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A faint, sepia-toned illustration serves as the background. It depicts a woman in a long, flowing dress standing in a library or study. She is surrounded by tall bookshelves filled with books. The style is reminiscent of a woodcut or a detailed engraving.

Legacies of Women's Monasteries in Clementinum

WOMEN'S MONASTERIES AS A SPIRITUAL PHENOMENON

Women's monasteries represented an exceptional phenomenon in the history of the Church – places of prayer, education, and spiritual service. Some religious orders devoted themselves to the education of girls, the care of the sick, and assistance to those in need. Others lived in silent contemplation, dedicating their lives to prayer for the world beyond the enclosure.

This diversity became crucial during the Josephine reforms, when the state began to evaluate monasteries according to their "usefulness." Spiritually oriented orders living in seclusion and prayer were regarded as unproductive, and many of them were consequently dissolved. It is precisely these contemplative communities active in Bohemia – the Poor Clares, Benedictines, Magdalene Sisters, Premonstratensians, Cistercians, and Carmelites – to which this exhibition is dedicated, seeking to present their way of life and their rich written heritage.

The daily life of the nuns in these convents was marked by obedience, humility, silence, and spiritual reflection. The strict rhythm of each order deepened their devotion and became both an expression of their dedication to God and a form of care for the world.

Although the contemplative monasteries were dissolved, part of their spiritual and cultural legacy has been preserved in the form of books, manuscripts, and documents, now held in the collections of the National Library of the Czech Republic. The exhibition invites visitors to enter the world of the vanished monasteries and to rediscover a spiritual and cultural heritage that has endured through the centuries as a living testimony to the past.

MENU

1

The Only German
Reformed Convent
of Nuns

7

In Silence and
Prayer

2

The Convent
of the Red Rose

8

An Exclusive
Convent

3

A Convent Lost
to the Mines

9

An Exclusive
Convent

4

A Convent on
the Borderland

10

Transformations of
Female Education
and Spirituality in
the Seventeenth
and Eighteenth
Centuries

5

The Convent of
the Snow-White
Nuns

11

Memory in the
Silence of the
Cloister

6

The Word in the
Convent of Silence

12

The Josephine
Reforms and the
Suppression of
Monasteries in
Bohemia

THE ONLY GERMAN REFORMED CONVENT OF NUNS

The Poor Clares of Cheb

The convent of the Poor Clares in Cheb is the second oldest house of this order in the Czech lands, following the Convent of St Agnes in Prague's Old Town. The first references to the Cheb Poor Clares date from 1256, although the convent certainly existed by 1273. The sisters were invited from the convent at Seusslitz, and the first abbess was Adelheid of Lobhaus.

The convent escaped the devastation of the Hussite Wars. In the second half of the fifteenth century, it was influenced by the wave of reform then sweeping through the convents of Dominican and Poor Clare nuns in Germany. Four sisters arrived from the Poor Clare convent in Nuremberg to renew the Cheb community according to stricter observance of the order's rule. The convent library also underwent considerable development: the sisters themselves copied many works, particularly spiritual and contemplative texts, often of a mystical nature. The Reformation of the sixteenth century left the convent largely untouched.

The convent was dissolved on 7 February 1782 by decree of Emperor Joseph II, and the community was evicted later that same year. The buildings subsequently housed the Criminal Fund, served as a prison under the judicial authorities, and eventually became the town archive. Today, the site is occupied by a memorial to the victims of the First World War.

After the suppression, the convent's manuscripts were transferred to Clementinum. Among the identified volumes are numerous works of spiritual and mystical literature that reflect the late medieval book culture. Most of the convent's library, however – its incunabula and early printed books – never reached Clementinum. Some were sold, while others were taken over by the Franciscans from the neighbouring monastery, in whose library several volumes have since been identified.

THE CONVENT OF THE RED ROSE

The Poor Clares of Český Krumlov

In 1350, Catherine of Rosenberg, together with her sons, founded a double monastery of Poor Clares and Minorites in Český Krumlov. The sisters, led by Abbess Elisabeth, arrived in 1361 from the convent in Opava. In the years that followed, the books they had brought with them were enriched by generous gifts from Peter II of Rosenberg, who donated, among others, a *Necrologium*, two parts of a *Lectionary*, and a *Collectar*. Although most of the manuscripts are modestly decorated, the Poor Clares are also associated with the richly illuminated *Liber depictus* from the mid-fourteenth century and with the beautifully ornamented Krumlov Miscellany (National Museum, Prague, shelf-mark III B 10), dated between 1415 and 1420.

Most of these manuscripts were rebound in Český Krumlov between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It was here that the so-called Master of Two Styles was active, decorating the binding of the *Collectar* with both Gothic and Renaissance motifs. The *Necrologium* of the Poor

Clares was rebound and ornamented at the request of Abbess Elisabeth by the chaplain and painter Bartoloměj Trnka.

