Universität Münster

Twelve months, twelve people
Portraits 2024

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Foreword

Dear Readers,

With around 42,000 students and 8,000 employees, the University of Münster has approximately the same “population” as towns in Germany such as Gronau, Heidenheim und Straubing. And life at our University – on the campus, in lecture halls, in laboratories, offices and seminar rooms – is just as bustling as in such towns. What contributes to this liveliness, creativity and scientific vibrancy is not so much our structures; it is, rather, every individual person here – with their work and achievements, their dedication and commitment, and their individual personalities, each in their own way contributing to the good reputation our University enjoys. It is the people here who make the University of Münster an inimitable, attractive biotope.

In this Yearbook we wish to show our recognition of these individual achievements at Münster University and present to you some outstanding people from the past year – in twelve portraits, one for each of the twelve months of 2024. You can read for example about a cell biologist who is doing outstanding work in research into memory; about one of our most distinguished chemists, who has been honoured by the European Research Council; and about a talented and highly engaged medical student who received the University Medal from the Rectorate.

“Whatever good someone gives to the world does not get lost,” as the German-French doctor and researcher Albert Schweitzer once said. I can promise you that you will discover much good while reading this publication, and I hope that it sparks your curiosity about research, studies and teaching, and that it arouses your interest. I wish you much pleasure and a goodly enrichment of your knowledge as you read about the twelve personalities from our midst.

Sincerely,

Prof. Johannes Wessels
Rector of the University of Münster

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“Organic chemistry is essential”

Prof. Ryan Gilmour’s research interest is in molecular design. His research involves the development of important small molecules which range from smart catalysts to carbohydrate-based vaccine leads. In January, he received an ERC Proof of Concept Grant from the European Research Council. *Dr. Christina Hoppenbrock*

You grew up in south-west Scotland, home to the poet Robert Burns …
Burns is to the Scots as Goethe is to Germans. His work is iconic but he started from humble beginnings, working as a farmer. He wrote beautifully and intelligently about everyday topics, and this fascinated me even as a schoolboy. At New Year, people all over the world sing one of his best-known songs, “Auld Lang Syne”. His work transcends cultures and generations, much like organic chemistry.

How did a lover of literature discover chemistry?
I had an excellent chemistry teacher. He belonged to a generation in which becoming a teacher was something very special. He took great pride in teaching and he was not afraid to confront us with complicated topics. Later, at St. Andrews University and also at Cambridge University, I benefited enormously from excellent teachers. These experiences shaped the way in which I teach today. I love the opportunity that comes with my job: getting young people excited about chemistry.

What do you find most appealing about organic chemistry?
I can’t imagine a world without organic chemistry. Without antibiotics? Without cancer drugs? I’d rather not. The development of the contraceptive pill revolutionised women’s rights. It is no exaggeration to say that organic chemistry has played a major role in shaping our society.

Every molecule has certain properties, a fingerprint. By combing these building blocks to form new structures, new properties are generated which can be used for specific applications. I am fascinated by this interplay between structure and function.

You once said you don’t go in for quick successes.
Right. Many projects, particularly at the intersection of chemistry, biology and medicine are complex. They require time and commitment.

For which you need a lot of patience …
Yes. For example, I started developing methods to generate synthetic fluorinated sugar molecules in 2010. 14 years later, we have published a really exciting result – a new type of vaccine against meningitis B and C. We see the potential to develop further vaccines from these fluorinated molecules, and these applications all stem from basic research.

You have also developed a strategy for the automated production of fluorinated molecule components.
Fluorinated molecules are crucial in the development of medicines, agrochemicals and smart materials. We have succeeded in generating previously unknown structures with exciting new properties. However, fluorine-containing compounds are often persistent in the environment and cannot easily be degraded. We have developed alternative structures that are not persistent in the environment and we now hope to bring them to market with the help of the Proof of Concept Grant from the European Research Council.

Is there anything that influenced you especially as a scientist?
During my time as an assistant professor at the ETH Zurich, I had the pleasure of working with the great crystallographer Prof. Jack Dunitz. Jack had an encyclopaedic knowledge of science and my daily interactions with him shaped me. A decade later, I can often recognise those discussions in my own work. Science is cumulative and we cannot shape the future without knowledge of the past. I have a deep appreciation for the history of science and enjoy reading historical chemical literature. Not only is it much more beautifully written than today, but scientists in the past often carried out fantastic experiments without today’s technology.

Do you need to know this history to do research?
You should. Very often, “new” discoveries are not new at all!

What is important to you?
Science has never been more important than it is today, and chemistry has never been so societally relevant. I am very fortunate that organic chemistry is not only my job but also my hobby. My hope for the future is that my children will be as lucky as I have been and that they reach the same level of inner satisfaction in their careers, no matter what they are.

Ryan Gilmour in his office – where historical chemical literature is to be found side by side with current papers.

A roadmap for bigger issues

Microbiologist Prof. Petra Dersch has been researching infections for over 30 years. She is not only a university teacher but also sits on several scientific bodies, e.g. Germany's Science and Humanities Council, to which she was appointed by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in February. *André Bednarz*

Up, up and away for Petra Dersch (59) as she takes the lift to Münster University Hospital's East Tower. Her destination is the café on the 21st floor, with its panoramic view – an ideal place to talk about her life (and she explicitly makes no distinction between her life and her work). She is not only a member of the Faculty of Medicine, although she is a microbiologist. For many years, she has been looking beyond her Institute and the University in her voluntary work in various bodies and institutions, e.g. the German Research Foundation (DFG), the Leibniz Association and the Leopoldina. This work as a specialist giving advice and support is a recurring theme in Dersch's professional life. In February she extended it when the Science and Humanities Council admitted her to its ranks. It means that she is now involved, at the highest national level, in advising politicians on bigger issues relating to the development of science and tertiary education.

