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"More emphasis on Holy Communion"

Zurich. Chief Apostle Wilhelm Leber declared that "we must make the celebration of Holy Communion more of a focal point in the divine services." In his interview with the editors the Chief Apostle also went on to explain why he believes training for our ministers is necessary. He also announced a second information evening toward the end of 2007. One possible topic might deal with issues concerning the Church's history.

Photos: Bischoff Publishers

We will reproduce excerpts from this interview here. You can read the entire interview in the January 2007 edition of "Our Family", the magazine of the New Apostolic Church. It will be published on 5 January and can be ordered from the Verlag Friedrich Bischoff in Frankfurt.

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Excerpts from the interview with Chief Apostle Wilhelm Leber

Topic: The Bischoff message

As Chief Apostle you are the highest agent of the Church and also represent it to the media. You recently gave an interview to a magazine closely affiliated with the Protestant Church. How did this come into being?

Our media officer, District Evangelist Johanning, approached me with this request. We considered the degree to which this would make sense for our Church, and came to the conclusion that this was an opportunity for us to present ourselves and counter prejudices. The journalist had likely been instructed to contact and get to know various denominations. On the basis of the materials at his disposal, he acquainted himself with the New Apostolic Church and enquired specifically about points that would be a little difficult to understand for people who are not acquainted with our Church. It has always been my approach to deal very openly with all matters. I believe this is appropriate in our time and also corresponds to our objective of attaining acceptance and a certain standing among the churches. This is a work in process, but it implies an obligation on our part not to withdraw.

Among other things, the interview touched on the so-called message of Chief Apostle Bischoff, namely that the Lord would return during his life-time. Your response to this question was a bit of a surprise. You intimated that you are open-minded regarding the "message" and the fact that it was not fulfilled is an unresolved question for you as well.

Yes. For me this is and remains an unresolved issue. There is an official position from the time of Chief Apostle Fehr which states that Chief Apostle Bischoff personally made this claim based on the authority of his ministry; but how this was revealed to him is not known. Several attempts have been made to explain the contextual circumstances, but no one has arrived at a convincing result. In my estimation, we will likely never know how Chief Apostle Bischoff received this message. He was never specific, but always said: "The Lord made it known to me."

The message of Chief Apostle Bischoff is, so to speak, a thorn in the flesh of the New Apostolic Church. Is it possible to put the divine nature of this revelation into perspective - regardless of whether it was fulfilled or not?

I don't agree with you that the "message" is a thorn in the flesh of the New Apostolic Church. Everyone who consciously experienced this time in the Church knows how intensively everyone anticipated the return of Christ. I personally am still of the opinion that it was a revelation. The "message" was interpreted as a revelation - as a divine announcement - and communicated to the congregations. But the question is how, when, where, and in what context? We do not know whether Chief Apostle

Bischoff interpreted this revelation correctly or whether there were things that were open to interpretation.

In other words, it is a revelation. That is something we do not contest. But its interpretation is a subjective matter?

That is how I see it. It is similar with the book of Revelation in Scripture. It describes certain events which we regard as an integral part of the plan of God. But the interpretation of these events is not always unequivocal.

In the interview, you responded with a clear "No" to the question: "Are you infallible?" Now the doctrine of infallibility does not assert the pope's infallibility as a private individual, but only when he speaks "ex cathedra", i.e. with the authority of his ministry. From this we might derive the question: "How do doctrinal decisions come into being in our Church, and what sort of authority do they have?"

I believe that we will always struggle with this, and that it is not possible for us human beings to completely separate the ministry from the person. This creates a certain probability of error. Fundamental elements of our faith are not up for consideration, but for my part I do not see these as being directly linked to the Chief Apostle ministry. Rather these are comprised of revelations of the Holy Spirit, the gospel, and the statements recorded in Scripture. But in all other matters - whether it be interpretations or contemporary questions- we cannot rule out the possibility of error.

Topic: Liturgy

Would it not be appropriate to give some more thought to the liturgy of our divine services?

