

# Patients and passions. Catholic views on pain in nineteenth-century Austria

## Abstract

The still rather young history of pain is more and more critical about the finalist historiography postulating an increasing secularization and medicalisation of pain in the modern era. In the nineteenth century, so the narrative goes, pain lost its status as a 'gift' of God, turned into something that needed to be avoided and became more and more controlled thanks to medical progress as e.g. the invention of anaesthetics. Against such a backdrop numerous religious practices of nineteenth-century Catholicism appear like anachronistic remnants of medieval, pain-idealising traditions and cults like Christ's Passion, at odds with secular and medical perspectives.

However, the starting point of our project is that this narrative of contrast does not adequately capture the history of Catholic views on pain. Whilst there was a relatively small elite group that did indeed cultivate this idealization of passion, other Catholic initiatives, like charity organisations, hospitals and religious orders focusing on health care, engaged in activities that aimed to relieve the suffering of others. In our project we will address settings and cases where both the positive and the negative view on pain existed at the same time. We will study this coexistence and interaction by focusing on different groups of people in what the contemporaries called 'holy' Tyrol: we will focus on stigmatics, the personification of the revitalisation of Catholicism and discussed as exceptional medical cases, and on the patients of local physicians, of the mental hospital in Hall that opened in 1830 and on those of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, a female religious order active in health care. We will examine what Catholics saw as emotional and/or physical pain, how they interpreted pain and whether or not these interpretations were influenced by new medical findings, and how they responded to pain – with practices of pain relief, meditation (on the passion) or even the cultivation of pain. In this way the sharp differentiation between religious and medical views in the nineteenth century can be reviewed and the history of Catholic pain will regain some of its complexity. Finally, by historicising pain and the reactions to (other people's) suffering we can address questions about compassion and sympathy, present-day questions about whose suffering we are able to see and with whom we can sympathize.