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‘Dramatic’: Franz Pfanner's path to holiness

‘Are you a chimney sweep?’ This seemingly absurd question was posed to the then Prior Franz Pfanner by an elderly gentleman in Agram (now Zagreb). The questioner did not know what to make of Pfanner's ‘black cap’. He is a Trappist, Pfanner told the bewildered man, who was completely baffled. This encounter inspired Pfanner to write an information brochure about the Trappists. Published in Graz in 1874, the booklet was a witty masterpiece of advertising: for priestly and religious vocations, for those who ‘always trudge’, who live ‘in forests, gorges and desolate places’, who work hard ‘like donkeys on poor feed’, who remain silent their whole lives, but think all the more for it. In short: for ‘people considered foolish by the world’ who, through their silence, already achieve on this earth what constitutes the blessed lot of the saints, namely to unite intimately with God.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

‘Most people have no idea what God would make of them if they only made themselves available to him,’ is a saying attributed to Ignatius of Loyola. Wendelin from Langen-Hub could hardly have imagined what his father's judgement that he was not cut out to be a farmer would mean for him. He could not have known that he would ultimately follow in the footsteps of Benedict of Nursia, then Bernard of Clairvaux, Jean-Armand de Rancé (the great reformers of religious orders, whom he mentions in his humorous promotional pamphlet: ‘Are you a chimney sweep?’), he could not have known that he would become the creative midwife of a new monastic culture with thoroughly comparable dramatic connotations. He could not have known, but he placed himself at God's disposal. At first, probably in the same way as most children who grow up in a deeply religious farming family that values daily rituals. Wendelin learned to pray and prayed with childlike fervour. In keeping with family tradition, the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph were at the centre of his devotion. He prayed and worked on the farm.

On Michaelmas Day in 1838, however, his father took the 13-year-old to Feldkirch to study, sprinkled him with holy water as he left the farmhouse, prayed the rosary with him on the way and said goodbye with the words: ‘Pray and study diligently’. Wendelin did both in an exemplary manner, and not only because he attended Holy Mass every day: in Feldkirch, in Innsbruck and also in Padua, where he seemed to be disgusted by the ‘ugly behaviour of Italian

students’. For the first time, he may have asked himself what God expected of him: After ‘a month, it was already clear to me that I would turn to the priesthood’.

Entering the seminary in Brixen seemed to have brought clarity about his future path. Or did it? In his memoirs, he records ‘the only strange thing’ about this time: the sudden urge ‘to go on a mission to the heathens’. Serious illness and poor health put an end to this dream. The extensive pilgrimage through Germany and Switzerland not only broadens his horizons, it also consolidates the contours of his path to sainthood. At the shrine of the Virgin Mary in Einsiedeln, he clearly describes the sign leading there: May Mary help him to become a ‘zealous priest’. The nuances of this holy zeal are provided by the Prince Archbishop of Brixen, Bernhard Galura, who ordains him as a priest, but also by the people in his homeland. The newly ordained priest's return to Langen resembles Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In his memoirs, Pfanner speaks not only of the ‘foolish joy’ of the people in the Allgäu region and Vorarlberg. "In the last market town on Bavarian soil, the procession resembled a triumphal parade. Amidst the crackling of firecrackers and green triumphal arches, I crossed the grounds of our family farm and, amid countless congratulations, I descended into my father's house. There my mother greeted me. It was a great joy for me to be able to bless my parents. Among the blessed was my twin brother, whom I had so often thrown into the grass (while playing and roughhousing). The first mass was a real rarity in Langen. “

Did our Wendelin, who was intoxicated by the excitement of Palm Sunday, suspect that his priestly life would take several dramatic turns, turns that would draw him more into the drama of Holy Week than most first Mass celebrants would like? Even upon his arrival at his first parish in Haselstauden, there was no sign of triumph. Rather, there was a deathly silence in the village. For several months, the new priest endured the suspicion of his congregation. Until one day a typhoid epidemic broke out and people barricaded themselves in their homes. Only Wendelin visited the sick every day, thus gaining their trust and becoming a valued – and zealous – priest. But once again, his poor health thwarted his plans. In all seriousness, the man who had placed himself at God's disposal without any ‘ifs or buts’ prepared himself for imminent death and acquired a place in the cemetery right next to the church wall. But God was far from finished with him.

