

Swiss Federal Day of Prayer

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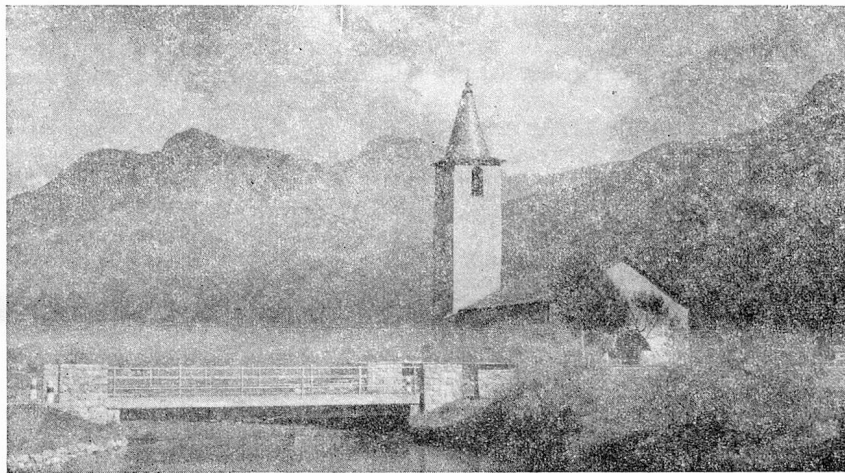
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SWISS FEDERAL DAY OF PRAYER



Sils, Engadine
Switzerland
S.N.T.O.

Sunday, 16th September, will be the Federal Day of Thanksgiving, Atonement and Prayer. With this celebration, religion and politics meet — religion becoming patriotic and patriotism becoming religious. Strictly speaking, it is not a solemn holiday in the church calendar. For instance, in article 40 of the present Protestant Church Order of the Canton of Berne it says that the solemn festive days (Hohe Kirchliche Festtage) are those which refer specially to the Story of Salvation (Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension and Whitsun), and it goes on to say that “a further solemn festive day is the Federal Day of Thanksgiving, Atonement and Prayer (third Sunday in September)”. The Federal Charter of 1291 begins with the words “In the Name of God”, and on all important occasions in Switzerland it is officially acknowledged that the Almighty has kept a protecting hand over our country. But according to the Swiss constitution the state is non-religious, while according complete freedom of religion to the community and the individual.

Even before 1500 the secular authorities in several Cantons introduced extraordinary church services with special sermons appealing for penance; such days of atonement were called for at times of danger or hardship. So, for instance, in Basle in 1541 when pestilence raged such days were observed monthly. In 1565, Berne increased the number of religious services during the plague,

and in its worst year, 1577, Thursday was instituted as a weekly day of prayer for which special prayers were composed and delivered. In the scarcity year of 1571, Zurich introduced Tuesday as a weekly day of prayer.

In 1572, the first day of prayer of all the protestant Cantons took place. But it was only in 1639 that the evangelical diet, as a solemn act of thanksgiving for deliverance from the Thirty Years War, introduced an annual day of prayer, usually in the autumn. On these days collections were made by the church communities in aid of foreign fellow-believers in distress. A few years later (1643) the Roman Catholic Cantons decided to hold special services. For decades these days of prayer were kept and often strengthened by official messages (Mandate). Often fasting was ordered on such days.

In 1794 the danger of war threatened and the frontiers were manned. In that dark hour the Government suggested an extraordinary day of prayer for all Cantons, which was repeated the following year. The new Helvetic government was uncertain whether to continue such a function or to let it die a natural death. Continuation would have meant interference by the state in religious matters. To let it dissolve would have corresponded to the Constitution which maintained that the state was non-religious.

A young diplomat from the Aargau, Philipp Albert Stapfer (1766-1840), an Helvetic Minister and a great educationist who, incidentally, was later responsible for saving the Valais from being annexed by France in 1802, managed to convince the Government that such a day of prayer would be desirable. The "Directorium" or Cabinet commissioned him to draft a circular which was to go to the "Statthalter" (the Cantonal Governors) to be forwarded by them to the clergy, together with the necessary police regulations. Several Governors added a personal note to the circular.

