Death Chronicle of Maria Laach

Brother Radbod Commandeur

Died on 14 December 1955

For our good Brother Radbod, the Advent of the year 1955 became the true coming of the Lord, for whom he waited longingly in his severe suffering. Our fellow brother was a tall, imposing man, truly an image of manly strength, and everyone who saw him had to think that a great age would be granted to him. And yet it turned out otherwise. In August of 1954 the pains that he had already felt in his left arm for years increased. An extended examination at the hospital in Mayen during Passiontide and Eastertide of 1955 finally revealed a malignant growth in the bone and a tumor in the lung. Since treatment no longer promised any success, he returned to us at his own wish in mid-April. At first he could still be up for a few hours during the day, but soon he had to keep to his bed permanently, since his spine and legs were also affected. He suffered great pains, which were almost beyond his strength to bear, although every available means was used to relieve them. On 15 October his condition was so critical that he received the holy anointing (Extreme Unction), but he recovered once more. On 13 December, around midday, he was suddenly seized by such shortness of breath that we expected his end. The following day the Most Reverend Father Abbot stayed with the dying brother during the midday meal, and after the meal the brethren also gathered around him. They sang the Suscipe, which Br. Radbod was still able to sing along with audibly. It was 1:30 p.m. when his soul left its earthly shell.

Br. Radbod, Theodor Commandeur, was born on 13 April 1890 in Hoorn in the Netherlands, in the province of Holland, the son of the spouses Krijn Commandeur and Maria, née Byman. Soon after leaving school, Theodor came to Düsseldorf in 1906 and worked there first at the silk piece-dyeing firm Laag & Co.; after three years, in 1909, he took a job as a tinsmith at the tinware factory Otto Reiche. In Düsseldorf his interest in art awakened, and he attended evening courses in order to penetrate the world of beauty. On 1 November 1911, however, he left his workplace to ask for admission to our community. He received the habit on 16 June 1912 and began his novitiate on 4 August 1913. The novitiate then had to be extended because of the wartime conditions, especially since in 1916 he had been declared liable for Landsturm service by the Dutch army. He was in fact still called up for military service in Holland on 25 June 1918; but his brethren at the Dutch abbey of Oosterhout claimed him, so that he was officially released from service and, from August 1918, was able to spend a few weeks of monastic life in Oosterhout. On 19 September 1918 he returned to us, and after the end of the war, on 15 December, he first made his temporary vows, and on the feast of the Epiphany in 1922 his perpetual vows.

At first, Br. Radbod was employed with us mainly in the kitchen and also helped out in the sacristy. In 1919, however, Father Abbot Ildefons took him into the art workshops. His master was Br. Reinhold Teutenberg. Soon he gave proof of his talent in the form of two beautiful bas-reliefs, which still adorn the Statio wing of the cloister today. His first larger work, created in 1924, was the baptismal font for the west apse of our church, which after the war went as a gift from our abbey to our destroyed neighboring town of Mayen. In the same year it was followed by the beautiful monument in our monastery cemetery.

The year 1925 brought the budding artist his first direct contact with the world of form and spirit of early and late Byzantine art, through an art journey to Venice and Ravenna, on which the Most Reverend Father Abbot Ildefons sent him and Br. Notker with a view to future tasks. The influence of the Ravenna impressions was shown by the choir screens and ambos of our church, which could be set up in 1926.

The conclusion of these years of preparation and study was a second, this time longer journey to Italy, which Br. Radbod was permitted to make in 1927, again together with Br. Notker, and which gave him essential impressions and inspiration, above all in Rome. His personal style actually dates from this journey, a style which he gained in dependence on late antique and Byzantine models, yet out of his own sense of form. And he brought back something else of importance, namely the decisive and bold extension of his artistic interests to mosaic, an art form he had previously used only in ornamental additions. Soon after his return he was offered a twofold occasion to try this art form on a larger scale: first in the design of a war memorial niche for the Herz-Jesu-Kirche (Church of the Sacred Heart) in Koblenz, then in the far larger design of the apse mosaics and sanctuary of the Christkönigkirche (Church of Christ the King) in Saarbrücken. Both works belong to the year 1928. A further step in the same direction were the two large wall paintings for our refectory, the depiction of the Holy Meal on the end wall (1933) and that of the Good Shepherd on the opposite wall (1934). He returned to mosaic for the figures on the inside of our Cross Altar (1936); and he created the picture of St. Michael in our church entirely in this technique (1938). In this way he was equipped for his two most important commissions away from Laach: the furnishing of the church of the Dormition in Jerusalem and that of St. Anselm in Rome.

