

**OPENING SESSION OF INQUIRY FOR THE CAUSE FOR THE
BEATIFICATION OF ABBOT FRANCIS PFANNER
GLENMORE CENTRE, DURBAN, 1 OCTOBER 2009**

COMMISSION MEMBERS PRESENT:

OFFICIALS OF THE PROCESS:

Bishop Stanislaw Dziuba OSPPE, chairperson; Mgr Paul Nadal, episcopal delegate; Fr George Lautenschlager CMM, postulator of cause; Fr Christopher Richmond OMI, promoter of justice; Fr Michael Nadaraju, notary.

OFFICIAL OF THE PROCESS FOR THE FIRST MEETING:

Fr Cyril Malinga, notary.

MEMBERS OF THE HISTORICAL COMMISSION:

Fr Pius Paul OSB, Inkamana; Fr Christopher Neville OFM, Newlands; Fr Henry Ratering CMM, Mariannhill; Sr M Arnulfina Schoeberl, Franciscan Nardini, Vryheid; Br Phillippe Denis OP, Priory, Maritzburg; Fr Karl-Heniz Ofenloch SCJ, Aliwal North; Fr Stefan Mandl CMM, Mthatha; Prof Joy Brain, Durban Chancery; Sr Maria-Corda Waldhoer CPS, Mariannhill; Fr Francis Jank CMM, Mthatha; Sydney Duval, Cape Town.

COMMISSION MEMBER ABSENT WITH APOLOGY:

Fr Siegfried Jwara CMM, Port St John.

1 Getting the session going:

Opening prayer and welcome by Bishop Stanislaw Dziuba.

The bishop asks Mgr Nadal to facilitate the session.

Commission members introduce themselves - they comprise theologians, canon lawyers, historians, educators and religious and laity with special skills and experience.

Commission officials and members are each given a copy of the Instruction *Sanctorum Mater* from the Congregation of the Causes of Saints, a CD and a working dossier containing relevant documentation:

A Cause of the Servant of God Francis Pfanner.

This document was drafted by the postulator, Fr George Lautenschlager, and notes AFP's importance for the Church in his time in these areas:

The racial and social question - he treated white and black as equal.

Self-reliance and manual work - the Trappist way that came to express the transforming power of dignified human endeavour as: "Better fields, better homes, better hearts."

The abbot fought against discrimination against women in white homes and under white employment.

Promotion of religious and missionary vocation - one of the greatest "recruiting officers" of his time. More than a thousand men and women followed his call to Bosnia, where he founded its first monastery, and later to South Africa.

Virtues practised by Abbot Pfanner to heroic degree - *ora et labora*; zeal for the kingdom of God with exemplary missionary spirit; ready to suffer physically,

mentally and spiritually during last 15 years of his life after his suspension and removal as abbot; generous in serving others and in self-renunciation; tremendous faith and trust in God.

B Short Historical Outline of the Preparations for the AFP Process - compiled by and read to the commission by Fr George. This document gives some background to the many years it has taken to get the process going, with a first attempt only in 1947 - war, inertia, disinterest of old priests at Mariannahill and the financial cost. This was followed by a second attempt in 1957 and consequent discussions in 1962 and 1963. The present situation dates from 1964. The two vice-postulators who were busy collecting material in South Africa and Europe died in 1982 and 1986 respectively. Fr Ivo Burkhardt CMM completed this task in 2006. He has catalogued all documents at the generalate in Rome and made two sets of photocopies - one for the generalate and one for Mariannahill. He made two more copies in 2008 and authenticated (certified) one set by hand in 2009. The 60 files of this set are ready for distribution among members of the Historical and Theological Commission.

C A Profile of AFP - The Man, His Mission, His Charism - this short biographical and character sketch was prepared by Fr Henry Ratering, who has assisted Fr George in promoting the cause. He writes in part: "Pfanner's missionary approach was indirect: he moved from what is known to the unknown, a socio-economic programme that was later formulated by one of his followers (Bernard Huss) as better fields, better homes, better hearts. Education, agriculture and training skills, aimed at enhancing human dignity, would lead to integral human development, based on Gospel values."