This famous "Bettagszirkular" shows first of all the attitude the Government took with regard to the National Day of Prayer. The Helvetic Constitution acknowledges the inviolable right of the citizen to worship. No religious bodies were prevented from congregating, but public order must be safeguarded and the respect of the lawful powers in the state must not be undermined.

The celebration of the Day of Prayer was fixed for 8th September 1796 and the Minister appealed to the Governors (Statthalter) to see to it that the Gospel was used to further unity and not to disturb it. The celebration should be one of thanksgiving to the merciful Creator who guided our destiny. The day should not be misused by painting the moral state of the nation or the new state order in hateful colours. Nor should the occasion be used

to show that the evils of the Revolution were God's punishment and the result of His wrath.

To do justice to Stapfer's appeal one has to consider the trend of thought in important leading circles of the Helvetic Republic. It was a brave confession of Christian faith and it remains Stapfer's achievement that he dared and succeeded in issuing such a religious, even Christian message to secular as well as clerical authorities in the name of and under the protection of the government.

And so the Day of Prayer became a national institution. It was kept up during the period of Mediation and Restoration. It was difficult to find a day which suited both denominations. Finally, on 1st August 1832, Parliament fixed the third Sunday in September on which to celebrate the Federal Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer in all the Cantons. The State and the Churches of all denominations officially join in marking this September Sunday as a nation-wide celebration of remembrance and prayer.

We have good reason to give thanks to the Almighty. There is room for penitence and need for guidance which we as individuals and as a nation shall pray for, wherever we are, when the bells call us to our places of worship on this year's Federal Day of Thanksgiving, Atonement and Prayer.

Mariann.

NEWS FROM SWITZERLAND

FEDERAL

The Swiss electorate will go to the poll on 4th November this year to decide whether to replace article 72 of the Constitution by a new one, viz. that the National Council should consist of a fixed number of 200 representatives rather than a member for every 24,000 inhabitants.

These seats would be distributed amongst the Cantons according to the number of inhabitants. Zurich would get three more Councillors (35), Geneva 2 (10), Baselland one (5), whereas Fribourg and the Grisons would each lose a seat.

* * *

The income of the Confederation for the first six months of 1962 rose from 1,528.8 million francs to 1,832.8. This sum is made up by the following items: Defence Tax (Wehrsteuer) 384.3 million, withholding tax (Verrechnungssteuer) 164.6, stamp duties 129.1, turnover tax (Warenumsatzsteuer) 434.5, luxury tax 0.85, beer tax 4.4 and import duties 450.9 million francs. Import duties on fuel amounted to 113 million to which a further increase was added amounting to 8.1 million. Tobacco tax brought in 62.6 million and tobacco import duties 38. Another 5.9 million was realized from various duties and 37.1 million from a number of special levies.

* * *

An Initiative for a revision of the AHIV (Old Age and Invalidity Insurance) has been successfully launched by the committee of cantonal organisations of pensioners (AVIVO) in Geneva. Of the 82,926 signatures 10,617 had to be declared invalid as the chief of the voting registry of Geneva had certified the votes with a facsimile rubber stamp signature only.

The journal "Schweizerische Beobachter" also started an initiative for an increase in AHIV pensions. The 237,428 signatures were sent to the Federal Office of Statistics for examination.

In this connection it may be interesting to know that the equalization fund of the AHV amounted to 6,069.9 million francs at the end of June. This total is held by the following bodies: Confederation 529.2 million, Cantons 996.5, Communes 801 millions, mortgage banks and institutions 1,581.8 million, Cantonal Banks 1,147.8, public institutions 21.9 and mixed private and public undertakings 991.6 million francs. The average yield amounted to 3.25 per cent.

(Agence Télégraphique Suisse.)

DEATHS

The following deaths have been reported from Switzerland.

Dr. Rudolf Laemmel, well-known educationist and writer, died in Zurich at the age of 84.

Giovanni Morandini, the Italian-born pioneer of films, who opened the first cinema in Lucerne in 1909, died at 81.

Dr. med. Arthur Kielholz, the psychiatrist, died in Aarau at the age of 83. Until his retirement in 1944 he had been director of the "Heil- und Pflegeanstalt Koenigsfelden" at Windisch (AG).

Alfred Leonz Gassmann, popular composer and known for his tune of "vo Luzern gaege Waeggis zue", died at Vitznau at the age of 86.

Henri Martin, well-known member of Radio Lausanne, died at 62.