In the meantime he did not neglect sculpture. In 1928, in collaboration with Br. Tutilo, an Easter candlestick was made, as well as the Lion Fountain in the forecourt of our church; in 1930 a wooden statue of Boniface for the Trier seminary; in 1932 the severely archaic group of the Annunciation on the outer wall of the Academy wing. In 1932 he also began the laborious work, which lasted for years, on the large baptismal font, rich in figures, for St. Mary's in Mülheim/Ruhr, which was completed in 1934 and acclaimed as his most mature sculptural work, and which then unfortunately was to fall victim to the destructive force of the bombing war.

In the field of sculpture, however, he had meanwhile opened up yet another area. His earlier hands-on familiarity with metal led him to experiments in repoussé technique. In 1929 he designed the precious shrine of St. Hildegard for the parish church in Eibingen and himself made eight figures of saints in repoussé work for it. For our abbey church, in 1930, with his own hand and with the help of Br. Eligius and others, he created the magnificent golden cover of the festal Gospel book. On Holy Saturday 1932 he delighted the community with the radiant triumphal cross for the high altar, which later adorned one of the side altars. He also made designs for actual goldsmith work, for example for various chalices and pectoral crosses.

Also worth mentioning is the Gospel book binding which he made for the Abbey of St. Hildegard. His truly great achievements in this field, however, began with the retables for two of our side altars: the Cross Altar, which was dedicated to its purpose at Pentecost 1936 in a memorable and solemn celebration, and the Sacred Heart Altar with the impressive image of the crucified Lord, which he completed in 1937. And then came that work which was to become the dearest to him, and whose small model he wished to have constantly before his eyes during the months of his final suffering: the wonderful, almost life-size figure of the Mother of God in her Dormition for the crypt of the Church on Zion. Br. Simeon carved it in wood

according to his design, and Br. Radbod himself clothed it in hammered, fire-gilded silver, while the noble face and the folded hands were made in ivory. The whole figure rested on a raised bier, which was draped with a colorful carpet made of mosaic. The whole was a sight of awe-inspiring grandeur. A similar combined design was then used by Br. Radbod once more, in a simpler form, for the figure of St. Benedict enthroned for our church.

The great commission for Zion occupied him for a long time. He carried out the sculptural and in part also the mosaic work here in Laach in his small and cramped workshop. These works then had to be transported to their destination and installed there. In this way Br. Radbod came to the Holy Land three times: the first time from November 1935 to January 1936 for the planning of the whole; then for the first seven months of 1938 for the furnishing of the crypt; and finally, shortly before the outbreak of the war in August 1939, for the execution of the decoration of the church itself. This last stay was then, as a result of the political and wartime turmoil, to extend to a full 8 years. It may be mentioned that his route led him through Italy each time; the first journey also took him to Egypt, the second to Asia Minor and Constantinople.

After eventful experiences, of which the brutal plundering and destruction of the Crypt of the Mother of God affected him particularly deeply, Br. Radbod returned to Laach on 5 July 1947. Laach, in the meantime, had likewise been affected by the war and its consequences. The first thing he was given to do here was the making of a grave slab for the tomb of the late Father Abbot Ildefons. From the remains of his mosaic tesserae and from marble pieces laboriously chipped into shape, he assembled with his own hand a austerely beautiful image of the Good Shepherd for it. But in his zest for life and his artistic élan he seemed somehow paralyzed. The time was also not yet suited to great commissions. Looking back, we recognize that our fellow brother's health was probably already affected at that time. He occupied himself quietly with painting and drawing and in this way created a series of large watercolors, in which he depicted mysteries of salvation history and of the liturgical year in a mystical, icon-like style. The sheets created in this way adorn our Brothers' Room today. From this state of artistic fallow, endured willy-nilly, a new and beautiful commission called him in the autumn of 1951 to his last creative achievement. Br. Radbod was, as already mentioned, to make designs on the spot for the layout of the church interior of St. Anselm in Rome. So he traveled there in November. The work, which proved more difficult and extensive than had been thought at first, took up almost two years. What emerged from the combined efforts of the architect and our Br. Radbod was a simple but festively beautiful place of worship, which by general consensus is to be counted among the most successful recent church interiors of the Holy City, and which is still admired by many visitors. The Most Reverend Abbot Primate, as the client, was not sparing in expressing his satisfaction and praise. He had also proved himself throughout the work to be an understanding patron, and so had eased the artist's labor.

