

***Sermon on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee (fiftieth anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood) of Father Leonhard Kofler in Kartitsch 23-8 2009***

**The most beautiful place in the world is my country Tyrol, with its mountains, hills and its wall of rocks.**

**Vallerie, valleria vallerie, valleria, high up in the alpine pasture!**

**My country Tyrol, you are so beautiful, so beautiful, who knows whether we will meet again, meet again... '2x**

All of you who have come to celebrate!

This song I sang for the first time when I was just eight years old, in the evening around the campfire with the Boy Scouts Association in my home in Holland.

Although I did not understand everything, there were two words that I understood very well, namely: 'The most beautiful place'.....and....'country Tyrol'

At night I would dream of that country Tyrol, the most beautiful place in the world and I wished that one day I would get the chance to visit it.

Today, at long last, my long-cherished childhood dream has come true: Here I am in the Tyrol, in Kartitsch, the most beautiful place in the world. I am very happy to be here.

However, it is already the third time that I have visited Tyrol.

The first time was in 1968 when I attended the celebration of the first Mass of my classmate Father Georges Hanser in Kals. That was an unforgettable event.

The second time was in 1993 when I visited my friend Father Alois Helfer in Vetzan in South-Tyrol and Father Conrad Forer in Sankt Jakob

In my forty years as a missionary in Uganda, I had the good fortune of meeting and working with various missionaries from Tyrol.

The first person to welcome me to Uganda was a Tyrolean missionary from Sillian, Father Micheal Ortner and for the first four years I stayed with him, working together very well. He introduced me with great enthusiasm and humour into the African pastoral work and into the African culture. Later I had a chance to work together with other Tyroleans like Father Alois Kronbichler, Father Conrad Forer, Father Alois Valentin and Father Alois Helfer.

In the year 2000 I had the honour and privilege to replace Father Len Wiedemayr from Kartitsch in a new and beautiful parish called Mbikko, which was founded and built up by him. Today I have come to realise that that parish of Mbikko was built with strong support of this, his home community, Kartitsch. And today I want to thank you very much for this support.

During the last two years I had the opportunity to work with another Tyrolean priest; his name is DDR.Leonard Kofler, the jubilarian of to-day and I feel privileged to be back in the Tyrol, this time at the occasion of his golden jubilee. Whilst it is a great honour for me to be invited to be the preacher for this celebration.... it is also a great challenge for me, a Dutchman, to preach in German.

I had never heard of Kartitsch until I met Father Kofler, who told me that every year at Christmas and Easter he would go to Kartitsch. He also told me repeatedly how he enjoyed being here in Kartitsch to celebrate Mass, to baptise children, to wed couples and to spend many hours in the confessional. Each time he told me and others about it, his eyes would light up and I realised how much he loves his country, his family and his people here.

Today I have personally witnessed how you, the people of Kartitsch, in turn love him. In the Bible we read that a prophet is not honoured in his homeland. In Kartitsch this statement from the Bible does not apply at all!

I too have come to realise that Father Len Kofler is a person who loves people and who is always ready to help.

In his lecture about happiness on Friday in the community hall here in Kartitsch, Dr.Sedmak said: "Hell means 'being incapable to love'. However: A person who loves is a happy person." I believe that Father Len Kofler is a happy person, precisely because he loves.

In his fifty years as a missionary priest he has indeed loved and helped many people. First the young students for the priesthood in Ireland, later the Maoris in New Zealand, the youngsters of a boarding school in Brixen, after that the students to the priesthood in the international Missionary Institute London of which he later became the president.

25 years ago he founded an institute called 'The Institute of St.Anselm' where he inspired and taught Priests, Sisters, Brothers, lay people, Bishops and even Cardinals from all over the world, accompanying them on their life journey. Until today 'St.Anselm' is like a small world church.

He has served the 'Institute of St.Anselm' like a true missionary, using to the full all his talents, his special abilities and all his expertise of his three doctorates. No wonder that his motto is: 'to love and to serve'

Now I would like to tell you a story about an eagle. Perhaps you know the story already. The eagle is a symbol of immortality, courage, and strength. And besides, I found this symbol on the coat of arms of Tyrol and Austria.

### THE EAGLE

Once upon a time there was a peasant who went to nearby forest to hunt for a bird which he would take home. He found a young eagle, took it along and put it in the hen house with the hens, ducks and turkeys. He fed it with chicken feeds even though it was an eagle, the king of the birds.

Five years later a naturalist came to his house. As they went around the yard, the naturalist observed:

"That bird isn't a chicken, it's an eagle."

"Sure," responded the peasant, "it's an eagle, but raised as a chicken. It's not an eagle anymore, it's turned into a chicken like the rest, even though it has a wingspan of almost three meters."

"Impossible," replied the naturalist, "it is and will always be an eagle. It has the heart of an eagle and that heart will make it fly, one day, up to the heights."

"No, no" insisted the peasant, "it has turned into a real chicken and will never fly like an eagle."

