

The challenge of reaching out to the world.

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Our preparation team conducted all of the planning in English. Thus the English title for our meeting is, so to speak, the original: "The hidden life of the nuns - and their outreach to the world". It took us quite a time to arrive at the formulation "outreach" and to determine to adopt it.

Just as it was so difficult to put a name to the opposite pole to our hidden life; it was likewise not easy to find a German equivalent for "reaching out to the world." Outreach, translated literally means "to strive after something", "to grasp something". This doesn't quite correspond to the meaning intended in our English formulation.

So I continued to mull over it and I remembered that at one point during our discussions, Fr Manuel had tried an explanatory gesture, in which he stretched out his arms and hands and opened them wide. To open oneself up, to give of oneself, this is a movement towards making contact and establishing a relationship. "Outreach to the world" which is how I like to describe it, begins in an inner disposition of attentiveness and a lively interest in world events and developments concerning the fate of mankind. Starting from such an inner disposition, a community can be made aware that events, requests, encounters that arrive from outside of the monastery, may be calls from God, that require not only our prayerful response, but perhaps also seek to change the way we think and the way we live.

I would like now to give an example of this, and relate how thinking and living in our community have changed, after we were challenged by quite external and apparently worldly circumstances.

Our old, dilapidated, dark and cramped home in Klausen was enclosed in accordance with all the Roman prescriptions, down to the thick stone wall around the property that had broken glass set in the top.

In our last five years there, during which we looked around in Klausen for a larger, more suitable and habitable monastic building nearby in the same diocese, and even thought about building,

for us it went without saying that a new monastery would naturally have the enclosure clearly and separately marked out.

And so when we received an offer "as if dropped down from heaven" from another diocese in the North of Germany, and were invited to take possession of an old monastic site, it was not just in favour of a removal that we had to decide, but also whether, through these circumstances, we wanted to let ourselves be challenged and changed by radically different living conditions.

Our old monastery was fit for demolition, so unfortunately the land and the buildings could be sold only for less than their true worth. From the proportionately meagre proceeds, our community had once again to shelve the question of provision for the elderly, which is a legal requirement in Germany.

This was the first great change: We no longer owned any property, neither house nor plot of land. Our present, beautiful monastery does not belong to us, but to the diocese, and we have become modest tenants of the site and its buildings.

The old 13th century commandery of the Knights of St John, that we now live in, was not conceived or built as an enclosed monastery. In order to

meet the requirements of the relevant Roman regulations governing enclosure, that is, to install a visible and significant material separation from the world, the inside of this beautiful, old and intact monastic site would have had to be completely rebuilt (i.e. the disposition of rooms, the staircases, halls etc.). Not to mention that this would have cost a great deal of money, and that the character of the building would have been completely lost.

So, for example, our chapel is installed in the large, light square room, that the crusaders of St John used in former times as a “confession and communion hall”, as can be seen on the old plans. Already on architectural and conservation grounds, it would have been unthinkable to want to divide up this space with barriers or grilles into a nuns’ chapel and a chapel for the faithful. We the sisters sit in a semicircle around the altar and the faithful immediately behind us, together with us in this same beautiful space.

This structural reality in the chapel and the whole of the entrance area leads to direct contact and personal encounter with the people who like to come to our liturgy on a daily basis, and are particularly numerous on feast days.

Also our monastery does not have a separate guesthouse, but we have adapted the attic of one of the wings as guest quarters. Guests, who spend the night with us, can reach their rooms only via the hall and staircase that strictly speaking are inside the enclosure. So it is unavoidable that we encounter guests and exchange the odd friendly word with them.

This is the second and very significant change: The enclosure has lost an exterior, material meaning and has simultaneously become more important for our personal inner life. The exterior material enclosure offers protection from the many influences of daily activity in the environment. It can help to concentrate on the essential, on prayer. However this material separation can also make one spiritually lazy and sluggish. For when I am automatically protected from outside disturbance and demands, I no longer make the inner effort for recollection. I neglect the interior effort for calm, while I have external peace apparently for nothing. There is then the great danger, that even inside the strictest enclosure I abandon and forget the true prayer of the heart.

If this exterior, material separation now becomes permeable to the world, I will be entirely responsible for my own enclosure. The morning greeting and leave taking of the visitors to our liturgy is personal and friendly, but also sober and short. It should be completely clear to people as they pass by me that I am not a private individual, but rather that I also belong to another, different sphere of existence. In contact with visitors and guests, I myself have to develop an inner sign that I belong completely to God and assiduously cultivate my inner enclosure - with no grille or wall to spare me this responsibility. In this way, the spiritual value of enclosure has become clearer for me.

We had neither sought nor planned these changes in the exterior enclosure. The change in our understanding of enclosure stems from the fact that we were confronted with a new situation. The external circumstances had changed, and so we came face to face with this challenge. In many intensive discussions in Chapter, we exchanged with one another about these alterations in the conditions of our enclosure and we came to the conclusion that this challenge was also a call to us from God.

But why had God led us along a path, on which we must open widely not only our entrance and chapel areas, as well as meeting rooms, but also our hearts?

