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MOUNT ANGEL LETTER

Touching Our Monastic History

by Brother Karl Nielson, O.S.B.

The founding prior of Mount Angel Abbey was Father Adelhelm Odermatt. This intrepid Swiss monk sailed the seas to reach America and then he searched the western states of these United States until he found the place where a new Engelberg should be established. That place was this hill here in the midst of the Willmette Valley of western Oregon. None of the present monks of Mount Angel knew Fr. Adelhelm or even saw him. Our Father Martin, of happy memory, was the last of the Mount Angel monks to have seen him. Fr. Martin arrived here as a lad to begin his seminary studies in the fall of 1920 and Father Adelhelm died in November of that same year.

To our great delight, Josef Odermatt, a grand-nephew of Fr. Adelhelm, has now come from Switzerland to stay with us here at Mount Angel for several weeks. Father Adelhelm Odermatt was the brother of Josef's grandfather, Peter Odermatt. Josef tells us the story of his own father's adventure, which was the inspiration of Josef's desire to come to Mount Angel.

At 14 years of age Walter, Josef's father, came to America, perhaps to think about becoming a monk at Mount Angel. Walter arrived in Mount Angel 1919. In 1920 Fr. Adelhelm died, and Walter returned to Switzerland in 1921. Nobody in Josef's family spoke much about why Walter returned to Switzerland, as that seemed to not have pleased Walter's father. Probably Walter's father had intended his eldest son to be a priest, as was customary in those days in Switzerland. But Walter spoke often of the beauty of the country around Mount Angel, and how big everything was here. Walter remembered well traveling with Fr. Adelhelm from New York across the whole country to Oregon. During their voyage to Mount Angel Walter was very impressed with the great number of important people that Fr. Adelhelm knew everywhere they went. Fr. Adelhelm had by that time been named a titular abbot and he was quite good at pontificating in the style of those days. Wherever they were, they would always be given large meals, and Abbot Adelhelm would afterward hear many confessions. Walter was surprised that his uncle could stay awake during those confessions after all of those large meals. For Walter, seeing this enormous country and all of those people who held Fr. Adelhelm in such high regard was overwhelming.

Now at Mount Angel himself, Josef says he can imagine what his father must have felt. Today, for example, when the Abbey church was full of bishops, priests, monks, sisters, and seminarians and faculty singing at Mass with large processions, Walter must have thought "Everything is beautiful--colors, sound, smell." Josef says that he had that same experience, only now there are "even people of different color". After the death of Abbot Adelhelm, Josef imagines that the absence of such an immense figure must have left Walter very lonely at such a young age and so it was only natural that he decided to return to his home in Switzerland.

But in spite of the fact that Walter returned to Switzerland, he told his son Josef "If you have the chance in your life to visit Mount Angel, you *must* do so."

Josef's father told him that he would find peace on the hilltop at Mount Angel, much as one does in Switzerland after climbing to the top of the Swiss mountains.

Josef Odermatt's home is in the village of Buochs, Switzerland, next to Stans, on Lake Lucerne, and near Engelberg. Between Buochs and Engelberg is the monastery of Benedictine nuns that founded the Benedictine Sisters' community in Mount Angel, Maria Rickenbach, which is directly under the Abbot of Engelberg. In Buochs is a church which was built over 100 years ago for the nuns when the Swiss government had threatened to take over the religious properties and close the monasteries. The nuns of Maria Rickenbach gave ownership of the church in Buochs to a consortium of local families in order to evade its falling into the hands of the government. Josef is now the director of the consortium's finances, and he is working to establish a secure income for the consortium, mainly from the guesthouse and pilgrims who visit.

This work is the first connection Josef has had with Abbot Berchtold of Engelberg. A second connection comes from another organization Josef belongs to, one that dates back to the 15th century, the U.G.R., a political and religious group in the locale of Buochs. This group has, for every year since its founding,

written a letter to its religious head, the abbot of Engelberg, describing the conditions in the area. (Josef notes that this chronicle of letters is a treasure for historians.

He also adds that the head of the organization who wrote these letters was always concerned about short-term difficulties, and that the abbot was always reminding him to be calmer in face of the long run, something the monks are used to with the hindsight of their monastery having been founded in 1120).

Josef's wife is Margaret, and they have 4 children: Nadia, Isabelle, Jost, and Andreas. Andreas is 16 and studying at Engelberg's school (probably not to be a monk, Josef chuckles).

Josef works in the civil branch of the Swiss military aviation. As the project manager his job has been to establish a new program, which included training people with computers, etc. Under his eye are 8 airports in which 3 languages, French, Italian, and German, must be spoken. In the new program, his division must collect timecards and record them in their master Computer. He also uses the time information to plan time management for the employees, 2400 in all. In the year 2000 a single new big computer will coordinate all the information from the 240 present computers. This program is now organized and finished, and Josef has trained a younger person to take over. So now was a natural time to take a break. He might even have to retire early because of Swiss unemployment problems, so while he is here at Mount Angel he is giving thought to what he might do in the future. Ten years ago he says, at the age of 50 a person would have been considered in the prime of his management career, but now 50 is really regarded as "over the hills." Young people need jobs when they come out of the university, and Josef thinks the older generation should make sacrifices and retire earlier to make room for the large numbers of graduates.

So his time here at Mount Angel is a break, a kind of sabbatical, to look at what he has accomplished in his life and to look at what lies ahead.

As a birthday gift to himself, Josef contacted the Abbot of Engelberg who arranged with our Abbot Joseph here at Mount Angel for Josef to come for an extended stay with us.

He comes, he says, with the following goals:

- To have more time to be with God, meditate, and study my beliefs;
- To find time to be myself, relax and reflect;
- To use my strengths in service of the community;
- To improve my knowledge of the English language;
- To get to know new people and their culture;
- To research a family tree with respect to Fr. Adelhelm and Walter;
- To study the German literature in the Abbey library.

For Josef, the surprises about living at Mount Angel have been "the spirit, the hill, the history of the Abbey, and all that these monks have done in just over 100 years." He also admires the multi-cultural aspects of the Seminary, and the youthfulness of its students. In Switzerland most of the clergy are elderly. He thinks that for this reason the next pope should come from this part of the world!

Josef also admires the open mindedness here. A big event for him was eating in the monastery refectory, discussing with the senior monks, and watching how the monks waited on table in the refectory. He laughs when he hears people say the weather is so bad here. "I have seen almost only sun, just like my life here!" Daily he meditates, and

writes down these meditations. He used to dislike having to work and make out schedules, he says, but now is doing it with delight here in his room in the guesthouse. He also enjoys the seminarians' liturgy in St. Joseph's Chapel, and often comes to the monastic Divine Office. His visit here, he says, is shaping up as perhaps the biggest impression of his life.

For Us, it is a remarkable opportunity to come into contact with our own history in terms of our founder. Just seeing Joseph and conversing with him lets us reach back to our beginnings. We are proud of our Swiss monastic heritage, and having Josef here with us maintains the connection with Switzerland. On the very practical side, Josef is helping us with an enormous project: the translation of hundreds of German letters in our archives.

Josef will leave for home in December. We trust he will take a little bit of Mount Angel back with him, and we know that he will leave a little bit of Switzerland here with us.

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