

To Do What the Day Demands

The Life of
Father Kaspar
Stanggassinger

OTTO WEISS

*Translated from the second corrected German edition
by Tony Kiesenhofer*

*Edited by Paul Laverdure and a
team of Redemptorists*



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INTRODUCTION

Father Kaspar Stanggassinger died on September 26, 1899, before he reached the age of 29. He had done his duty. He was a beloved educator. He did not accomplish anything extraordinary. After his death, when some of his colleagues started to gather information about his life, Father Kaspar Stamm, who was held in high esteem by the Bavarian Redemptorists, exclaimed, “Why all the ruckus? He was a good, young priest.”¹ Therefore, his burial was not any different from that of others at the monastery at Gars on the Inn River. Since he had been transferred there just a few weeks before his death, the local population barely noticed his death. Walking behind his casket were only his relatives, his Redemptorist confreres, his students, and a few diocesan priests from Munich.²

Unusual, however, was that even decades later, he was not forgotten, neither among the Redemptorists nor among so many others. His biography was published only three years after his death, and a short time later this biography saw a second edition. As was the custom at the death of a Redemptorist, the chronicler of the Gars residence had asked relatives and friends for details about the deceased. Soon he

received more material than he could handle. But it was not the massive amount of material, but the contents of the various reports from Stanggassinger's friends and acquaintances that led the chronicler to give the biography a wider audience.³

After that, Father Stanggassinger's reputation spread remarkably. More than just a few who were close to him considered him a saint during his lifetime. Now many turned to him in prayer and believed they were miraculously heard.⁴ In April 1935, his beatification process was formally begun. At the same time a healing occurred that was believed to be based on his intercession. The doctors testified, "Here a higher power has intervened."⁵

Despite the fact that the reputation of his holiness has spread far beyond Austria's borders to Brazil and California, Africa and India,⁶ he himself never traveled to exotic locations. Of course, many who seek his intercession assert, "He is a saint, but he is a human saint; not someone who has left the earth behind, but a human being like you and me who, day-in and day-out, did not do anything else but what each of us do." How he did it was different. It is exactly this difference that makes his holiness so attractive.

ENDNOTES*

1 Zeunisse 208.

2 Causa Mon. 144, 148, 165, 357, 382.

3 *Meier*, Foreword to the first edition.

4 Causa Mon. 267, 271, 331, 339, 364, 379; Suppl. 24, 36, 61.

5 Summarium 316–48; Relazione sulla seduta della C.M. della S.C.

6 Schuster–Wildenauer 157.

* NOTE: Explanations of endnotes and abbreviations start on page 165.

CHAPTER ONE

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

*“A priest, this is what
I want to become one day.”*

KASPAR STANGGASSINGER AT THE AGE OF TWO AND A HALF

Kaspar Stanggassinger's life began in Berchtesgaden. He was born on January 12, 1871, in the mountains in one of the most beautiful corners of Bavaria. He was the second of sixteen children. His father, also named Kaspar, was a well-to-do man. He was a farmer in Unterkälberstein, the owner of a rock quarry and a shipping business. He also held a position in both local and provincial government, and today we would say today that his word carried considerable weight. People used to say that his son, Kaspar, inherited “a tireless power to create” and also “a clear-headed outlook on life.”¹

As was customary, his father engaged in local politics at a tavern table—something that did not set well with Kaspar's mother. Family members clearly remembered that on this very point young Kaspar once had a serious talk with his father when they were together setting up the yearly Nativity scene.² Later, when he was a novice with the Redemptorists, he wrote to his father never to forget to bring God into his public life and his daily work.³

Kreszenz, his mother, was a good and pious person, with more of a serious disposition. While she experienced much joy in caring for her large family, she likewise had to deal with many difficulties. To her children she passed on a sense of sincerity and piety. Kaspar showed both of these qualities early in his youth, and they matured as he grew older. During the process of his beatification more than thirty years after his death, a number of witnesses could remark, “He got this from his mother.” He himself said of his mother, “From my childhood onward, she led me to God.” This, he thought, was the beginning of his Christian life and set him in the right direction.⁴

