

DOROTHEA AND  
NICHOLAS OF FLÜE  
THEIR LIFE AND WORK

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## THE JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE

Nicholas of Flüe, born 21<sup>st</sup> March 1417, came from a well-to-do Obwalden farming family who owned a cattle farm above the village of Sachseln. Numerous testimonies by contemporaries provide a reliable picture of the personality of the farmer and later hermit.

After his marriage to the considerably younger Dorothea Wyss from the opposite shore of Lake Sarnen, a new house is built for the young family close to that of his parents. Over the course of twenty years, ten children are born. Nicholas lives through the everyday joys and toils of a farmer. As a councillor, he becomes familiar with the art as well as the perils of politics. In the process, he gains the confidence of his community. Over an extended period of time, he acts on their behalf in a court case against the local priest. On military expeditions, he contributes to keeping the troops disciplined. He is aware of the conflicting influences in the league caused by the prosperity after the Burgundian Wars and the wheelings and dealings by unscrupulous speculators.

On 16<sup>th</sup> October 1467 – Nicholas is 50 years old – he leaves his wife and children. The homestead is well looked after, the eldest sons are easily capable of taking over the farm, economically the family is well-provided for. All the same, saying farewell must have been hard. Yet, after a long struggle, the couple is convinced that “it is God’s wish”. Nicholas wants to spend the last days of his life on the pilgrim ways of Europe, completely in communion with God.

It is not to be. A few days after his departure, just outside Liestal, he sees – is it a vision? – the little town in flames. Worried, he approaches a farm. The farmer prevails on him to talk. Soon the conversation turns to the intended pilgrimage. Now Nicholas becomes more uneasy. The first person he has talked to since leaving home brusquely advises him to go back: He is not to be a burden to strangers in foreign countries, the confederates are not very popular any

way. Confused, Nicholas lies down to sleep under a hedge. During the night, he feels as if his innards are being cut out of his body.

Led by a higher hand, he returns home. A few weeks later, he finds his peace in the Ranft, in the narrow valley of the Melchaa. He has come to feel certain that this is the place where he is meant to stay.

Soon the rumour spreads that the hermit is not eating anything. Government and church authorities investigate. Prying folk come and want to see the “living saint”. Nicholas himself answers the probing questions about whether he is really not eating with a mere “God knows”. Finally his contemporaries are convinced: The “fasting miracle” is reality. The humanistically educated abbot Johannes Trithemius writes in 1511:

“I know and I do not doubt, all of posterity will be amazed, some will say that we are lying, others that we are ignorant. But we are neither untruthful in this matter nor ignorant of the truth if we take this to be a historical fact.”

Now his fellow countrymen build a hermitage and a chapel for Brother Klaus. A stream of visitors descends to him in the Ranft. People in distress come looking for comfort and advice. Confederate councillors consult him, church authorities seek his mediation.

In December 1481, when the conflict between the town and the rural communities in the league dangerously comes to a head, he negotiates a peace agreement workable throughout generations.

On 21<sup>st</sup> March 1487, his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, he dies after a long and painful struggle. His body is buried in the parish church at Sachseln.

*Sources, critical edition:*

*Robert Durrer: Bruder Klaus. Die ältesten Quellen über den seligen Nikolaus von Flüe, sein Leben und seinen Einfluss, Band I und II, Sarnen 1981*

Then Peter said, Lord, we have left all, and followed thee.

And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting.

*St. Luke 18, 28-30*

## THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

Brother Klaus can neither read nor write. His spiritual world is formed by what his priestly companions teach him, by the devout spiritual exercises known in his time, and by apparitions and signs that in decisive moments point his inner way.

From the earliest moment, he is driven by an extraordinary religious unrest. He searches for the "one and only being". He fasts and is able to sink deeply into prayer. He carefully chooses the priests he confides in and lets himself be guided by them. Heimo Amgrund teaches him "the contemplation of Christ's suffering": In the rhythm of the canonical hours, he also suffers what Christ suffered on his way to the Cross. Day after day, he inwardly follows the stations of Christ's Passion:

Vespers (6 p.m.): Holy Communion

Compline (10 p.m.): Mount of Olives

Matins (midnight): Derision of Kaiphias

Prime (6 a.m.):