His ecclesiastical superior sent him to Agram (Zagreb) as spiritual director for the Sisters of Mercy and as prison chaplain. The priest, who was in poor health, not only pondered death there, but also the possibility of joining a religious order. ‘What does God want from me? Should I become a Franciscan or a Jesuit?’ he may have asked himself. At the end of 1862, he

met two Belgian Trappist monks in Agram. Their stories about the strict monastic life of the Trappists fascinated the now 37-year-old priest. He soon made his decision: ‘I would rather take on penances to death than study myself to death!’ (With the Jesuits). So, he asked Bishop Gasser in Brixen for permission and at the same time inquired at the Trappist monastery of Mariawald in the Eifel region about being admitted to the convent.

Not unlike Saint Ignatius, who hoped that his pilgrimage to Jerusalem would bring him clarity about his future path, our Wendelin also made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where he experienced the drama of Christian existence in a liturgical way. "During Holy Week, I read Holy Mass at the place where Jesus was nailed to the cross. I was so moved that I couldn't continue with the prayers for a while. On Holy Thursday, I attended the foot washing ceremony, to which the Patriarch of Jerusalem admits twelve pilgrims. He washed the feet, dried them with the linen cloth and kissed them. ... On Good Friday, we visited the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, kissed the holy places of the Stations of the Cross and felt unworthy to walk this path of suffering without a cross. ... During the night, there were seven sermons in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre ... On Easter Sunday at five o'clock, I read the first Mass at the Holy Sepulchre in the same place where Jesus' body had lain."

Could Wendelin have imagined that in the years to come he would not only commemorate the drama of following Jesus in a liturgical manner, but also through his existence as a Trappist monk? He, who felt unworthy because he had walked the Via Dolorosa without a cross, probably did not suspect that God would make him more than just a Trappist who ‘wants to take on penances unto death’. In his ‘farewell letter to his loved ones at home,’ he justifies his decision to take this radical step: "I am doing this because I recognise God's will, just as I recognised 13 years ago that I was to become a priest. ... I do not want to become rich or seek honours, I do not want to be important in the world, but to live there in poverty and obscurity; hopefully forever, if I can be of use there. I ask you to pray for me, that I may have the strength to fulfil what is required of me there. Live in such a way that we may all meet again in heaven."

Ladies and gentlemen, how should we describe the life of a man born 200 years ago who radically broke with convention? What hermeneutical framework should we choose? In our religion-critical age, an age whose mentality in matters of faith and the Church merely makes use of cheap clichés and deconstructs and pillories almost everything to do with the Church? In an age in which so-called postcolonial discourses not only critically question much of what Europeans have done in Africa, but often reject it outright? But also, in an age in which, on the one hand, an enormous moralising narrowing of religious life is taking place within the Church

itself, while on the other hand, the appetite for scandal seems to know no bounds? Are the scientific approaches to an exceptional church personality, which claim to be critical and therefore objective, helpful in this context today?

As a paradigm, we need only refer here to an essay published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences on Franz Pfanner and the conclusions drawn there on the stereotypical theme of ‘myth and reality’. Quote: "Despite the historical facts that have since been re-examined, a positively romanticised image of Franz Pfanner's personality and the founding stories of his monasteries still dominates today. The myth of Pfanner as “herald” and “drummer of God”, as “man of providence” or as “one of the most important pioneers of missionary work among the Bantu and one of the greatest apostles of South Africa” has been nourished for decades, now also massively via the Internet, exclusively from church information sources."

And I ask: what does the critical scholar, who fundamentally distrusts church sources and therefore gives more credence to all other sources, contribute to the traditional image in terms of new insights? Probably just a few platitudes that hardly do justice to his boundless personality. Quote: "Pfanner did not believe he had to abide by laws and rules. His behaviour was characterised by repeated disregard for social, cultural and religious customs. He was constantly involved in conflicts, both in Austria and in Germany, Croatia, Bosnia and South Africa." So what? – the systematic theologian will object ironically. Isn't that true of most great, boundary-crossing, creative personalities? In society and in the Church?