"It's a great honour for me," she says. How exactly it came about, Dersch cannot explain. "All I can say is that the DFG asked if I could imagine taking it on." Some months later – and she had almost forgotten the nomination – a special letter arrived: from the Federal President, with her nomination. Although such engagement is increasingly important for her – above all due to the increasing pressures on democracy and on scientific freedom – she never explicitly planned it that way, she says. But two things provided a major impulse. Firstly, a setback at the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research in Brunswick, where she had taken on too much responsibility too early – "without understanding the working method and strategy," she recalls, "which meant that I fell flat on my face." And secondly, her appointment to a Review Board at the DFG. From these two events, Dersch concluded that she had a reputation in her field, but that she still had to learn how to act more strategically.

In this she has clearly succeeded. Within the DFG she helps shape funding for German research and can set priorities, as well as providing support for projects and structures in line with the Excellence campaign. As a member of the Science and Humanities Council – which, unlike the DFG, is not a funding institution and provides no money – she is active on the Research Committee and the Medical Review Board, drawing up data-based recommendations for politicians for the development of science in Germany. Any preparatory work she needs to do, she does mostly in the evenings or at weekends so that one thing doesn't suffer: her research work.

"I'm fascinated by the ingenious tricks and the efficiency with which pathogenic bacteria manipulate our highly complex immune system and trigger infections," says Dersch, who did research in, among other places, Boston, Berlin and Brunswick. Her scientific role model, she says, is Marie Skłodowska Curie, who recognised that research might be laborious and exhausting but it is nonetheless the best work in the world. The work of the Science and Humanities Council is also laborious – or, as Dersch says, "thorough" – and takes up a lot of time, but the work is highly regarded, she explains. Especially with regard to science, to funding and systemic issues, she hopes that politicians will act in an innovative, reliable and long-term way.

Considering all her engagement and her achievements, one side of herself which Dersch reveals in our conversation is entirely unexpected: she sometimes has self-doubts. Whether she has really deserved all the awards and appointments; and how it could happen that she dined with the Federal President; or that she was there when her friend and colleague Emmanuelle Charpentier was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 2020. Petra Dersch is certainly able and willing to name her strengths: organisational talent, hard work and creativity, for example. But her self-doubts show that she doesn't take all this for granted. "I don't come from an academic family, and I didn't start studying with the aim of becoming a professor," she declares. Although she had no clear roadmap, she still noticed at an early stage, again and again – despite setbacks and misfortunes – what she was capable of and what she wanted: to do research, make plans and show her commitment to science.

At heart, Petra Dersch is a researcher through and through at the Center for Molecular Biology of Inflammation, and in her work for various bodies she repeatedly focuses on the big issues in German research.

When he wants to take a rest from the stress of everyday life, he gets his violin out of its case. But Max Sommer serves music in another way too: in March 2024, he was a member of the organising team for the big orchestra festival at Münster University.

“Every concert has its own attraction”

In March 2024, the University of Münster hosted the European Student Orchestra Festival. Seven University orchestras from all over Europe came together in Münster to make music. As a member of the organising team, student Maximilian Sommer had his hands full. *Linus Peikenkamp*

On this Wednesday in March 2024, the rows of seats in the Großes Haus in the Theater Münster are all filled with musicians from all over Europe. The University of Münster’s Young Symphony Orchestra striking up the prelude to Act III of Wagner’s “Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg” at 8 pm precisely marks the beginning of the European Student Orchestra Festival (ESOF). Over the following evenings, European university orchestras delight participants as well as audiences from the city. Münster is transformed into an open-air concert hall. Passers-by at many places in the city hear and watch chamber orchestras, for example from France, Slovenia or Estonia.

Two years before, members of the Young Symphony Orchestra started their preparations for the event. One of them was business administration student Max Sommer. He and PhD student David Eidecker were responsible for the logistics in particular. How to get the chairs into the concert hall? How can the orchestra from Ljubljana get a harp? Without their hard work, the numerous rehearsals and performances of the seven university orchestras would not have been possible.

Arranging 80 chairs in a certain layout in the rehearsal room; taking a minivan taxi at short notice to drive to the Halle Münsterland to exchange a double bass; converting the stage in the Aasee Auditorium for the next orchestral rehearsal – and, in between, as an “orchestra buddy”, explaining to the Tallinn University Symphony Orchestra how to get to the concert hall. This, roughly, is what Max Sommer’s days were like during the festival. Added to all this were his own performances with the Young Symphony Orchestra. “Each orchestra has different requirements for props, and a lot of requests came spontaneously. I was on the go from morning till evening,” says the 26-year-old Sommer with a laugh. “Heaving stuff around certainly didn’t do my knees much good.” But, as he emphasises, organising the event wasn’t down to just one person. “We had a lot of busy helpers who all made the festival happen.”

Max Sommer grew up in a town near Bonn and, as a six-year-old, he tried out various instruments and discovered his love of music. Every week he played a new instrument. “I ended up staying with the violin,” he says. At the age of ten he joined a children’s orchestra. He enjoyed making music together with others, and a few years later he was playing in a chamber orchestra. He took part in numerous concert tours which took him for example to Israel, Hungary and England. Sommer invests a lot of time in his passion, with heart and soul. “For me, making music relaxes me and stimulates me mentally. It’s a source of calm and strength.” Still, it is only a hobby. Career-wise, he wants to go in a different direction. In five years he would like to be working as a management consultant or as an auditor.

“What was special about the ESOF,” Sommer comments, “was the diversity of the orchestras. Each orchestra was seen as being of equal value, despite having different qualities, and each one had its own musical attraction.” It was above all the pieces that were typical of each home country that thrilled him. Now he knows that “I really like Estonian music too.” The cultural exchange was an enrichment anyway. Almost every evening the orchestras’ members met to chat and celebrate. The good relationships among the musicians continued after the festival. A few months later, for example, festival participants from Paris put up others from Lüneburg for the night. “These friendships are the true reward for all the hard work,” says Sommer.

If there were another large festival to be organised, he would very much like to help again. However, it is unlikely that this will happen – unless the festival takes place in Vienna – because Sommer will be embarking on his master’s thesis in “finance and accounting” in the Austrian capital. “Vienna is an extraordinarily musical city with a lot of orchestras,” he explains. After all, geniuses such as Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Mahler lived there and left their mark on the city’s musical heritage. So Max Sommer is certain that, “I’ll be in good hands there musically, too.”

