

# Nicholas von Flue (Bruder Klaus)

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**NICHOLAS VON FLÜE (BRUDER KLAUS)****A Great Swiss.**

(An Appreciation on the Occasion of His Canonisation.)

On the Feast of the Ascension, May 15th, an outstanding Swiss, Nicholas von Flüe, will receive the highest honour from the Church when he will solemnly be declared a Saint. A great day in Rome it will be, at the same time it will be a memorable day in Switzerland. (The Swiss Catholics in England will celebrate the occasion on Sunday, June 1st, by a special Church- and Civic Service, particulars of which will be given later.) This remarkable event will above all be suitably celebrated in Sachseln. At Whitsun a "Bruder-Klausen-Jahr," a year specially dedicated to the memory of this outstanding Swiss will be officially opened.

Nicholas von Flüe lived in the 15th century, 1417-1487. It was a time when in Europe reactions set in against the Middle Ages, or had already borne their fruit. The 13th century had been a century of great achievement. It was the culmination of human genius in many respects. On the other hand a reaction, or rather a revolution emerged and new ideas made headway. In Italy a revival of the old pagan classic culture was seen and with it much paganism came alive; I mean the well-known Renaissance. In the spiritual life, as a reaction against Scholasticism, mysticism and all sorts of mystical teaching flourished, many a

beautiful flower, but, alas, among a great number of weeds. — In political life, the 100 years' war between England and France had just ended, leaving a poor France, weak in every respect. In Italy the perennial quarrel between the Guelfs and Ghibellines worked havoc. In Germany, as ever, there was the rivalry of the princes with many disturbances in the fight for the emperor's crown. — In ecclesiastical life, the Church still suffered from the "Captivity" of the Popes in Avignon. True, it had ended, but unfortunately had given way to schism; three dignitaries claimed to be the rightfully elected Pope. It was settled at the council of Constance, 1414-18. Later we see the quarrel between Pope and council, namely the council of Basel which was suspended by Rome. From the East the Turks menaced Christianity. Constantinople fell, 1453. New Crusades were organised, but without avail.

Into this framework of history we have to place the life of Bruder Klaus who lived in the very midst of this European world. The Swiss Confederation was founded well over a hundred years before, 1st August, 1291. It consisted at that time of the first eight Cantons ("The acht alten Orte"). It had fought the memorable battles of Morgarten and Sempach, resulting in the independence from the Austrian crown. The years of Nicholas' life saw the civil war between the Swiss and Zürich, the battle at the Zihl and St. Jakob an der Birs; the campaign against the Archduke Sigmund, conquering his territory this side of lake Constance, the present Thurgau; further the interesting personality of Hans Waldmann, mayor of Zürich; the fight against Charles the Bold, routing his powerful army in three battles, Grandson, Morat and Nancy; the important Tagsatzung at Stans; Fribourg and Solothurn received into the Confederation. With this we already touch the very life and activity of Nicholas von Flüe. Let us now look at it in due order.

Born on 21st March, 1417, Nicholas was baptised in the church at Kerns, as his own parish of Sachseln was vacant. He was called after St. Nicholas of Myra to whom a church was dedicated just on the opposite hill facing Flüe, the home of his parents. His father was a well-to-do farmer, who owned, beside his estate on Flüe, an alp in the Melchtal. His mother hailed from Wolfenschiessen. She seems to have been in close connection with the "Friends of God," a brotherhood of lay people who felt themselves called to a pious life. She must have known the hermit Hattinger who lived near Wolfenschiessen. She had connections too with St. Andrew's Convent at Engelberg, a centre for the "Friends of God" in that part of the country. Knowing his mother, we can guess the outline of the future life of Bruder Klaus.

Nicholas as a boy loved already prayer and retirement. Otherwise he seems to have been like other boys, working hard at home on his father's farm and entertaining himself with playmates of the same age.

As a youth he "joined the forces" and took part in the war against Zürich. There were a good number of battles in which he probably took part: at the Etzel, Thalwil, St. Jakob an der Sihl. What must have been his thoughts when he heard about the heroic death of the Swiss at St. Jakob an der Birs?

At this time falls his marriage with Dorothea Wiss of Oberwilen-Schwendi. Many people probably expected he would choose the life of a hermit or a priest. But, surely after long consideration in prayer before

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God, he decided on married life. His marriage was happy; he became the father of ten children.

However his work did not end with caring for a large family. He never refused to render service to his borough or to his canton. His services were greatly appreciated and he was even elected judge of the canton. Later he was offered the honourable post of governor (Landammann). But he refused to accept it. He was sent on various occasions as a deputy of Obwalden to important meetings.— To mention further his career in the army, he took part in 1460, as a Rotmeister, a captain, in the campaign against Sigmund, in the conquest of Thurgau. It is recorded that he kept good discipline among his soldiers. On one occasion he saved the convent St. Catherinenthal from being burnt down. Some enemies had hidden there and therefore fire was laid to the building. However Rotmeister von Flüe prevented the disaster.

