

THE FAILURE OF CLEMENT HOFBAUER

In his very perceptive article "The changing image of Clement Hofbauer", Otto Weiss offers some interesting perspectives on Josephism. He acknowledges that there were positive aspects to this movement, that Clement was not in the business of preventing the emergence of a "national" German Church nor did he save Germany from schism. Weiss distinguishes an "early" Romantic movement and a "late" Romantic movement and debunks the idea that Clement was "the father of the Romantic movement". Rather Clement is presented as a pastoral worker sympathetic to Romanticism with the genius to celebrate the faith in a Romantic style. Clement was not a literary figure, nor a reformer of literature, indeed he was not an out-and-out Romantic at all.

In Redemptorist literature we are very familiar with the "success story" of Clement: in particular the dazzling success of the perpetual mission at St Benno's, Warsaw, from 1787 (two years after his Profession) to 1808 (when the community was imprisoned and then expelled from Warsaw). We are also familiar with the extraordinary personal ministry of Clement in Vienna from 1808 till his death in 1820. These amazing successes have been well chronicled, greatly cherished in the Congregation and remain undisputed graces in the life of Clement and in the history of the Congregation.

Nineteenth century Warsaw and Vienna may seem not just like another country and another age to post-Modern Christians of the twenty-first century but another planet altogether. Clement's undoubted success may appear as something to be admired rather than imitated. Perhaps his failures may carry a pertinent lesson for us.

- (i) Perhaps the most public and dramatic failure for Clement was the suppression of St Benno's on June 17th, the imprisonment of all forty members of the community and their eventual deportation. It was the end of the Transalpine Congregation for the time being.
- (ii) Less public but no less heartbreaking for Clement was the failure of most the foundations he had made. It is difficult to keep track of all the foundations Clement was involved in (cf. 'In the footsteps of St

Clement, appendices) but there were certainly at least 20 and perhaps as many as 25. One by one, all his projects failed: from France to Romania.

(iii) Two letters give us an insight into another level of failure in Clement. One was from **Father Isidore Leggio** (1737- 1801, Consultor General in the Papal State, Procurator and Admonitor, later Bishop of Umbriatico). Leggio accused Clement of changing the Rule, neglecting Regular Observance, abusing his position " changing the morning meditation for two sung Masses. No observance of silence, no afternoon acts, novices admitted before receiving the habit etc" Leggio accused Clement of refusing to return to Italy because "you do not want to have any superior over you, so you can do as you please". Leggio put a lot of Clement's failures down to the hasty and inadequate formation both Hofbauer and Hubl had received during their short stay in the novitiate in Italy (October 1784 - March 1785). In this Leggio touched on a raw nerve in Clement's own reckoning. While his love for the Congregation is unquestioned, he was very aware of his shortcomings and he was for ever asking for books and material about Alphonsus and the early confreres, about the development of the Congregation, anything to supplement his meagre grasp of the Congregation he loved.

Given the pastoral passion which Clement and Thaddeus (Hubl) showed in establishing the CSSR in Poland and the monumental efforts they put into their ministry for the most abandoned, it was especially galling to be criticised so heavily by a Consultor General.

(iv) The other letter came from Clement's own community in Warsaw, from **Fr James Vannelet**. Again the question of Regular Observance seems to have been the issue and Vannelet and Passerat seemed to be uneasy with the pace and style of Clement's version of Redemptorist life.

Clement must have found all these criticisms hurtful. At least from the Italian side he could argue that they did not understand the Northern European context. He constantly badgered Italy for news, information often complaining 'that the Congregation showed little interest in its northern offshoot....I haven't even been able to receive a copy of the Constitutions, the lives of the first Fathers....' (June 12th 1800). Even from Vienna he is still complaining 'I have been abandoned by all. Nobody has helped me, and I own all that I have and all that I can do only to divine Providence and to my own sweat and tears....We weren't even

given information on the Solemnity of the Beatification of our Father and Founder, as if it did not interest us' (May 1816).

Criticisms from within his own community were of a different kind. His personality clash with Passerat, his loss of Thaddeus (who died at 47 as a result of a sever mugging) sapped his energies and no doubt burdened his spirit.

A Step Back

Just because a person changes direction in life a few times does not imply failure, rather growth and development. Clement's first "vocation" was to be a baker and he did a three year apprenticeship with a master-baker in Znaim. He then made efforts at studying (for the priesthood) under the Norbertines(at Klosterbruck, near Znaim). It is with his attempts at the eremitical life that we might be tempted to call him a '**failed hermit**'.

