

TRANSFORMATION IN LOYALTY. RENEWAL PROCESS IN FRANCISCAN COMMUNITIES

A Series of Publications and their Sitz im Leben

« **T**he Transformation in Loyalty » – altogether 28 brochures were issued in the years between 1960 to 1985 by the publishing house of the Saxonian Franciscan province, the Dietrich-Coelde-publishers, situated in Werl. « A Series about Christian Life today » is their subtitle. Their origin is to be found in conferences of the « Franciscan Working Group », to which, especially, Franciscan sisters' communities were invited. In the spirit of the Council and applying the program for the reform of religious communities, the published talks and discussions demonstrate the struggle for actualizing the Franciscan charisma in predominantly apostolic communities. In this way a compendium of Franciscan spirituality came into being, which, at the same time, is an excellent source for the « *aggiornamento*-process » of the Council-period and the time after the Council.

Two Franciscan fathers belonged to the initiators and were the mainly responsible persons of the workshops, which at first took place in the region of Northwest Germany, but after the Council included also sisters from Southern Germany. Lothar Hardick (1913-1999) of the Saxonian and Kajetan Esser (1913-1978) of the Cologne province of German Franciscans had been working together already before in the research on St. Francis and had issued the Franciscan Sources. From 1961 to 1966, Hardick had been the chief editor of the « Franciscan Studies ». He was involved in the central *aggiornamento*-commission of the order after the Council and belonged to the initiators of the « Institute for Franciscan History » in Münster. Heribert Arens summed up Hardick's life achievement : that he was a person for the research of Franciscan sources, of Franciscan spirituality and for the renewal of the regulated Third Order¹. The life work of Kajetan Esser focussed on the testament of St. Francis. On the occasion of his 100th birthday, the Capuchine Father Leonard Lehmann wrote about him : « Father Kajetan placed his life and his work totally into the service of a historically secure *aggiornamento* of the Franciscan charisma². » After extending the

¹ Heribert ARENS, « Sermon at the Requiem Mass for Dr. Lothar Hardick, ofm », in *Wegzeichen*, 1999, n° 1, p. 54-55.

² Leonhard LEHMANN (ed.), *Das Testament des hl. Franziskus. In Erinnerung an Kajetan Esser, ofm (1913-1978) zum 100. Geburtstag*, Werkstatt Franziskanische Forschung 7, Norderstedt, 2013, p. 6.

circle of interest beyond the region of Northwest Germany, it was the sisters' part to play a significant role in the workshops, especially Sr. Ethelburga Haecker of the Franciscan Convent of Gengenbach. She was in this capacity also a member of the Würzburg Synod (1971-1975) and the co-founder of the inter-Franciscan working group (INFAG), an association of the communities of the German language area based on the charisma of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi.

Before the Council

The starting point for organising the working weeks for sisters was the re-discovery of St. Francis of Assisi. Lothar Hardick recognized in this a necessary requisite for the Franciscan witness in the present time: « But if one knows exactly the spirit, out of which the founder of the order and the first generations lived and shaped their religious life, then it is easier to do what the time today demands of us in the strength of the same spirit. This means concretely for the Franciscan person: what is important, is to know and to do what St. Francis would do today³. » It could not be taken for granted before the Council to postulate and to emphasize a proper Franciscan form of the evangelical counsels, that we « even possess our own and common imitation of Christ⁴ ». Since most of the sisters belonged to communities of a regulated Third Order, they requested an interpretation of their rule that had been introduced by Pius XI in 1927. This rule would stand « in the circle of light of the gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ and of the evangelical life of our order's founding Father⁵ ». To be clarified was the relationship of rule, constitution and customs. The original features of the various communities were shown in their history above all in externalities of dress and liturgical peculiarities. The constitutions were juristically unified in the pre-conciliar time. Reform started with the customs: « It is the task of every generation to furnish the proof by a vital care of customs and a tested further development of the traditions that it has understood the basic law of the rule and

³ Lothar HARDICK, « Überblick über die franziskanische Literatur der letzten Jahre », in *Selbstbesinnung der franziskanischen Familie. Erste Werkwoche der Franziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft im nordwestdeutschen Raum vom 14. bis 18. September 1959 und 19. bis 23. April 1960 im Exerzitienhaus zu Werl/Westf.*, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 1, 2. ed., Werl, 1962, p. 19.