At home Nicholas von Flüe retained his love for prayer, retirement and penance. Often when the others had gone to sleep, he prayed for hours and hours in his room, or went sometimes into the valley of the Melchaa, where he selected a lonely place for his meditation. Nicholas seemed now to be really happy; was he not a man well-honoured by his people, was he not the happy father of a large family, and was he not in perfect peace with God, leading such a saintly life?

But suddenly there was a change in his life. He came into his fiftieth year. He heard an inner voice. Louder and louder it told him to leave family, home and country, and to retire as a hermit. First he

thought it was a temptation. Surely it was not right to leave his family, the youngest child not yet a year old. On the other hand the voice was clear and decisive. He took counsel with his confessor and friend the parish priest of Kerns. He took counsel with his wife. In the end they arrived at the decision that it was a special call from God, that he had to obey.

After his wife had consented, he took leave of his beloved ones. He left home and turned towards Basel. Probably many of his friends and neighbours thought there was something wrong with him. But this did not perturb Nicholas. He had made up his mind to follow God's special call to a hermit's life. He intended to join some hermits in Alsace. But near Liestal a farmer told him to return; he should become a hermit in his own country. Bruder Klaus retraced his steps. That very night he had an extraordinary experience. He felt a horrible pain in his bowels and seemed to be near to death. However, after some time he recovered, and from that moment he did not feel any more need for food nor drink. From now onwards he lived without bodily nourishment. Indeed, a living miracle.

First, Bruder Klaus settled down on an alp high up in the Melchtal. Later he came down to the valley itself, the place now called Ranft. Soon he was discovered. We can imagine the thoughts and gossip of the people. Certainly most of them could not understand his extraordinary behaviour.

However, by and by his fame went abroad. Especially his miraculous fast was much spoken of.





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The Swiss, critical as they are, investigated it officially. Nothing suspicious could be found against it. Later on the Auxiliary Bishop of Constance tested it with the same result. It was a fact that Nicholas lived without food.

Of course many people came to see this living miracle. Some out of curiosity, others with great admiration for the man of God. People came to ask his prayers and his counsel. He never refused to listen. He had always a kind word ready, a word of comfort and consolation. But it must have been a great burden for him; had he not left everything to find seclusion and silence, to live alone with God?

When the throng of visitors pressed too hard, the magistrate forbade visits to him without the special permission of the parish priest of Kerns. — In the meantime the government had built a hut for the hermit and later a chapel was added to it. At first, the hermit went for his Sunday Mass down to Sachseln. Sunday after Sunday his people saw him coming to church, an awe-inspiring figure. Slowly criticism gave way to admiration. After some years Nicholas was given a chaplain who said Mass in his chapel at the Ranft.

There he lived absorbed in prayer and meditation doing penance of the sins of the world. He had so much to pray for his own people, for the Church, for the settlement of so many quarrels. His piety was simplicity itself. He had a great devotion to Our Lady. Often he went on pilgrimage to Our Lady of Einsiedeln. Great was his devotion to the Passion of Our Lord. This was a characteristic piety of the "Friends of God," and generally of the mystics of the Middle Ages. Further he was filled with a deep devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. What great veneration had he for the Priesthood, for Holy Mass and Communion. The Holy Eucharist was in fact his nourishment which gave his soul and body the necessary food. Finally we have to mention his admirable insight into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. Here we find the culmination of his mystical life and his mystical experience.

But this, his mere mystical life, was not the meaning of his calling. Christian religion is essentially charity, love of God and of man. Providence had called him away from a small circle where he had done such a lot of good, had called him into a much larger circle where he was urgently needed. More and more Bruder Klaus was visited from all parts of Europe. He was looked at as a man with marvellous insight into the happenings of the time. He could judge and divine the signs of the time. He was even used as an intermediary between foreign princes and the Swiss. Such a visit is known of the ambassador of the Duke of Milan in 1483. It is most interesting to read his own account. Among other items, he tells his lord in a letter: ". . . . I went to visit the hermit whom they believe to be a saint, because he does not eat (sic).

He enjoys the full confidence of the Confederation. I spent an evening and a morning with him and spoke much about the point in question. I found him thoroughly informed . . . ."

Other important visitors are reported: Geiler von Kaisersberg, Archduke Sigmund of Austria sends his delegate to negotiate peace with the Swiss (1473) and presents the hermit with a chalice; Hans Waldmann, mayor of Zürich; Albrecht von Bonstetten, dean of Einsiedeln, etc. (All these visits and many more are recorded in the marvellous collection: Eye-witnesses report about Bruder Klaus, "Augenzeugen berichten über Bruder Klaus" by Werner Durrer).

Bruder Klaus received presents from everywhere which he used for his chapel and the maintenance of his chaplain. A present is recorded even from the Queen of Scotland, Eleonora.