Thus a rich life's work was granted to our Br. Radbod; his monastic vocation, which at first led him into narrowness and seclusion, became for him the gateway to unimagined breadth: "Eduxit me in latitudinem" ("He brought me forth into a broad place"), he could say with the words of the Psalm. It was the merit of the Most Reverend Father Abbot Ildefons to have recognized his gift for great artistic tasks and to have steered it onto the right path. Through him Br. Radbod received the pointer to the formal language and wealth of content of late antique Christian art, and the possibility of making it his own. Abbot Ildefons gave or arranged for him the commissions, which on Br. Radbod's own side were met by an unusual versatility and a mind made for wide dimensions. Br. Radbod had the courage to lay his hand

to great things, both in conception and in execution. He held within himself, and built up there, an inner world that reached as much into depth as into breadth, and that was full of light and splendor and majesty. Its color symbol was the triad he preferred of light green, pearl gray and delicate pink, and we also see its reflection in the materials he chose by preference: gold, ivory and colored stone.

Br. Radbod, however, was by no means a powerful, forceful nature. On the contrary, he had an almost mimosa-like, sensitive constitution of soul, which one would hardly have suspected in this imposing man. He was not soft or dreamy, but certainly sensitive; not loud and massive, but quiet and reflective. This nature of his soul also made itself felt in his works of art, less in his fully sculpted figures, but all the more in his mosaics and paintings. Its hallmark was the elongation of his painted figures, their slender faces, a touch of over-refinement in their bearing and expression. It was probably also one reason for his growing inclination toward painting in general, in which, as it appears, he wanted to escape the barriers and laws of statics and corporeality. But one may well say: wherever he yielded to this tendency, he somewhat weakened his work and denied it the final monumental greatness. Here lay the limit of his artistry, which we cannot overlook in the work as a whole. But what was given to him, and what he passed on to our monastic family and to many people in this work of his, carried a glimmer of early Christian joy of faith and certainty of transfiguration into our time, and that was more than "liturgical functional art for the monastery's household needs" and more than talented imitation of style. Not everything that Br. Radbod created, but certainly much of it will remain and bear witness to a genuine mission.

Br. Radbod was a man of above-average gifts and a born artist. With ease he acquired the manifold knowledge and skills which he needed for his particular artistic expression, and he handled them with instinctive assurance. For he was able to incorporate and fit them into an inner vision already present. He was no imitator or merely skilled technician. His spirit was turned toward the old formal language because it was akin to it. And so he was able to express himself in it without losing what was his own.

His monastic life was also genuine. To it he owed his deepest experiences and his broad development. There was never in him a doubt about his monastic vocation, nor any worldly ambition, nor a search for artistic freedom. Although his character and his pronounced spirituality did not actually allow him to become a man of community, he fitted into the life of the family with the greatest naturalness. He was deeply humble and in no way wanted a special position. Throughout his life he took part as one of the most zealous and faithful in the common exercises and labors of the brethren and was ready for any service that need required. He himself, however, called on the help of others as seldom as possible. Only in the artistic field did he make an exception in this respect, and this too appears to us again as a sign of his selflessness: very often, namely, he had parts of his combined designs carried out by skilled brethren, because he did not trust himself to have the necessary skill. And so there came to be fraternal, hand-in-hand work, true communal works under his direction. For his own person, however, he was, until his illness, entirely undemanding, and this was precisely the hardest sacrifice for him in his months of suffering: to be dependent on the assistance of his brethren for every movement. He was truly content with the least, according to the ideal of humility of the Holy Rule. The only privilege he asked for himself was the Sunday visit to the library, where he spent an hour with books on art history, cultural history, or hagiography. He was happiest when alone in his small studio, and he carried out all the work himself, even the roughest. In dealings with others he was reserved, but of modest courtesy. Any ingratiating familiarity he rejected. The spiritual world that he carried within himself gave him a natural dignity, which he knew

how to preserve. What in him was to be purified and improved was taken care of by the divine Sculptor's own hand with the hammer blows of suffering.

Already in Rome Br. Radbod was plagued by pains in his left shoulder. After his return they became so obstructive that he could only with difficulty wield hammer and chisel. Nevertheless he still devoted himself to one more work, which was to remain his last and unfinished: a fountain with the sign of the cross, to be furnished with mosaic decoration, which was to adorn the center of our cloister. God's will itself nailed him to the cross over this work and, in inescapable pains and sufferings, purified his soul for the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, whose splendor he had been called to capture with the means of earthly art and to depict in faith and hope. May Christ the Lord and his most holy Mother, taken up into heaven, whom he was permitted to glorify here, have received him into the community of those who behold and, beholding, are blessed.

R.I.P.