Hermits in 18th century Europe were somewhat disreputable, often indistinguishable from common beggars. Sometimes they were just eccentric fellows kept on estates (as at Hawkstone) and part of the Romantic Follies. Clement tried his vocation as a solitary in Muhlfrauen (Austria) on an off between 1775 and 1777. Still in his middle twenties he was quite serious about his search for God without ruling out his earlier goal of becoming a priest. The Sacristan of Europe (the emperor Joseph) banned the hermit life and Clement returned to his baking.

He had another go at studies, this time at the University of Vienna but gave up on that too (disliking an atmosphere uncongenial to his robust faith) and then became a hermit for six months at Quintiliolo, Tivoli (near Rome). These months of solitude made a lasting impression on Clement (this is where he adopted the name 'Clement' -after St Clement of Ancyra-) and he would often refer back to the hermitage at Quintiliolo: "There you could really pray!". By now he was 32 but still unsure of his real vocation. After six months (and without a word to his companion Kunzmann) he walked back to Vienna; a year later he is back in Rome (this time with Hubl) still searching.

The fledgling Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer did not encourage hermits: "To be excluded are those who come from other communities or congregations, and those who have been hermits or solitaries are not to

be admitted" (Constitutions of 1764). Did Clement get a dispensation? Did the CSSR in the Papal States not bother too much with such anti-hermit prejudice? Did the superiors recognise in Hofbauer and Hubl the hand of Providence shaping the future of the Congregation? Was Clement a failed hermit? Did his solitary experiences shape the rest of his life - in terms of a love for silence and solitude, in terms of ascetical vigilance, in terms of personal effort, in terms of humility and simplicity? How is success and failure measured in the desert?

A quick look at the **formation** Clement received as a Redemptorist can serve to highlight another area of failure in Clement's life. He was received into the Congregation on the 24th October, 1784, aged 33. He made his Profession (Perpetual) on March 19th 1785, -a novitiate of just under five months. Ten days later he was ordained a priest. By October Clement and Thaddeus were back in Vienna!

The Congregation Hofbauer and Hubl entered consisted of twelve communities -four in Naples, one in Sicily, one in Rome and six in the Papal States. Alphonsus was still alive (aged 88). Their novice master was Fr Giuseppe Landi (1725-1797) and the novitiate was in the San Giuliano community (near via Merulana). Landi had made his own profession in the hands of Alphonsus and had been in community with the founder for nearly 30 years. He is described as "intelligent, straight-laced and somewhat severe". The entry of the first non-Italian members into the Congregation was a great talking point but their quick novitiate and sudden commissioning to go straight back to Vienna and establish the Congregation beyond the Alps left many flabbergasted. What kind of preparation had they? How deeply could they assimilate the charism of the Congregation in such a short time?

Clement himself shared these doubts and in times of great difficulty such questions would return to haunt him: he would frequently beg for resources to be sent north so that he could pass on something of the traditions of the Congregation; he knew that his grasp of CSSR history was skimpy, his knowledge of the early members sketchy and his authority on things Redemptorist undermined by his inadequate formation.

His unfinished theological education was also a source of limitation to Clement. "I am proud, I am vain, I have learned nothing" Clement lamented, and added "but one thing I am, I am Catholic through and through". His famous Catholic nose carried him though many discussions about Romanticism, Josephism, & the Enlightenment but it let him down when it came to discernment of trends in spirituality, character assessment (a case in point was his opposition to John Michael Sailer is an example) and anything to do with mysticism.

Clement's **temper** was legendary: "I thank God I have this shortcoming because if I didn't have it, I would be tempted to kiss my own hand out of respect for myself". Stories of his failure to control his temper sparkle on the pages of his biography: we know of Passerat's long suffering ("Everyone must bow to the will of Father Hofbauer, before whom we tremble"), of Leggio's criticisms, of what Br Emmanuel Kunzmann had to endure and we know of the rather amusing incident in Vienna when there was a blazing row between Hofbauer and his two younger confreres, Sabelli and Stark. Clement completely 'lost it' and yelled at them "Just do whatever you want! I have had it with staying with you. I am going to America". He quickly packed a bag and left without saying goodbye. On his way through the city on the first part of the journey to America(!) his anger cooled and he went into the Mariahilf church. After a time of prayer he regained his composure but he couldn't just go back and say sorry -after all he was the superior (and Vicar General). He imagined the young confreres welcoming him back "converted all of America already?" So his Catholic instincts took over and he asked Mary to help him praying that the two younger confreres would come looking for him to bring him home again! But with no sign of them, Clement continued on his way (to America!). Imagine his delight when eventually the two younger confreres did catch up with him and all three returned home, chastened.

