

Johann Fürst was born on 18 February 1941 in Kalladorf (Archdiocese of Vienna). He attended elementary school in Kalladorf, middle school in Wullersdorf, high school in Hollabrunn and Strebersdorf, and finally the Stiftsgymnasium in Melk. He graduated in 1960 and, on 14 August of that same year, joined Melk Abbey as Brother Leo. He took his temporary vows on 15 August 1961, and his solemn vows three years later, on 4 October 1964. After studying theology at the University of Salzburg, he was ordained a priest on 10 July 1966 by the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Dr. Opilio Rossi.

From that moment, Fr. Leo dedicated himself entirely to pastoral work, even though he spent two more years studying German and Latin education at the University of Vienna. From 1966 to 1972, Fr. Leo served as chaplain, first in Traiskirchen, then in Gainfarn, and then again in Traiskirchen. From 1972 to 1984, he was pastor in Untersiebenbrunn, and from then until his retirement in October 2017, he served as pastor in Melk. In addition, Fr. Leo worked as a religion teacher, chaplain for the fire department, military, and Red Cross, as well as a hospital chaplain and pastoral caregiver in the Melk nursing home. He spent his retirement in the Abbey.

Fr. Leo's deteriorating health led to several stays in the Melk State Hospital, the Melk nursing home, and a hospice, where he was consistently cared for attentively and lovingly. A heartfelt thanks is extended for this care. After a long illness, Fr. Leo passed away peacefully on the night of 26 June to 27 June in the Melk State Hospital.

On 13 October, on the feast day of St. Coloman, Fr. Leo wrote a will, offering a deep insight into his life. Far more than merely a document for managing his estate, it is a testament to a spiritual life and is addressed to all the people Fr. Leo encountered. The text reads: "When, where, and how I die, I want to accept death as gratitude for my life. Above all, I thank God for this life, which was never easy for me but always full of movement and surprises. Encountering Him in word and sacrament was a daily gift. I never intended to be a convenient contemporary for myself or the people around me; I thank everyone, my Abbot, my brothers, and the believers for whom I was pastor, for tolerating me as I am. If I have offended anyone, I ask for forgiveness."

Visibly weakened and marked by illness, Fr. Leo said on Holy Saturday of this year, upon realizing that Easter was fast approaching, that he would try to celebrate the holiday solemnly. The dignified celebration of worship, especially the Holy Mass, and the appropriate arrangement of the church space were always of great importance to Fr. Leo. This found expression in major renovation projects of Melk Parish Church, in which he also personally participated in the manual labor.

When Fr. Leo presided over Holy Mass, he always kept his remarks brief; there was never a word too many, yet he never appeared rushed. In his sermons, his freely spoken words of interpretation left a lasting impression. The fluidity and clarity were always a sign that the sermon was well-prepared, even though it was never written down. Fr. Leo could never rely on prepared material; each time, he approached the reading texts afresh to provide his interpretation.

Fr. Leo often reflected on how liturgical celebrations could be designed to align with ecclesiastical guidelines while also fitting each specific situation. It was his initiative that during the Christmas and Easter seasons, all the prescribed readings were read in the Abbey Church on Sundays: two readings, the psalm, and the gospel. Until the end, he continued to offer suggestions, urging discussions on them. Perhaps he was sometimes a little too persistent and did not always recognize when a compromise might have been better than adhering strictly to a carefully considered solution with its own unique logic. As he wrote, he never intended to be a convenient contemporary. However, it was never about personal vanity for him; ultimately, he simply wished, as he wrote on his ordination card – once again with the utmost brevity – to be a “Servant of Your Joy.”

Throughout his life, Fr. Leo was a meticulous thinker, with a deep love for even the most inconspicuous detail. The often mysterious traces of local history fascinated him and sparked his detective instincts. In the parish newsletter “Die Brücke” (“The Bridge”), there was a dedicated column for this interest, “Back Then ... Remembrance of the Past.” In his later years, Fr. Leo increasingly devoted himself to solving Sudoku puzzles and other riddles, which was likely more than mere pastimes. It kept his investigative mind sharp and reflected his effort to delve ever deeper into the mysteries of words and numbers.

Fr. Leo, from whom one could learn the dignity of the spoken word, yet who himself never spoke a word too many, gradually returned the gift of speech to God in his final weeks. Sentences grew shorter, sometimes only a few words – mostly kind and grateful – and some days he remained silent altogether. The “Hail Mary” became the last sure bridge between spoken language and his full retreat into a world where language was no longer necessary. When the prayer was started near him, he would join in as best he could. The communal prayer would always end with the words: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.” Let us pray for Fr. Leo and hope that he, too, will be a good intercessor for us all.