



400 JAHRE

BARMHERZIGE BRÜDER BAYERN

Hospitalität schafft Zukunft

Video by Max Kronawitter

2022. Healthcare and welfare facilities are still struggling with the pandemic. The Church's plight is also far from encouraging. There is talk of an impasse. Not only have abuse cases destroyed trust: women are demanding access to the ministries, lay people want to count for more. While some are battling passionately for the future of the Church, others are leaving. Has the Church and her institutions in our country reached the end of the line?

A glance back at history offers grounds for hope. It is precisely when the Church has been at her lowest ebbs that she has so often encountered opposing outcomes: there are always people determined to reaching out and bearing witness to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit still lives on. This has also been the case in the history of the Brothers of St John of God in Bavaria.

1622. The Thirty Years' War was raging in Europe. Hunger and the Black Death were decimating the population. The 'do-good-Brothers' (as they are known in Italy) knew only too well what it meant to take care of the wounded in the turmoil of war. Impressed by their contribution in the naval battle of Lepanto, Pope Pius V not only officially recognised the Brothers in 1572, but also called them 'the flower that was missing from the garden of the Church'. After the Order had spread to Italy and France, where, in the meantime, the Brothers had opened 60 hospitals, Brother Gabriel, Count of Ferrara, planned to introduce the Order into the German-speaking world. But the Brothers were not warmly welcomed. They were ridiculed as 'welsche monks' (Eye-tie monks). But what they did, and how they did it, soon won over the respect of even the most cynical critics.

Neuburg. Idyllically situated on the Danube, this was the ducal residence. Brother Gabriel sent two Brothers to the town in 1622. Duke Wolfgang Wilhelm welcomed them warmly, but informed them that the former Benedictine monastery had already been donated to the Jesuits. The Brothers were not discouraged. Months later, the duke authorised the foundation of a hospital in Neuburg.

They were difficult times: in 1632 Field Marshal Tilly laid siege to the town, and shortly afterwards Swedish soldiers occupied it, murdering and looting. Only about 400 inhabitants of the upper town survived. 'Neuburg is a graveyard,' wrote one contemporary chronicler. In the midst of all this death, the Brothers tried to help and heal. When peace was finally

restored, Europe lay in ruins. Of the original 16 million inhabitants, only four million remained alive. For the Brothers of St John of God, every life is precious.

The peace, however, was short-lived. For in 1703, Neuburg became once again a theatre of war due to the War of the Spanish Succession. Cannon fire destroyed a large number of houses. Hundreds of corpses were thrown into the Danube. Those who survived were cared for by the Brothers of St. John of God, who treated friends and enemies alike, and when this was no longer possible, they buried them with dignity.

Even though the situation was challenging, the Brothers did not let themselves be intimidated, and they even thought about how to expand their work to other places. Starting in Neuburg, they first tried at Erding and Landshut, but failed because of the particular interests of those who had invited them. In 1750, at the Sendlinger Tor in the heart of Munich, they founded the St Maximilian Hospital which soon had 66 beds. In combating typhoid fever and cholera, 60 Brothers of St John of God lost their lives.

John of God's innovative policy to give each sick person their own bed and clean sheets caught on and created a trend. And the Brothers also drew on the know-how and skills of their day to ensure the absolute best patient care.

Training centres were established in Prague, Feldsberg and Bruchsal, and in 1785 in Munich. The Order then became the pioneer of nursing care.

100 years later, the Brothers' receptiveness to new treatment methods also brought them into contact with Pastor Kneipp, who had established a new water-based healing treatment at Wörishofen. In 1894, the Brothers took over his institution where people are treated to this day using alternative therapies.

Medical progress in the 17th and 18th centuries was reflected in the constant expansion of the Brothers' therapeutic methods. During the Enlightenment, scientific discoveries in medicine, particularly anatomy, led to enormous progress. Naturally, the new rationalism also led to increasing scepticism about the Church.

1803. The Regensburg authorities decided to seize the Church's property. The Brothers of St John of God were forbidden to make contact with other communities or the general government in Rome. The Religious communities were to be bled to death. Their institutions were taken over by others. As no replacements could be found to staff the hospital in Neuburg, the Brothers were allowed to continue serving there, paid a mere pittance of 3 guilders a year, two shirts and two pairs of socks. But since no new candidates were allowed to join, they were condemned to extinction. With only five years, nine Brothers had died. Eventually only one Brother was left, Brother Eberhard, who refused to abandon the sick. The end of that flourishing institution seemed imminent: Brother Eberhard sent out repeated appeals to the government. But to no avail. But then came the turning point: in 1831, King Ludwig I allowed the restoration of the Order and the readmission of novices. At the St Wolfgang Hospital in Neuburg, the number of beds soon increased again to 35, and then to 80.