The first recorded mention of the Poor Clares' library dates from 1782, when an inventory was compiled during the suppression of the convent to list the books destined for transfer to Clementinum. Several volumes, however, were not removed and remained in the possession of the Minorites and the sisters themselves. Among them was the *Psalter of Elisabeth*, donated to the Poor Clares after 1510 by Václav of Rovné, chancellor and humanist of Český Krumlov, in memory of his late wife – a book later discovered hidden in the attic of the convent.

A CONVENT LOST TO THE MINES

The Magdalene Sisters of Zahražany

This convent is the only one presented in the exhibition whose buildings have not survived. Yet valuable written records remain – twenty charters (National Archives of the Czech Republic) and a single manuscript (National Library of the Czech Republic, shelfmark XVII D 28). The convent of the Magdalene Sisters in Zahražany near Most, founded in 1283 by King Wenceslas II, has a long and eventful history.

It was home to women from burgher and noble families and probably also served as a school for the daughters of townspeople. The convent was repeatedly destroyed – during the Hussite Wars, in fires in 1515 and 1679, and again during the Estates' Uprising.

A new church was consecrated in 1774, but only eight years later the convent was dissolved by Emperor Joseph II. The buildings were subsequently used for various purposes until, in the 1970s, they disappeared without trace in the coal-mining pits.

A CONVENT ON THE BORDERLAND

The Cistercian Nuns of Pohled

The convent at Pohled, founded in 1267 by Guta of the Witikonids, is probably the oldest women's Cistercian monastery in Bohemia. It served the daughters of the nobility and became an important spiritual centre. Destroyed during the Hussite Wars, it was restored in the fifteenth century and once again flourished.

The convent was dissolved during the Josephine reforms; a cloth factory was subsequently established on the site, and later a château. The monastic complex, including the church, still stands today.

Its most significant written monument is a cartulary and *Urbarium* from the first third of the fourteenth century (National Library, Prague, shelfmark XIV E 13) — the oldest surviving urbarium in the territory of the Czech Republic. Approximately sixty-five original charters have also been preserved (National Archives of the Czech Republic).

THE CONVENT OF THE SNOW-WHITE NUNS

The Premonstratensian Canonesses of Doksany

The convent of Doksany, founded by Duke Vladislav II and his wife Gertrude of Babenberg around 1144 in the picturesque landscape of the Ohře River valley, was the first female Premonstratensian canonry in the Czech lands. This house of the “snow-white nuns” became, over the course of its 637-year history, the home of countless women and girls from royal, noble, and later also burgher families.

Thanks to the continual presence of male provosts (later abbots) and other Premonstratensian clerics closely connected with the Strahov Canonry, Doksany flourished not only as a centre of spiritual life but also of learning, art, and architecture.

Throughout the centuries, the convent withstood the ravages of Hussite, Swedish, and Prussian armies; yet it did not survive the Josephine era. It was among the first women's religious houses in Bohemia to

be dissolved by imperial decree in 1782. Among the documents removed from the convent during the process of suppression, particular attention is due to the holdings of its abbatial library. In terms of both content and provenance, the collection was exceptionally rich: alongside theological, hagiographical, and philosophical works, it contained an unusually extensive selection of literature in the fields of mathematics, mechanics, the natural sciences, and garden architecture. The contemporary catalogue of this library is preserved today in the archives of the Strahov Canonry.

After the dissolution, the convent buildings briefly served as barracks. In 1804, Doksany was purchased by Johann Anton Lexa von Aehrenthal, whose family retained ownership until the end of the Second World War. Today, Doksany is once again a living convent, where the present community continues to care for the rich cultural heritage of their predecessors.

THE WORD IN THE CONVENT OF SILENCE

The Premonstratensian Canonesses of Chotěšov

The convent of Premonstratensian canonesses at Chotěšov was founded around 1202 at the initiative of Blessed Hroznata of Ovenec (c. 1160–1217) as the female counterpart to the monastery at Teplá. A key role in its foundation was played by Hroznata's sister, Vojslava (c. 1160–1227), who lived near the convent as a *familiaria*, managed its estates, and helped shape the life of the emerging community. The first sisters came from Doksany, bringing with them the Premonstratensian rule and spiritual tradition.

The nuns lived in strict enclosure, dedicated to prayer, work, and contemplation. From the Middle Ages onwards, the majority of the community consisted of women from noble and burgher families, attesting to the prestige of the convent and its regional importance.

