

# **Father Hildebrand (Peter) Meienberg OSB**

27 November 1929 – 3 December 2021

*It is perhaps no coincidence that our confrere, Father Hildebrand Peter Meienberg OSB died on the memorial of the great Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier. Immediately after the Community Mass, he breathed his last on earth and entered into eternity, to which he was called by God through Christian baptism and his lived faith.*

*The following lines were written by Father Peter Hildebrand himself in 2005 and are only an excerpt from the original eight pages.*

## **Formative Roots**

I was born on 27 November 1929 in St. Gallen-St. Fiden as the second of six children and baptized on the following Sunday in the Gallus chapel of the monastery with the name Peter Marcus Maria. My father Alois, an aesthete and artistically gifted, chose (probably out of idealism) a rather prosaic profession which was little suited to his inclinations, namely that of an authorized officer and auditor at today's Raiffeisenbank. That meant that he was doing auditing every other week in the month. Thus he was absent from the family for half of his life and so our very energetic mother Maria, née Geiges, cared for us totally and influenced us children.

I completed six years of elementary school in the east of the city, and two years of secondary school in the Flade. Even then, in the former rooms of the monastery, the Benedictine way of life impressed me and at age fourteen I already believed I was called to be a priest and missionary. At the end of the second year of secondary school my parents permitted me to enter the monastery school at Einsiedeln in 1944. I found this transition quite hard. Even if the Benedictine culture and some very competent teachers made a deep impression, it was clear to me that I was not called to a life of stability in one and the same monastery. To clarify my vocation, my parents gave me a free year in France. Back again in Switzerland, I knew that my path was that of a Benedictine missionary.

## **Exciting First Years**

In the autumn of 1951 I entered the Benedictinum in Fribourg, and as the only novice, I underwent the novitiate that was abounding in crises in the care of Father Valerian. I considered the three-week military reserve exercises, from which I expressly did not allow myself to be dispensed, as time off. After simple profession in October 1952 began a very happy, although rigorous time at the university, where I graduated in 1956 with a licentiate and wanted to do a doctorate in medieval church history. I was frustrated by Abbot Bishop Eberhard Spiess of Peramiho who rejected such studies and wanted me to study empirical sociology. In 1958 I enrolled at Fordham University in New York City, USA for sociology. After a little more than a year, I had my Master of Arts in the subject and transferred to Columbia University where I took courses in social anthropology and social psychology. In the fall of 1960 I was invited for further studies at Oxford and enrolled there when a telegram from Abbot Bishop Eberhard ordered me to Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada, for a year to study cooperatives and credit unions—this was not to my liking.

## **Too Young and yet Successful**

In 1961 I began to move around the African continent. I made my first attempts in Songea with Fr. Vitus Maier whose paternalistic-colonial mentality I did not like at all. So I was called back to Peramiho and was commissioned by the Bishops' Conference to write a modern civics text for the country's secondary schools, which I (brazenly) accepted straight away. This was completely against the opinion of the confreres, who did not expect a newcomer like me to carry out this task. The manuscript was completed in four months. After changes and adaptations to the new political situation of the country, it was declared a compulsory textbook by the National Department of

Education and published by Oxford University Press in 1966. With the title *Tanzanian Citizen—A Civics Textbook*, it received a very good review in the newspapers, but only three weeks after publication it was at first forbidden to be used and later banned from school libraries. Thirteen years later, without my knowledge, it was reissued by the government itself.

In the meantime at Peramiho I had taken over the Social Department. It was not a good time because my views on development work and understanding of mission were not those of my confreres, who called me "soci", sometimes scornfully, sometimes jokingly. Many semi-literate Africans considered me a spy and a traitor who had been rebuked by Nyerere with the banning of the book. Not least despite the tensions in the background, I went to the newly established Girls Secondary School Peramiho and successfully taught religion, Holy Scripture, history and now and then civics and thus led the first candidates to receive their diploma.

### **Pleasant Work with Hurdles**

At the beginning of the 1970s came a new beginning in Kenya. In 1972, I left Peramiho and, together with other confreres in the Kerio Valley, began evangelizing the profoundly isolated and tradition-bound Marakwet. This time, too, was not without tension. I had hoped that on this occasion we would adopt modern methods of missionary work, but this was not possible under the leadership of Father Benedikt Rüegg as the station superior. As a "thorn in the flesh" of the confreres, it was arranged that I be transferred to Eldoret in January 1973 to take over the large parish of Majengo. In this parish I was in my element and worked there for four very happy years. As a consultor to the bishop I made the proposal to draft a new prayer book; this was immediately accepted. A first edition came out in 1974, but as a national prayer book and hymnal. In the context of the 43<sup>rd</sup> International World Eucharistic Congress in Nairobi in 1985, I worked with innovative contributors to produce an expanded and improved new edition of the national prayer and hymn book *Tumshangilie Bwana*. In the meantime, this has appeared in several editions with over 400,000 copies.

In the 1980s and 1990s I worked at building up and consolidating the city monastery in Nairobi and in Tigoni. This period also had its tensions. I found the common life with the African confreres, who under Prior Magnus enjoyed all possible freedom, to be extremely wearing. During a visitation of our monastery by Abbot Anselm in 1999, I was told that my African confreres would not be unhappy if I left the monastery; this was supported by the visitor and the archabbot suggested I find myself a position as chaplain to sisters. However, this was not my style and in the spring of 2000 I moved into a private residence in Nairobi South B that belonged to the Faraja Society I had founded in 1999.