What am I getting at with these rather fragmentary methodological remarks? In his study on the ‘Dramatic Understanding of the Church in Ignatius of Loyola’, Raymund Schwager, founder of the ‘Innsbruck Dramatic Theology’ approach, expresses a fundamental thesis that applies without reservation to the life, commitment and piety of the Trappist monk Franz Pfanner. It is this thesis that I have chosen as the hermeneutical framework for my lecture. Quote: ‘True unity with the Church (is) to be sought through all the prejudices, emotional narrowness and sinfulness of individual believers and representatives of the Church.’ For "unity with the Church is achieved in the encounter between people ... between whom all moments can play out as in a drama – that is, development, conflict, tension, crisis, defeat and ultimately reconciliation – indeed, they even “must” play out. ... However, this drama is not tragic, but is enlivened by the certain hope of ultimate reconciliation. Where, however, the courage for this drama is lacking and reconciliation is sought prematurely, it is likely that the all-encompassing Spirit is no longer at work, but rather an idolatrous absolutisation of visible structures is emerging."

Presumably, anyone who is familiar with the history of Mariannhill will first think of the abbot's suspension in 1892 when reading this last sentence. At least if one recalls the clear demand of the visitor, Franziskus Strunk: ‘The abbot must be brought to submission, but he will only submit if forced to do so by the Holy See.’ Not only the visitor, but also many influential church authorities lacked the courage to take dramatic action at that time in the context of the creative awakening that was taking place in Mariannhill. The animosities, tensions and fears – not only in Mariannhill, but also in other circles of the Trappist Order and even in the Curia in Rome – were initially resolved hastily by the tried and tested Caiaphas-like scapegoat strategy: it would be better to send the one person into the desert than to risk escalation. But this one man – the rugged man from Langen-Hub – did not lack the courage to be dramatic. And not only because he grew up in the barren Alpine landscape, had to work on a farm as a child, undertook daring mountain hikes as a teenager and had survived several dangerous illnesses. Franz Pfanner did not lack the courage to be dramatic because he had unshakeable faith in God, God to whom he surrendered himself without reservation, and therefore knew that he was protected in a childlike way by the Mother of God and Saint Joseph. That is why his path as a Trappist, which he embarked upon in 1862, is characterised by tension, conflict, crisis, defeat and hope for reconciliation.

Wendelin therefore enters the Mariawald monastery in the Eifel region, primarily because he considers this step to be the best preparation for death due to his poor health. However, the Trappist way of life, especially the frugal diet, improves his health in a radical way. Was it a coincidence, a sign of providence, which still had plans for this man? To put it radically and somewhat ambiguously: was he perhaps guided by the Holy Spirit to enrich the Benedictine monastic tradition with a new nuance? Father Franz could not possibly have known this at the time, nor indeed until his death. Such presumptuous self-confidence was foreign to him. But not the gift of reacting quickly to what was needed at the moment. As banal as it may sound at first glance, the first conflict with the superior in Mariawald was sparked by the question of the cleaning brooms, without which he and his fellow brothers could not clean the house. The superior threatened to throw him out of the room.

‘No, I'll leave myself,’ replied the young Trappist, thereby violating the discipline of the order and later suffering for not having remained silent. In the weeks that follow, Franz becomes a problem for the superior, who also lacks the courage to take dramatic action. Even at this early stage of Pfanner's Trappist journey, the tension is resolved by rushing into reconciliation. Franz and his fellow brothers, who are fascinated by him, are told to move away and found a new

monastery. So they leave with the ritual greeting of peace and are confronted with the incomprehensible on the way: the superior informs them in a letter that Pfanner is to become a secular priest again. But Franz wants to remain a Trappist, so he goes to Rome to fight for this option. There he receives the decree authorising him to found a Trappist monastery in what was then the Austrian monarchy. Once again, we have the same problem: coincidence or a sign of providence? Because the plans fail again. The door closes, but at the same time a small window opens:

In Bosnia, in Banjaluka, which is under Turkish rule, he receives a plot of land. He settles in a calf barn with four brothers and two postulants: the monastery 'Mariastern' is thus born. Despite difficulties with the Pasha in Banjaluka, who tries by all means to prevent the construction of a proper monastery, and despite conflicts with the Franciscans, who have a monopoly on pastoral care in Bosnia, a magnificent monastery is built there. Due to the size of the monastic community – 76 people live there – it is even to be elevated to the status of an abbey. Franz Pfanner is only one step away from the dignity of an abbot. But is that what God ultimately wanted for him? No, once again we must say: God is still not finished with him.

At the General Chapter of the Trappist Order in Septfons in 1879, a missionary bishop from southern Africa appeared, requesting the establishment of a Trappist monastery there and promising every assistance, but his pleas fell on deaf ears among the abbots. 'If no one else wants to go, I will,' said Pfanner, thereby renouncing the dignity of abbot of the abbey he had built from scratch in Bosnia. What drives the man to take this step? A thirst for adventure? Ambition? Why not the Holy Spirit?