More than good grades

In April the German Academic Scholarship Foundation awarded its Daidalos Coin to Prof. Andreas Pfingsten from the School of Business and Economics in honour of his many years of service as a liaison professor.

Brigitte Heeke

Producing good work is important to him, says economist Prof. Andreas Pfingsten with a smile. But he is appreciative of students who, in addition to their studies, enjoy art and music or are engaged in voluntary work. As a liaison professor, Pfingsten mentored many a year scholarship holder from the German Academic Scholarship Foundation. He draws on his experience to take a closer look at individual courses of study. Some students, he says, need to be advised to look further afield and not just at good grades; others need to be warned about taking on too much. Pfingsten, who was principal liaison lecturer at Münster from 2004 to 2023, is especially pleased when he sees that most students are not wonks. He has observed, he says, that "many of them have more than one voluntary job. And I enjoy concentrating on each individual and thinking about whether what this person is planning makes sense." His work also includes proposing gifted students for a scholarship, supporting various selection procedures as an assessor, and taking an active role heading working groups for the Foundation in its summer academy.

Every semester, Pfingsten takes scholarship holders to concerts at the University or to a museum. The Picasso Museum in Münster is as much one of his favourites as the Sandstone Museum in Havixbeck is, where he lives, because the material is so typical of the region. The groups who accompany him consist of around 15 students; there are currently about 420 scholarship holders at Münster University – and being one of them is a privilege. The Foundation does its best make this privilege also available to students from non-academic backgrounds, as Pfingsten points out.

During his studies of industrial engineering and management at the University of Karlsruhe, he benefited from support from the Foundation. In 1997 he moved from the University of Siegen to Münster, and soon afterwards he took up his work as liaison lecturer. Last year the Foundation showed its appreciation of all his work by awarding him the Daidalos Coin. "All my former scholarship holders were invited to the presentation," he reports. "And among them were a husband and wife who met in my group and have since pursued two successful careers and raised children. Some current scholarship holders organised a first-class musical programme to accompany the ceremony."

Andreas Pfingsten has been undertaking teaching and research in Business Administration at Münster University for 30 years now – as a Senior Professor since 2024. Every semester, around 800 students attend his lectures in Lecture Hall H1. "Such a large group will only listen if you're authentic," says the popular professor, who has made a habit of inserting light-hearted elements into his lectures, for example with personal anecdotes. Many graduates recognise their former teacher outside the University. Whenever anyone approaches him – as recently happened during a breakfast in Café 1648 – it doesn't bother him at all. On the contrary: "It even happened once while I was on holiday in Italy, and I'm delighted when it happens. Nevertheless, I chose to live a bit further out, where I'm simply a neighbour or just one of the members of the local sports club."

Talking of sport: at the Finance Center Münster, students have the opportunity to take part in a seminar outside the University. A typical day in such a seminar – which takes place with around 30 people in a self-catering house – consists of meals taken together, skiing and two or three talks followed by discussions in which the students present and defend their seminar papers.

A small metallic figure on Pfingsten's desk in the Juridicum reveals another, very different, activity which he pursued for many years. The figure represents a DJ at his turntables. From 2006 to 2023 he could be found once a year at the mixing desk in a club. It was no coincidence that Andreas Pfingsten was a DJ from the very first 'Night of the Profs': "The guy who started up the series had been one of my students and he asked me if I wanted to join in," he recalls.

The Picasso Museum is one of Andreas Pfingsten's favourite destinations, and one which he likes to visit with his scholarship holders from the German Academic Scholarship Foundation.

Katrin Kogman-Appel researched for ten years into the Golden Haggadah, a Hebrew codex produced in around 1320. She contributed a facsimile to the "Body. Cult. Religion." exhibition organised by the "Religion and Politics" Cluster of Excellence in the Museum of Archaeology.

A cosmos between two book covers

Prof. Katrin Kogman-Appel has been making a name for herself for many years now as an expert on Jewish book culture. In May, the Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Künste elected her as a new member. *Anke Poppen*

Books not only contain stories – they tell them, too. This becomes clear when you listen to Prof. Katrin Kogman-Appel, a Judaic scholar and art historian, who has devoted herself to Jewish book culture. Her interest in history was sparked in her childhood, when her father took her to a Roman excavation. It was while she was a Jewish studies undergraduate at the University of Vienna that the focus of her work emerged – which she has remained faithful to ever since. "There was a professor working on this topic and he knew how to pass on his enthusiasm to students," says Kogman-Appel, who is today one of the world's leading experts on the history of Jewish art in the Middle Ages.

What fascinates her most of all is the transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period. "There is this notion that the invention of printing in the mid-15th century suddenly changed everything," she says. "But it was more of a gradual change, with the transition lasting around a hundred years." And how is this apparent? "A new medium initially orients itself towards its predecessor until it finds its own form," she explains. "The first printed books had formats similar to manuscripts, even down to similar typographies." The manuscript culture continued even after the invention of the printing press. Books with a particularly artistic design became valuable status symbols for collectors, which increased their worth, although – and even because – the new printing technology was establishing itself at the same time. For a long time, art historians focused on the illustrations in books. What Katrin Kogman-Appel also does is look into questions of a book's physical features and the material used. She is also interested in the ways books were handled on a practical level: "Who actually had books at that time? Who bought them? At first, the big change consisted less in the books' design than in their distribution." It is questions such as these that get Kogman-Appel delving into the cultural history of past times.

Linking up two approaches – to social history and to religious history – is what characterises Kogman-Appel's work. She has done pioneering research into the Leipzig Machzor illuminated manuscript, an early 14th century prayer book for Jewish holy days. Her interdisciplinary approach has also been recognised by the Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Künste. After numerous awards – such as, in 2013, the Bezalel, Mordechai, and Nessia Narkiss Prize for outstanding research into Jewish art and the Alexander von Humboldt Professorship in 2015 – she was elected to the community of scholars in May 2024. "This recognition of my work is an honour for me," she says. Since 1970 the Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Künste has been providing a forum for interdisciplinary exchanges between outstanding researchers and renowned artists. At the academy, Kogman-Appel appreciates most of all the interdisciplinary inspiration in the humanities class. "I'm especially interested in over-arching questions regarding cultural exchange processes between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The discussions I have are an inspiration for my further research."