⁴ Dietmar WESTEMEYER, « Die Aufgaben der franziskanischen Familie », *ibid.*, p. 63.

⁵ Raymond LINDEN, « Die Regel als Lebensform », in Lothar HARDICK (ed.), *Regel und Leben. Zweite Werkwoche der franziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft im nordwestdeutschen Raum vom 12. bis 16. und 19. bis 23. September 1960 im Exerzitienhaus zu Werl/Westf.*, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 2, 2. ed., Werl, 1962, p. 15.

its spirituality as well as the present time⁶. » There was an open result at the end of the second working week that gave the direction for renewal : « Our rule is the big frame. Within this frame there are many possibilities. This is at the same time a happy and a difficult matter. We would like to have security in a system, where everything to the last detail is laid down, we would like to have ready-made recipes. But this is not the way of St. Francis. He was against regulating too much, he wanted to give space to God's grace for different persons and times⁷. » Most of the workshops in the years between 1960 and 1968⁸ were dedicated to a systematic penetrating of the rules of the Third Order.

Things that were in the way of renewal were identified already in 1960 by the Franciscan provincial superior Dietmar Westemeyer following the Jesuit Friedrich Wulf and the Belgian Cardinal Suenens. What is needed is « to transform again the charismatic treasures to fruitful gifts of God for our time⁹ ». In addition every chapter should investigate our own piety and how the relationship to the world could be arranged without being estranged or distanced. Westemeyer demanded freedom from petty regulations and stood for development instead for one-sided adherence to traditions : « We should have more trust into all that God allows to happen in the succession of the sisters' generations¹⁰. »

Processes of Renewal after the Council

In autumn of 1965, when the basic lines of the decree of the Religious Orders started to transpire, the first steps towards a change of a style of life were already discussed. The Capuchin Father Faustin Sonst thought that the religious habit as a sign of a long history would withstand the time of crisis without problems¹¹, and he was hardly contradicted. The theme of poverty was discussed

⁶ Lothar HARDICK, « Regek und Brauchtum », *ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁸ The Working Weeks in 1967 were cancelled because of preparations for the various special chapters.

⁹ Dietmar WESTEMEYER, « Die Ordensgenossenschaften vor dem providentiellen Anruf kommender Aufgaben », in Lothar HARDICK (ed.) *Einzelmensch und Gemeinschaft. Dritte Werkwoche der franziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft im nordwestdeutschen Raum vom 18. bis 22. und 25. bis 29. September 1961 im Exerzitienhaus zu Werl/Westf.*, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 3, Werl, 1962, p. 165

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹¹ Faustin SONST, « Symbolgehalt und Zeugnis kraft des Ordenkleides », in Lothar HARDICK (ed.), *Zeugnis von Christus. Siebte Werkwoche der franziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft im nordwestdeutschen Raum vom 20. bis 24. September und vom 27. September bis 1. Oktober 1965 im Exerzitienhaus zu Werl/Westf.*, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 8, Werl, 1966, p. 50.

under the key word « simplicity of life style ». A relaxation of the enclosure would mean a challenge towards autonomy and independent maturity.

In the years after the Council, it was decided to formulate a common general constitution for the German-speaking Franciscans. With this the circle of participants widened. With the 10th brochure of the series « Transformation in Loyalty¹² », the endeavours for renewal of the Franciscan workshops in North-west Germany, in Southern Germany and in Austria merged. The years after 1970 were marked by a clear program of renewal, firstly through a conference about basic matters of religious life, and then the following Working Weeks about the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience as well as about life in community. For six further years, the Franciscan sisters dealt with the person and legacy of their founder Francis of Assisi. In these publications, the results of the debates and discussions take up a big space. They show an increasing differentiation of opinions and the difficulty to mediate between the generations and the diverging mentalities. Lothar Hardick brought the problem to the point :

What is said and printed about Religious Life today is more than ever under the sign of a provisional statement. All the ideas that are thought to this theme today have to be proposed with the conviction that they cannot be the one and for ever valid statement¹³.