Fr Henry continues: "Pfanner had to spend the last 16 years of his life in lonely isolation, in prayer and manual work."

Fr Henry then sets out reasons for believing that Abbot Francis Pfanner was an instrument of Divine Providence.

D Questions to be answered by the members of the Historical Commission - through the inquiry into the abbot's heroic virtues: Practice of the love of God and neighbour; practice of the three theological virtues; practice of the cardinal virtues; examples should illustrate the virtues; practice of religious vows; other virtues, reputation, intercession. These questions are tied to the tasks which the Instruction *Sanctorum Mater* requires of the Historical Commission.

2 Responses and interaction among commission members:

From here on, for the sake of brevity, all members will be referred to by their religious name or first name and without title.

On completion of the introductory part of the agenda Paul invited comments, questions and insights from commission members. Some issues to emerge in a lively interaction were:

- + Allocating roles to commission members, forming teams and appropriate procedures and methodology. Where to meet and how often?
- + A shared awareness of the depth, scope and formality of the inquiry - was there an envisaged time frame for this major undertaking?

- + How best to read through and evaluate the 60 files of documents, mainly in German and some in English and Italian.
- + Commission members spoke openly of the abbot's controversial character - could this be a complicating factor in wanting to establish the abbot's sanctity?

+ The commission had an instructive sharing from historians Joy and Phillippe who had served on the process for Benedict Daswa of the Diocese of Tzaneen. Their insights from the Tzaneen experience were signposts for the commission in facing the process and challenges ahead.

Paul drew a series of questions from Phillippe - with input from George on the territorial boundary of the process. For the moment no one was working in Europe. He thought it best to concentrate on the process in South Africa and then approach Europe where there were people who could do the work.

+ Other issues raised by Phillippe:

The need for meticulous notation of significant documents - file number, page number, exact quote and when it was made for the sake of context.

If it was true that the abbot was saint then we needed to find the evidence for incorporation in the final report. It was important to find a saint with his/her cross. A saint without his/her cross was not possible. We had to find out everything that could be known about the abbot, humanly speaking. The filed documentation required both reading and interpreting to understand the context and meaning of words. It was not enough for two people to read the documents. As a historian he was not sure that everything about the abbot was in the 60 files. He suggested reading non-Catholic historians as additional sources and engaging with other people to get a full understanding of the texts and their implications. He mentioned historian Steve Coetzee. He recommended "For the Sake of Silence" by Michael Cawood-Green".

On this point Paul asked if Phillippe was suggesting reading and critiquing the texts concurrently or separately afterwards. Phillippe felt the reading needed both understanding and critical analysis at the same time.

George sought clarity on how the reading could fit in with the concept of teamwork that he had in mind.

Phillippe suggested concentrating on topics - for example the abbot and obedience; how to assess fairly the Trappist relationship with blacks? A sub-committee could go through all the files, using a logical process with targets.

George responded that from the very beginning, how to start the process of studying the documents had been his major concern. He had hoped the opening session would arrange the teams and agree on a process so that the reading would start from today.

George said the abbot's last years at Emaus were more important than his early years. He had matured there. He had not been born a saint. He had become a saint through his suffering.

Commission members had a lively exchange on aspects of the abbot's personality

and actions.

- + Pius thought there was merit in the Cawood-Green book as it would provide commission members with an orientation based on good research. They could get to know the problem points they would encounter when studying the records. He also referred to the matter of the abbot's vows, based on correspondence from the Abbot of Oelenberg, Alsace Lorraine. Pius was familiar with the rule of St Benedict which was more flexible than the strict rule of the Trappists.

- + Joy said she knew of people who did not pat the abbot on the back, but this was not a time for using "nickety-pickety" criteria to assess his life. She made a strong case for knowing the abbot by his fruits. She had reservations on the Cawood-Green book. It was written as a novel and was not meant to be used for a beatification process. Sr Annette Buschgerd CPS had researched and written extensively on the abbot and had shown he had taken his vows.

