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Autor: Bossard, Paul
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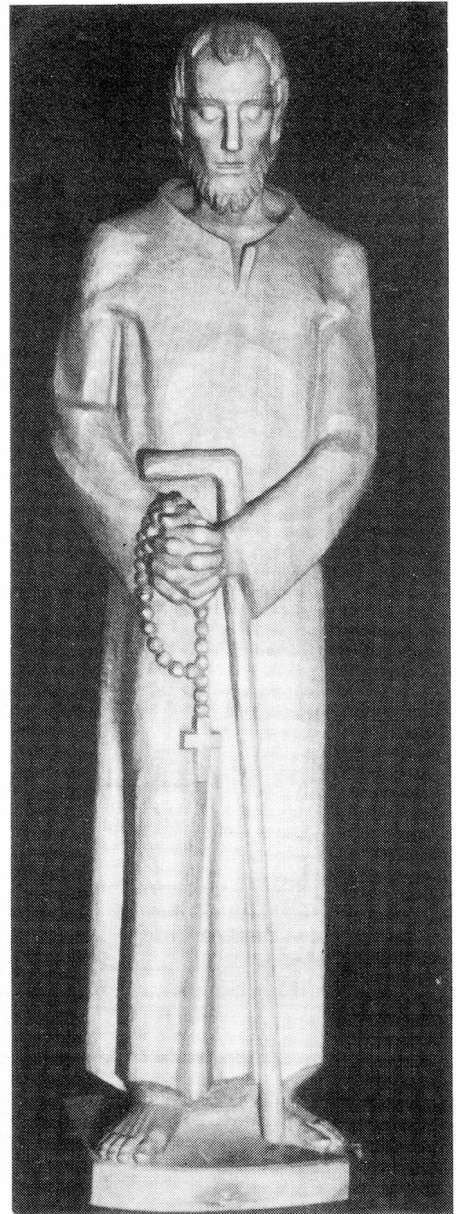
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THIS year we celebrate one of the most important historical events in the history of Switzerland when the young federation of eight states began to expand south and west into the Italian and French speaking cultures and integrate them into one nation. The great danger of such a step had been felt. It nearly caused a civil war and brought the Swiss Confederation to the brim of the abyss. The Diet of Stans in 1481 found the answer: Expansion with restraint and no interference with other neighbouring powers – the famous Swiss Neutrality. How did it come about? And what was the central role of Nikolaus von der Flüe? This is the first of a special series of articles written for the Swiss Observer by Father PAUL BOSSARD.

The hermit in the Ranft . . . a great power for peace



THE second part of the 15th century, which marked the approaching end of the Middle Ages, was a time of great turmoil, of war and disease – the Black Death – and of affluence and poverty. While the wealthy families, the noblemen and sovereigns – members of the Church, bishops, abbots and prelates not excluded – indulged in excessive luxuries and exquisite tastes in dress, food, drink and sex, the poor died of hunger and disease, were exposed to cruel punishment, torture, inquisition and inhuman executions.

No wonder that many people in those days expected the end of the world to be imminent. It looked not unlike our own time, the second half of the 20th century, with its grave problems of social unrest and its fear of total nuclear destruction.

After the victorious war against the Duke of Burgundy, Charles the Bold, in the three battles of Grandson, Murten and Nancy, the Confederation of Switzerland rose to the height of its military and political power.

It had won the admiration and respect of neighbouring rulers, had gained great wealth in booty and trade and was looked upon with considerable fear for its army. But inside it was very brittle, divided and torn. The wealthy towns were in bitter opposition to the rural communities, economic and political interests in the South (Italy) and the West (Savoy) clashed and tore the communities apart.

The quarrel came to the peak

when Fribourg and Solothurn applied to join the Federation. At the Diet (Tagsatzung) of Stans in 1481 the delegates came together to find a solution to the different problems, but there was no answer to the bitter arguments. On December 22, when the delegates were on the point of parting to decide the issue by force of arms or by foreign intervention, a peace formula was found in an emergency session. It was the work and influence of one man, the hermit in the Ranft, Nikolaus von der Flüe.