A few aspects should shortly be mentioned. When young people are interested in Religious Life, one has to take notice that « their concept of our religious life does not conform with traditional opinions ». However, « it could be possible, indeed, that young people of today could give an indication how our communities should respond to the time and the present reality¹⁴ ». There was the demand for further education for the sisters, whose capacities and charismas had to be taken into account before admission to the religious profession until new responsibilities were given to them. They have a right on free time and relaxation. « A trend towards small groups and a reserve against being institutionalized¹⁵ » is to be observed.

The sisters came to the conclusion « that the origin for a new concept of authority in our religious communities would also be the changed role model of

¹² Lothar HARDICK, *Bedrängt, doch nicht erdrückt. Werkwoche der franziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft über die Regel der klösterlichen Dritten Ordens des heiligen Franziskus Kap. 6-8, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 10, Werl, 1969.*

¹³ Lothar HARDICK (ed.), *Grundfragen des Ordenslebens. Werkwoche der franziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft 1969, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 11, Werl, 1970, p. 7.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

women¹⁶ » and that therefore a kind of obedience should be developed, which encourages partnership and is democratic and which would include co-responsibility, own-initiative and independence of the members. Regular convent-chapters could contribute to this, and the sisters would have to learn (in this way) how to discuss. It would be the superior's task to co-ordinate the various opinions. The relationship between the sisters and superiors should change radically : « Space has to be given therefore to the initiative of the individual sister, it has to be fostered and it has to be appreciated. It is the task of the superior to be the servant of the community by informing, consulting and delegating¹⁷. » The sisters themselves regarded their capacity for democracy in a rather ambivalent way at the beginning of the 1970s.

The convents are not yet ready for democracy. The situation is most probably different in the various convents. We thought that the teaching communities were ahead of us, since they had their fair say for a longer time in all the matters of schooling. Sisters of a more progressed age often become insecure, because beforehand they were not allowed to voice their opinion. But these sisters as well have adjusted to the time, when the concept of the world was different, not only in the leadership of religious communities, but also in the leadership of the Church¹⁸.

It was stated in a lapidary way : « Franciscan obedience is nothing else but the fulfilment of God's will¹⁹. »

The most difficult theme proved to be dealing with celibacy. The discussion about « chastity, purity, abstinence, virginity, celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God, being the bride of Christ » were impacted by « strong tendencies of suppression after dealing with these matters of religious profession²⁰ ». The sisters discussed about the decision-making ability, about loyalty, about platonic friendship, about the acceptance of one's bodylines and suppressed sexuality. « Also a religious sister has to be first of all a woman and in this way mature to the full unfolding of her personality. To circumvent, disregard and suppress sexual imaginations and sensations is also hindering a holistic maturity²¹. » « Today the human and Christian values and the importance of some aspects of inter-human relationships, like affection, friendship and sympathy as

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁷ Lothar HARDICK, M. Ethelburga HÄCKER (ed.) *Gehorsam und Autorität. Werkwoche der franziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft 1970*, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 12, Werl, 1971, p. 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

²⁰ Lothar HARDICK, M. Ethelburga HÄCKER (ed.) *Leben in Ehelosigkeit. Werkwoche der franziskanische Arbeitsgemeinschaft 1971*, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 13, Werl, 1972, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

well as the whole range of emotional and affective life would have to be recognised and considered also for the religious life²². » The view of a higher value of the celibate over married life would hardly be defended. Generational differences would be obvious in religious communities. « The openness and cordiality of the young sisters often has a shocking effect on the older sisters, because they immediately suspect something bad and a danger for the good morals and the spirit of the order²³. » The sisters affirmed the character of celibate life of being a symbol and a testimony, « the orientation to the eschatological reality²⁴ ». Stressed was to be the accent of surrender and disposability. It was stated that « there is a slow process of rethinking in our convents concerning the celibate life²⁵ ».