She has been undertaking research since 2015 as Professor of Jewish studies at the "Religion and Politics" Cluster of Excellence. After reading Jewish studies, art history and history, she was initially engaged in teaching and research in Vienna and Jerusalem, where she completed her doctorate in Jewish art history in 1993. Her work took her to the USA and then to Israel for 20 years, which she spent at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beer-Sheva. From 2014 to 2015 she was a Fellow of the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Nowadays she commutes between Münster and Jerusalem. Her husband and two of her three grown-up children live in Israel, where she spends the semester vacations. In the little free time she has, she likes visiting museums. Appropriately enough, she contributed several exhibits to the "Body. Cult. Religion." exhibition organised by the "Religion and Politics" Cluster of Excellence. On the flight back from Israel, she actually transported photographs by Lea Golda Holtermann in her hand luggage because there was a public holiday, which meant there were not enough staff to organise professional transport. "It was a curious situation, but the exhibits arrived safely," she emphasises.

Bringing more light into the darkness

Cell biologist Prof. Karin Busch wants to leave the safe pathways in research and discover new things. Since June 2024 she has been heading up an alliance project on memory research which is receiving a total of around 1.2 million euros through the Human Frontier Science Program. *Dr. Christina Hoppenbrock*

Never before did Karin Busch have so much time to immerse herself in research. Now that her three children are grown up and studying at university, she can get even more intensely involved in her work – for example, drawing up funding applications and acquiring new projects. Together with her colleagues, she would also like to get a new research training group off the ground …

The research grant from the Human Frontier Science Program (HFSP) which cell biologist Busch was awarded – together with a biochemist from Scotland and a neurobiologist from the USA – came just at the right time. "It's like a gift, I'm really happy," she says. "Sometimes you have ideas which seem to be crazy and which are out of the question for conventional research funding." The HFSP, an international programme designed to strengthen outstanding research in the life sciences, expressly calls upon researchers, however, to leave well-trodden paths in order to discover new things. "It allows exploratory research based on knowledge that we have acquired over the years." Also, it's fantastic, she says, that she was able to look for outstanding partners from all over the world with whom she could tackle unsolved puzzles. "What I like especially is that interdisciplinary working is one of the conditions of the grant; that pools expertise and permits synergies."

The German-Scottish-American team aims to understand the importance which an efficient energy supply to the nerve cells has for forming long-term memory. It is a field which has scarcely been studied so far. Specifically, the group is looking into how ion currents regulate the central enzyme in energy metabolism, the ATP synthase, in the so-called mitochondria of the cranial nerves.

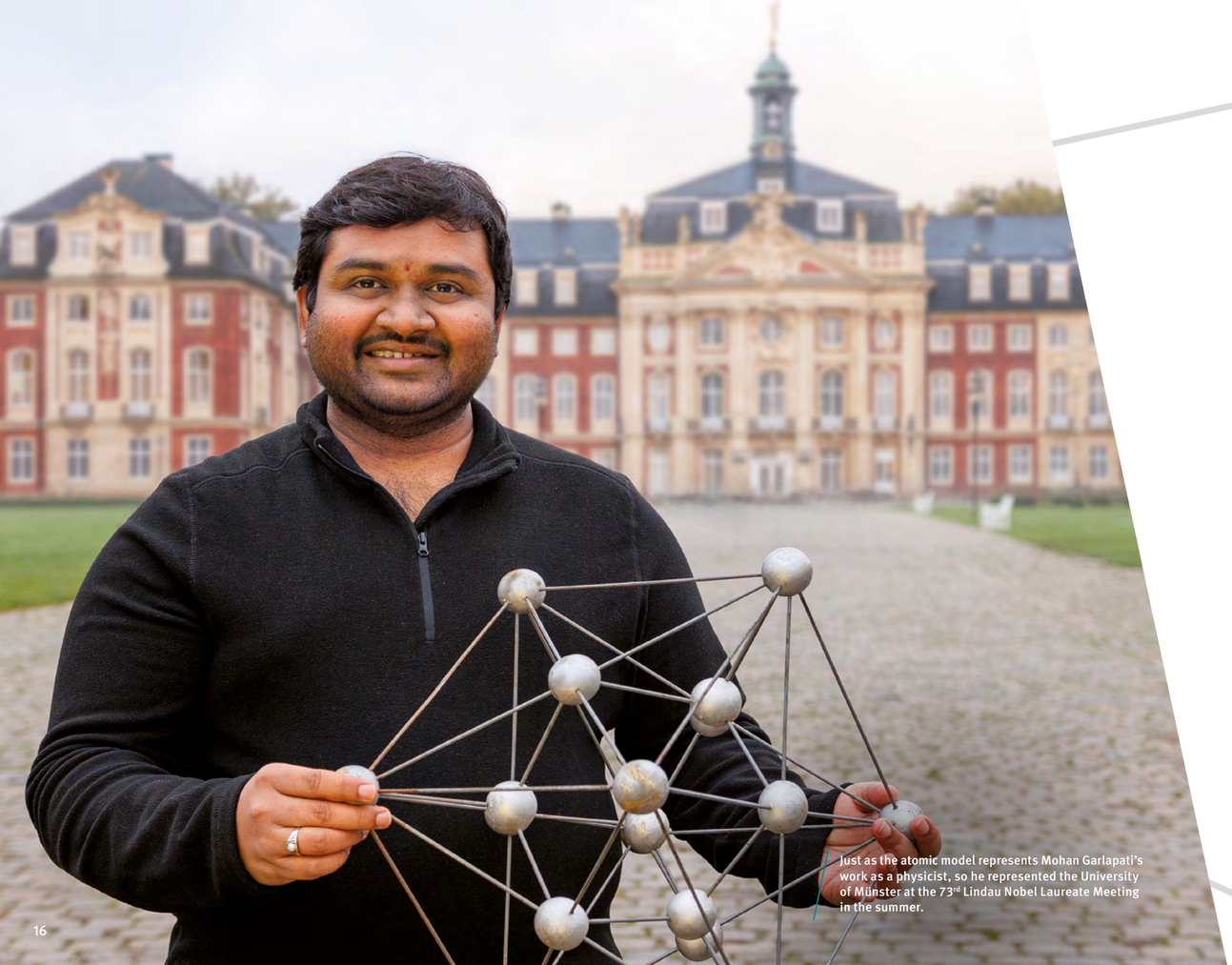
Mitochondria are Karin Busch's hobby. Like small organs in the interior of cells, these structures (called organelles) – sometimes more spherical, sometimes less – see to it that the organism is supplied with the energy it needs. The processes involved are extremely complex and have already provided generations of scientists with material for research. There are still enough unanswered questions. "I could talk about mitochondria for hours," Karin Busch enthuses. The fact that nowadays research can be carried out on the molecular processes in the mitochondria in living cells, is down to her. Young people from all over the world come to see her in Münster in order to learn the technique she developed of single-cell microscopy in mitochondria. With this method, the movements of proteins in the two membranes of the organelles can be followed, providing deep insights into the energy machinery.