Handing over to Pilate and Herod

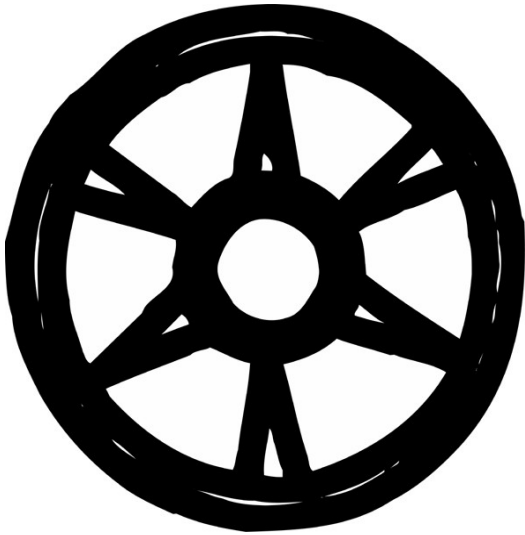
Tierce (9 a.m.):

Flagellation

and Crowning with Thorns

Sext (noon): Crucifixion

Nones (3 p.m.): Death



### THE MEDITATION SYMBOL

His “book” that helps him meditate is a simple line drawing. With its coarse lines, it aims to represent the perfection of God. Threefold the lines radiate from the One and Only, threefold they lead back into the centre. An unknown contemporary reports having visited Brother Klaus in the Ranft and how he explained the symbol to him:

“Do you see this figure? This is what the Divine Being is like. The centre is the undivided Godhead in which all the saints rejoice. The three points leading to the inner circle are the three persons; they radiate from the one and only Divine Being and have encompassed the heavens and the whole world, these are in their power. And as they radiate from the Divine Power, thus they lead back into it and are indivisible in eternal might.”

Looking at the line drawing, faith may become lost in unfathomable questions: How can God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be the One and Only? How can he radiate from himself without becoming diffuse – and what comes back into him? What makes the Perfect One even more perfect?

O my Lord and my Master,  
take everything from me  
that bars me from you!

O my Lord and my Master,  
give me everything  
that helps me reach you!

O my Lord and my Master,  
take me away from myself  
and make me your very own!

*Prayer by Brother Klaus*

## THE VISIONS

Brother Klaus is also guided by visions. Around the year 1501, Heinrich Wölflin writes about them. Among other things, he describes the following occurrence:

“When the time had come to look to the cattle and put them out to pasture, he sat down on the ground and, in his own way, began to pray from the bottom of his heart and to devote himself to celestial contemplation. Suddenly he saw a white lily with a marvellous scent growing out of his own mouth until it reached the sky. When, soon afterwards, the cattle (the yield from which supported his whole family) passed by and he lowered his eyes for a while and looked at a particularly fine horse, he saw how the lily from his mouth bent down over that horse and was eaten by the animal in passing.”

*From: Heinrich Wölflin,  
Life of the Blessed, around 1501*

A tension fundamental to human life becomes manifest: The desire for the celestial (the lily) is consumed by the temporary-material wants. The horse that awakens pride of possession and pleasure, eats the flower growing heavenwards.

Brother Klaus' visions frequently concern this conflict: Man is a stranger in this world to which he is yet tied by so much. His eternal home is in the hereafter. The goal of his real desire is the source of life: God.

And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.

*St. Luke 9, 58*

## DOROTHEA

We know little about Dorothea Wyss.

She came from a farming family on the northern slope above Lake Sarnen. She gave birth to five sons and five daughters. Descendants are still alive today. After a good twenty years of married life, she gave permission to her husband to leave the family and, as a pilgrim, search for the undivided communion with God.

The clerical law Nicholas of Flüe has to keep is unambiguous on this issue: "No-one is allowed to leave the marital bed, not even for life in a monastery or as a hermit, if the other marriage partner does not consent." This consent must be given without force. A father confessor also has to confirm the seriousness of the purpose.

Was Dorothea allowed to live to see her youngest son study in Basle and Paris, and become chaplain in the Ranft in 1491 and vicar at Sachseln in 1502?

"When we had come half the way, the lay priest Oswald Ysner asked me whether I also wanted to see Brother Klaus' wife and his youngest son. I said yes. So he pointed out a house across a deep valley on a steep mountain and said: This is where Brother Klaus used to live, and this is where his wife and his youngest son still live, and his elder, married sons live not far away either."

He led me to her and to her son. I shook hands with her and also with the son and wished them good morning. His wife is a still pretty woman younger than 40 years with an attractive face and unwrinkled skin.

First I asked her: Dear woman, how long has Brother Klaus been away from you? She answered: This boy, my son, will be seven years old on St. John the Baptist's Day. When he was thirteen weeks old, on St. Gall's Day, Brother Klaus left me and has not come back since.