Poverty was discussed in a typically Franciscan way. It was recognized as a necessity « to shift our traditional concept from a juridical to a spiritual point of view²⁶ ». The sisters focussed on the apostolic aspect of poverty when they asked about the poor. « Who are the poor today ? Those who are not accepted by society, as for instance the drug addicts, ex-prisoners, migrant workers – and their children, welfare recipients and so on, all the unfortunate people²⁷. » This is a wide field of action, far too big to be managed by the order alone. But poverty also within the community should not mean an absolute equality for each member, but the needs of the individuals have to be considered : « One should not look for unity within the community and not so much for uniformity, but work for a unity in diversity²⁸. » The Franciscan attitude of « life without owning anything » would consist in « an existence without security²⁹ » and in availability. Time and again the comparison with the « Little Sisters of Jesus » were made, whose practice of poverty was felt as far more radical than the one in Franciscan communities. The question, if their own communities would be poor, was answered with « No », but there was a search « for possibilities of an expression of solidarity with the poor of our time³⁰ ». For this reason, there should be a rethinking about the founding idea of the communities. But the changeover to a modern kind of help would not be easy on account of the big establishments and

²² *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁶ Lothar HARDICK, M. Ethelburga HÄCKER (ed.), *Leben in Armut. Werkwochen der Franziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft 1972*, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 14, Werl, 1972, p. 31.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

institutions. One group summed up : « We understand the demands of the gospel in being available as poor people. An expression of this Franciscan poverty would be this availability in “perfect joy”³¹. »

In dealing with the evangelical counsels it had become already obvious that renewal would be possible only in community. The experiences immediately after the Council were gained and exchanged in sharing groups, in smaller convent groups, in circles of discussions and in training conferences. However the sub-structures of the big convents were not only seen in a positive light. The sisters asked themselves how their community life could become attractive for young people and mentioned their participation at meals and at prayer. But is this the purpose of religious life ? « A good life-community is indispensable for religious life, and it should be possible to be realised in the order ; however also this could not be defined as the meaning and purpose of religious life³². » But community would be prior to work. The traditional form of life has to be queried, but « to be “queried” should not be understood as to be thrown away³³ ». In view to St. Francis, the question about the appeal of community and of personal relationships received a new quality. The refusal of class-consciousness and of privileges was regarded as a modern form of realising the charisma of St. Francis. « We discovered as characteristic Franciscan marks of a Franciscan community : joyfulness, simplicity, naturalness, and above all a sisterly, not so much a hierarchical being with one another³⁴. » In this regard, the Franciscan formation of life has to be taken forward.

A New Discovery of the Person of St. Francis

The years of the second half of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s stood for the Franciscan communities under the sign of a re-discovery of the person of their orders' founder, St. Francis. The 750th anniversary of his death (1976) and his 800th birthday (1982) marked the memorial days, and in the years from 1974 to 1979, the testament of St. Francis was the theme of the workshops. It was published under the title « Spiritual Legacy³⁵ ». Lothar Hardick placed the

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³² Lothar HARDICK, M. Ethelburga HÄCKER (ed.), *Leben in Gemeinschaft. Studententage der franziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft 1973*, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 15, Werl, 1974, p. 74.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

³⁵ Lothar Hardick, M. Ethelburga HÄCKER (ed.), *Geistliches Vermächtnis I-IV. Studententage der Franziskanischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft 1974-1979*, Wandlung in Treue, Schriftenreihe zum heutigen Ordensleben 16, 18-22, Werl, 1975-1980.

comment of the testament of St. Francis expressively into the context of an inner reappraisal of the Franciscan family.