Karin Busch grew up in Bensheim, in the south of the state of Hesse, without any academic role models in her family. As a teenager she wanted to be a travel writer – or an explorer. After studying biochemistry and gaining her diploma, then doing teacher training in biology and chemistry, she wrote her doctoral thesis on plant biochemistry at the University of Tübingen in the mid-1990s, and that sparked her enthusiasm. "Research has gripped me ever since," she says. After various academic steps – including a post-doctorate at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel, and being a team leader and then an associate professor in Osnabrück – she moved to Münster University in 2015. In her private life, her home is still in Osnabrück where her husband, likewise a professor, works.

She already has on her agenda the next research questions beside the HFSP project: what role does the ATP synthase play in the occurrence of muscle weakness and in ageing? And how can the efficiency of the enzyme be influenced? "I don't like letting go. When something grabs me, I want to understand it," says Karin Busch, who finds an alternative to work in gardening and mountain tours.

One day a week, she still sits at the microscope herself – something she still insists on doing despite her duties as a university teacher. When she is sitting in a darkened laboratory, observing fluorescent cells and molecules under the microscope, a good metaphor occurs to her for what she most likes doing: she is bringing light into the darkness.

Karin Busch researches into molecular processes in the mitochondria in cells and gains insights into the energy machinery in organisms.



Just as the atomic model represents Mohan Garlapati's work as a physicist, so he represented the University of Münster at the 73rd Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting in the summer.

Happiness at Lake Constance

Physicist Dr. Mohan Muralikrishna Garlapati was one of two junior researchers from the University of Münster who were invited to attend the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting in the summer. A special honour: and one which was followed by another in the winter. *André Bednarz*

There is nothing to remind one of the sunlight glistening on Lake Constance in the summer as Dr. Mohan Muralikrishna Garlapati arrives at the Münster Schloss one cold November afternoon to talk about his career and about the 73rd Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting he attended in July. The Schloss is shrouded in fog, but despite this, materials physicist Garlapati is in a good mood. He has been looking forward to our conversation and has brought some good news: "I've been offered a position as professor at the Indian Institute of Technology Patna, which I shall soon be taking up," he says.

What is good news for the 30-year-old Garlapati is not necessarily good news for the University of Münster, which will be losing a gifted and ambitious scientist. Although the promotion represents the highest recognition for his achievements, he is quick to point out the importance of Münster University for him. "It made me the scientist and researcher that I am today – and I'm very grateful both to the University and to the Institute of Materials Physics for allowing me to work here and advance my development for several years in a highly professional environment," he says. At the Nobel Laureate Meeting, Garlapati also emphasised the role played by Münster when he declared that the University had made this "greatest moment of happiness in my career" possible.

The path from an Indian village to the meeting with Nobel laureates was long. Mohan Garlapati embarked on it from an early age, and always with a huge interest in nature and the science behind it, as well as in inventions and in technological and human progress. The physicist covered part of the way as a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and Humboldt Fellow and as a research group leader at the University of Münster, where he produced and analysed synthetic materials in the Radiotracer Lab – the "only one of its kind in the world", as he says. For Garlapati, along with humility, curiosity has also gone hand in hand with ambition and self-discipline. "There were times," he says, "when I was too ambitious – and perhaps I still am today. During my doctoral studies, my father passed away, and because of my work I missed out on enjoying many precious moments with him." He has since realised that it is important to spend time enjoying your private life too alongside your work.

His ambition, curiosity and perseverance took him to Lindau, where he and over 630 other junior researchers from 90 countries had been invited to meet with almost 40 Nobel laureates in order to learn from them, as well as from one another. On the recommendation of Prof. Gerhard Wilde, the Dean had put Garlapati's name forward to the selection committee, and they subsequently invited him to attend.

"The first impression itself is the best one," he says, as he speaks about his five-day stay in Lindau and describes the evening reception to welcome everyone. "I felt these vibes, this enormous motivation in me and all around me as I was surrounded by more than a dozen Nobel laureates as well as by members of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences." In the conversations he had, he noticed that these luminaries were themselves also human beings – but distinguished by two things in particular: consistency and perseverance. One Nobel laureate told him, Garlapati recounts, that he had been nominated for the prize 22 times before he was finally awarded it at his advanced age. Despite this greatest of all awards, he said, he and his wife remember above all the many years of hard work and the financial difficulties they had before he received the prize. "That was something that inspired me greatly," Garlapati says.

He will take this inspiration back to India to start his work as a professor, fulfilling his "social responsibility towards humanity and the environment," which he says he has as a scientist. "I see this as an encouragement and will continue trying to achieve something in life," says 30-year-old Garlapati – as someone who has met Nobel laureates, conducted hundreds of experiments at Münster, published more than two dozen papers, registered patents and who will soon have fulfilled his lifelong (professional) dream. But while he is happy about these achievements, Garlapati remembers the enormous support and encouragement provided by his wife Sai Meghana and mother Lakshmi, acting as the backbone for his success.