*Hans von Waldheim of Halle  
reporting on a meeting  
with Dorothea of Flüe on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1474*

For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.

*Jesus on those who listen to him  
St. Mark 3, 35*

## THE POLITICAL WORK

With the Compact of Stans in 1481 the nascent Switzerland is given a new confederate constitution that is to remain valid until Napoleonic times. The statutes explicitly state: This new constitution mainly came about because of the deliberations and concrete advice with which Nicholas accompanied the preparations over the course of years and, in the crucial hours, saved the negotiations. With the new league, it is now possible to “reap the fruits of the loyalty, effort and labour invested in these matters by the devout Brother Klaus.”

After the Burgundian Wars (1476/77), the tensions between the towns and the rural communities had grown. Solothurn and Fribourg were to be admitted. This threatened the country districts with becoming a marginal region in a confederate system dominated by the towns. The political discussions were conducted passionately, sometimes venomously. Above all the town of Lucerne, however, continued to look for Brother Klaus' mediating advice. Numerous delegations travelled into the Ranft and discussed the state of affairs with the hermit. Carefully balanced pre-agreements finally put the renewal of the old alliances within reach. Provided with the necessary instructions, the representatives gathered for the signing of the agreement at Stans on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1481. But unexpectedly early the rifts appeared again. Soon a final failure seemed inevitable and thus a bloody clash.

Thereupon the vicar of Stans, Heimo Amgrund, rushed into the Ranft on the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup> December. For several hours, he must have discussed the controversial issues in detail with Brother Klaus. After another four-hour march, he returned, exhausted, in the morning. In tears he beseeched the representatives to gather again and listen to the advice of the man of God. His authority was effective. Within a few hours, the differences were cleared, the new league could be sworn to. The ringing of the bells carried all over the land the message of peace regained. “Thus God brought success. As bad as things stood before noon, after this message things were much better and within an hour everything was completely resolved.” In these words Diebold von Schilling, a chronicler from Lucerne, who had personally been present at Stans, described the turn in the negotiations in his records of 1513.

## TEXTS ON BROTHER KLAUS AND HIS WORK

From childhood on they had had a lot in common, when they were still little boys, and also when they tilled the fields or did other work together: There, Brother Klaus was always a decent, generous, virtuous, devout and truthful man who never angered anyone.

*Erny Rorer of Unterwald,  
childhood friend and neighbour, 1488*

None of our descendants may doubt that it is today publicly proven and well-nigh the most certain conviction among all Germans that this hermit Nicholas during the last twenty years before his death did not eat the least thing, that he had a power of discernment far exceeding his erudition, that he knew how to grasp the most profound secrets of the Holy Scriptures and that, full of the spirit of prophesy, he foresaw many things.

*Johannes Trithemius,  
abbot and humanistic writer, 1511*

He certainly was larger-than-life but an authentic man of Obwalden, with a healthy zest for the life of Lake Sarnen and enjoyment of its pleasures (if accompanied by a faint melancholy) but, at the same time, with something of the deep rift of the River Melchaa, of a strong and dual nature where life on earth and the hereafter, the heaviness of the earth and the vision of eternity, the realistic, active world and the idealistic divinity were struggling. He looked into infinite timelessness with its primeval images and then again took pleasure in milking his fine brown cows and he currycombed his horses and stored the abundant late-cut grass in the barn.

*Heinrich Federer (1866-1928),  
writer*

His life was in heaven, but he clearly saw the human conditions, he knew without fail God's word and the ups and downs of time.

*Jeremias Gotthelf (1797-1854)  
minister and poet*

In him, whatever is austere confederate takes on a religious character, free from any sentimentality as befitting this essentially democratic country. In a serious way he makes one feel what, in a Christian way, is the meaning of home to man. A farmer-saint with the smell of manure clinging to him and whose hands were callused from hard work.

*Walter Nigg,  
protestant theologian*

If Nicholas is one of the fathers of the Confederation, he owes it to his actions. Had he only been a hermit, we would no longer know anything about him. That is why the Reformers were right to insist on his political role.

*Denis de Rougemont  
cultural philosopher, 1938*

The strongest moral power in the land of the Swiss.

*Giuseppe Motta,  
Minister of State from 1912 to 1940*

His mediation saved Switzerland from civil war and thus perhaps from dissolution. Nicholas of Flüe is one of the eminent examples of statesmanship that derives its parameters not from outward success but from the most profound awareness of religious commitment.

*Sigmund Widmer,  
historian, 1973*