On Ash Wednesday 1844, Father Magnobonus set out in a wagon bound for Straubing with three novices to take over the local city hospital. Seven years later, the Brothers in Bavaria became a Religious Province. The spirit of optimism was felt everywhere.

Their embracing of new treatment methods brought the Brothers into contact with the parish priest, Fr Kneipp, who had established a water-based curative treatment in Wörishofen. In 1894, the Brothers took over this facility, where people are treated to this day with alternative therapies.

Two decades later, new storm clouds were gathering: the First World War broke. Every second Brother had to do his military service. One in three remained on the battlefield. Religious houses were seized by the military.

In this period of uncertainty, the Province's leadership boldly took a new step forward: in 1916, they bought a restaurant at the rotunda of Nymphenburg Castle in Munich. It was to become the nucleus of a modern hospital. The first patients are admitted, but the times remained precarious. There was a revolution. The Wittelsbach family in the nearby Nymphenburg Castle even feared for their lives. Prince Franz and his family sought protection from the Brothers of St John of God.

The following years were also marked by decline and political chaos. First the spread of the Spanish flu pandemic, then the collapse of the economy. Inflation and unemployment plagued the country.

But the Brothers - seemingly endowed with an unshakable trust in God - went on building and building. By the 1930s there were already 150 beds in Munich. At the height of the global economic crisis, they were building a four-storey hospital in Regensburg with 350 beds, plus a women's hospital with 300.

As soon as the two hospitals were finished, a new disaster struck. Hitler unleashed a war without precedent. The hospitals were turned into military hospitals. Seriously wounded soldiers were treated in facilities that were themselves increasingly coming under enemy fire. Air raids from 1940 onwards were terrifying Munich and Regensburg: a bomb hit the Nymphenburg Hospital in 1942 weighing 18 tonnes. 250 patients had to be evacuated at Christmas 1944. Many Brothers were to pay for their commitment with their lives.

When the Americans overran the city in 1945, the Brothers brought out the sick from the air-raid shelters and took them back to the bombed-out hospital. The damage was immense, and once again the Brothers rolled up their sleeves.

But the losses suffered in the war and the ever-present fear of death were not the worst experiences in those years. Hitler's euthanasia programme inflicted an even more hideous trauma on the Order.

People with disabilities have always been a special target group for the Order's mission from the very beginning. After Bavaria became a Province in 1851 more and more houses were built for them, such as:

Straubing
Reichenbach
Gremsdorf

They were just the ones that needed particular of protection, branded in Hitler's Germany as parasites of the people. Despite their vehement protests, the Brothers were forced to let their charges be transported away. Some 400 residents of Reichenbach, 550 of Straubing, 800 of other Religious institutions were deported to the death camps, where they died of starvation, poisoning or gassing.

The Provincial Superior Eustace Kugler never tired of pleading for justice, making him a prime target of the Nazis. Kugler had to endure 30 Gestapo interrogations, sometimes for up to six hours at a time. Nevertheless, he managed to lead the Order through this grim period. And, shortly after the war, Kugler died. His tireless commitment to the values of his Order was never forgotten. On 4 October 2009 he was beatified amid the applause of thousands of people gathered in Regensburg Cathedral. With Eustace Kugler, the Bavarian Province gained a special protector and a champion.

The post-war period was again a time of enormous growth for the Brothers. Hospitals were being modernised, laboratories, workshops and support facilities were being built, and new forms of accommodation were being provided for the disabled. Geriatric care was stepped up, new facilities were taken over, and a model hospice was established

But despite the flourishing of the centres and the many causes for celebration, a new sword of Damocles is now hanging over the Order. There are virtually no new vocations. Whereas in 1900 there were 260 Brothers in 14 communities, today there are only 20 Brothers left. Is it still possible to carry on a project of this magnitude under such conditions?

The answer is YES. In a laborious process, the Brothers are drawing up a set of institutional guidelines and adapting their structures to today's changes. This is enabling the 10,000 co-workers to become involved in the Order's hospitality project in such a way that the spirit of John of God will live on.

There will be further challenges ahead that no-one can yet imagine, challenges that will again endanger the Order and its very existence. But a glance at the history of the Brothers of St John of God in Bavaria tells us: Do not be afraid! Trusting in God will also make it possible to carry this special spirit forward into an uncertain future.

Video link:

400 Jahre Barmherzige Brüder in Bayern

<https://vimeo.com/666084678/5f3d75b631>

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