**Theodosius Florentini 1808 – 1865**

“THE NEED OF THE TIME IS THE WILL OF GOD”

How did Fr Theodosius react to the “NEED OF THE TIME?”

**What inspired Theodosius to found this congregation for women?**

My reflection on how our Congregation was founded.

The 19th century was especially marked with the consequences of the French Revolution, and industrialization: political, social and economic developments in society and religion indicate radical changes and a new era.

Theodosius and his time. Theodosius was an observer as well as a criticizer. He spoke of his society as without foundation, as one of materialism, indifference of religion, of poverty, of unemployment, scrupulously treating the poor and the sick, ruining family life, and as one where the transcendental aspect of the human being was ignored.

The reaction of Theodosius, from his observations, was the opposite of passivity, powerlessness, fearfulness, condemnation, refusal and total rejection.

His judgement was decided and critical in concrete reality, but he differentiated it, confirming him as one having a full understanding for the real merit of the radical party during his time.

His vision on the Catholic Church during his time in Switzerland is also informative. Theodosius himself was strongly rooted in catholic tradition and he himself experienced his church in Switzerland as “a damaged and powerless institution” because the states took control of education in schools.

His sense of responsibility is in his words saying, “This situation should not be ignored, because God gave us the gift of his holy church – to carry out this mission. Reform should come from within. The understanding of human beings must be integrated with body and soul and the transcendental dimension.”

First step on the way to fulfilment. Earlier Theodosius wanted reform of thinking as well as the corresponding reform of society. All obstacles such as misunderstandings, unsuccessfulness etc. should not prevent us from intervening in history and taking immediate action. Moreover, it is our responsibility that one should not be idle here.

Founding a Teaching Congregation

The fundamental principle builds from the renewal of schools and education. The present illness shows itself in “pernicious schools and teaching persons, but these beliefs were lacking or in some cases there was no interest in training”. (Theodosius to Bovieri, Pope’s Messenger)

How does Fr Theodosius present the specific school reform?

His conviction was that “the catholic church should be active through the religious communities. He thought religious women/nuns would come forward from their exclusive position and intervene in active life.”

He wanted to establish Religious Congregations in such a way, so that they would fit everywhere. (Letter to the Bishop of Basel/Switzerland 1856) In his biography 1853 he writes: “Before 1839 I drew a plan to establish a religious congregation, conforming to the needs of the country”.

What was the aim of this specific congregation?

1. Catholic schools in contrast to education opposed to Christian values
2. Christian treatment for the poor, the neglected and, in contrast to rationalist treatment.

Among other students at that time in the convent boarding school “Maria Krönung in Baden, Switzerland there were three young girls capable of becoming teachers for his project, namely actually “teaching”.

Events appear as obstacles for his plans. In 1841 a decree by the Aargau Government was to abolish the convents. The Capuchin monastery and the convent “Maria Krönung” together were affected and with the local uprising, a warrant was also issued on Fr Theodosius Florentini so that he was compelled to leave the country.

What occurs with his plans in this situation? Dejection? Powerlessness? Renunciation?

It appears that through these events the NEED OF THE TIME is more visible, still more necessary and audible. Theodosius made known to Maria Anna Heimgartner, Cornelia Mäder and Feliziana Kramer the possibility of study in a foreign country, to study for their career as teachers as well as for religious profession. This was with an educational centre under the Ursulines of Freiburg in Breisgau, Germany, the Ursuline sisters in Fribourg, Switzerland and with the nearby School Sisters of the Divine Providence in Ribeauvillé, Alsace/France. Here the first seed was sown for the future congregation of “Teaching Sisters”.

CHARISM. The plan of Theodosius was not just an idea, nor a personnel wish, but an inner desire, which compelling him to act.

The theologian Fr Philippe Lecrivain SJ says that the original foundation lies in the founder’s experience with God. This means that in the beginning it is a spiritual experience, a picture of God experience as we can see in Theodosius who continues with his plan in spite of all the difficulties.

Hesitation and Surprise.

