



**Brother Claus:
Richness in emptiness**

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Ladies and Gentlemen

Welcome to the geographical heart of Switzerland

Welcome to the spiritual heart of Switzerland

Welcome to the 15th century: in the Pilgrim's Chapel in Flüeli Ranft.

Thank you for being here.

UBS has invited you to Flüeli, the place where Brother Claus, a mystic and eremite of the 15th century, lived all the 70 years of his life. Some of you may know a lot about him, most of you may never have heard his name before.

I have the pleasure and the honour of presenting more about Brother Claus, the patron saint of Switzerland, to you in the next 30 minutes. As you are an international audience, I will focus my presentation on his concept of life – the mysticism – and his key message: richness in emptiness.

Chapter 1: The 15th century

Brother Claus lived in the 15th century, so let's start with a brief explanation about this time, an extremely turbulent one for the inhabitants of Western Europe. Historians will never agree when exactly a new era ever begins, but there is no doubt that around the 15th century began what we call the "modern" times. The 15th century experienced a breakthrough of new concepts, of new ideas, and new values. Values and concepts we still consider 'modern'. There are three points which aid in explaining this:

- 1) In the 15th century took place a clash of culture between the preference for the individual and the preference for the collective, the Community. One evidence of this is that Roman Law, which favoured the individual, gradually overtook the traditional German Law which favoured collectivism.
- 2) At the beginning of the 15th century, Filippo Brunelleschi (1377 – 1446), an Italian architect from Florence, discovered the linear perspective. What is meant by that? We consider older pictures as being "naive" because people close or far away were often painted equal in stature. But the painters were not 'naive'. A person far away may very well be as tall as somebody close to you. Later painters painted somebody close to themselves bigger than somebody far away, because they saw him bigger or smaller. What's the difference? In the first case, the painters took the perspective of God: everyone has *their* own size. In the second case the

painters took *their* own perspective as the true one. I'm not talking about a question of art or perception. Beyond this change of perspective is a fundamental change of concept. In the 15th century, the society in Western Europe didn't just become more and more individualised, people also started replacing God as the centre, as the subject and middle of life, and replacing him with themselves.

- 3) So, and this is the third point, up to the 15th century God was the subject and human beings were his objects; the human being was dependant on him. No one described that more convincingly than Thomas of Aquin. In the 15th century things changed. The human being became the subject and God the object. Man started to believe that he was the owner of the earth, the owner of truth, and the owner of faith. How is this to be understood?: A sentence without an object can still be a complete sentence; a sentence without a subject is incomplete. In other words: A World without God was incomplete in the time prior to – and became “thinkable” after the 15th century.

Thus, in this time started what has become the most decisive influence of the thinking in Western World since the 17th century: the Age of Enlightenment. When René Descartes concluded: “Cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) he pointed out that human beings exist as their own entity – without God. The consequence of this enlightenment: the overwhelming influence of rationalism, is what distinguish the Western World most from the other cultures still today.

Well, that's my short introduction. I haven't told you about wars or kings and queens in that century, because nothing influenced that time period more than this change of values, concepts and ideas.

Chapter 2: The Pilgrim's Chapel of 1501

The chapel where we are now allows us - in an amazing and extraordinary way - a vivid look at the discordance (Zerrissenheit) of this time. The construction of the chapel began in 1501, 14 years after the death of Brother Claus (1417 – 1487). The growing number of pilgrims coming to this place, where the “living Saint” had spent nearly 20 years, made it necessary to construct a larger place for worship. What does it show us about that century? First of all, the proportion of the chapel was derived according to the size of the human being. That means that the nave, where the people sits or stands, was measured according to the proportion of a human body (without its extremities) and the altar to its head. That was ‘modern’, because the human being itself became ‘modern’.

Secondly, at the same time, this chapel was partially constructed in the 'old-fashioned' way. According to the 'old' concept, the worshippers remained in the darkness of the nave, worshipping God. That's why the only windows in the chapel, at that time, were situated around the altar. God was the light, God was salvation. 100 years later, windows were constructed in the nave, the old paintings were destroyed. Now the believers needed more light, the old concept had to go – 'definitively'. With the last renovation of the chapel a few years ago, the once 'modern' windows in the nave disappeared again. Where we can still see the traces of them on the wall, we are able to recognise part of the history of this building. And this history is part of our history too.

