

Witness to Justice
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OUR MANDATE FOR ACTION
Presentation to the General Chapter of 1997

During our German renewal programs in Rome, I always liked to contact sisters whom I did not know yet. One topic we usually talked about was what they were doing besides their teaching ministry. The responses often impressed me deeply. There were sisters engaged with the youth in their parish, others nursed an older or sick companion sister in their community, some conducted the adult church choir and the children's choir. There were the sisters who worked for vocations. They held weekend courses giving an orientation to religious life and they organized pilgrimages to Mother Theresa's tomb and kept oral and written contact with all who were interested.

I would have liked to see one of these sisters here on the panel. But our topic is the Mandate for Action, and that did not exist when we started to care for people and issues that were close to our hearts.

In order to find the way to the poor and marginalized I needed a definite conversion. When I entered grade school I met with a strong class-consciousness, if not class-conceit. I was one of the smart ones who would later go to the Gymnasium. We entertained social contacts with the medium class girls, but not with the so-called dirty children. In our eyes they were unkempt and stupid. Though two of them lived in my neighborhood, I would never help them with homework or walk home from school with them.

Things changed when at the age of 17, I came to know the new social worker in our parish. Much later I got to know that she was a candidate of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who could not be received because of the Nazi regime. After the end of the war, she was one of the first to enter. Her name is Sister Hedwig Karl.

In my home parish she cared for all, the poor the sick, the lonely, the seekers for meaning and she had the gift of awakening, fostering and promoting the hidden talents in others. We never talked about my prejudices, I was not even aware of them myself. I accompanied my friend to the home for the aged, to the barracks outside the town where the homeless families lived and I got to know the people who were so close to her heart. She always treated them with respect, kindness and humor, and so did I because with her at my side I also experienced these people as lovable and amiable.

When in 1944, I started my first term at the university in Freiburg, it was quite natural for me to join the Elisabeth-Konferenz who cared for the poor as St. Elisabeth of Thuringen or of Hungary, their patron-saint, had done.

After the end of the war, all the people were poor and most of the houses were damaged. But in my memory this time was wonderful, because I have never experienced so much natural solidarity. People shared what they had in the family, in the neighborhood, even with strangers. In the crowded public vehicles the people who had a seat remained sitting only for a short time, and then offered their seat to others.

In 1946, I entered the candidature, studied in Munchen, made my novitiate and then taught in Munchen, later in Amberg. During this time we used to make care parcels for people in East Germany. Our sisters sent us the addresses of needy families, my classes were enthusiastic and so we sent parcels with food and clothes all the year round. The fact that each parcel had to be carried to the public health office in order to be disinfected was a nasty trick of the communist regime, but soon that was a "normal" thing for us to do.

That poverty is the result of unjust structures was something I learned when I met Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler at the 1968 general chapter in Rome. Her work on the chapter, her engagement in the civil rights movement and her genuine love of all, particularly the poor, made a deep and lasting impression on me.

When I returned home I realized that we in West Germany also had prejudices and marginalized people, but Margaret Ellen had shared her vision of a society where prejudices can be overcome and where all can find their place.

This vision influenced my teaching more than I was aware, particularly in literature and social science. Then one day, an 18 year old student told me full of joy, that she and her friends had met a social worker who shared my ideas. That was a happy day, and it started concrete actions. Frau Neumann, the social worker of a Catholic Women's Association, wanted to give the children of the homeless families in the barracks a chance to get on in life. She was looking for students to work with groups of these children and to help them with their homework. Many girls of my class were committed to that task. Sister Canisia Engl, our young principal, was very positive about it. She offered an alternative to the students who were obliged to perform a practical social work of 4 weeks – they could work with the children in the barrack quarters once a week all the year round.

This project was not only a help for the poor children, but for the students as well. They had come to understand the social reality and were ready to work for a positive change. They experienced the setting, surroundings and environment of the children. They were sought out by the mothers and they met with Frau Neumann regularly in order to discuss the problems. – I became a member of the Catholic Women's Association, was the contact person for the school and could invite girls for the project who were not obliged to do practical social work.

A few years later, some students who were aware of the injustice and suffering in the world told me that we needed a group of Amnesty International in Amberg. Their friends of another Gymnasium had already convinced their young teacher. I also thought it a

good idea, and after many difficulties, the Amberg Amnesty group started working in 1976. The first prisoner we had to care for was a South African. Since the correspondence with him and all the authorities was in English, I was assigned to this task and in this way received much insight into the apartheid system. We learned to deeply respect the churches in South Africa who had united in order to help and interceded for the victims. This ecumenical office was of great help to us – our prisoner was released.