### **Genocide in Rwanda**

The big turning point, a real key experience, came with the genocide in Rwanda, where, since April 6, 1994, 800,000 people were massacred in 100 days, and the Hutu military carried off two million people, mainly women and children, from their land to Goma in Zaire. According to the BBC, thousands of people were dying of cholera and typhus. A vision at night told me, "Come to us in Goma!" and two days later I was actually on the spot with a World Food Programme transport plane. In one of the seven or so camps, called Kivumba, where 300,000 people languished, I coordinated my service with the Irish relief organization GOAL, going from hut to hut, from tent to tent to console dying people, to anoint them, to pray with them and baptize children. The following Sunday I celebrated Holy Mass in Kiswahili. Meanwhile, the noisy Caterpillars scooped up the piled up dead and deposited them in mass graves. Since in the meantime the Irish had run out of medicine, I was asked to fly to Switzerland as quickly as possible to raise money. A day later I was in Zürich, had the photos developed, wrote a long report on the experience, published it in various newspapers and magazines, spoke on the radio, and collected more than 70,000 francs in ten days. With this I bought the necessary medicines from a central office, which were flown to Goma via Geneva, and flew back to Goma myself via Kigali via the US airbase in Frankfurt with

a Starlifter, again free of charge. Once there, Archabbot Notker instructed me to go from Goma to track down the confreres of Gihindamuyaga in Bukavu and find out what they needed in exile, which I succeeded in doing a day later. After about three weeks, the time granted to me by the prior had expired and I returned, very reluctantly of course, to Nairobi, again with a transport of the US Air Force via Mombassa. A week later in the cathedral I preached in English and Swahili from morning till evening about my experience in Goma. In this way, it soon became known that a Benedictine of Tigoni was sympathetic to Rwandan refugees in the big city, so that shortly thereafter a run of such people headed for the monastery.

*At this point, Father Peter Hildebrand's account of his life is supplemented with words from his nephew, Christoph.*

### **Faraja—More than a Consolation**

From then on, Father Peter Hildebrand took care of the refugees and Kenyans in need of help in the slums of Nairobi. At the age of 70, when we have been taking it easy for a long time, he went full throttle again and founded the Faraja Society a few years later, which later became the Faraja Foundation. *Faraja* is a Swahili word and can be translated as comfort and encouragement. He was actively supported in the slums of Nairobi by the German doctors who maintained an outpatient clinic there. He was supported financially by his many patrons, as well as his family in Switzerland and abroad.

As a penniless fugitive in the slums of Nairobi, it is natural to be picked up by the police and end up in jail. Thus, Father Hildebrand's emergency aid in the slums developed more and more into help and support for the prisoners in the Nairobi prisons. The Langata women's prison in particular became a focus of his work. The first thing that caught his eye was the inhumane infrastructure, which he improved: He had simple kitchens built so that the prisoners would not continue to risk smoke poisoning while cooking with wood; he had windows installed in the large previously windowless cells, where 50 or more women slept on the floor; he later organized beds. In addition, there were further training opportunities for the inmates, the construction of a sports field, a nursery, since small children up to four years of age are in pre-trial detention together with their mothers; this can also last several years.

Faraja continued to develop: from the construction of a humane infrastructure to the training of guards where they learn how to deal with the prisoners in a humane way. Training in prison and counseling of prisoners who, with this knowledge, can also counsel their fellow prisoners accordingly. Support when they are discharged and start-up help to set up their own business when they are released. Today, the care of young adults takes up a large part of the time and resources. They are accompanied by a scholarship from Faraja even after leaving prison. Their family or village community is prepared beforehand on how they can best support and integrate the person so that he/she gets a chance not to relapse again.

Today Faraja is a professional and excellent organization, universally recognized and also by the state. It has become an indispensable partner for the prison authorities in its work for the improvement of the situation of the prisoners and also of the guards.

Father Peter Hildebrand could not tackle all these tasks alone: He was supported in Nairobi above all by the young Swiss Fabian Waldmeier. In this difficult environment with great energy, he put his many skills into building up a professionally managed organization, which made possible the framework for Father Hildebrand's work in the first place. Since Fabian Waldmeier's return, this organization has been led by the foundation's president, David Bett, and executive director, Jane Kuria.

In Switzerland, a benefactors' association was founded early on to provide financial support for the many projects. Here Urs Böhlen played a leading role and through his great personal commitment made it possible for the second important project, an apprentice farm south of

Nairobi, to become a reality today. Father Peter had originally bought land south of Nairobi to provide refugees with a piece of land. However, it soon became clear that a much greater impact would be made with training and courses. For some years now, the agricultural apprenticeship training has been recognized by the state, and the sponsorship has been expanded by local and international companies and organizations.

Thus, both of Father Peter Hildebrand's major projects have passed into local hands. This laid the foundation for the continuation of the work he had begun with incredible dedication.

### **Conclusion**

Father Peter Hildebrand concludes his 2005 notes with the words: "As someone who looks to the future with hope, I calculate that I will be active for another ten years or so, which would be the average age of my father (79) and my mother (91)." Here he miscalculated. The heavenly Father granted him 92 years and six days, even if in the end the active part was more and more at the mercy of the dictates of debilitating forces.

St. Otmarsberg Abbey

Uznach

8 December 2021