Chapter 3: Some milestones in the life of Brother Claus

It was in this century, the 15th, that Brother Claus lived. He was born in 1417 as the son of a farmer in Flüeli. If you have walked in the direction away from the Paxmontana Hotel, you will have passed his farmhouse. There he lived with his family from 1448 to 1467. He was married to Dorothea Wyss and together they had 10 children, probably only five survived childhood. He couldn't write or read, so we have very few original sources about his thoughts and ideas. Nevertheless, we have much more authentic and reliable information about him than about many of the so-called 'historic' and more famous people of the past.

Like his father and most of his contemporaries, Claus von Flue was a farmer. He was also a well-respected citizen of his village, representing it in the government, a farmer's council, of Obwalden (of about 5,000 – 7,000 habitants, nowadays they are about 4 times more in this valley). As member of the government, he was a politician, judge and penal authority at the same time.

At the age of 50 he decided to retire and end his life as a pilgrim. For this objective he received – as he told friends personally – the permission from his wife and his two elder sons. In the autumn of 1467, he left his family and his home and set off in the direction of Basel. A few days later, during the night, he had a vision which led him to return and to begin – close to his family – a life as eremite. 20 years later, in 1487, he died at the same place, here in the Ranft.

And this man is a Saint?

Well, first of all, Brother Claus, as he called himself in the Ranft, had not eaten or drunk since the vision that I just mentioned. You may wonder whether or not this is true. Many do. As a historian, I have to say that this fact

is much better proven and documented by his contemporaries than so many 'true' stories of the past (and the present). From the scientific point of view, it is impossible to prove anything like that. But in India, as well as in Western Europe, this phenomenon – absolute abstinence – is well known and often documented. Perhaps it's more important to simply accept it and not ask, how? but rather why?

Brother Claus, when asked about it, always answered: "God knows". Just once, when his friend and father confessor, the parish priest of Kerns, insisted, he answered, that God had allowed him this privilege to be closer to him. I will come back to this statement shortly.

Secondly, Brother Claus was a man of wit and wisdom. In this turbulent time, with a Church in deep trouble, respectful laymen all over the countries became important counsellors of the common people. Brother Claus very soon became a centre of attraction, and people of all social levels and from all over Europe came to visit him.

Once, in 1481, he assumed a decisive role as mediator between the cities and the farmer's councils in the Swiss Confederation of that time. That's why he became later the patron saint of Switzerland. The so-called "contract of Stans" in 1481 is an important date in Swiss history. For more than 300 years this contract was the legal basis of the Swiss Confederation. The contract guaranteed – and that made it so unique in Europe – a balance of power between the cities, where the bourgeois ruled, and the countryside, where farmer's councils (normally also not very democratic) governed. It's worth mentioning that the cities thanked Brother Claus immediately for his contribution to the successful closure of the long negotiation process, which lasted more than three years.

The farmer's councils – and Obwalden was a part of the countryside – needed about 100 years to recognise this contract as something positive for its own development. I just mention that because many Swiss overemphasise the unity in the past. The truth is that Swiss – in the past as well as in the present – are internally arguing and debating as every other nation does.

Thirdly, Brother Claus was a mystic and the few testimonies we have of him, written down in letters he had personally dictated or in testimonies of visitors, are of an incredible clarity. When I began my studies on Brother Claus – about 20 years ago – I didn't know whether he was just a wise man or indeed something more. Now I have no doubt that he is one of the most challenging mystics.

Chapter 4: Mysticism

The Greek expression 'myein' refers to a concentration directed and focused on your own being. We find mysticism in all high religions. Probably the most lucid mystics can be found in Japanese Buddhism and in the so-called German mysticism. Its most famous representatives are: Master Eckhart, Heinrich Seuse and Johannes Tauler. When I wrote my dissertation about the mysticism of Brother Claus, I found that the thoughts of Teresa de Jesus, a Spanish nun from the 16th century, closely matched those of Brother Claus. That just as a remark; maybe you know about some of these persons.

Mysticism is the search for the ultimate reason, the search for the deepest point. Brother Claus never left this valley after his return, but his visions allow us to recognise how rich, how intensive his internal, his spiritual travels were. Who is God for a mystic? In the case of Brother Claus, his perception of God was absolutely ahead his time. His perception of God is the one of a force, of a spirit, of a dynamic which is as perfect and complete in the smallest particle as in the whole universe. God *is* the World.

