

FORGIVENESS LIVED

by Sarah Mundell



A perspective on the Bruderhof written by Sarah Mundell and recently published in Living City Magazine. Living City Magazine is a publication of the Focolare, a Catholic ecclesial movement founded in Italy during World War II.

The Bruderhof, a Christian community founded in the 1920s in the Anabaptist tradition, focuses on living the life of the early Christians and engages in many concrete initiatives that aim to infuse the Christian message into today's society. One of their main forms of outreach involves bringing a message of forgiveness and reconciliation to thousands of youth in the U.S. each year and collaborating with various international organizations who share their passion for peace.

More than words

“It all began in Berlin in the 1920s in the house of my grandparents **Eberhard and Emmy Arnold**, where people of every type often met. They consisted of laborers, artists, students, Jews, Evangelicals and anarchists. They discussed and reflected on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). The one question which gnawed at them was: ‘What can we do?’ They had to react; they were tired of only words.”

This is how Johann Christoph Arnold, speaker, author and pastor of the Woodcrest Bruderhof in Rifton, New York, described the desire of his grandparents to concretely live out their Christian life, and the reason behind their leaving bourgeois Berlin with a group of followers and moving to a small German village called Sannerz to found the first Bruderhof community (Bruderhof means “place of brothers” in German).

“The first Christians were of one mind and heart and they held everything in common,” said Arnold. “For us to do the wash at the community laundry, to teach at the school, to weigh the baby at the clinic, to fix the water pipe ... each job in the community is the concrete expression of our mutual love.”

Even today, their daily life generally takes place on rural village-like campuses and in urban house communities called “Bruderhofs,” a name that refers both to the places where they live

and the movement as a whole, now spread to the U.S., the U.K., Germany, Australia and Paraguay.

Even though they are not numerous – 3,500 members in all, living in 24 communities – their message of purity, simplicity and forgiveness finds an ear even at high levels in the world. They have an excellent publishing house, though most of their outreach is now by Internet at plough.com, with articles and books in eight languages.

Forgiveness lived

One of their principal tenets is that of forgiveness. “The great need for daily forgiveness, especially in our communal life, has been a central belief since our founding,” says Martin Johnson of the Maple Ridge Bruderhof in Ulster County, New York. “The Gospel is insistent on forgiving our brother and sister ‘seventy times seven times,’ so if we want to follow Jesus, we should find the way and spirit to do this daily. Grudges and unforgiveness will block the spirit of love that we want to rule our communities and the world.”

Coming from the Bruderhof, these are not empty words. Their history is marked by trials as well. Not long after their founding, they were persecuted and eventually driven out of Germany by the Nazis. Joined by some Englishmen, they relocated to Paraguay and finally the United States. Despite this experience, and perhaps because of it, they are a very peaceful people.

“We have met a few times with then–Cardinal Ratzinger and had deep fraternal exchanges with him, especially relating to the persecution of the Anabaptists of the Reformation times,” said Johnson. “As Pope, he has written responses to our messages to him, and we hope for a longer exchange with him one day ... We feel that our friendship with him and with the Catholic Church as a whole is a response to the great change in attitude in the Vatican, especially toward those that were persecuted by the Catholic Church in former centuries.”

They had also previously met with Blessed John Paul II in 2004 and during his visit to New York in 1997. At that time, Arnold was able to share their experience with him, acknowledging the hatred of the past and affirming that “it was this which made us begin our journey of dialogue between churches, because hatred between Christians is inconceivable.”

Forgiveness shared

The Bruderhof reach thousands of people each year through their ministry in prisons and in urban renewal, as well as through their work with [youth assemblies](#) across the U.S. They also collaborate with International organizations such as: Oxfam, Save the Children, Doctors Without Borders, Mennonite Central Committee, World Vision and Maryknoll Lay Missionaries, helping victims of poverty, disease and natural disaster.

“Our reaching out to encounter others, and to be concerned with others outside of our Bruderhof communities is vital,” said Arnold. “Our principal objective is not to make new members, but to build true relationships with other people and groups, to listen to the heartbeat of our times and

bear witness to the possibility of living in unity without distinction of color and culture: we do not feel separated, but part of the larger, vaster community.”

The Plough, Bruderhof’s publishing house, offers their books in eight languages. Suffering is often a principal theme. Arnold, author of eleven books, explains the aim of these publications: “I try to give a message of hope and forgiveness. I have related sad experiences of illness, of violence, many of which were lived out in the difficult social reality of America and elsewhere. In all these stories one sees the personal response of those involved in the face of suffering (one book, *She Said Yes*, by the mother of a girl slain at Columbine, Colorado, was published in Italian by Citta’ Nuova). These books show how in the midst of suffering, in order to find inner peace, forgiveness is necessary. This is an art which has been lost today.”

-With Caterina Ruggiu

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