It would be too easy and too inaccurate to paint a picture of Clement as a complete failure. Nothing can ever detract from the "glory days" of 21 years ministry at St Benno's; nothing can diminish his personal apostolate of the confessional, the pulpit and the drawing rooms of Vienna but his

life was shadowed by very real failures -sometimes external, often internal, sometimes to do with the Congregation, sometimes to do with the Church and of course he wrote no books or pamphlets. From his letters (170, of which 40 are included in St Clement Hofbauer: His writings and Spirituality) and from the Spiritual Maxims (lovingly gathered by one of his circle Joseph [Cardinal] Rauscher) we get hints of his way of dealing with failure.

[A] Maxim 8: WHEN WE ARE CONSCIOUS OF HAVING FAILED AND DONE WRONG, WE MUST HUMBLE OURSELVES BEFORE GOD, IMPLORE HIS PARDON, AND THEN GO QUIETLY ON OUR WAY. OUR DEFECTS SHOULD MAKE US HUMBLE, BUT NEVER FAINT-HEARTED.

One of the most significant crises in Clement's life came very soon after his ordination. Despite his short novitiate and his brief experience of CSSR life (in Italy) when he found himself in Warsaw he had to face a real challenge: a literal fidelity to what he knew of the Redemptorist tradition OR an engagement with the real situation in northern Europe. Faced with such a conflict Clement chose both: he tried to be as faithful as possible to what he had inherited and at the same time to respond imaginatively to the pressing pastoral needs around him. Out of this tension was born the great surge of creativity which was St Benno's and the 21 year Mission! Without the language of today, Clement inculturated the Congregation in Poland. He wrote (to Fr General Blassucci) "It is important to know the particular spirit of each people and take it into account". In the face of criticism and mistakes, even opposition, he 'went quietly on his way' to the greater glory of God and the good of God's people (which turned out to be the good of the Congregation too).

[B] In the midst of almost frantic activity, persecution, abandonment, immense pastoral commitments, interminable travels, Clement had a secret which carried him through failure and rejection, loss and disappointment:

"he created in his own heart a solitude, a quiet cell, a small oratory. Into this solitude of his own heart he withdrew at pleasure, at all times, wherever he chanced to be. Even when he was walking through the most crowded streets of Vienna, in this way he would go deep into himself" (Fr Bartholomäus Pajalich 1791-1863).

It was in the 'hermitage within' that Clement dealt with failure. It was in that hermitage of the heart that he learned to be still and wait on the Lord in patience (Ps 37). Here contemplation and action kissed, justice and peace embraced.

Alphonsus used to say that "the lives of the saints are the gospel lived". The gospel we see lived in Clement includes the experience of dealing with failure. The failure of all Clement's projects for the Congregation is a small echo of the failures that attend all who try to live the gospel, it echoes the failure of Jesus himself. Although the gospels recount some of the spectacular successes of Jesus in his preaching, miracles and healings, they also proclaim the failures of Christ: failure to be accepted, even by his own people, considered out of his mind by his own family and relations, deserted by most of his followers, betrayed and denied, seemingly abandoned by his Father in heaven and finally executed.

A Christianity that does not deal with failure is trying to bypass the way of the cross. A spirituality that ignores failure, ignores history and the lives of the saints. A culture of success (in business, politics, education, show business, social life etc....maybe also in preaching, writing, lecturing...) becomes artificial and eventually a tyranny. The human reality is forged in weakness, failure, learning limitations and the ever present redemptive grace of God. "If I am to boast" St Paul tells the Corinthians, "let me boast of my own feebleness.....I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me and that is why I am quite content with my weaknesses, and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and the agonies I go through for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong" (2 Cor11:30, 12:9-10).

Paul's insight is of immense importance to growth in the Christian Way: he is discovering in his own experience the truth that Jesus came for the weak, for sinners, for failures, and that the acknowledgement of our weakness/failure/sin is always also an acknowledgment of our need for grace.

