

SISTER ANGELIKA, COMMUNITY OF IMSHAUSEN (GERMANY)

## The Spirit of the Beatitudes

Brother Roger often repeated: Jesus did not come to bring a new teaching, but a communion. This discovery also lies at the beginning of our road and, in addition is its orientation. Vera von Trott, the daughter of an old noble family, and Anna-Elisabeth Hohmann, an employee in Vera's parents' house, became sisters as a result of a serious illness in which Vera accompanied Anna-Elisabeth. Together they had discovered God's healing mercy. Vera expressed it in retrospect with these words, "To describe the beginning of the community: absolute helplessness, total abandon to the One who loves us, trusting Him, not passively but in active surrender, has consequences. The beginning was an event, a happening—not a teaching or ideas."

From this beginning a small house-community came into being before and during the Second World War, mainly women to whom children, invalids and refugees were entrusted. Students and soldiers, attracted by the spiritual life, came and went. They had nothing, shared everything and discovered prayer, intercession and the celebration of the Eucharist as a source of energy for life in narrow straits and outer hardships.

Vera von Trott became more and more convinced that she was living in a country under a criminal regime that brought untold calamity and misery to many peoples and countries, including its own.

Her brother Adam was an active participant in the resistance against Hitler and was executed after the attempt on Hitler's life on July 20, 1944. One of the soldier friends of the small house-community, Hans Eisenberg, a young officer and theologian, came to the house as a wounded man at the hour Adam von Trott was put to death and stayed. With Vera he took responsibility for the growing house-community and became "Brother Hans." In the course of their common service, "Frau Vera," as we called her later, and Brother Hans discovered the charism of living together as man and wife, without being married, but rather making possible between them a wide space for many people, often in dire need.

In 1952 they became acquainted with the communities of Taizé and Grandchamp, which had already chosen to make a life-commitment. They felt encouraged by this and so, at Easter 1955, two sisters and two brothers made the first commitment for life. The Imshausen Community became visible, a community of women and men, in the past in the midst of a lively home for children, today in the midst of guests seeking silence, people who share their life and people looking for direction. The evangelical counsels were not explicitly named in the commitment, but they were clearly implicit.

So we have been on the road for sixty years, always in the same place; today we are a small community of six sisters and five brothers. We do not consider ourselves an order, and not just because of our small number. When Brother Hans was asked, “So what do you do in Imshausen?” he used to reply, “We live together!” And I would like to add: we are trying to and practicing it, because the longer we practice, the clearer it becomes how much we, people so marked by individualism, need to learn about community.

In his rule Brother Roger gives a direction for this kind of common life: “Be filled with the spirit of the Beatitudes: joy, simplicity, mercy.” I consider this triplet inspired and have discovered in it a new interpretation of the so-called “evangelical counsels” for our time.

## **JOY / POVERTY**

I have noted a saying of Brother Francois: “Our only discipline is to remain joyful.” There are many bible texts that witness to the fact that joy arises in scarcity, for example Psalm 126: Those who sow in tears will harvest in joy. This is a very important question today for those who have set out on the road with Jesus. How do we deal with scarcity, with lacks, whether material or psychological or spiritual? Do we find in outer hardships, in sickness, failure or in the face of the misery in our world an access to this joy which—as Brother Roger says—is above all inward? In a joyless world this is an important witness. Jesus wishes for his followers that his joy may be in them and their joy may be complete. Daily we sing the Beatitudes and have to ask ourselves: how is it with our joy?

In our common life as women and men there always were and are tensions. Even the temptation to separate has not been spared us. We experience it as a miracle when, in this situation, when everything seems paralyzed, joy in God, in God's road with us, breaks through once again. It is a gift; we do not have it, but when we hand over to Christ our not-having, not-being-able, not-knowing, it comes about that his joy can flow into our emptiness.

It is not an accident that the book published in 2012 with early still unpublished texts by Brother Roger was called “To Joy I Invite You.” This makes it clear that the journey with Christ is an invitation and for our happiness it is constantly renewed to make it clear to us that we must set out on it, with everything that is lacking in us.

## **SIMPLICITY / CHASTITY**

when Brother Roger speaks about simplicity, I think he means something deeper and more inclusive than a life-style and a way of being with others—however important these may be. Does he not mean the simple and total surrender, with no “Yes, but...”, to Christ who invites us? To be

with our whole being available to the One who awakens our trust, in all simplicity, to him and to those with whom we live and those whom we encounter. Christ invites us to surrender ourselves to him anew each day with all our energies, including our sexuality. Christ does not need our efforts to be faultless, but he needs our unqualified trust that he can begin something even with our failures. When I consent to the road with Christ together with my sisters and brothers, I consent to a never-ending process of transformation. Already in the 1930s the little house-community had become acquainted with the celebration of the Eucharist the way it was developed and practiced in the liturgical movement of the Protestant Church. The extensive *epiclesis*, the calling of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts, is still a central element for us today. This prayer leads to the request: "Transform us too and make us and this world new according to your love." The prayer for the world to be transformed requires our daily readiness to let ourselves be transformed through the "minor hurts each day brings", as Brother Roger expresses it, through the simple acceptance of what is asked of us in suffering, illness, incomprehension and failure. All that is an opportunity to live in simplicity and surrendering oneself. We cannot do anything remarkable. Frau Vera thought, with respect to the history of injustice that we cannot avoid: "We will be humus." In other words, our little community may disappear at some point, but what was lived and is still lived until today there through God's grace can—like humus—make possible life and growth and bear fruit in God's future for the human family.

## MERCY / OBEDIENCE

What about the third aspect—mercy? Is there a relationship with the third evangelical counsel, obedience? Brother Roger speaks—I don't know in what context—of "obedience to reality." What is meant by that? The parable of the Good Samaritan can give us an answer: mercy; spontaneous, with no delay, because that is now the commandment of the hour. The question is: how do we as a community respond to the questions of our time? When for instance we are asked to shelter refugees threatened with expulsion, we are confronted with this question: what is the obedience required of us? And similarly, when we reflect on our attitude concerning global warming. Each new step in the common life asks us about our attentive response as we look towards God, who is a God of mercy, not only with human beings but with his entire creation.

## SUMMARY

Life in the spirit of the Beatitudes, joy simplicity mercy, should serve the common life. In the exhortation read at profession Brother Roger expressed the meaning of this life in these words: "The Lord Christ, in his compassion and his love for you, has chosen you to be in the Church a sign of brotherly love. He calls you to live out, with your brothers, the parable of community." This text is also an important indication for us. We have to become aware, over and over again, that the important thing is being together a sign in our world marked by divisions, both on the large- and small-scale. This too is an invitation: our life together, often tedious, is intended to point beyond itself, to God's intention to make his Kingdom visible here and now among women and men who make room among themselves for him, his life and his teaching. Our great diversity of origin, temperament and gifts are no obstacle to this. We are and remain pledged to mutual forgiveness and generosity. Is this not true as well for our life together in our respective Churches and among

the Churches? Are not spiritual communities privileged places where experiences of unity are made in the readiness to share spiritual as well as other possessions, and with those who belong to another religion, or to no religion at all. Our history in Imshausen is marked by a variety of encounters with sisters and brothers of the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Churches. They have encouraged and strengthened us on our way, for which we had no model. We are welcome in their houses and they experience that they feel at home in our worship as well.

Let us not tire of letting ourselves be penetrated by the spirit of the Beatitudes in our communities: joy simplicity mercy. Do we not owe this witness to the people of our day?