After the end of the Thirty Years' War, Chotěšov experienced a revival thanks to the efforts of the provosts Maurus Bandhauer (1585–1657) and Michael Norbert Kastl (1629–1698), who worked to renew the convent's spiritual and cultural life. Under their leadership, literary and musical production flourished, and the convent's library and archives expanded. In the eighteenth century, the community continued to prosper, and the convent underwent a Baroque reconstruction. Its existence, however, came to an end in 1782 as a result of the Josephine reforms.

Only part of the once rich Chotěšov library has survived – manuscripts and printed books that still bear witness to the spiritual and intellectual life of this remarkable community.

IN SILENCE AND PRAYER

The Dominican Nuns of St Anne and St Lawrence in Prague's Old Town

The convent of the Dominican nuns of St Anne and St Lawrence was founded in the early fourteenth century, when the sisters purchased the former Templar commandery by the Church of St Lawrence in Prague's Old Town. By 1316 they were already resident there and had built a new convent with a Gothic church dedicated to St Anne and St Lawrence. From the Middle Ages onwards, the community enjoyed the patronage of the royal court, the nobility, and the burghers, and after the Thirty Years' War, it became a prestigious educational institution for girls from prominent families.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the convent began to decline economically, partly due to military events, and its dissolution in 1782 marked the culmination of a prolonged crisis. Most of its property was sold, and the proceeds were used to repay debts. From the convent library, Karel Rafael Ungar selected the most valuable volumes for the University Library, while the rest were sold, some even as waste paper.

The Dominican nuns lived in strict enclosure and made use of a shared library for their reading. In addition to liturgical texts, it contained mainly sermons, prayer books, saints' lives, Marian writings, and works promoting personal devotion – with an unusually large proportion of books written in Czech.

AN EXCLUSIVE CONVENT

The Benedictine Nuns of St George in Prague

The Convent of the Benedictine Nuns of St George, founded beside the Basilica of St George at Prague Castle, holds the distinction of being the oldest monastic house in the Czech lands. Its founder and first abbess was the venerable Mlada of the Přemyslid dynasty, who established the convent in 973. Both its historic primacy and its Přemyslid foundation contributed greatly to the esteem in which it was held by contemporaries. The convent was regarded as a symbol of Czech statehood, a centre of book culture and music, and a refuge for royal daughters – among them Elizabeth of Bohemia, who stayed here briefly before her marriage to John of Luxembourg – as well as for noblewomen and, in later centuries, for wealthy burghers' wives. Above all, however, it stood as an important ecclesiastical and political institution, for the Abbess of St George's enjoyed, among other privileges, the right to take part in the coronation of Czech queens.

Throughout its existence, the convent attracted the attention of chroniclers and historians for its close association with the cult of St Ludmila, whose relics were deposited in the Basilica of St George in 925.

The convent also excelled in its musical culture. As early as the beginning of the fourteenth century, polyphonic singing requiring a high level of education was practised here. The convent was likewise a venue for early Easter plays, which stand at the very origins of Czech drama. Throughout its long history, St George's remained a major centre of cultural and artistic life.

AN EXCLUSIVE CONVENT

The Benedictine Nuns of St George in Prague

After centuries of extraordinary cultural and spiritual flourishing, the convent of St George met the same fate as many other ancient monastic houses. Despite the considerable opposition of contemporaries, the more than eight-hundred-year history of St George's came to an unexpected end in 1782, when its dissolution was decreed during the first wave of Josephine secularisation.

The process of suppression, carried out between the spring of 1782 and the autumn of 1784, included, among other measures, the sealing of the convent's library and archives, followed by the cataloguing of its written holdings for transfer to the Imperial Court Library in Vienna and the University Library in Prague. Numerous manuscripts of St George's provenance – including the renowned Passional of Abbess Cunigunde, a prayer book, and a collection of breviaries containing the St George's Offices and references to the Přemyslid dynasty – today form an important part of the historical

collections of the National Library of the Czech Republic.

The privileges of the Abbess of St George's were transferred, despite the protests of the last holder of the office, Maria Theresia von Harnach (1729–1803), to the superior of the Theresian Institute for Noble Ladies.

Some of the St George's Benedictines continued to live a communal life even after leaving the convent, residing together in a house at 506 Ječná Street in Prague's New Town. They did not cease to strive for the restoration of their former convent and longed for their return to Hradčany. Yet Providence decided otherwise: in the 1790s the former monastic complex was temporarily used as artillery barracks, later as a military storehouse, and from 1825 to 1857 it served as a correctional institution for Catholic priests.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF FEMALE EDUCATION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

The Ursulines of St John of Nepomuk at Hradčany

The Order of St Ursula, inspired by the ideas of St Angela Merici (1474–1540), settled in the Czech lands during the period of re-Catholicisation and profoundly shaped both female spirituality and education. Unlike the contemplative orders, the Ursulines devoted themselves to the upbringing and instruction of girls, which they regarded as a means of spiritual renewal for society as a whole. They arrived in Prague in 1655 from Liège at the invitation of Countess Sibylla of Lamboy and established a school that became a model for later institutions of female education.