Some initial thought has already been dedicated to this subject. In today's fast-paced time we have difficulty concentrating on the divine service. This already gives rise to the need for a little more in the way of liturgy, a little more freedom for the emotions. For example, an additional hymn, or perhaps some discreet organ music, or even silence might create more opportunity for contemplation and introspection. Why not? This is something you would otherwise hardly find anywhere any more. Such small elements of a liturgy - an adaptation to societal realities in order to help the brethren concentrate upon the word - that is not something I would rule out. But we will not suddenly introduce completely new elements.

So there will be no interaction between the congregation and the officiant within the course of a divine service? At present the congregation is primarily a hearer of the word.

No. On one hand the congregation is incorporated into the divine service through music. But depending on the circumstances, this might in future have greater prominence than is the case today. We might also- with certain guidelines - have a Bible reading. This would provide an opportunity for the congregation and the members to participate. This would also have the advantage of encouraging the brothers and sisters to read in the Bible. That is why I am very open to this idea.

Might not the celebration of Holy Communion be somewhat expanded and enriched, for example through a preliminary recitation of a prayer of repentance or returning to the biblical text of the institution of Communion?

Certainly. I have always felt that the lead-up to Holy Communion, its preparation is too brief. We must make Holy Communion more of a focal point. But such changes would have to come about carefully. We must also create the necessary awareness among the priestly ministers, because anything that is ritualised will eventually level off again later on. If Holy Communion is reduced to a mere appendage of the service, then any other measures we discuss will ultimately be inadequate anyway.

Topics: Training / Information evening

As Chief Apostle it is a great concern of yours to improve the quality of the sermon. To accomplish this the ministers have to be taught and supported. You recommend and encourage this time and again. Some district apostle areas seem to encourage this while others don't. How do you plan to overcome this hurdle?

We want to make more material available to the district apostle areas so that they can work with it directly. For example, we have produced a film on the subject of "The soul-care visit". This project will be introduced directly into each region. It is indeed true that projects were launched and the district apostle areas implemented them according to their understanding and as best as possible, but naturally in different ways as regards form and intensity.

To date many ministers have been of the opinion: "I have heard something once and am now proficient in it." But anyone who has ever studied knows that just hearing something does not mean we are proficient at it by a long shot. How would it be if the New Apostolic Church was to found a sort of Bible school for seminars and courses, where interested brothers could take courses on a voluntary basis? There are many who do not know how to access biblically founded information.

We do not have anything like this at the moment, and it would likely be difficult to establish. A facility such as a Bible school would be conceivable. But a suitable curriculum would have to be developed. On the other hand, we must not overlook the fact that many maintain that things are being dictated by the intellect, by reason. They fear that the more courses and instruction are offered, the more the original - the spiritual - will be pushed into the background. Incidentally, despite certain deficits many inspiring and stimulating services are being conducted. Certainly, the training of the ministers has to be enforced. That is one important aspect. But there are also other fields of activity in our Church, for example music. Here we are making great efforts to introduce even more musical activities. People are right in pointing out that music no longer enjoys much support either at school or at home, and that some of our choirs are in poor condition. On top of that we also need to reappraise historical things, and, and, and ... All I mean to say is that the danger exists that we get bogged down trying to accomplish too many things instead of concentrating on one thing at a time.

And then we must remember that we are an international Church. This makes it difficult to set up a uniform concept in this matter. For example, in North America there are as many religious denominations as there are grains of sand on the sea shore, so that the New Apostolic Church there puts the bulk of its efforts into clearly

distinguishing itself from all the others. That is why I believe the Church there places more emphasis on the spiritual.

When will you conduct the next information evening, and on what topic?

Probably sometime late in 2007. One thing I will talk about are issues concerning the history of our Church. This is something we want to deal with openly. The History committee has come up with some partial results which show that many things can be more clearly explained, and that the history of the Church was not always unproblematic. I think we cannot hide and don't want to hide either: we want to acknowledge our history. At the moment I am not sure what else will be on the agenda. Some references to the catechism might be conceivable. The new divine service guide might also be a topic. But none of this has been finalised. After all, it would be a little one-sided to organise such an evening only for historical topics.

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