

Introduction of Martin Werlen, O.S.B.

Do you know Jonas? I think you do.

All Benedictine sisters know the book of Jonas.

He is one of the Twelve Minor Prophets. Within this group, the Book of Jonas is a special literary genre because it is not a collection of words of the prophet, but a biblical narrative about a prophet, his mission in Ninive and the way Jahwe, the God of Israel, teaches him.

Now you are going to get to know a Swiss monk (and young abbot emeritus) who says about himself: "I am Jonas" – and this triggered by a loud bang...

Here and now you will listen to someone whose focus is on mercy and hope – on the discernment between tradition and the many small traditions... and who, in the German speaking countries, is a bestselling author.

Although Martin Werlen has become the Abbot of Einsiedeln as early as 2001, I noticed him only in 2012 due to a publication.

"To Discover Together the Embers Under the Ash"

Here in the CIB, this will many remind of the book of Sr. Joan Chittister published in 1995

"The Fire in These Ashes"

Joan Chittister wrote out of the perspective of having been deeply rooted in religious life for decades. She wrote about religious life here and now, not about the value of her past, nor about a possible shape of her future. She puts forward a simple question: What is the spirituality of present-day religious life in general? What is the work of religious life today? What are the virtues that religious must have today? Which virtues are required today of religious who have a strong character and are committed to trying to bring the world nearer to the Kingdom of God, and another human closer to the truth of life?

Those two are a bit similar...

I then invited Martin Werlen to a meeting of the AIM Advisory Board – and I listened to a Benedictine who is fighting against short-sightedness in order to discover the ember under the ashes today!

His biography can be found on Wikipedia, but I would like to present it here nonetheless:

- He was born in Obergesteln in the Canton Wallis on 28 March 1962 as Stefan Werlen.
- From 1969 to 1977, he attended the primary schools in Obergesteln, Oberwald (Canton Vallese) and Münster (Canton Vallese). After the school leaving examination at the teachers' seminary in Sitten in 1982, he finished his studies of philosophy at the Theological University of Chur. Later, in 1992, he earned a licentiate degree in psychology in

Rome.

- He entered the Benedictine Abbey of Maria Einsiedeln in 1984 and received the religious name Martin. From 1984 to 1988, he studied theology in Einsiedeln and in St. Meinrad's in the United States. He made his profession on 11 July 1987. On 31 October 1987 he was ordained deacon, and on 25 June 1988 he was ordained priest. In the following years, he was novice master, instructor of the fratres, master of ceremonies, and prefect of the boarding school of the Abbey of Einsiedeln, where he is teaching developmental psychology and psychology of religion up to the present day.
- On 10 November 2001, the community of Einsiedeln elected Fr. Martin Werlen the 58th abbot of their Abbey. His motto is: *Ausculata et pervenies* (Listen, and you will arrive).
 - The Abbot of Einsiedeln is elected by the community of the Abbey and then confirmed by the Pope. He is a territorial abbot with the insignia of a bishop, and an ordinary member of the Swiss Bishops Conference.
- On 13 January 2012, while playing badminton, Fr. Martin hit his head against a wall and suffered a brain hemorrhage which affected his speech center. He was treated in the University Hospital of Zurich and in the rehabilitation clinic in Valens, and he had to learn again to read and to write. After two months and 160 hours of therapy, he returned to the Abbey of Einsiedeln. Since May 2012 he has felt healed again.
- On 19 January 2013 he announced that he would like to resign as abbot of Einsiedeln after 12 years. On 4 October 2013, Pope Francis accepted his resignation and thanked him for his "contagious example".

In his 40-page booklet "To Discover Together the Embers Under the Ash", which he published in November 2012 and which I have mentioned already, he presents his suggestions (a <pro> <vocation>) for possible concrete steps in order to "light together a fire, which gives warmth" – especially in the Catholic Church, which he considers to be in a "dramatic" condition.

He felt inspired by the homilies of Pope Benedict XVI, his ideas which Joseph Ratzinger published in a book in 1965, and the saying of Jesus, "I have come to send fire on the earth" (Lk 12:49), and he developed some "pointed" proposals for possible innovations in the Church which he expected "would create quite a stir". He advocates to give more competences (privileges) to the monasteries, to have less traditionalism within the Church, to develop more credibility without claiming to possess the truth, to allow more dialogue, to open up the groups who take the decisions, to clearly respect human rights, to be open to criticism, to open up space for courageous steps, to draw up new rules for appointing bishops, to revise the laws of celibacy, to admit women to the priesthood, to find new regulations of powers for the cardinals, to set up a new advisory board for the Pope – which we have by now...

During his time as abbot, he actively used Twitter, and he continues to do so today...

His publications:

(annotation of the translator: This is just a translation of the titles into English without knowing if a translation really exists)

- *Too Late. A Provocation for the Church, Hope for all. (2018)*

- *Looking at Today. Provocations for a Church Which Accompanies the People. (2014)*
- *Christmas the Whole Year Round. Everyday Experiences Seen from a Benedictine Perspective. (2008)*
- *Conflict Skills. Tensions May Exist. (2005)*
- *Are Monasteries Still Fitting in Our Times? (2004)*
- *Looking for the True Values. Being a Guest in the Silence of a Monastery. (2003)*
- *God's Message was Clear: Do not Take Yourself too Seriously! (2003)*
- *Your Always Grateful Brother Meinrad Eugster. (1998)*

One of the main messages of his penultimate book "*Looking at Today*" is: The Church is for man, and not man for the Church. And this is the point where, according to Martin Werlen, much is wrong, yes, in this respect the Church is chronically sick. In reality, however, the Church would have great potential to inspire people to live their faith with joy or even to rediscover it.

Martin Werlen is a great fan of Pope Francis and, in his last book, there are many references to the messages of the modest philanthropist from Buenos Aires. He notes that there are resistance, reserve, and indifference towards the call of Pope Francis. For example, bishops, abbots, and priests often call people to go through their lives seeing and listening. But many of them do not do that themselves, he accuses them.

Martin Werlen unmask the situation when he comments that, out of all people, especially those act in a deeply non-Catholic way who consider themselves to be most Catholic. With clear words, though without condemning them, he certifies that they are in a shocking way hypocritical – or "ambiguous", as he calls it diplomatically. And this, he says, is the greatest sin. "To do as if, is ridiculous even in the life of faith," he says in his book. It is a simple sentence with an explosive content, as is seen repeatedly when reading the book, because the "stone of lying" destroys a great part of the Church's credibility.

In 2016, Fr. Martin Werlen was preaching the community retreat in my home abbey in Eibingen. As at that time I was still working in Paris, we went part of the train journey together.

In September 2016 the election of the Abbot Primate was due, and I asked him to give in to the wish of an Abbots' Conference and to accept to be a candidate. His answer was: "Only if also a woman could be elected – for example the Moderator of the CIB!"