

## Feast Day: Clement Maria Hofbauer

### Clement, The Apostle, The Mystic in Action

The great project which God had entrusted to Clement was to establish the congregation beyond the Alps; he would consecrate his whole life to this, all his activity in Warsaw, his journeys in southern Germany, and in Vienna in the midst of police harassment.

Clement put himself with immense energy at the disposal of people. He tried in the situation of his time, to achieve the best he could – with the means at his disposal and within the possibilities available to him.

The perpetual mission at St. Benno's in Warsaw is a clear example of the dynamism of Clement. This consisted of morning and evening prayer, Masses, sermons in many languages, devotions, meditations on the Way of the cross, Visits to the Blessed Sacrament. This went on from six in the morning till late evening. All this in a day at St. Benno's, then there was the pastoral activity outside the church, school, etc. Clement involved his students in the preparation of the divine services. He handed over to them the catechetical instruction and, to some extent also, the preaching.

Clement could not, of course, think of introducing the pastoral methods of the popular mission preaching from parish to parish into Poland and Austria – they were forbidden in those countries at the time. He had to follow other paths. He attached great importance to proclamation (preaching) – "explicita Verbi Dei proclamatio". In St. Benno's in Warsaw, in his foundations in Germany and also in Vienna, the pastoral activity he preferred himself was preaching. He was the most remarkable preacher in Vienna, - regarded by the faithful, noted by the State police, who once withdrew his permission to preach for a year.

"The Gospel must be preached anew", he used to say in relation to the religious situation of his time. He preached simply and popularly. "Today I'll preach a sermon so simple that even the most stupid of you and every little child can understand." – he is supposed to have said, according to a police report. One might almost be listening to Alphonsus! And the police report had to admit that it was "absolutely frightening the way people are running after Hofbauer."

It is worth noting that there was a large social-concern component in Clement's pastoral activity: In Warsaw he took over an orphanage, set up schools and went begging for his children. In Vienna he used often trudge out to the suburbs to help the poor. He once said that he had pass through his hands a gigantic fortune. Clement had, of course, no idea of the possibility and necessity of improving structures and changing situations. (He lived a good half century before Karl Marx who was the first to shape the scientific tools of social analysis). But, within his possibilities, he was concerned with the salvation of the whole person.

With regard to Clement's pastoral activity in St. Benno's, one can make three assertions:

**First**, Clement strove with his broad vision not only for the salvation of the individual's soul, but he was also concerned with the well-being of the entire person. He regarded education as a missionary service with broad and long-term effects. Christian education is catechism. In teaching young people, one is instructing the fathers and the mothers of tomorrow. Clement said that the work of the Bennonites was essentially a service for the state and society.

**Second**, he blazed new ground in that he took laypeople and their honest work for the sake of the Church seriously. Clement and his confreres systematically formed laypeople for an active role. He called them to collaboration, and bound them together in communities: the Society of Oblates;

widows were invited to be teachers; even a community of nuns he had envisioned to teach and care for the sick.

**Third**, Clement believed in the international character and the union of all people. He was a man with a catholic heart who felt and lived with the whole world. His homeland was a border country where blood was mixed and peoples of different nations encountered one another. The international character of Clement was present from the beginning when his Czech father married his German mother and gave him life. In Polish Warsaw at the time, there also lived a good many Germans, Russians, and Frenchmen. Various languages and nationalities collided. St. Benno constituted something like a unifying shrine for the nations. The school at St. Benno's was open to all who were poor: Poles and Germans and Russians, Catholics and others. In the church at St. Benno's each one could hear the Good News of the Gospel in his or her own language.

A striking feature of Clement's pastoral activity is his work among the great and powerful in Vienna: among the students, artists in the circle of Viennese Romantics that gathered around Dorothea and Friedrich Schlegel; in aristocratic circles. Hofbauer, the simple working man and farmer's son gained access to these people. A significant number of them were to find their way into the Catholic Church through him.

There is one other characteristic of his pastoral dynamism: his thinking was European, indeed global. The confessor of the Ursulines in Vienna makes plans for the Church in Germany, knows about religious needs in Romania, is concerned about the pastoral situation of the people of Poland – and does what he can. One gets the impression that his apostolic charity knew almost no geographical bounds.

Clement's spirituality was incarnated in the different levels of society, from intellectuals to the workers and the poor, or with students and artists. We are dealing, therefore, with a spirituality with had been profoundly incarnated. To study that closely would mean studying the whole apostolate of Clement in Vienna. All are called to sanctity. Clement announces the Gospel to each person. Every person has to sanctify himself/herself according to their state of life. He did not necessarily give pride of place to the priestly or religious vocation, but he opened up the possibility for everyone to find a path that might or might not lead to a vocation.

There is also an ecumenical sense in his spirituality. If Clement held that the purity of faith was to be found among Catholics, he nevertheless respected the faith of others. This was a mark of his relationship with Protestants. He did not interfere with those who were subjectively convinced of what they believed. However, with those who had recognized the truth of Catholicism in their hearts but were prevented from taking the definite step by ridiculous prejudices, he would intervene very firmly. He insisted on the principal points of doctrine and left the rest to the action of divine grace.

Clement was an apostle by nature. We repeat the words of the great Austrian poet (Hermann Bahr) who said of Clement, "From this Saint onwards, Austria began to be Catholic again." And we know that before that Warsaw and other areas of Europe experienced his influence. He was a man who accepted completely and entirely the challenge of his time and struggled like a giant against the superior forces of the political situation and intellectual currents of his day

Clement was truly a Missionary of Hope in the footsteps of the Redeemer. On this his feast day, I invite you all to pray for us Redemptorists that inspired by the life and example of St Clement, we too, all of us Redemptorists today, no matter where we are may be truly Apostles, mystics of action as Missionaries of Hope in the footsteps of the Redeemer. Happy Feast.