A score to settle in Tokyo

For seven years, Fabian Dammermann led a double life – as a student and as a professional athlete. No easy task. But with support from Münster University's top-class sports programme he recently completed his master's degree and took part in the 2024 Olympic Games in the German relay team. *Hanna Dieckmann*

Commenting on the 400-metres race, a journalist from the ZEIT newspaper once wrote: "This is a profoundly inhumane discipline, and the human body was not made for it." For Fabian Dammermann, this isn't true. The one-lap distance is his speciality. "The journalist made it sound dramatic, but it's an accurate description of the special character of the discipline," says the recently graduated Master of Education in sport and social sciences. The 27-year-old not only succeeded in getting into top-class sport but, in August 2024, he also achieved the highlight of his career so far: taking part in the Olympic Games in Paris with the 400-metres relay team. For athletes, the Olympics are "the ultimate dream", he says.

Fabian Dammermann looks back on Paris with mixed feelings. "After I had just missed out on qualifying for the Olympics in Tokyo, I was proud to hear that I would be in the summer 2024 team." The fact that the German relay team just missed out on a place in the final and, as a reserve, he could only sit and watch, is something that he cannot forget. "I was in top form, and I wanted to show what I was capable of on the track. So it feels like unfinished business," he says. It means, he says, that he is all the more motivated for the next Games in Los Angeles. "I'm used to organising my whole life around these highlights. "But because we have to qualify for the Olympics or for the World or European Championships, we don't know until a late stage whether the work has all been worthwhile," Dammermann explains. 'All or nothing' is often the motto in his sporting life.

Field and track athletes are generally seen as being lone fighters. Fabian Dammermann, by contrast, describes himself as a team player. As a child in Osnabrück he discovered athletics through a school athletics club – and stayed with it because he liked training in a group so much. He became a competitive athlete because, as he himself says, his trainer lured him "with a place in the 4 x 400-metres relay". He enjoyed trying out different disciplines in athletics, he says. "I would have liked to stay with the 100-metres distance," he recalls – adding, however, that he wasn't fast enough over the short distance. "I remember not being at all interested when my trainer put me in the 400-metres team."

In the end, the decision turned out to be a stroke of luck. Team player Dammermann found his niche in the lone fighters' sport. "And I also realised that with hard training I could achieve comparatively more running one lap." What followed was qualifying for the German Championships in 2014. "That's when I first tasted blood and seriously began doing high-performance training." During puberty, his body developed fast, and Dammermann's performance took a considerable leap forwards. He passed his Abitur in 2016 and became German indoor champion in the under-20s age group. After that came his first nomination for the German national under-20s team. His breakthrough from the juniors' to the men's class came soon afterwards. In his second year as a professional, he won the European Championships relay title. "At that time, I knocked one second off my best time, which is an enormous improvement over 400 metres," he says.

Even though he has occasionally had problems with injuries, Fabian Dammermann feels ready for higher aims. "This season we want to qualify for the 2025 World Championships in Tokyo. I'd like to be chosen to run and reach the final." He also gets his motivation from a defeat. "In 2021 I missed out by a whisker on the qualification for the Tokyo Olympics – so I still have a score to settle," he says. The fact that this year, for the first time, he can concentrate on his sport fits in well with his plans. In the medium-term, he will have to do his practical training as a trainee teacher. How being a teacher and being a top-class athlete can be reconciled is difficult to foretell. But one thing is certain: as a top-class athlete and an Olympian runner, he will be a good role model.

Focused on his aims: after graduating, Fabian Dammermann is now concentrating on his sport.

Most of all, Daniel Kluger loves being in nature, always climbing upwards. He has a passion for climbing high mountains, including the Himalayas. In Münster he has found a refuge – in the Alpine section of the University of Münster's Botanical Garden – which gives him an opportunity to indulge his passion for mountains.

Not just all in the mind

Psychologist Dr. Daniel Kluger is investigating the interplay between the brain and the body. The European Research Council awarded him an ERC Starting Grant in September which will enable him to set up his own research group in the coming years. *Dr. Kathrin Kottke*

Even as a child, nature was an important element in Dr. Daniel Kluger's life, and one which brought him happiness and an inner balance. "There are photos showing me at the age of 18 months, utterly content and staring at the mountains in the French Alps," he says. Being at one with nature, with the body and the mind in balance: this interplay fascinates him just as much today as it did in the past. Understanding how the brain functions is Kluger's vocation. At the Institute for Biomagnetism and Biosignalanalysis at the Faculty of Medicine, he is investigating the interplay between brain activity and diverse dynamic processes in the body. Doing research as a career wasn't planned. "During my psychology studies I was sitting in a lecture being given by Prof. Ulrich Mußhoff. He was talking about the complex development of the brain – and the spark was ignited in me right away," Kluger (35) remembers. "That was the turning point for me. I wanted to be a researcher and not a psychotherapist."

Things have gone well for him as a researcher. In September he received a Starting Grant from the European Research Council. The grant, worth 1.5 million euros, will enable Kluger to set up his own research group. "There are a lot of rhythmic processes in the body such as breathing or the heartbeat. They not only fulfil vital functions for our survival but also influence neural processing in the brain, thus modulating human behaviour," he explains. This interplay between the brain and the body is something he wants to understand and elaborate in connection with various neuropsychiatric disorders such as epilepsy or anxiety disorders. "The close links between mental and physical health show us that our thoughts aren't just all in the mind but are part of our body's dynamic system, inseparable from it."

Kluger is very pleased and grateful that he can now set up his research group based on his own ideas. "It was due to a lucky coincidence that I submitted an application to the European Research Council," he comments. He was encouraged to do so, he says, by a professor from Maastricht whom he met at a conference in Italy. "She said I should send her my research exposé and my CV, quite informally." This he did – and she encouraged him to submit an application.