With 30 fellow brothers, he ventures '*un salto mortale al paradiso* – the courageous leap into paradise' – as he himself says about his crossing to Africa. And ends up in purgatory, or even in earthly hell. The images of the farm and the financial conditions that the missionary bishop had mentioned in his advertising turned out to be a well-intentioned illusion and had nothing to do with the desert-like reality. The shock to the Trappists who arrived was profound. Father Franz could only say one thing to his brothers in this desert: *Deus providebit*: God will provide that we survive.

He has boundless faith that the dramatic twists and turns in his life have a deeper meaning. The man who decades ago prayed that he would become nothing more than 'a zealous priest' has long since become a brilliant promoter and beggar for the mission: he now embarks on his next begging trip through Germany, Austria and Switzerland, inspiring crowds and recruiting postulants. And he experiences betrayal. Ironically, it is Bishop Ricards, who lured him to

Africa, who obtains a ban in Rome on Father Franz's return to his monks, who are now toiling in the desert-like landscape.

However, the bishop, who broke his word, did not count on the monks' loyalty to their superior. They stand by their absent prior and therefore seek a new location in the south-east of South Africa: in Natal. Bishop Jolivet, who is responsible for this area, also welcomes them. After initial misunderstandings and difficulties, but also a small rebellion among the fellow brothers (two of his priests slandered Pfanner in an almost limitless manner, becoming, so to speak, false witnesses in the long-running discussion process about the prior's integrity; they officially retracted their claims and were then dismissed), the group set off from Durban.

The hour of Mariannhill's birth had struck. The narrative of the founding of this work, which crowned Pfanner's life, could have been taken from a biblical book. In the late afternoon of 26 December 1882, the convoy of wagons coming from Durban gets stuck in the mud. ‘Unload!’ cries Father Franz, ‘In the name of God, we take possession of this land. Now let us kneel down and all kiss the ground three times in the name of the Triune God.’ The next morning, the first Mass is celebrated in the open air.

Ladies and gentlemen, what happened in Mariannhill and around Mariannhill worldwide over the next 10 years was nothing short of a miracle. As you all know, a huge complex was built there with farms, schools teaching in Zulu, workshops and printing presses. Gradually, numerous mission stations were added. Father Franz, together with his fellow brothers and very soon also the ‘Red Sisters’ whom he loved so much and whom he had launched, ventured to the limits of what had previously seemed self-evident, crossed these boundaries, felt their way forward towards something new, experienced unprecedented financial support (from Europe) and also admiration worldwide (Mariannhill became a much-visited place: not only Gandhi and Mark Twain – who wrote an essay about the abbey – came to see this first and largest abbey in Africa).

The miracle, which was even praised by the Vatican's Congregation '*Propaganda fide*’ (1886) as an exemplary model of monastic missionary work because of its ‘fruitful combination of spiritual instruction, practical work and local involvement’, but this miracle also harbours enormous potential for conflict. And not only because it attracted envy and slander. Pfanner's spirituality, which had a dramatic character, was not limited to the conventional, the established, the traditional, the ritually proven and the legally codified, but perceived the challenges and opportunities of everyday life with unparalleled sensitivity. This spirituality continuously transformed his path to holiness.

What do I mean by this? In the 19th century, when dogmatics (i.e. what he must have learned during his theological studies in Brixen) divided human life into two spheres: that of nature and that of grace, thus neatly separating them from each other and thereby also trivialising everyday life in religious terms, because dogmatics separated the experience of grace from everyday life and relegated it to the second level as something more valuable, thereby effectively tearing apart the Benedictine *ora et labora*, dividing it into the corresponding levels and, accordingly, devaluing the *labora* and valuing only the *ora*.

Pfanner thus returned – without knowing it, of course – to the great scholastic tradition in which Bernard of Clairvaux grew up: *Gratia supponit naturam et perficit illam* (grace presupposes nature and perfects it). The search for God and the explicit experience of God presuppose the shaping of everyday life through work and profession, through political and social engagement. These are therefore integral components of what Christian experience is.

That is why the rebellious Trappist mocked those missionaries who merely waved their Bibles about, and why he had a special love for his brothers in the order and also for the 'Red Sisters', whose missionary work focused precisely on practical work. But he also kept an eye on the priests: 'No missionary, whether priest or superior, should despise manual labour.' Grace presupposes nature!