Master Eckhart says that God is within us, we just have to give birth to him. Nicolaus von Cues, another contemporary of Brother Claus, said: "God, when I look deep inside of me, I recognise you have been there even before." Maybe that sounds too strange, too 'religious', too 'Christian' for you. I can use other words: mysticism is based on the conviction that the World is a challenge – and not a danger –, attitude is more important than behaviour, ethics more decisive than morals. Mysticism creates no illusions, mysticism is vision, because illusions are hopes, visions are goals. Mysticism was never and can never be popular because mysticism demands self-responsibility. You (we) are responsible for your (our) destiny.

Probably that's the main reason why the Christian Church or other religious hierarchies are not very pleased about mysticism. It's too independent, it's too individual, it's dangerous. Every high religion needs and is fed by mysticism, but it's not for everybody.

As another example of the "internationality" of mysticism, I would like to mention that Sufism – as the Islamic mysticism is called – considers human life as a journey, and the one who is looking for Good as a traveller, a searcher. The first principle of Sufism is that God exists in everything, and everything is in God. What I have just mentioned does not differ, for example, from German mysticism or the one of Brother Claus.

Chapter 5: The key message of Brother Claus

Our main proof of the specific mysticism as regards Brother Claus is his own life. His main goal was to give himself up for God. That's why he could talk of the "privilege" of not eating or drinking – for nearly 20 years. We have to understand this key point and to listen very carefully.

Mysticism does not ask you to give yourself up as a human being, but to give up your self-absorbed, selfish and limited personality, incapable of concentrating on anything other than yourself. Master Eckhart says that you can't fill a cup if it is full. Johannes Tauler writes that it is impossible to catch anything with your hands, if your hands are occupied. So, first you have to give away to be able to receive.

That sounds very fine, but it's not so easy. Why should we give up something precious without knowing whether or not we will get anything different, or even better? When talking about this point, we think automatically of material things. But that's where we are wrong. It's much harder to give up conceptions, convictions and perceptions. Perceptions of God, for example.

Whatever we can imagine as God, can't be God, Augustinus taught us. Brother Claus had to fight extremely hard to overcome his convictions and perceptions. Thus Brother Claus' key message is: richness in emptiness.

Give up what hinders you from coming closer to God, to vitality, to spiritual freedom. Give up what hinders you from living. In giving up your selfish being, you will find a richness you cannot imagine. Mystics have no guarantee that their way will be successful; nevertheless, they have to go their way, something is stronger than any doubt. And what did they receive, or see, or experience or feel when they had what we call a "unio mystica", a unification with God?

I'm not a mystic, so I can't give you a correct answer. The author of the "Theologia Deutsch", a book written at the beginning of the 14th century, wrote that nobody can describe it well. Those who experienced the "unio mystica", he writes, have no words for it, and the others – you and me for example – have to wait until they experience it.

Chapter 6: Richness in emptiness

We all know that it is never too late. However, I do have my doubts of becoming a mystic one day. Thus, how can we take advantage of the concept of life of Brother Claus? I would like to make three final remarks:

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- 1) Richness in emptiness: we are often afraid of losing something. These fears make it impossible to get something else. Having too much leads to a lack of freedom, spiritual freedom, a lack of independence, a lack of autonomy. Poor is someone who can't leave what he has, rich is someone who is not dependent.
 - 2) Richness in emptiness: we have two different and independent – but in a sense – identical testimonies, where Brother Claus refers to fortune, economical fortune. In his letter to the authorities in Bern, for example, he wrote: “If you are lucky on earth and your fortune is growing, be grateful to God so your fortune will grow in heaven too.” People who are capable of recognising their fortune not as a virtue of its own are probably much more capable of “being grateful to God”. Brother Claus was not against fortune, but he called for an attitude toward fortune which did not lead to dependency on economical fortune.

This doesn't sound, by the way, very Catholic; it could stem much more from Zwingli or Calvin! As a matter of fact, Brother Claus was appreciated very highly by the Swiss reformers remembering his religious teachings much more than the Catholic's. And by the way, the separation of the Christian Church occurred about 45 years after his death.

- 3) Richness in emptiness. In a chronicle of the 14th century the author tells about a spring, where rich people get a remedy against boredom. It's a sickness when wealth makes somebody so full, that nothing more is able to fill him or her. But there are people – rich or not – who are open-minded, eager to know more, 'hungry' in a positive way. They are never full because they are able to maintain independent of their wealth, to maintain a space or open a space for new things and ideas, to be – in one way or another – “grateful to God”. It's emptiness, not richness that gives you freedom and autonomy and helps you, so that “your fortune will grow in heaven too.”

Thank you for your attention.