For Kluger, there are many reasons why the brain is the most fascinating organ in the human body. Two examples: the brain has around 90 billion cells, and the neural pathways in the brain of an adult have an overall length of about 5.8 million kilometres – which corresponds to 145 times the Earth's circumference. "This knowledge alone often exceeds the powers of our imagination," he says. "That's why I can't imagine anything more fascinating than trying to discover as much as possible about this organ." At the Institute for Biomagnetism and Biosignalanalysis there is a magnetoencephalograph (MEG for short) for Kluger to work with. A total of 275 sensors – and over 1,000 measuring points per second in each sensor – measure the activity of the brain both spatially and temporally at a high resolution. "Using the MEG, we can measure things we couldn't previously," he comments. "We're now able to explain everyday situations better – for example, why we briefly hold our breath when shooting an arrow in archery or breathe out when lifting a heavy weight."

Being able to stand in a lab and observe, in real time, how the brain functions is the driving force for Kluger in his work – especially if one day his basic research is put into practice to help patients to become healthy again. Just as important for him is the work-life balance in his research team. For this purpose, his team has drawn up a "lab manual" laying down rules for long-term wellbeing. "It's a kind of philosophy which we live by here," he explains. Among other things, the manual sets out how a working environment characterised by mutual respect can be achieved and maintained.

One aspect which undoubtedly applies to many fields of research – but especially for research into the brain – is that every answer throws up many new questions. It's just like hiking or trekking: after every mountain comes a new peak to climb. "I like climbing mountains – both literally and figuratively – when you make real progress."

Great interest in the four-day week

Well-being increases when working time decreases – with productivity remaining constant or even rising slightly. This is shown in a highly regarded study carried out by the University of Münster and headed by Prof. Julia Backmann, who presented the results in mid-October. *Brigitte Heeke*

The list of people who have contacted her Chair, asking for quotes and results of the study, is endless. "But the most unusual was an enquiry from a children's radio series," says Prof. Julia Backmann, whose research project was explained in the children's news there. As soon as her pilot study on the four-day week got going, her telephone never stopped ringing. She was even invited to the state of North-Rhine Westphalia's press conference in mid-October to present the results of the study. After the conference, the pilot study team split up over several rooms in the state parliament building in Düsseldorf. No sooner had one call finished than the phone started ringing again. Backmann was often in front of cameras or microphones, explaining the results of the study. "And we're still getting enquiries," she says. She is also delighted that many of the companies want to try out or retain the new working time model beyond the six-month project period. When she put the producers of the children's radio series through to Dr. Felix Hoch, the co-leader of the study, it was a sign on her part of appreciation of her team. "The project is a team effort – with two habilitation candidates, two PhD students and 17 students on master's degree courses. Several of us dealt with media enquiries," says Backmann.

"It's a very emotional topic, and we have had corresponding reactions to it," Backmann reports. The pilot study showed that well-being increases when working time decreases, with productivity remaining constant or even rising slightly. The four-day week led to a significant positive change in people's satisfaction with their lives, and this resulted mainly from having additional free time," she explains. In advance of the pilot project, 64 percent of employees expressed a wish to spend more time with their families. After the four-day week was introduced, this figure went down to 50 percent. "We have to be careful that these results are not over-interpreted," Backmann concedes, "but it's nice to see a scientific study having such an effect."

45 organisations from different sectors took part in the pilot project on the introduction of the four-day week, carried out with project partners Intraprenör – a management consultancy in Berlin – and the "4 Day Week Global" organisation. The employees themselves drew up measures to implement it – whether through more effective meetings or the use of digital tools. Julia Backmann was surprised at how enthusiastic the employees went about the task. "Such a degree of motivation is not usually achieved in change processes," she says. She is currently examining whether the stress levels of those involved during the project period changed not only subjectively but also objectively. This was based on 600 qualitative interviews, data from fitness trackers and cortisol measurements in hair samples, which a laboratory at the University Hospital analysed.

Julia Backmann has been familiar with entrepreneurial thinking since her childhood, as her parents had a joinery firm in the Münsterland. She chose to study European business at Münster University of Applied Sciences and the University of Portsmouth, following with a master's degree in human resource management at the London School of Economics. "I always wanted to see the world," she says. After spending time at University College Dublin, in consultancy work, at the WHU – Otto Beisheim School of Management and at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, as well as several research stays abroad, including Japan and Australia, what attracted Backmann to the Professorship for the Transformation of Work was that the position had been newly created. "It's like virgin territory: I can develop ideas from scratch and push forward with innovative ideas." When she returned to her homeland in 2022, she also fulfilled a wish she had long had: to have a dog of her own. She now takes her Miniature American Shepherd for long walks from home or after leaving her office on Schlossplatz. Or she teaches him tricks. "My dog can do every trick in the world …" she says.

"New work" includes different models for handling working time. Julia Backmann headed a national pilot study on the four-day week, and the results were published in numerous media.

Maurice Dellin is often found at the Institute of Medical Education – either learning, exchanging ideas with others, or putting projects into practice.

Impressive and unshakable

In November, Maurice Dellin received the University Medal for his many years dedicated to the development of new hybrid teaching formats in the Faculty of Medicine. Voluntary work is the young physician's life and passion.

Dr. Kathrin Kottke

No matter where Maurice Dellin is found – in the student body headquarters, in the lecture hall, in the University Hospital or on the Medical Campus – his broad, friendly smile can be seen from afar. Congenial and open is a good way of describing the brand-new medical graduate when you first meet him. And when you get to know him better, he reveals much more: he is engaged, motivated, interested and versatile – both a doer and a team player. From the first day of his studies, which he began in October 2017, Dellin was involved in all sorts of activities. "While I was still at school I got involved in many fields – for example, I was on the organising committee for our school prom. So, for me it made sense to look in on the Faculty of Medicine's student body and ask whether they could do with some help," Dellin (24) recalls. And then the list of the voluntary work he did just grew: member of the student body representatives, advisor for IT and digitalisation, member of the faculty board, team leader for Münster eLearning docs – to name just a few.