This explains his critical stance on racial segregation: "How can you seek to civilise and Christianise someone you find repulsive and feel hatred towards? ... When will South Africa finally abandon this deeply rooted and radically destructive prejudice? As long as that doesn't happen, one may train Black people, but not convert them." This explains his efforts – which were by no means a matter of course at the time – to educate girls, to set up women's shelters for wives from polygamous relationships, and to focus on vocational training and craftsmanship. The Trappists in Mariannhill should keep all this and much more in mind. Just as they must keep their rule in mind. And the necessary compromises? During an audience with Leo XIII shortly after the Mariannhill story began in 1883, Franz, who was still prior at the time (the elevation to abbey and the abbot's consecration took place two years later), requested several dispensations from the rule and received them. (Leo XIII may have been fascinated by Pfanner; it should be mentioned in passing that three years after the publication of Leo XIII's encyclical '*Rerum novarum*' in 1891, Pfanner himself wrote an essay on the 'social question').

The extraordinary success of Mariannhill, the many dispensations from the Trappist rule, the practical transgressions of the rule, but also defamations gradually raise the question of the unity of this abbey with the worldwide Trappist community. The conflict intensifies in the

question: how can and to what extent can a contemplative religious community be a missionary community? The process of development and debate, the creative search for an adequate witness, which this extraordinary man had initiated, was abruptly interrupted only ten years after the founding of Mariannhill first by by the visitator's lack of courage to take dramatic action, then through Pfanner's suspension and his resignation. And again, one might ask: was it a coincidence, a sign from heaven? What does this decision mean in the context of the question of the holiness of the deposed abbot? I can only repeat the judgement already quoted: 'Where the courage for drama is lacking and reconciliation is sought prematurely, it is no longer the all-encompassing Spirit that is at work, but rather an idolatrous absolutisation of visible structures.'

As has often been the case in this life story, however, this dramatic turn of events brings with it a qualitatively new beginning. For God is still not finished with Francis. The following 17 years, which he spends in the Emaus station he has built, condense the drama of his life into Holy Week. There is also the golden jubilee of his priesthood, the celebration of which may have brought back memories of the Palm Sunday frenzy he experienced at his first Mass, but there are also the Gethsemane experiences as he wrestles with questions about the future of the abbey and, above all, how he can secure the future of his 'Red Sisters'. There are painful and humiliating confrontations with the administrator Obrecht ('Never in my life has a person disappointed me as much as this one,' Pfanner writes to the General Definitor of the Trappists in Rome). And then there is physical pain and the loneliness that increasingly weighs on him. He has carved the Way of the Cross into a 70-metre-high rock, the Way of the Cross whose 174 steps he now walks every day, as long as he is able. Of course, he is preparing for death: 'Do not pray for the alleviation of my suffering, for in this world there must be suffering, but only for the grace of a blissful hour of death.' The drama of Holy Week, which he experienced so emotionally decades ago in Jerusalem, has now become an existential reality for him.

But he was also granted a glimpse of the Easter morning of this dramatic path to holiness: In 1906, the sister community he had founded was recognised by papal decree – albeit not as 'Red Sisters' (the men of the Curia may have found the red habit provocative) – separated from the Trappists and set on its own feet. Pfanner breathed a sigh of relief and prayed '*Te Deum laudamus*'. On 2 February 1909 – four months before Franz Pfanner's death – Pope Pius X signed the decree separating Mariannhill Abbey from the Trappists, thus paving the way for a new missionary society: the Congregation of the Missionaries of Mariannhill.

'*Currite Ut Comprehendatis*' was our abbot's motto – run so that you may receive the prize. The path he walked led him to a dramatic life story. He received his prize: not only in the

countless fruits that his works in Africa and now throughout the world have produced. The much-quoted phrase interpreting the Resurrection, ‘The matter of Jesus continues,’ could also be paraphrased to refer to him: The matter of Pfanner continues. But according to the vision of the prophet Isaiah, he himself may experience eternal *fruitio*, the enjoyment of eternity, on the heavenly mountain, and probably also enjoy the finest foods and exquisite wines described in Isaiah's vision, he who was so well satisfied with the meagre fare of his earthly life.

All that remains for me to do is to wish – for myself and for you – that Pope Leo XIV will follow the example of Leo XIII, who granted Franz so many dispensations. In other words, that Leo XIV will grant the Servant of God Franz Pfanner dispensation from the obligatory miracle as a condition for beatification. After all, his entire life was one big miracle.