



Father Benedikt Rüegg OSB

12 January 1927 – 25 November 2021

The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord, alleluia

Father Benedikt wrote this verse of Psalm 33 about his life as a monk and about his work as a priest. And I believe they were not just words of a Jew praying thousands of years ago, but the life of our confrere was a living testimony to this thought day after day, so to speak.

Father Benedikt saw the light of this world on 12 January 1927 in Jona and was baptized in the parish church there with the name Gottfried on 16 January. Together with his parents Josef and Elisabeth Rüegg-Hug and his six siblings, he experienced a blessed childhood and youth on the farm of the agricultural cooperative Jona-Rapperswil. After elementary school, Gottfried went to the St. Josef Institute at Gouglera for a year. He then transferred to the gymnasium at Disentis and spent the last three years before graduating in Schwyz. It may well

be assumed that already as a child and young man, in the family and in the schools, Father Benedikt witnessed this goodness of the Lord that marked him so much throughout his life.

On 2 October 1948, at the age of 21, Gottfried entered the Benedictinum in Fribourg. Just three days later, he was admitted into the novitiate and on 16 October 1949 made his temporary profession. Immediately afterwards the young Frater Benedikt began his studies at the University of Fribourg. He completed this part of his vocation with ordination to the priesthood in Saint Michel on the feast of St. Benedict, 21 March 1953. On Good Shepherd Sunday, the newly ordained Missionary Benedictine celebrated his first Mass in the parish church of Jona and soon afterwards set out for language studies in England. From there he wrote to Prior Notker at the end of 1953, "The other day, an educated, Catholic Englishwoman said to me, 'If England is to become Catholic, we need an English clergy. If there is one Order that corresponds to the English, it is the Benedictine Order. Benedictine priests should go to parishes.... It is the simple, sober and liturgical prayer of the Benedictines that so appeals to the Englishman.'" Quite clearly, these words were inscribed deep in the heart of Father Benedict, because 50 years later, the *Linth-Zeitung* headed the article on the occasion of our confrere's golden jubilee as a priest with the following words, "Preach briefly, succinctly and close to the people." Yes, it was our deceased confrere's desire to live and preach the "goodness of the Lord" in understandable words, so that the "Alleluia" could resound.

In November 1954, after he had been assigned to the mission territory of Peramiho in present-day Tanzania, Father Benedikt boarded ship in Venice for Dar es Salaam. For a full 17 years, until 1971, he served in various parishes in the southwest of the country. Then Father Benedikt along with other confreres made himself available for the new foundation in Kenya. The Kerio Valley in west-central Kenya became his home until 1999. An especially close companion now was Father Paul Steinmann (d. 2008), with whom he had already shared the journey in the novitiate and in studies. A letter of Father Peter Hildebrand Meienberg reports about the beginnings as follows: "In November 1971, the first two volunteers, Fr. Benedikt Rüegg and Fr. Paul Steinmann, set out and on the foggy, cold high plateau began studying Kalenjin, understood only by the people in the valley and essential for the mission." But what was or what is this Kerio Valley? An excerpt from a travel report gives us the following insight or outlook: "After a 25-mile drive over the high plateau, this land opened up in all its glory: first the slender cedars that lined the road; then five miles of virgin forest at an altitude of

2500 m, followed by a belt of willows and meadows thick with round huts, and finally the view into the Promised Land, the Kerio Valley, about ten miles wide and a hundred miles long, on whose steep slopes the Marakwet people settled about 90 years ago and here in a confined space the mountain farmers eke out a meager life." In addition to the geographical and geological features, it may also be interesting to know who these Marakwet are with whom Father Benedict shared 28 years of his life and gave a touching witness to the "goodness of the Lord." The writer of the newsletter also gives information about them: "We share long legs with the Marakwet. Here you can feel that these people, who cultivate their meager fields on the steep slopes and now also on the valley floor, still have the former cattle herder's life with its wandering in their blood. They are incredible walkers right up till old age who walk uphill and downhill many miles a day loaded with heavy loads, apparently effortlessly. What amazes us most is their constant smile, even when the sweat is pouring off forehead and body...They are actually cliff dwellers, people living in cliffs." Into this inhospitable region and tribal culture, Father Benedict proclaimed the Gospel of Christ and our Church, built schools and health centers, and in his way was a concrete witness of the Lord's "goodness on earth" in order to be able to sing the Easter Alleluia with them. That there were also tensions and struggles at the same time Abbot Primate Emeritus Notker Wolf of St. Ottilien shared in his letter of condolence to us confreres: "I had met him and came to know him for the first time in the Kerio Valley during my first overseas trip as archabbot. He had quite original ideas about inculturation. We talked a lot, argued and laughed together. It was heartening, even when I met him later. He was a Benedictine missionary body and soul."

But for all the spirit of adventure and enterprise that Father Benedict carried and cherished, he was also a monk. This became evident when Abbot Marian proposed him to be the priest for the shrine at Maria Bildstein in 2001, contrary to his plans to return to Kenya. He agreed, first for a time, then he committed himself to it and showed everyone, confreres and the faithful, that it is possible to be a Benedictine missionary with passion anywhere. It was touching for me as a young monk to see how he carried out this service of love naturally and at the same time with deep faith. He was visibly happy in the faith, in being a monk and with people. This was a triad that characterized his life not only in the days as a priest serving pilgrims, but with us here. And this triad lasted until his last breath. Not only were the ten years as the priest for the pilgrims at Maria Bildstein marked by being "open-minded, pious and beloved," as the *Südostschweiz* headlined it once, but also the ten years of aging and declining strength until his death this past Thursday morning. It may be said openly that Father Benedict was one of the most beloved confreres in our community. Yes, he was "open-minded, pious and beloved" in the days of old age and illness. On the feast of St. Otmar nine days before his death, he said, already attuned to his approaching death, "Abbot Emmanuel, I would simply like to be with the people." Thus he sat contentedly with us in the Gallus Hall and enjoyed the fellowship. And in the end, he also died just as he lived. Thus the evening before his death, he took part in the Divine Office, watched the daily news, and said in the room to Father Mattias who accompanied him during the night, "I am not sure I am going to survive this night." After feeling unwell for a short time, he died unexpectedly and quickly a quarter of an hour before we monks opened the day with Vigils. Yes, "The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord, alleluia."

29 November 2021

Abbot Emmanuel Rutz osb