

Day 2: Clement Maria Hofbauer

Faith and the Will of God

The real point of departure in the spirituality of Clement is his **faith**. Everything springs from this. It was the mother of the Saint who inculcated in him his clear and profound understanding of the mysteries of the faith. But Clement himself during the course of his life developed this deep sense of faith with which he approached God and Jesus Christ. He said of himself that never, in the course of his life, had he a temptation against this virtue. Even the less than orthodox and aggressive teaching of the University professors could not alter his faith in the least, "Professor, what you have said there is not Catholic teaching!"

While the priests of Vienna, influenced by Illuminism, confined themselves to "vague considerations on universal Christianity, on universal charity, and to generalities in the area of morals," Clement, in his preaching spoke of God, of his love for people as revealed in the Incarnation and Redemption of Jesus Christ, but he also spoke of the Eucharist, devotion of Mary and the Saints, confession, and time and again he returned to the theme of "The Church, its authority, it's head".

The efficacy of his preaching can be attributed to the power of his faith. "This was almost incarnate in him; it was manifested in every line of his face, in every movement of his body." His sermons, said his listeners, were inspiring acts of faith. He was the "hero of the faith". Clement avowed that he had "many faults, but God had given him a faith that he would not wish to exchange with anyone in the world." To the children who came for catechism he used to say, "My children, learn your religion with great care."

Clement found the sources of his faith in the Gospel which he read and meditated on frequently. In Vienna he would make his reflections during the reading of the Gospel, even interrupting the reading of the text to explain it. But it was especially the Catholic Church, its teaching, its history, which were the basis of his faith. He would say, "Only those who are part of her, who have the happiness to be her children, can understand her."

Faith for Hofbauer was not first and foremost a rational understanding of the Christian articles of faith, but rather a surrendering to God, a friendly connection to the person of the Saviour. His joy in and from his faith came from this understanding. Faith for him was anything but a duty or a must. Time and again he spoke of the great privilege in being allowed to believe. He thanked God for the gift of his faith and said it would be better to lose one's life than to let the faith decline. One of his prayers began with the words: "Take everything, but not the valuable treasure of faith." Clement knew that his deep faith was a blessing, an undeserved gift. He asserted often with gratitude that he would never exchange his faith for that of another. He insisted on making the strangest of statements. If someone said to him that God could be seen with one's own eyes at a certain place, he would close his eyes and say: "My faith does not need any such proof." It was surely the integrity of his rock-solid faith that made such a deep impression on everyone. One witness at the process of canonization summarised all this in one sentence: "His faith was a living faith; he related everything to God."

The Will of God: Clement searched for the Will of God in order to fulfil it. He discovered this in the will of the Church and of the Pope. Whether at Warsaw or Vienna, through whatever adversity he was able to see God's will and through the challenge and sought to respond to God's will for him and the Congregation. Clement also sought the will of God in the Constitutions and in the decisions of his superiors.

However, characteristic of Clement's spirituality was his search for God's will *in and through events*. For example, in 1796 he wrote to Fr. Blasucci: "I believe that in these times so critical for the Church and religion, the spontaneous offer of foundations is not just pure chance but a providential sign." Writing from Mount Thabor to the Nuncio in Vienna, after he had encountered a disastrous situation, he said: "Perhaps it is providential that I have learned now what was hidden from myself and the confreres both in Vienna and Warsaw." He emphasizes his attentiveness to the will of God as expressed through events in these words: "I don't know what the Lord will decide in this matter, or by what paths Divine Providence will bring it to a close but all I seek is to do God's will."

The thought of Clement on the will of God is expressed in a series of texts which are truly jewels and remind us of Alphonsus' own ideas on the will of God.

Clement writes to St. Benno's from Babenhausen in 1806:

Courage, God is in charge. He directs all to his glory and our good and nothing can resist him. All human plans, well organized as they are, only serve to accomplish his holy will. As for me, in the present situation, I have totally abandoned myself to his good pleasure. I see that all that appears hostile to us brings us to where God wants. Let us allow ourselves to be led by God and all will be well... My dear brothers, let us keep ourselves from sin, strive to perfection, it is the only thing we must search for; let us encourage each other and inspire each other to do good. Practice charity among you. I greet you all in the heart of Jesus.

The death of Huebl, his companion and friend, was a severe trial for Clement. Four months after Huebl's death, Clement wrote to a friend in Italy:

I resign myself to the will of God. I always protest that I want only what God wills, and nevertheless I must confess that since his death I have not had a moment of happiness.

Writing afterwards to the bishop of Chur in Switzerland, he said again:

When one meditates at the foot of the Cross, one seems ready for everything. But as soon as the Saviour imposes his cross, one is unable to carry it. See what an old ass I am.

He would again write to Fr. Passerat, "Pray for us as we pray for you so that we may accomplish fully the most holy will of our Father."

When confined in Küstrin, he wrote, "We abandon ourselves to the fate that the will of God has assigned us. It is easy to suffer because we have nothing to reproach ourselves with."

There is a lesson for all of us to learn from Clement. The gratitude we need to have constantly for the gift of our faith and then to express this gratitude in living our faith joyfully each day. Our Faith will be tested but like Clement we learn that there is nothing more joyful in seeking to do God's will each day, revealed to us through the Gospels, through the teachings of the Holy Father and the Church, through the events of each day and the people we meet, we seek constantly to do what God's desires for each of us.