Among all his activities, his first love was for developing technical innovations. Just how well he knows his way around this field became clear when the Covid 19 pandemic paralysed the University's operations. "There was a lack of people who already had experience of digital teaching formats," Dellin recounts. "I took a look at the problem and, together with other students, developed a concept and the technical infrastructure for digital teaching in medicine." It was for this development that he and his team received the Special Teaching Prize from the Faculty of Medicine, as well as the University of Münster Students Prize. The award of the University Medal in November, was in recognition not only of Dellin's developing innovative formats in hybrid university teaching, but also of his "outstanding project management, impressive innovative abilities and unshakeable sense of responsibility," as Prof. Bernhard Marschall, Dean of Studies at the Faculty of Medicine, wrote in nominating Dellin for the award.

Anyone thinking that all this must go to a young person's head would be wrong in the case of Maurice Dellin. He has both feet firmly on the ground and is always unruffled – which is almost unbelievable, given that medicine is one of the most demanding subjects that can be studied at university. Besides having to learn a lot of theory, there are time-intensive pre-clinical phases, the first and second state examinations and a year of practical training all waiting. Dellin also wrote his doctorate during this time, completing it this year with the grade "summa cum laude".

All this shows that Maurice Dellin is not only one of those people who like to become involved in things during their free time, but that he does so heart and soul. "I've never felt that the extra work was stressful," he says. "Quite the opposite: it's my passion and my hobby at the same time. I'm grateful that I had the time to help get things done, suggesting topics and implementing them with a lot of great people."

That all the effort has paid off is shown by how the new concepts have been integrated. Since autumn 2022, all the medical lecture halls have been equipped with hybrid technology, making it possible for every lecture to be transmitted live. "Münster is a pioneer in this field," he says. "We've already had enquiries from the Universities of Aachen, Marburg and Munich about implementing digital university teaching."

In November, Dellin successfully completed his medical studies. The offer of a job may be taking him to Davos, in Switzerland, where he could start as a research associate at the AO Research Institute in April next year. Or he might succeed in finding a job in trauma surgery at Münster University Hospital. At any rate, he sees his future not only in patient care, but would like to combine hospital work, research and teaching. The possibility, otherwise, is that he might start to get bored.

Successful detachment

Prof. Michael Seewald was sitting in a café in Paris in mid-December when a phone call informed him that he had been awarded the Leibniz Prize 2025. A few days later, while he is talking about it in a café on Münster's Domplatz, it is soon clear that the award is not going to go to his head. *André Bednarz*

The facts – a theologian who, just before Christmas, receives Germany's most important research award, the Leibniz Prize, and who quickly achieved much as a researcher at a young age – might suggest that writing a portrait of Prof. Michael Seewald would be an easy undertaking, would practically write itself. But the Professor of Dogma and the History of Dogmatics in the Faculty of Catholic Theology does not make things that easy for his interviewer.

This is because Seewald keeps a detached attitude to many things such as titles, prizes, appreciations – and even to his own subject. He even maintains this position vis-à-vis his biography as a description of his life story. "Self-reflexion or the idea that there are chains of biographical events decreed by fate are alien to me. I don't look for any common threads in my life," he explains. This comes across neither as conscious understatement nor as forced aloofness. There simply appear to be things to which Michael Seewald attaches no (great) importance. However, such things need not therefore be unimportant or uninteresting: born in 1987 in Saarbrücken, where he grew up with joint German and French nationalities, Seewald studied Catholic theology, philosophy and politics in Tübingen, Pune (India) and Frankfurt am Main. He wrote his PhD in Munich, received his habilitation there after lengthy periods studying in Boston, and in 2017 he was appointed to a professorship at the University of Münster. At school, while studying for his Abitur, he won a national debating competition for young people, and in 2013 he was ordained as a priest. Since 2022 he has been the spokesperson for the "Religion and Politics" Cluster of Excellence, and since 2024 a Permanent Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg Berlin.

Even though Michael Seewald (37) describes all these roles as "labels", they are useful for this portrait. He says, for example, when asked about the debating competition, that debates are simply essential and that he is especially motivated to engage in debate when someone declares a discussion to be over. In his subject – Dogmatics – in particular, he says, it happens repeatedly that people aim to have teaching posts in order to propagate "supposed truths, in an authoritative way". This is not what concerns him, he says, either as a university lecturer and researcher or occasionally in his role as a priest. "What's important is always the persuasive force of the best argument," he declares. Studying philosophy was useful, as the subject "requires that statements display analytical clarity", he says.

For this, he needs language. His aim is always to write clear, accessible texts. Not in kitsch-laden texts but "cloaked in simple beauty" such as he seeks daily in "beautiful literature and music" after reading an unsatisfying academic text. In this act of distancing himself from other people and their sometimes tedious texts, and in his wish to do things differently, there is a special feature which Seewald calls an "ironic detachment from theology and from my occupation". Perhaps, he says cautiously, this approach might be a reason why for example his books or some of his – deliberately restricted – appearances in the media "seem to strike a nerve" when, seen from the outside, he either talks of "other things" or talks of "things differently". In conversation, Seewald constantly refines what he says, formulates different views, pre-empting them in order to keep the matter at a slight distance, as it were. On the award of the Leibniz Prize, for example: he was simply lucky, he says, because there are other people who are just as proficient but who didn't receive it. "I have a reserved attitude to awards and titles," he says, in his customary detached way.

This attitude certainly raises the question of how this researcher, who is both experienced and, at the same time, still quite young, can have achieved so much without describing himself as being ambitious in the conventional sense. Michael Seewald would certainly object to this psychological approach, but some things may be due to his roots. He speaks animatedly of his homeland, the Saarland. He gives the listener the impression that, located on the French border and between France and Germany, it gave him a special identity: not entirely German, not entirely French, but something else in itself – simply somewhat detached.

Just as the Campus of Theologies and Religious Studies, currently under construction on Hüfferstraße/Robert Koch Straße, combines the Stiftung (front) and the new building (back), Michael Seewald also combines the old and the new by researching into Catholic doctrine both past and present.

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