Grace does not connect with our strengths, our successes, our virtues...rather grace connects with our weaknesses, our failures and our sins. At the heart of weakness lies the power of God, "like a seed that will germinate in faith and surrender" (Louf:Tuning in to Grace p.43). We do not wallow in our weakness, we do not flounder in our failures but we open ourselves to GRACE, we surrender to MERCY, we shed tears of LOVE.

This mention of tears brings us to the instructive failures of Peter, the first to profess Jesus as Messiah and the first to fail him. The impetuous, warm-hearted Peter was for ever getting hold of the wrong end of the stick. Jesus found him a 'skandalon'/ stumbling block, a 'satan' (adversary). His most critical failure came in the dark night of Jesus' passion when Jesus most needed support. Despite Jesus' earlier warnings, Peter failed when put to the test, "I do not know him", "I am not (one of them), my friend", "My friend, I do not know what you are talking about" (Lk 22:54-62). At that very moment "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter, and Peter remembered what the Lord had said to him.....and he went outside and wept bitterly".

It is that 'look' of the Lord that did it! 'emblepo' is not a casual glance, a fleeting glimpse, but a steady straight gaze into the eyes, a holding of the other in one's eyes.....an encounter that pierces the heart, a moment of light in the dark of denial. It is a turning point for Peter.

Such an encounter is a turning point for all who fail: the 'look' of Jesus: if in our prayer we bring our failures before the Lord, if through our conscience he looks at us -as he did at Peter, there can be no other response than real compunction: a piercing of the heart, a puncturing of our pride, a turning aside from the scene of our failure and tears: tears of repentance but also tears of love for the truth and forgiveness we see in the eyes of Jesus.

Let's fast forward to our own 21st century and pay a quick visit to a bookshop: it is hard to avoid the plethora of books on success: seven steps to a highly successful career/ how to succeed where others

fail/success can be yours. If we turn on the TV the same myth of success is advertised aggressively : to succeed in business, buy this; to succeed in love, buy that.....to succeed in sport, eat this; to succeed in life, do this course; to succeed in retirement, invest in that.....the relentless pursuit of success. Unquestioned is the content: **what is success?**

Does it mean prosperity? Does it mean good health? Does it mean popularity? Does it mean power? The dictionary is fairly sober: "to accomplish one's purpose" which just moves the question back a little: what is one's purpose? Are all purposes equally worthy?

The **tyranny of success** extends into the Church/Religious Life. What is a successful parish priest? A good administrator? A healthy savings account? A well-organized parochial structure? What is a successful superior? One with "flair and care"? One who lets us do our own thing/whatever we want?

Hand in glove with the tyranny of success goes the **Fear of Failure**: the popular notion of failure is so pervasive that to fail in one area easily spreads to the whole of life: so synonyms for failure include :"fiasco, washout, flop, dud, also-ran, loser". This mentality seeps into the Church /religious life : "he is a passenger"/"she is a 'high maintenance' person/he is good for nothing, can't be used."

Soon after Mother Theresa received the Nobel Peace prize for her work in Kolcuta, she was asked by a reporter how she could dedicate herself to her work when it was obvious that she was not going to eliminate hunger, disease and poverty from that densely populated city in India. Her reply was simple yet disturbing: **God has not called us to success, but to faithfulness.**

This sits well with the New Testament approach to all our efforts: "What is Apollos and what is Paul?. They are servants who brought the faith to you. Even the different ways in which they brought it were assigned to them by the Lord. I did the planting, Apollos did the watering, but God made things grow. **Neither the planter nor the waterer matters, only God, who makes things grow.** It is all one who does the planting and who does the watering, and each will be duly paid according to his share in the work.. We are fellow workers with God." (1 Corinthians 3:5-9).

If the history of Christian spirituality teaches us anything, it teaches us to live with paradox: the poor are the truly rich, the humble possess the earth, the hungry are fed, the last are the first and the first last. Notions of success and failure and stood on their heads and "Christian success" is forged in apparent failure: in weakness which is open to God's strength.

It is the recognition of our true calling -to fidelity- which allows us to sail through weakness, loss and failure while leaving everything to God.

This is why Clement was able to retain a serenity and tranquillity about the loss of St Bennos, the failure of his foundations and the scattering of all the TransAlpine confreres.

It is such fidelity to God in prayer and humble service that will allow us to deal with personal loss, gross failures of our personalities and the apparent collapse of our projects.

Classical (Greek) Tragedy is the dramatic turn from success to failure, The only Christian tragedy would be the loss of God.