Our Amnesty group was active in many ways, for instance for the people seeking asylum. We continued to keep contact with some of our adopted prisoners after their release from jail. One of them, another South African, who was leader in the nonviolent struggle in his township, was morally and financially supported by our group for years, until Nelson Mandela was elected president.

The members of our group were also open and ready to take steps whenever peace and the integrity of creation were concerned. So I was also committed to the peace movement against atomic armament and joined the resistance against the construction of a vast plant for the reprocessing of contaminated atomic bars, about 18 miles away from Amberg. Our protest against this highly dangerous nuclear plant which was fenced in like a concentration camp, mainly consisted in praying in a near-by clearing of the wood. A more than life-size crucifix, some wayside shrines, simple benches and many flowers turned the place into a chapel. The people from the surrounding neighborhoods, particularly young families with their children assembled there each Sunday afternoon and at other times for prayer services. They were always prepared by a group, and Amnesty Amberg was one of them. A peasant of the nearest village or his son always provided the microphones. So the praying people were heard at some distance.

After each service there was a kind of meeting. Groups and families of other parts of Germany were introduced, there was much sharing of information, and again and again we heard about or saw the damages done to the crucifix and the shrines. Those who did the damages were backed by the authorities, but the people patiently repaired the damage and did not give up.

Obviously the chapel in the clearing and the prayerful people were seen as a greater hindrance than the great demonstrations that were organized once in a while by groups from all over Germany. The non-violent but dogged resistance of the local people who never gave up must have been one of the reasons why the construction of the plant was finally discontinued.

When I was nearing my retirement and had a reduction of lessons, I started visiting in a home for the aged that had formerly been run by our congregation and where one of our sisters, Sr. Dimundis, did some pastoral service.

I started visiting a 90-year-old blind woman, but soon got to know others as well. Most of them were single women who had worked hard all their life for little pay. I was moved by their dignity. They did not complain of their fate, their frailty or their loneliness. They

did not readily talk about themselves. But when they gained more confidence they let me have a look into their lives and I was touched and filled with esteem and admiration for their hidden greatness.

When I came to Rome in September 1992, there was nothing I could do outside the generalate because I cannot speak Italian. But thanks to the Mandate that the general chapter had given us, opportunities for foreigners were found in Rome to get in contact with the poor. I liked the community of St. Egidio best. One of the many ministries of this lay community is the mensa, a soup kitchen where 3 times a week between 4 and 8 p.m. a substantial meal is served to 1100 –1400 poor people. Each meal requires a personnel of 60 men and women, and most of them are volunteers who think this engagement worth while. Once a week I used to serve in the mensa, together with Sr. Deborah from Wilton as long as she studied in Rome, and now together with Sr. Paulissa from Mankato.

Most of the guests are young men from all over the world who are trying to escape persecution or misery. Many understand some English, and all understand the language of benevolence and sympathy. Sometimes I meet a guest of the mensa in town. Then we have a little talk together. I cannot change his situation, but I can help him to experience kindness and care in a strange world.

Finally I want to mention how I was inspired by S. Cathy Arata from Baltimore and by our sisters in Honduras during the EGC in 1995. I had read a moving report by S. Cathy, and I received a women's cross from S. Patricia and understood that new markets for Salvadoran crafts would be helpful for people who had undergone so much suffering during the civil war.

In Honduras we experienced the great poverty caused by the unjust economic world order and we witnessed the efforts of the people to regain self-esteem and a living by re-awakening the ancient Maya culture in many forms. The solidarity of our sisters with the poor and their radically simple life style attracted me very much – I would have liked to join them. But all I could do was return with a parcel of women's crosses and Maya crosses and share their spirituality with my sisters, family, friends, former students and others.

With the help of Sr. Anne Marie Gardiner of Baltimore and Sr. Mary Kennedy of Honduras who are providing the crafts, and all the sisters who carry them in their baggage to Rome and Munchen, I was able to transfer more than \$13,000 to our sisters. I know that makes no difference in the economic situation of the two countries, but as an expression of solidarity it may strengthen our hope and trust in God.

By S. Ingeborg – given to S. Mary Ann Kuttner