Though he never came to the meeting personally, his influence and advice was a constant feature. Not less than seven official messages from him are recorded, as well as several special envoys to the Ranft.

Diepold Schilling mentions in

his chronicles that the delegates were already in different inns for a final drink when the parish priest of Stans, Heimo am Grund, a friend of Nikolaus, after a night spent at his hermitage in the gorge of the Melchaa, called them back to the council hall to consider the last message from the "holy man."

We do not know what this message was. But after the meeting peace was restored.

Fribourg and Solothurn were accepted to join the Federation with limited rights. Expansion was accepted with restraint. The churchbells of Stans began to ring, were taken up by other churches and spread the happy news in a short time all over the confederate countryside.

Who was this man, Nikolaus von der Flüe, and why did he

exercise such influence and political wisdom? How was it possible that he, during the difficult years of the Reformation, decades after his death, was held in such deep respect by Protestants and Catholics alike? What was the secret that enabled a man who could not read and write to formulate the basic principles of Swiss international politics in such concise sentences that they became obvious to anybody who listened to them? Gems such as: "Do not make the fence too wide," or "Do not get mixed up in foreign quarrels." There is an astonishing simplicity in his words, a simplicity which seems so strange to us today.

Nikolaus was the first son of Henry von der Flüe, a rich landowner of Wolfenschiessen in Canton Obwalden. He inherited



Dieser zeit enthielt sich bey den Schweyzerñ nicht verre von Lucern in einer vngeworen aynde ein alt man gar in gelafne vnd abgezognem leben bey. 77. iarn an alle leipliche speys. den neint sie brüder Nicolaßen. der w3 dürts magers außgeschöpfts leibs. allain v3 harvt. geeder vnd gepeyn zusammen geschmuckt. Vnd wiewol die aynsydler von wegen irs müßigen wefens am schatten. vñ darumb auch das von irer vnuerdung wegen vil feuchter kalter vnd roher vberflässigkeit in inen gesamelt werden defstenger fasten mügen. yedoch so hat diser mensch in ganzem abzug so lägerzeit als ein himlisch lebē auf erden on vnbesleckte vermaylegüg gefüert. vñ wiewol ettlich mensche disen bruder Nicolaßen ennenrümgeri gen man zesein beschuldigt vnd sein

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From the World Chronicle by Hartmann Schedel, 1493

a large property above Sachseln, where he built his home. It is still intact and restored to nearly its original design.

To this estate two alps had been added, the "Melchi"- and the "Klisterli"-Alp, where he kept his cattle during the summer. The size of his property suggests that he kept about 30 head of cattle, which was a considerable wealth in those days.

The young farmer married Dorothea Wyss, a local girl of about 14, who grew into a courageous, understanding and healthy mother of five sons and five daughters.

His common sense and exceptional honesty soon won him the confidence of the people in the valley who elected him a local councillor, a justice of peace and a guardian of the banner. In the

army he was captain or bandleader (Rottmeister). He was offered the highest dignity of the canton, that of mayor (Landammann), but he declined.

His military and political life was very active and successful and in great contrast to many of his colleagues since he abhorred intrigue and was held in greatest respect for his unbribable sense of justice and integrity. This caused him many a hidden enemy.



The seal used by Nikolaus von der Flüe

Though he had a deep respect for his church and a cordial relationship with his parish priest, this did not prevent him from conducting a law suit against some of his privileges, which he found unfair to poor farmers. He even went to law against the powerful monastery of Einsiedeln.

With great concern he observed the ever growing tendency of young Swiss to sell their courage and military skill as

mercenaries to foreign powers and did whatever he could to hinder it. His political wisdom and influence stood entirely in the service of keeping and restoring peace.

Such a man was no comfort for unscrupulous politicians and landlords, and many a soldier in his band could begrudge the integrity of his captain and guardian of the banner, who would not tolerate neither cruelty nor looting directed against innocent civilians, churches and monasteries, a practice laid down by the Swiss since the battle of Sempach but often widely neglected.

But he could not win against the corruption in high society. His political career ended in failure.

To be continued