

Farewell to Notker Wolf

Sermon at the requiem mass on 6 April 2024

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"Conservative, but with a broad heart." That is a note in my diary about the first encounter with Archabbot Notker after a visit to St. Ottilien in 1982.

Today, 42 years later, I and our entire community are standing by the coffin. Many thousands around the world have joined us in prayer and mourning. Hundreds of messages of grief have reached us. Very often these are not pre-formulated expressions of sympathy, but very personal testimonies. Many report how Notker was important to them, how he helped them personally, with encouragement and support, with good words and example, with his humour or with his empathy.

One can hardly do justice to all of them, but one has to try.

At 37, Notker became the abbot of our community. Very young, fresh, back from Rome where he had worked as a philosopher and cantor. A surprise candidate who brought an outside perspective with him. He led and shaped our community for 23 years. He did not do this alone - many others helped him, as is customary among Benedictines. But his manner was formative. After many years of cautiously trying out how our missionary Benedictine life should be lived in this new post-conciliar era, Notker arrived with youthful vigour and a certain insouciance. His years in Rome had taught him openness, urban manners and pragmatic flexibility. He brought with him a basic trust that the world is not so bad, that God means well with us, and that our monastery and he - Notker - have a place and a task in this world.

In one of the biographies, a very black and white picture was drawn for dramaturgical reasons. Before Notker and since Notker. That was an exaggeration, because this monastery was always bigger and wider than any one individual could be. But Notker did bring a cheerful optimism to this monastic community, which slowly made its way through the ups and downs of the last quarter of the last century.

Eight years ago, he came back to us as a former abbot primate very naturally, without any detours or fuss. He was not an emeritus prelate, but a confrere whose presence enriched our everyday life. These days, we are painfully aware of how much we miss him in this everyday life.

As Archabbot, he was responsible for the management of the entire congregation. It was a time of upheaval. The old mission territories became dioceses. Mission was critically scrutinised and even rejected by many. Notker, who had found his way here out of missionary enthusiasm, was able to give our old mission a new form: Founding monasteries where monasticism did not yet exist; monasteries as living centres for local churches and societies; missionaries did not necessarily have to come from Bavaria. Korea and Tanzania could send out missionary

Benedictines just as well. He was happy to promote new beginnings and foundations, even where it sounds difficult or even absurd: monasteries in communist China. Let's try that. A hospital in North Korea. "Why not?" Philippines and Zaire, Uganda and Togo. Not everything succeeded, but a lot did. It was the dynamic of today's gospel that kept him going: "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to every creature!"

Something new came upon him in 2000, very unexpectedly at the time: Abbot Primate in Rome. He didn't long for it. I was present when – for a short moment - he was overcome with emotion as he packed up his office here at the abbey. He had great optimistic plans for Sant'Anselmo and then had to accept very quickly that something much more mundane was required of him: the proud Benedictine monastery on Rome's Aventine Hill had become a bit of a hovel over the course of 100 years. Instead of fancy new foundations, the focus was now on renovation and refurbishment. He recruited helpers, both inside and outside the order, with whom he set to work. For over 16 years, he made Sant'Anselmo fit again for the task of offering our large worldwide religious family a place where we can learn to look beyond the narrow walls of our monasteries, understand the Church and value diversity. A place where ancient monastic wisdom is cultivated and transmitted to the whole world.

He hardly bothered with the Vatican apparatus and tedious committee work. This was sometimes criticised, but it hardly did us any harm. With his global presence - the many kilometres travelled by plane that are often mentioned - he strengthened the awareness that we tens of thousands of religious, hundreds of thousands of students and many more are a true family.

Then there are so many others to whom he meant a lot. There is his family, especially his sister Rita, who is mourning with us here today. Friends from all phases of his life. People who crossed his path at some point and to whom he remained close for years and decades. Notker had a passion for people. His email responses were often praised, usually arriving after just a few hours and at all hours of the night and day. No request was too abstruse for him. If there was still a little space in his diary, he would agree, come and read or make music, hold a mass or a lecture, baptise, marry, accompany a pilgrimage, as he did at the beginning of this week. He gave himself away, generously and playfully.

A whole bundle of qualities helped him to become the Notker we remember him as today. I would like to mention a few:

Notker was a man of immense loyalty: once he stood by someone, it was hardly ever shaken, even if prudent caution suggested otherwise. In the last few days, a number of monks wrote to me whom he had helped to get a second or even a third chance in Rome and elsewhere. He has tried to keep a path to the future open for monasteries whose demise seemed certain, often with success. When the Catholic Biblical Federation went into a tailspin some time ago, he embarked on years of toil as chairman. "He does not extinguish the smouldering wick," as the prophet Isaiah has it. Notker lived that.

Almost like a contradiction, but actually more like a complement, he was also prepared to accept the inevitable, and then again with full commitment. The elections in 1977 as Archabbot and in 2000 as Primate, which truly turned his life upside down, were not planned. Many things happened during his 39 years in leadership that he would have wished differently. Here we come across a secret of human life, which today is often called unavailability, and which has to do with God. Notker was not a planning fetishist. He knew that we cannot predict and plan everything. He did not allow himself to be frustrated and was able to accept the unexpected as a gift and grace, or at least as a task. His love of music has something to do with this: it was living music, not canned music. Music that is created anew in the moment and is unavailable until it is heard. - *Jubilate Deo!*

After all, I recognised a very deep love of Christ in Notker. He could laugh about many things and make fun of many things, including monastic whims and ecclesiastical absurdities. But when it came to the essentials, he was truly pious! It was an annoyance to him when - especially in our circles - God was not taken seriously. The proclamation of the gospel and the following of Christ kept him on the move and were the deeper reason for his apparent restlessness.

Nothing can really come after the love of Christ, can it?

But there is one more thing I would like to mention, and I will put it at the end because it is our key to understanding Notker's life. The former Archabbot of Pannonhalma in Hungary, Asztrik Várszegi, once gave a eulogy for Notker and said at the end: "But above all, he was a *Mensch* – truly human!"

Everyone here today will agree. Humanity came from every pore of Notker. Structures, systems, plans - as the clever man and philosopher that he was, he was good at dealing with them. But what mattered most to him was people. In this he was similar to the One he followed throughout his life. Notker loved people. This was often refreshingly earthly, but it was also imbued with the love of God for the world that is spoken of in the Gospel of John. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son for us."

We are sad that Notker is no longer with us. But above all we are grateful that he was the way he was and that he was with us for so long. Amen - Alleluia.