ditto Warbara Eirlin,
 ditto Anderas Eürll,
 8th ditto Anna Kerelin
 11th ditto Marta Feittin,
 14th ditto Mathoys Rain[n]er,
 18th ditto Valetiny Pauhoffer,
 19th ditto Cathrina Stainbacherin,
 20th ditto Sabina Prambergerin
 29th ditto Anna Nayin
 30th ditto Catrina Auerin



The “Crucifix of the Vow” in the parish church of Oberammergau

THE “CRUCIFIX OF THE VOW”

IN THE PARISH CHURCH

A further silent witness of the Passion Play vow is a large wooden cross in the parish church of Oberammergau: the “Crucifix of the Vow”. Tradition has it that this is the actual cross in front of which the villagers made their solemn promise in 1633 that, every ten years, they would re-enact “the story of the suffering, death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ”. Originally, the cross stood in the cemetery next to the church, where the Passion Play took place until the year 1820.

A prayer before the Crucifix of the Vow

*Lord Jesus,
you came into the world to be near us,
to feel the joys and hopes, the sorrows and fears of human life.
For this, people crucified you.
You know the sufferings of our lives and our world –
because you experienced them in your own body.
But you also overcame them.
And so your cross became a symbol of salvation.*

*For this reason, it was to you our ancestors turned in their desperate need and fear.
They prayed to you for help,
to rescue them from death and the terrors of the plague.
You heard them, you accepted their promise
to continue to re-enact in the Passion Play
your life, death and resurrection.*

*Now I come to you, with my own sorrows and needs – you know them all.
And I ask you: Be near me.
Give me the strength and acceptance to endure what is hard.
Come to me in all the tangles and muddles of my life.*

*Confident that you will hear and help me, too,
I will listen to your words, and base my life on them.*

Fr. Thomas Gröner, parish priest of Oberammergau

IN GOOD TIMES

...AS IN BAD TIMES

The villagers of Oberammergau first fulfilled their vow in 1634, and have kept it faithfully ever since, with astonishing determination. Since 1680, the play has taken place in round decades, and only twice in almost 400 years has the play not been performed. On both occasions this was due to external factors; in 1770 it fell victim to a general ban by the state, and in 1940 it could not take place because of the Second World War. On every other occasion the villagers succeeded in overcoming resistance to the play. In 1780 they managed to obtain a special permit which had been refused them in 1770. When this privilege was again withdrawn in 1810, they battled until they were finally allowed to perform "The Passion", as they call it, a year later. The consequences of the First World War made a performance in 1920 impossible, but, rather than cancel it altogether, the villagers simply postponed it till 1922.

Times have changed: nowadays about 100 performances play to packed houses. And financially things have changed too: whereas at one time, citizens had to fund the Passion Play from their own pockets, it has now become a valuable source of income. Nonetheless, what drives many people to take part is the same vow first made in 1633: again and again you hear people say "We must fulfil our vow".

The cemetery, Oberammergau –
the first venue of the Passion Play (fresco
by Gerhard Ester on the Bierling House
In Oberammergau, 1970)



A VOW IS

...A HANGOVER FROM THE PAST?

But – what is a vow? A hangover from the dim and distant past? At best, people tend to think that a vow might possibly have some sort of role to play for someone entering a monastic order and taking a vow of poverty, chastity and obedience. More rarely still, we encounter a particular sort of piety when people give thanks for an exam passed, or an illness overcome, by undertaking a pilgrimage, and possibly even leaving a votive offering or gift at a shrine.



Votive tablet (1785)
from Kappel church
Now in the priest's house,
Unterammergau



A marriage ceremony – image in the register
of marriages of the parish
of Schönau for the years 1712 – 1827
(Archive of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising)

A VOW IS

...A PROMISE

What we mean by a “vow” is, at root, something which everyone can recognise from everyday life: a vow is a promise – nothing more, nothing less. Even though a vow is a promise made to God, it is still a promise. And we often make promises. It might be a simple, everyday promise, an undertaking to do what someone else asks. But it might also be a commitment with far-reaching, possibly even legal consequences. In such undertakings, the morally binding nature inherent even in informal promises becomes particularly important. An obvious example is the marriage vow. Another is the signing of a contract. For instance, someone joining an organisation signs a form, as witness to their undertaking to pay their membership fees punctually and regularly, to play an active part in the club’s activities, and to abide by and uphold its values and aims, and so on.