- + Sydney said Michael Shackleton had given the book a very good review in The Southern Cross. He had not read the book to avoid being influenced by it while he was writing about Abbot Francis and Emaus (Archbishop Buti Thlagale had asked for details of the book after the SACBC pilgrimage to Emaus in August 2008).

- + It was noted that Paddy Kearney, former director of Diakonia Ecumenical Centre, who helped publish Archbishop Denis Hurley's memories and has just published his own biography of the archbishop, had said: "Pfanner's zeal to spread the faith in Southern Africa must have been divine-inspired and is an indication of his sanctity."

- + Phillippe added that the 60 files needed scanning - the abbot's personal correspondence could be more important.

- + George said 70 to 80 letters of intercession existed concerning the abbot - more than he had thought and covering the 1940s and 1950s and "in our time".

- + The commission returned to discussing the central issue of the appropriate working process. Joy said she was not happy with the working procedure as suggested by some. There were those of us who could best get on with things ourselves and do good work in our own way. It was not necessary to be teamed up with someone else all the time.

Sydney supported Joy's view. While the commission could work in teams within a proper structure and follow due procedure and protocol, members should nevertheless be free to contribute their special gifts and expertise in their own way in a spirit of creative co-operation - working with others and working alone. He had earlier described the process as an opportunity to explore new ideas on what constituted heroic virtue and sanctity - the commission was discerning the life of an extraordinary man who had lived in extraordinary times. He suggested the commission find a process that dealt with the essence and substance of its assignment - that would get to the heart of the man and his virtues and failings.

3 **The commission navigates the way forward:**

With commission officials and members having acknowledged that most were new to a beatification process, they nevertheless progressed to a consensus on how to move forward - with input from Promoter of Justice Christopher (Richmond) on the critical issue of understanding the implications of the prescribed requirements set out in the Instruction *Sanctorum Mater*.

The commission's response to the opening session could be summed up as:

The realisation that they faced a complex process involving theological, historical, canonical and technical issues. They had to move carefully and correctly from the start and avoid doing anything that may compromise the process. Members should consider how much time they could give to the volume of work they faced.

Though it may be disappointing not to have set up teams to start reading the files, it was practical and wiser to prepare for the delegation comprising Stanislaw, Paul and George to meet with Congregation officials at the Vatican to get a clear understanding of what is required of the commission in its work and final report, and some idea of the time frame to complete the process.

Two important points that members discerned were:

- 1 Try to get from Rome a definition of what is meant by "heroic virtue" – to serve as a guide when studying the documents.
- 2 Try to get from Rome an indication of what they see as requirements for sainthood – apart from a miracle. Is it a flawless character or is it the fruits of his work?

The commission seemed to have an unexpressed consensus that the Benedict Daswa Process at the Diocese of Tzaneen, with the active participation of Joy and Phillippe, could be a valuable learning experience for the Pfanner Commission.

Discussion and acceptance of the following programme of action:

- 1 Phillippe to be the convenor of a commission working meeting at Mariannhill Retreat House at 9am on 3 November. Lines of communication through him and from him to Paul. In the meantime commission members are free to get on with work they want to do. They can access files at Mariannhill.
- 2 The commission produces a preliminary report.
- 3 The delegation takes the report to Rome on 9 November, returning on 19 November.
- 4 The commission to meet in full session again at Mariannhill Retreat House at 9am on 4 December.

It was noted that Stanislaw was in possession of required empowering documents and that the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference as a whole, on their pilgrimage to Emaus in August 2008, had expressed and signed their support for the cause for the beatification of Abbot Francis Pfanner.

The first session ended with commission members taking the prescribed oath and signing the corresponding document – and a closing blessing by Bishop Stanislaw.

Kind greetings

SYDNEY DUVAL

11 October 2009