Kaspar also had an especially close relationship with his maternal grandmother. She, too, was a good and even saintly woman. She proved indispensable in helping her daughter in the home. Whenever she changed Kaspar’s diapers, she prayed that God might lead Kaspar to the priesthood. At an advanced age, she began to have doubts whether she had acted well in her life. However, her grandson, now away at the seminary, comforted her. He wrote to her that God’s grace knows no boundaries. He wished that she would live to see his ordination. But this was not to be. When the news of her death reached him right after his reception of what, in those days, were called “minor orders,” he could not hold back his tears. Still, he found words to comfort his parents: “She was happy in her hour of death. She reached all her goals and finished her journey. She is now in heaven.”⁵

In his relationships with his siblings, Kaspar was espe-

cially close to Elizabeth, almost two years his senior,⁶ and to his sister, Kresenz, five years younger.⁷ Both died before he did, Kresenz when he entered the seminary, and Elizabeth a few months before his own death. His fellow Redemptorists saw how much these deaths affected him.⁸ He also witnessed the death of another sister named Babette. She died of typhoid fever when she was only ten years old.⁹

Stanggassinger's siblings later recalled how their brother often went on walks with them and prayed the rosary with them. When he was in high school in Freising, he brought them various sweets.¹⁰ Yet he could also be strict with them, especially once when three of them, aged only between three and thirteen, finished off half a bottle of brandy that they had bought for their father.¹¹ This did not, however, cause them to hold a grudge against him since they admitted he had acted in their best interests.

On May 17, 1877, Kaspar entered primary school in Berchtesgaden. Not the most gifted pupil, he nevertheless was the hardest worker. This caused some of his classmates to think of him as ambitious. This drive came from his wanting to become a priest. In fact, he liked to "play priest." He built an altar and preached to the younger family members from a tree trunk. He was a happy individual and had the ability to laugh hard; but he avoided overdone pranks as well as scuffles with other children.¹²

It would be too much to see signs of a saint in his behavior since many other children acted as he did. Something, however, was special about him: even early in his life, Kaspar

had an attraction to prayer. When someone was looking for him they often found him in the Kalvaria Chapel on the Fürstenstein.¹³ When his mother told him of the sufferings of Christ, he burst into tears and was heartbroken.¹⁴

As to his wanting to be a priest, was it only a child's game that he would outgrow? In answer to this question, those who believe in the guidance of God can clearly see that something more was at work here. The youngster had decided to hear God's call at an early age.

Kaspar's leaning to become a priest was very clear from the beginning. The words of a two-and-a-half year-old, "A priest, this is what I want to become one day,"¹⁵ may not mean much in themselves. But they gain importance when one traces the straight line that Kaspar followed to this goal—especially after November 21, 1880. For, as a priest, Stanggassinger was to make a list of the most significant days of his life. In his listing we find that date with a note that says, "Calling to priesthood."¹⁶ He says he heard a call during Mass at the consecration.¹⁷ Whatever happened to the nine-year-old on that day, thereafter he had only one goal. Along the way there would be many tests.

On September 23, 1881, Stanggassinger entered high school in Freising. For three years he lived in the house of the parish priest named Roth.¹⁸ These years were not entirely filled with unspoiled joy. Kaspar was an "excellent student," but he did have difficulties, especially in mathematics. Thus, one of his teachers told him to go home and work on the farm.¹⁹ Another suggested that he become a shoemaker.²⁰

When his father heard of his low marks, he burst out in anger, “This is too expensive! If he does not have the talent, he should give up study! The pitchfork is what he should take up!”²¹ During these years Kaspar often turned to the two sisters of the priest and begged, “Pray for me!”²² Was he perhaps not called to the priesthood? Regardless, he would do his best.