The commentary intends to link the absolutely necessary historical embedding of the text with the actual questions of religious life today. It will try to scrutinize the text especially in the context of our time and its problems. In this way, the testament of St. Francis will serve the Franciscans' religious life exactly in those questions that are seen as especially important and urgent since the Second Vatican Council: How is it possible to gain one's own position and the line of orientation that is demanded today by reflecting on one's origin and spiritual legacy? For, if one talks about that what is typically Franciscan, then it is indispensable to start and to be guided by the one who has given the name to the Franciscan spirituality³⁶.

It was also queried in the implementation of the mission of *Perfectae Caritatis* 2b, what is typically Franciscan:

“The spirit and the special aim of the founder”, this means for the big Franciscan family everything that has come down to us from St. Francis in an original way. And to this belongs in a special way the testament of the saint that he has written in the last days of his life and that he has left to his followers as a spiritual legacy. To reflect on St. Francis means therefore for all those who call themselves Franciscan, to comply with the Council and with the expectations of the Church. The Church expects of the followers of St. Francis and of all those communities that bear his name today that they, true to their name, cope with the reality of their Franciscan life, of a life that is wholly determined by St. Francis³⁷.

The first controversies within the order about the testament of St. Francis of Assisi had arisen after Pope Gregory IX had decided already in 1230 that the Franciscans would not be bound by the exact wording of their founder's last will. It was therefore the intention of the commentators of the 1970s to firmly adhere to the time-conditioned roots of the testament as well as its updated application in the present time. The calling of St. Francis for instance would be an occasion to examine one's own calling, it would be an occasion to clarify the direction of Christian piety in the tension between the horizontal focussing on people and the vertical relationship to God. The fact that St. Francis did not speak about his own mystical experiences should certainly make us to reflect « in view of the many visionary and pseudo-visionary tendencies in modern piety³⁸ ». A new concept of the piety of adoration would be as important as the different forms of the presence of Christ and its application to the post-conciliar liturgical awakening. A central concern of the Franciscan *aggiornamento* would be, on the one side the relationship of authority and office and on the other side fraternity as a structural principle of the order. The ecclesiality of the order, as it has been given to the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p. 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, III, p. 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 13.

order by St. Francis as a task is showing itself especially in the polarisations around Pope Paul VI : « It is and remains for us as Franciscan people a criterion, a distinguishing mark for the Catholic attitude of a Christian, of a theologian and also of whole movements : their position to the pope³⁹. » The authors demand a clear position in confrontation with the theological disputes of today, which would also lead to consequences in further education. Other themes were the work in the Franciscan life, the relationship of work and asking for donations as well as peace as a task towards the outside world and within the communities. The Franciscans are together with the whole Church on the path of pilgrimage of the people of God. Its result is the principle of availability of the individual and the « flexibility and adaptability of the various communities⁴⁰ ». It is necessary to search for a new motivation and praxis for poverty in today's consumer society, as also for special rights and privileges. That obedience and « simplicity » are basic attitudes, which have to be acquired in a long process of learning, was dealt with in the conferences, as well as consequences of harming the order of the community and the question about the relationship of juristic and spiritual directives.

To apply the rule, promulgated by Pope Pius XI, into the context of the preparations of the Council was the intention of the study-days for the sisters of the Franciscan communities. New was the search for reforms in the frame of a spiritual family that was transcending their own community. The Second Vatican Council called for this commonality. This was then practiced by Franciscan sisters' communities of the German language area and supported by Franciscan and Capuchin fathers. The sisters discussed about the history of spirituality, about theological, biblical and human science impulses and in this way broadened their horizon and the understanding for the mental transformation of the 1960s and 1970s, without, of course, being able to reach a final result. The publications of the working weeks and the study days show how old and new elements are linked up with one another, truly a « Transformation in Loyalty ».

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³⁹ Bonifacius STRACK, « Bindung an die Kirche (Testament des hl. Franziskus, Nr. 4) », *ibid.*, II, p. 48.

⁴⁰ Alexander GERKEN, « Was bedeutet die Pilgerschaft des Volkes Gottes für ein franziskanisches Leben ? (Testament des hl. Franziskus Nr. 7) », *ibid.*, IV, p. 49.