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# The hermit in the Ranft



A friendly man "of high stature with wild hair ... and bright intelligent eyes"

AT the age of 50 Nikolaus von Flüe stood before the ruins of his entire career.

It all began with a court case in which he defended a poor farmer against a rich and influential landlord. Two of the judges accepted bribes and he lost the case. He was forced to withdraw, to the great delight of his enemies.

More and more he was plagued by great anguish, seeing the evils of the time against which he was helpless. He often disappeared for long hours in prayer and only his wife knew where he was and what went on within him.

With her he shared his great trouble, with her he struggled. She fought for her happy marriage and family and he for a new task, which he became convinced was what God wanted.

The records simply say: "Since he needed his wife's agreement he tried his best to convince her, but for a long time in vain, because it involved the family and his duties as husband and father. But he knew that his present life-style was against his call to serve God by fighting against the world. Finally, on his constant insistence, reluctantly she gave in and with tears gave her permission."

This is not, and never has been, easy for us to understand, but we can respect it. It certainly had nothing to do with a religious whim of a frustrated politician.

The economical situation of the family was secure and he remained its spiritual head. There was no loss involved, but great sacrifice, resented by his elder sons, though carried with courage by his wife, Dorothea.

He left home, clad in a long rough robe and went towards Basle. In the Alsass there was a lay organisation called "Friends of God" who, under the guidance of great spiritual masters in the tradition of the mystical life of the Middle Ages like Eckhart, Tauler, Seuse and Ruisbrook, exercised a great influence, which was also felt in Obwalden through the Monastery of Engelberg and priests like Heimo am Grund.

In Listal he had a terrifying experience which greatly disturbed him. Visions and "visits by the devil" play a great part in contemporary chronicles, but he always remained cautious and very discreet. There is certainly no reason to suspect a sick mind.

They are a feature in the mystical life and show in vivid pictures his state of heart. He never followed or entertained them but worked them out in prayer and meditation, took expert advice and followed sound reason. This he did in Listal and

**By Father  
Paul Bossard**

then returned home and hid himself on the Klisterli alp until the winter forced him down to the gorge of the Melchaa, a few hundred yards from his home, where he lived in a shelter of branches.

After two years his people built him a small two-storey house to which a chapel was added, where he spent the rest of his life in austere fasting and prayer.

Slowly his fame was spread all over the country and far over its borders. People with their problems and sufferings began to approach the "holy man" for advice and guidance, which he was always ready to give.

He was often curt and unexpected. A man who complained about his unfaithful wife was told: "You have done her great injustice. Go home and ask for forgiveness!"

But there were others too, especially clerics and monks. Attracted through his "miraculous fasting" they tried to set him trap after trap and threatened to denounce him to the inquisition. So the authorities felt it a necessity to protect him from "these unholy rogues" and guarded the approach to his hermitage.

Early visitors described him as a friendly man of high stature with wild hair, a rich sonorous voice and with bright, intelligent eyes.

His miraculous fast need not be explained. It is a fact of his-

## ‘A living example of the fact that prayer and meditation is the most effective weapon against terror and blind force’

torical evidence that people far and wide were convinced that he did not take any solid food. They even secretly guarded his house until they were convinced.

Then the authorities of the church through the auxilliary bishop of Konstance ordered an official inquiry to which the government of Obwalden had invited an independent witness from Berne in the person of Adrian von Bubenbergh. They listened to his clear and humble replies and were impressed by the fact that he did try to eat some bread and drink some wine as requested and saw how he suffered pain and convulsions.

The bishop apologised and said this was his duty and not his desire. But whenever he was asked about it, he neither affirmed nor denied, but only said that God knew.

This certainly was the most

effective way of protesting against the eating and drinking habits of his time, which was also common among clerics and monks. It had its positive side and showed that “man does not live by bread alone.”

Such a thing is not entirely unknown in the mystical traditions of other world religions, as in India, Tibet and China. But with Brother Klaus it had a definite Christian message through his great veneration of the Holy Eucharist, which he received as often as he could.

His death was not a peaceful, romantic farewell. For more than a week his body was racked with the severest pain which made the old man toss and turn on the floor of his hut and complain with great agony about the aches in his bones and his tendons.

Gratefully he died on March 21, 1487. There was great

mourning in the country and far beyond the frontiers. The dome of St. Stephan in Vienna was lined in black and a hundred priests, together with the royal household, attended the memorial Mass. He was buried in the parish church of Sachseln.

The historical research of his life and influence is practically complete. It was ordered by the Government of Obwalden – an unusual thing for any Swiss Government – and undertaken by Dr. Robert Durrer. He, at first, was reluctant to do it, being too good a historian to know that the halo of historical personalities decreased the more it came under the critical eye of historical research.

After he had finished his life's work he came to the conclusion that it was the other way round with Nikolaus von der Flüe. The more documents he discovered,

the more he was able to see the outstanding significance of this great personality.

Just 460 years after his death he was canonised by Pope Pius XII in 1947. This gave rise to considerable misgivings among many Swiss, especially among non-catholics.

But the great protestant theologian from Basle, Karl Barth, spoke for many when he said: “In spite of the canonisation, which we reject, Klaus von der Flüe will remain ‘our saint’.” Walter Nigg in one of his books calls him the “Swiss Starez,” and the best monographie, still worth reading, was written by Arthur Mojonnier, professor of history at Zürich. Non-catholics have certainly written some of the best contributions for a wider and deeper appreciation of this great Swiss.

And there is no doubt that a serious study of the life and of the prayers of Nikolaus von der Flüe will reveal amazing insights and connections with our present times and its problems and point unmistakably into the direction where true solutions can be found.

Political manipulations, world reformers, replacement of one superstructure by another will in no way bring any positive result. The life and work of Nikolaus von der Flüe is a living example of the fact that the single individual has to change himself, that prayer and meditation is the most effective weapon against terror and blind force, that spiritual life alone can raise the standard of living for the individual and activate the material resources for the benefit of all, and that real peace can only be found together with God.

● To be continued