Since the Reformation, Catholics are in a diaspora situation in Northern Germany. As in the whole of Western Europe, this area too is markedly post-Christian. The federal state of Lower Saxony, in which we now live, has approximately 8 million inhabitants. About 30% of the population of our federal state still are Protestant Christians. Only 18% of the inhabitants are Catholic (about 1.5 million). Of this 18% only about 14% (approximately 210.000 !) are actually practicing Catholics; attending mass and participating in the life of the parish community. This is a very small flock! This already means that a majority has grown up without any knowledge concerning the Christian faith, or has only superficial and vague notions of it. And so in our surroundings we can no longer assume or expect any understanding of our contemplative life. In our area there is no living or lived Catholic tradition or popular piety, in which knowledge about "praying sisters" behind walls and grilles could be taken for granted. To the extent that religious life is still a concept, here people associate it with the active, good works of an apostolic congregation.

Contemplative life is unknown, exotic, and foreign.

The bishop had publicised the foundation of our monastery through the media, and this had made people curious. And so many many groups came, wanting to know what was going on in Lage these days. In the first four or five years we had about 60 such groups per year. In concrete terms that means conversations and meetings with around 1,000 to 1,500 people a year. With such groups, we also sit in a meeting room in a circle together, without separation by means of a grille or barrier.

In these often intense encounters, we have found answer to the question as to why God wanted to found our monastery:

Maybe people don't know about the Christian faith any more, but they are seeking, seeking often in doubt and they know not what. They are ill at ease and experience spiritual hunger, but they don not know what it is they are yearning for.

As for us believers, the living relationship with God is indispensable and everything stems from the personal encounter with Jesus Christ, so the living witness to our faith, today more than ever begins only through human contact, personal relations. Encounters play a central role.

Perhaps here lies a possible answer to the question as to why God has led us into a different understanding of enclosure, why we should open the door and our heart to real contact with people.

For many visitors to our monastery, meetings and conversation with us are the first time in their lives (!!!) that they have had any close contact or talk with a person who believes in God, who prays and sets prayer, the relationship with God, in the centre of his or her life. Here direct, personal human contact is indispensable.

When we take leave of a group of visitors and accompany them through the cloister to the gatehouse, many ask another personal question or make a remark about what they had noticed or felt: "Do you always wear that white dress?" , "The silence here does me good." , "What do you do if you have quarrels and fall out?" , "You are so happy."

After one group conversation a young woman burst into tears and then said that her concept of life had now all fallen into place. Another visitor remarked personally to me: "I can afford what I like, and I only do what I want to do. But to live as you do requires courage. Perhaps you are indeed freer than me."

Such experiences have given us food for thought. Obviously it is just as important today as in Biblical times for believing Christians to be actually visible, approachable and speakable to.

Our monasteries always used to be in a living relationship with the surrounding area. It went without saying that people knew what a monastery was, they could be certain of being prayed for there, they came to the door bringing offerings and supported the community. Thus the sisters knew the

people of their neighbourhood and knew about their troubles and needs, their hopes and joys. But people, who no longer have any knowledge of faith, no longer have any notion of what a religious community is either, have very little inclination to approach a building that calls itself a "monastery".

If we were to continue to live in Lage in the traditional way - enclosed with walls and grilles concealing us completely from the world - people would not miss us, they would not ask about us. Two worlds, - one enclosed inner world oriented towards heaven behind the wall and one outside the wall, getting along without God -, would lead parallel lives that never meet!

This is only by way of an example of many possibilities, as to how opening up to the world and encounters with people can be achieved in our time. Our enclosure has not been abolished, more than ever we value and need the space into which consciously withdraw, and where we lead the common life, pray, work and study. But enclosure is only one of the means, with the help of which we pray, conscious of our post-Christian times that we may learn to discover new possibilities and occasions of contact with people.

In the course of work on this subject, I gathered together a few quotations from our Constitutions and tried to draw the structure of the contents of the first section together into a diagram. In this diagram, the real value of enclosure, set in context in the overall scheme of our form of life, is clearly visible.

LCM No. 7 : ...participation of all in the ordering of the life of the monastery is of great importance...

LCM Nr. 14 : In the various dealings of the monastery with neighbours, guests and others, the nuns should manifest a charity which, despite their hidden life, will form a bond of unity with them...

LCM Nr. 35/I : ...In the cloister the nuns devote themselves totally to God and perpetuate that singular gift which the blessed Father had of bearing sinners, the down-trodden and the afflicted in the inmost sanctuary of his compassion.

LCM Nr. 97/II : Christ is the Word of God. We hear him in the Sacred Scriptures... We hear him in the voice of the Church... in the sacraments of faith... in the teaching of our shepherds, in the example of the saints. We hear him when the world and our brothers and sisters cry out for our love. For there is one Spirit of Christ who intimately attunes our inward ear to his inspiration.

LCM Nr. 181 : According to the mind of our holy Father Dominic, it is fitting that the nuns, like the friars, should have enlightened participation in their own government... This responsibility... is to be fostered among the nuns by an awareness of their genuine vocation and special role within the Order as well as by a solicitude for Dominican contemplative life promoted according to the conditions of each new age.

Constitutions of the Nuns (LCM) Distinction I - Section I

The Following of Christ

*(LCM, Sect.I: Chapter I - IV: the **elements** of our Dominican way of life)*

Religious Consecration Prayer Study Work

- Common Life
- Obedience = *(LCM 35 //I: the **means** towards the*
- Poverty *fulfilment of our Dominican way of life)*
- Chastity
- Regular Observance / Religious Observance

Enclosure. Silence. The cell. Meals. The habit. Penance. Chapter

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