I have to mention now one great event which actually made Bruder Klaus famous, the Swiss had gone through some years of fame. They had been victorious against the greatest menace of the time, the Duke of Burgundy, Charles the Bold (Karl der Kühne). In three decisive battles they routed his powerful army; in the last one, the Duke himself lost his life. As he had been very rich, immense booty fell into the hands of the victorious Swiss. This was now the cause of a long quarrel. At the same time the two cantons Fribourg and Solothurn requested to be received into the Confederation. The quarrel dragged on for three long years. At last at the Tagsatzung of Stans, the national assembly was determined to settle the points in question. But, alas, again with a negative result. Already the parties wanted to leave, angry about the renewed failure of the negotiations. Weapons should decide the issue.

In this great danger of civil war, the parish priest of Stans hurried to the hermit, informing him of the great menace. Bruder Klaus knew all about the quarrel and had prayed very hard for peace. To the priest from Stans he made now a clear statement about a possible settlement. This was conveyed to the delegates who were already on the point of leaving Stans. Another meeting was called together, the proposals were heard, and behold, the whole assembly agreed to each point. It was the weighty authority of the hermit

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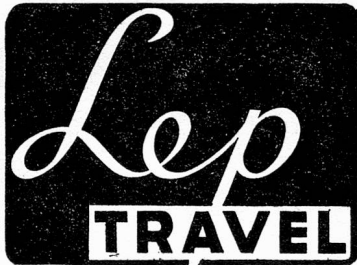
in the Ranft that had worked the impossible. — Soon the good news spread all over the country. The bells were rung. In the morning they had thought to be obliged to alarm the country for a war; in the evening the bells rang out the joyous news of peace. Great rejoicing was all over Switzerland. Solothurn, Fribourg, Luzern and Bern sent their special thanks with gifts to the peace-maker in the Ranft.

This life of Nicholas in the Ranft lasted just 20 years. He had a revelation that he would die on his 70th birthday. A week before it, he fell ill and endured a very painful illness with the greatest patience. Fortified with the Rites of the Church he passed away, as foretold on 21st March, 1487. His funeral at Sachseln was a signal recognition of the love and the veneration of his people. Soon after his death people began to visit his grave. Miracles were recorded and the belief in his powerful intercession grew more and more. He was officially beatified 1672. A few years later a church was built at Sachseln and dedicated to him. The centenaries of the years of his birth and death were always solemnly commemorated, especially in the last two centuries. Among official pilgrimages I wish only to mention one in 1940 with 100,000 pilgrims who besought the saint's protection in the war. Happy are we now that the greatest honour the Church bestows upon her children will be accorded to him.

May he thus shine as a shining light all over the world, a personification of eternal Christian values. May he be a signpost to peace showing forth three outstanding maxims: generally in life, *God* first! In politics, *honesty* first! In Religion, *charity* first!

(Rev.) Albert Würms S.M.B.

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## SWISS COLONY LIVERPOOL.

On March 25th the Swiss Colony in Liverpool had the great pleasure to have the visit of Mr. E. de Graffenried, Commercial Counsellor of the Swiss Legation in London, who came to attend a meeting of the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, where he spoke with very great success on Anglo-Swiss trade relations.

For this occasion, the Swiss Club of Liverpool organised — on the initiative of the President, Mr. Comte — a dinner for the Swiss Colony at the New Bears Paw Restaurant. About fifty compatriots attended this meeting and enjoyed a very nice evening. The president of the Swiss Club, Mr. Comte, expressed a very hearty welcome on behalf of the Swiss Club and the Swiss Colony to Mr. de Graffenried, and then announced that the Swiss Club will resume its activities, curtailed by the war. He invited the countrymen to join in and to help by personal collaboration to revive the activities of the Club. Mr. de Graffenried gave a very interesting speech on Swiss problems with a special view on the actual economic problems. He also pointed out how the Swiss Societies in London are managing the social life of the Swiss Colony, and expressed his very best wishes for the development and the prosperity of the Swiss Club in Liverpool. The Acting Consul, Mr. Schärer, thanked Mr. de Graffenried for his very interesting address expressing the hope of still closer contacts between the colonies in London and Liverpool. He expressed to the President of the Swiss Club, Mr. Comte, and to the members of the Committee, his very best thanks for the organisation of the party and invited the members of the colony to join the club and to help to revive the social life of the colony. He pointed out that the club will have every support of the Consulate for its activity.

The meeting of the Swiss Colony was a very great success. Everybody is expecting now the announcements of the following meetings and it may be hoped that the members of the Swiss Colony will support actively and personally the efforts of the Swiss Club.

(From a special correspondent).

## SWISS CONDUCTOR IN EIRE.

Mr. Robert F. Denzler, the eminent Swiss musician, and conductor of the Zurich Opera House, has recently conducted the last Spring Series of the Radio Eirann Symphony concerts in the Capitol Theatre in Dublin. An exceptionally enthusiastic ovation was accorded to him and the Press notices are throughout very flattering.