In the year 1841 Theodosius is once again in Altdorf, Canton Uri/Switzerland. The three young women who had completed their noviciate returned to Switzerland. Fr Theodosius faces a challenge and questions himself. Where could the sisters start their apostolate? Theodosius appeared uncertain, undecided and silent.

So a temporary solution that perhaps the three could enter the Ursuline convent in Lucerne, which was willing to accept them as novices. The three novices did not accept this proposal. They had no intention of entering an enclosed convent, preferring to return to Ribeauvillé. Would this be a surprise to Fr Theodosius? We do not know!

The young women understood his plan and were able to identify with his ideas. The seed began germinating.

Call sign from Menzingen. The parish priest Fr Röllin and others there were interested in establishing a school for girls. A conference was held on 8th August 1844 in Menzingen to which Fr Theodosius was invited. His contribution was important: He could offer three qualified teachers, as well as statutes for founding a Religious Congregation according to Franciscan spirituality.

Essentially it also required the authorization of the Bishop to establish religious institutes. Decision was made to organize the religious profession in Altdorf, Switzerland, under Fr Theodosius and he obtained the necessary permission from the Bishop.

The girls’ school in Menzingen opened in 1844 on 3rd November for the higher classes with 32 students and on 27 November for the lower classes with 56 students.

1845 Theodosius, chaplain in Chur. There were no limits to the ‘Need of the Time’ with caring for the poor, the sick and the neglected. For these apostolates, he needed the personnel, whom he obtained from Sr Bernarda.

This undertaking developed with the foundation of the hospital as well as the entrance of novices, who formed a community.

In 1852 Sr M. Theresia Scherer was appointed Superior as well as Novice Directress of the Sisters of Mercy of the Hospital in Chur, Switzerland. Theodosius obtained from the administration of the diocese permission to re-organize the structure of the institute. He already had in view to build the motherhouse in Ingenbohl. This development naturally led to reviewing the fundamental purpose, the re-organization and administration.

A painful period. This is not the place to express in full detail the suffering conflict between Theodosius and Bernarda. The main question was: Should the Teaching Sisters and the Sisters of Mercy be united as one congregation or be two separate congregations?

Theodosius as founder claimed forcefully to be the administrator. The concern of the dioceses was important: Menzingen in Diocese of Basel/Switzerland and Ingenbohl in Diocese of Chur/Switzerland. The final decision in 1856 leads to “separation” of the two institutes. This final solution included “separation”, “release” and renouncement in its service for both Congregations.

The charism of the Founders and the charism of the founding

In his book “The Charism of the Founders” Antonio Roman indicates the difference between Charism of the Founder and the charism of the Foundation, which means the first group are involved in founding. He differentiates the two categories of charism.

The original charism is from the start open to development, but always inspiring. The spirit is enriched through each member of the religious family. Bernarda’s contribution was identifying and making visible that which was possible and realistic. Theodosius was the original idealist.

The solution of this conflict brought clearness and richness to the charism during the period of Theodosius.

The period was marked with the Cross and opened a new road to the two institutes: The Teaching Sisters under the direction of Sr Bernarda Heimgartner and the Sisters of Mercy under the direction of Sr Maria Theresia Scherer.

View

What was visible in the charism of the Founder is confirmed today and this inspiration goes further in each community, in each member of a religious congregation. The Aggiornamento through the Holy Spirit in the service of the church and world goes further today and tomorrow, always new in dynamic loyalty to the origin. This is valid for all Sisters in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Needs, signs of the time in diverse forms show the sisters, where God needs their presence and their involvements.

Sisters who can be flexible themselves are able to work and in the daily life are able to intervene. As persons living in the Franciscan spirit, they respect each person, especially the under privileged and the despised.

As sisters who are capable of intervening and engaging themselves for a Christian life.

As sisters who are conscious that each change pre-supposes a personal inner renewal and as Christians remaining loyal in their faith, but also with respect for others in their way of thinking and understanding.

The search for an answer in our time to the Will of God in the diverse cultures, leads us, Sisters of the Holy Cross, Menzingen, to reflect on the principles of the Gospel to analyse the actual contexts with the original charism of Theodosius Florentini and the charism of the foundation with Bernarda Heimgartner.

Sr Maria Crucis Doka