In 1884, one of his deepest wishes came true when he was admitted into the minor seminary in Freising. His classmates liked the friendly and unassuming boy. “He imparted a heartfelt friendliness,” they would say later. “Those who knew him, liked him ... He held his head high ... he was not a complainer.” He was “quite amusing” and “could laugh heartily,”²³ even when a harmless joke was at his expense.²⁴ Of course, the cheerful boy had other qualities besides. He was sensitive, not indifferent to praise or to disparagement, and sometimes had a problem restraining his anger. If he was inwardly excited about something, this was obvious. Mostly he avoided discussions. But when it came to religious questions, if he did not agree he would state his opinion firmly but calmly.²⁵

Stanggassinger’s former classmates agreed in their assessment that there was nothing to criticize about his character. This does not mean that he was exemplary in every way. Rather he was natural and shared a normal student’s smaller and greater joys and setbacks with the others, even if these were very human. His prefect said that he once found him deep in thought and asked him if anything was wrong. “Oh,”

he replied, "I was just wondering if there was going to be dessert today."²⁶ However, when it was appropriate to stand for something, he was decisive, even in smaller things. As the story goes, he always kept strict order on his desk, in his closet, and regarding his clothing. So it seems we can gather that his external orderliness indicated what was inside him.²⁷

Many have given special emphasis to his sincerity. He preferred to receive a poor grade than to deny his convictions. One day his German literature professor proposed as a topic for an essay Schiller's *Bride of Messina*. Stanggassinger did not like the work and consciously interpreted the topic differently. This promptly earned him a failing grade for the assignment.²⁸ However, he did not have many opportunities to show such courage. In Catholic Freising, only Professor Hellmuth dared to defend liberal Catholic views, because the Bavarian Centrist Member of Parliament, Georg von Orterer, exerted his conservative influence here. The well-respected politician who taught Stanggassinger Latin in his third year called him "the most refined character among [my] students."²⁹

Since Stanggassinger had entered the minor seminary, his performance in school slowly improved. In the fourth year, however, his teachers advised him that it would be more reasonable if he would repeat the year. Repeating was out of the question for Kaspar's father: "If he has to repeat a year, he proves that he is unfit to study. Then he has to come back home!" When the teachers heard of the father's reaction, they saw to it that Stanggassinger passed the year successfully.³⁰

In the fifth year, his grades improved. Tenacity and industry, which his report cards mention, eventually paid dividends. (Interestingly, it seems that homesickness during his first year in the minor seminary had lowered his grade for industry).

In the later years he excelled in religious studies, always with top marks. But he also did well in history and German, and this was duly recognized by his teachers.³¹ They were delighted when the otherwise calm Kaspar spoke vividly and with style. As he grew older he caught up with the students for whom the studies came easily in the early grades. Success continued to elude him only in mathematics, which, he later confessed, he never did like.³²

His success was found in other arenas. On a number of occasions, he played a part in the seminary's theater performances. His classmate, Josef Hofmiller, later acclaimed as a literary scholar, reported that Stanggassinger's performances were "not theatrical, but deeply moving."³³ Of his first stage experience, Kaspar, barely age 18, reported to his parents:

Three days ago I was an actor. I played a servant of King Oedipus. The old Greek play, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, was presented at the seminary. It was the first time that I performed in front of such a respected public. When we, the actors, arrived in the dining room after the performance, we were overwhelmed by the thunderous applause. However, now your Kaspar has retreated again into calm solitude.³⁴

The last sentence of this letter indicates that outward success during these years was not essential for him. Rather, his “inner life” took first place. During these years a certain piety matured into a deep connection with God. There is no doubt that he was serious from the beginning, despite the fact that the external character of his piety seems to us only somewhat “enlightened.”

Through the support of the pious sisters of the parish priest, Kaspar joined a number of religious groups, among them the Sodality of Mary. From these various groups he owned several medals, which he wore around his neck. At night, when it was quiet in the dormitory, one could hear the noise the medals made when he moved. His classmates teased him, saying that “the cow with the bells is going to bed.”³⁵ This may have been a lesson for Kaspar. All his life, he was opposed to any kind of outward show of his personal piety. His classmates soon noticed that there was more depth to him than this. While they called him “the priest,” or “the cleric,”³⁶ it was taken not as a nickname but as a mark of honor.³⁷

Kaspar was careful not to draw attention to himself. He participated in the celebration of Mass every day, even during vacation time. He received Communion every Sunday, as was the custom in those days, and he spent many hours praying in the chapel. However, when it was time for recreation he happily took part and was in no way a killjoy.³⁸ Later he wrote of what may have been a mature realization: “In our first fervor we may want to see only serious faces. But God loves a cheerful giver.”³⁹