The Hradčany convent, founded in 1700, combined spiritual and educational activity with a rich artistic life. Supported by both nobility and burghers, and owing to the popularity of its boarding school, the convent flourished. The Ursulines therefore decided to embark on an ambitious

construction of a new convent complex. The Church of St John of Nepomuk, built to designs by Christoph and Kilian Ignaz Dientzenhofer, was consecrated in 1729 and became an important centre of the cult of St John of Nepomuk.

Despite its prestige, the community struggled with increasing debts resulting from the costly construction and the damage caused by wars. Although the Ursulines, as a teaching and publicly beneficial order, were exempt from the Josephine reforms, the convent's financial situation became unsustainable. On 28 September 1784, at the request of the nuns themselves, the Hradčany convent was officially dissolved. Most of the sisters moved to their mother house in Prague's New Town, and the property was transferred to the Religious Fund.

MEMORY IN THE SILENCE OF THE CLOISTER

The Discalced Carmelites of St Joseph in Prague

The convent of the Discalced Carmelite nuns in Prague was founded in 1656 with the support of Emperor Ferdinand III, his wife Eleonora Magdalena Gonzaga, and the entire imperial court. The order, shaped by the reforms of St Teresa of Ávila, placed great emphasis on enclosure, prayer, and an ascetic way of life.

The first prioress, Mary Electa of Jesus (1605–1663), was a distinguished spiritual leader and founder of the convent community. Under her guidance, the convent stabilised, expanded, and established a rigorous observance of the rule. After her death, a local cult developed around her person, and she was venerated as a saint.

The daily life of the Carmelite nuns was filled with prayer, liturgy, manual labour, spiritual reading, and ascetic practices, including fasting and penance. The convent library, which contained mystical writings,

hagiographies, and works by St Teresa of Ávila and St John of the Cross, reflected their contemplative vocation, spiritual life, and the multinational character of the community. The linguistic diversity of the collection – most books were written in Latin, Spanish, Italian, or German – mirrored the varied origins of the nuns, many of whom came from the circles of the imperial court, noble families, and the emerging aristocracy.

The convent of St Joseph became a centre of contemplative life. When it was dissolved in 1782, most of the nuns went into exile in the former Cistercian convent at Pohled, where they remained for ten years. Only after the accession of Emperor Leopold II, they were permitted to return to Prague, settling in the former Barnabite convent of St Benedict on Hradčany Square.

THE JOSEPHINE REFORMS AND THE SUPPRESSION OF MONASTERIES IN BOHEMIA

The second half of the eighteenth century brought profound changes in the relationship between Church and State. The Enlightened ruler Emperor Joseph II (1780–1790) continued the reforms initiated by his mother, Maria Theresa, seeking to integrate the Church into the state system while ensuring that it served the broader needs of society. He favoured religious orders engaged in scholarly, educational, charitable, or pastoral activities, while limiting contemplative and mendicant orders, which he regarded as of little benefit to the public good.

In 1781 he ordered a survey of the so-called “socially unproductive” monasteries, and a year later issued a decree for their suppression. By 1789, seventy-four monasteries in Bohemia and a further forty-one in Moravia had been dissolved. Monastic property was transferred to the Religious Fund (*Religionsfond*), which was used to finance the reorganisation of ecclesiastical administration and to provide

pensions for former members of religious orders.

During the suppression process, particular attention was paid to the written heritage of the monasteries—their books, manuscripts, and archival materials. According to the decree of May 1782, commissioners were first required to compile inventories of the monastic libraries and send them to Prague, so that the most valuable works could be selected. Only then were the books and manuscripts transported to Prague, where they were received by Karel Rafael Ungar, librarian of the Imperial and Royal University Library (today the National Library of the Czech Republic). Ungar and his colleagues sorted the individual volumes and incorporated them into the collections of the newly established scholarly library, while the most precious manuscripts were transferred to the Imperial Court Library in Vienna. Some books—such as duplicates, popular devotional works, or literature deemed of lesser scholarly value—were sold at auction or even disposed of as waste paper.

The suppression of monasteries represented one of the most far-reaching interventions in the spiritual life of the Habsburg monarchy. Although it resulted in significant cultural losses, it also laid the foundations for the modern network of libraries and educational institutions.

LEGACIES OF WOMEN'S MONASTERIES IN CLEMENTINUM

1 November 2025 – 31 January 2026

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The exhibition has been realised with the financial support of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic within the Programme of Applied Research and Development of National and Cultural Identity (NAKI III), as part of the project *Written Heritage of Suppressed Monasteries in Bohemia* (DH23P03OVV056).