A VOW IS

...AN AID TO UNDERSTANDING

There are other sorts of promises as well that are made these days: a football fan pledges that, if “his” club is promoted, he will get a tattoo of the club crest. Promises such as this are almost religious in nature, and demonstrate distinct parallels with a vow. Quite often, they involve the invocation of supposedly higher powers to help bring about the longed-for result.

In addition, promises like this are a declaration of faith and a mark of loyalty. For instance, when our football fan promises to have his club’s crest immortalised in a tattoo – always assuming the club is successful, of course – he does so in the fervent belief that his team really can and will achieve success: he believes in his team. And if he finally sees his faith rewarded and keeps his promise accordingly, he’s paying homage to the team and professing his allegiance to it.

The plague (fresco by Karl Gries on the Heinzeller-House in Oberammergau, 1959)



A VOW IS

...AN EXPRESSION OF FAITH

A vow is very similar to this sort of promise. Depending on its form it may be like the example above from the world of sport, where the keeping of a promise is dependent on the meeting of a condition. Or, to give another example, like the Oberammergau Passion Play vow: “If such-and-such happens, then” At first glance, this may look like some low bargaining along the lines of the ancient Roman principle of “do ut des” – literally, “I give so that you may give”, or “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”. But underlying both of them is an expression of faith. The person who makes a promise to God in return for something happening is certain that God can and will bring about what he or she is asking. They have faith in God. As far as the vow made by the villagers of Oberammergau in 1633 is concerned, they promised that, if the plague ceased, they would perform the story of the Passion. This vow was an expression of their faith, their firm belief that, even when it seemed that no-one could help and all was lost, God could still save.

A VOW IS

...AN EXPRESSION OF THANKFULNESS AND PRAISE

When someone’s heartfelt prayers are answered, and they do what they had promised to do in return, it’s not just them keeping their part of the bargain. It’s much more than that: it’s an expression of their thankfulness and celebration. So when, after the plague had ended, the villagers of Oberammergau performed the Passion Play, it was their way of praising God whose help they had so recently experienced. They declared their faith publicly in a God who can be moved by human suffering and who, through the person of his Son born into humanity, shares that suffering, bears it with human beings, and ultimately overcomes it. This is the God described in the Bible, in particular in the Gospel accounts of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.



Crucifixion scene by Johann von Halbig on the Osterbichl in Oberammergau, a gift of King Ludwig II of Bavaria to the village of Oberammergau, 1875

A VOW IS

...TO BE HANDED ON?

18 The Oberammergau Passion Play, performed down the generations, presents this God afresh. It allows us to see God with new eyes in our own day. And, in view of all the hurt and brokenness in this world and in the lives of every single one of us, that makes complete sense. Of course, today's villagers are not obliged to fulfil the promise made by their forebears nearly 400 years ago, to keep it alive – a vow is only ever binding for the person who makes it. Yet they can, as descendants of those people, choose to take on the vow for themselves. They make it their own, and follow the path of the vow themselves. This is what the villagers of Oberammergau do in the ceremony of what is called “the Renewing of the Vow”.

In fulfilling this renewed vow, they are clearly not only expressing their thanks and praise to God for saving the village from the plague in 1633. When they take up their forebears' vow for themselves, they do so above all because they have had similar experiences of rescue and help in their own lives, over and over again. All down the ages – and here, and now – people in need can discover that, if they trust God, they will know His help, presence and care. Just as it says in Psalm 118.6:

“The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.”

And that is a very good reason to tell once again the “history of the suffering, death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ”, to celebrate this God, and in doing so, to bring comfort and support, courage and hope to others.



Hands raised in the vow
(fresco by Karl Gries on
the Heinzeller-House in
Oberammergau, 1959)

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Uns geht Fußball unter die Haut. Fans zeigen ihre Fußball-Tattoos, in: Sport Bild (32/2017), S. 46-49.

SOURCES

Text: Dr. Angelika Winterer, Pastoral Care Leader of the Parish of Oberammergau
Text, p7: Dr Roland Götz, Archivist of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising
Prayer, p.11 Fr. Thomas Gröner, Parish Priest of Oberammergau

Title page: View of Oberammergau and the Balenser Cross (by the sculptor Georg Meßmer sen.) from the Wiesmahd path near Unterammergau

Photos: Title page, pp. 5, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18: Christian Schraner, Freising.
pp. 6, 8/9, 14: Archive of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising
p. 10: Erwin Reiter, Haslach



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