So they decided to test it. The naturalist took the eagle, lifted it high and challenging it, said: "Since you are an eagle, since you belong to the sky and not the earth, open your wings and fly!"

The eagle stayed on the naturalist's arm. It looked around distractedly. It saw the chickens below, scratching at their grain, and jumped down beside them. The peasant said, "Told you so! It's become a simple chicken!" "I won't hear it," the naturalist continued to insist. "This is an eagle, and an eagle will always be an eagle. We will try again tomorrow."

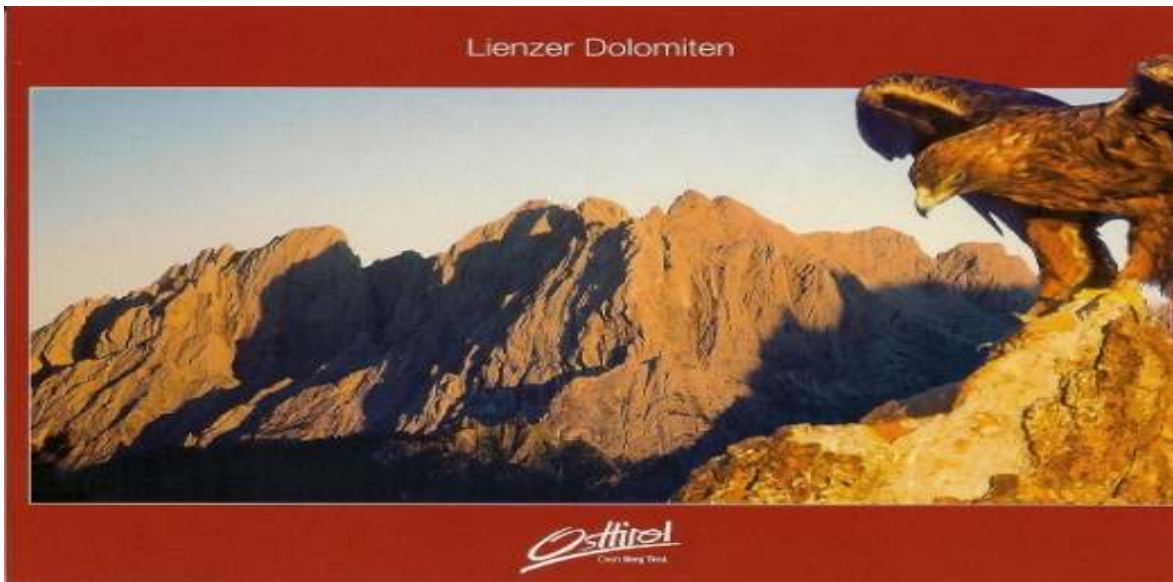
The next day, the naturalist brought the eagle up on the roof of the house. He whispered to it, "Eagle, since you are an eagle, open your wings and fly!"

But when the eagle saw the chickens below, scratching the ground, it jumped down again next to them. The peasant smiled and teased "I told you before, it's become a chicken!"

"No," the naturalist responded firmly, "it is an eagle and will always have the heart of an eagle. We are going to try one last time tomorrow. I will make it fly."

The next day the naturalist and the peasant got up very early. They picked up the eagle and took it far from the city, far from houses, to the heights of a mountain. The sunrise coloured the peaks of the range gold. The naturalist lifted the eagle high and ordered, "Eagle, since you are an eagle, since you belong in the sky and not on the ground, open your wings and fly!"

The eagle looked around. It trembled as if it experienced a whole new life, but did not fly. Then the naturalist took its head and firmly pointed it in the direction of the sun so that its eyes could fill up with the clarity of the sun and the wide open horizon. In that instant it opened its immense wings, let out the typical kau-kau of eagles and lifted up, sovereign, on its own. It began to fly, to fly higher and higher. It flew . . . flew . . . until it disappeared into the blue of the sky, never to return....



The naturalist of this story is for me father Len Kofler. I like to explain the reason why.

In 1993 after I had worked for 25 years as a missionary in Uganda, I felt exhausted; I had survived not only the terror regime of Idi Amin, that notorious dictator, but also the dictatorships in Uganda which followed.

During that time I had read about the Institute of St. Anselm and I had also discovered that the director of the Institute was a Mill-Hill missionary, namely Father Len Kofler. I felt a strong desire to follow a refresher course, so that I could get new strength and energy. And so I decided to follow this course, which lasted 7 weeks. Whilst I attended the course I came to realize that I had just become like that chicken in the story, depressed, its wings down. Just like the naturalist from the

story, Father Len Kofler helped me to open my eyes; he made me aware again how much potential I had in my wings. So I was able to open my wings again empowering me to fly back to Uganda, like a real Flying Dutchman! With renewed vigour and new enthusiasm, I could again continue to spread the Good news.

This is what Father Len Kofler has done for the last 25 years. By his love and inspiration he has helped not just me but so many others from all over the world to 'fly' again, like the naturalist helped the eagle in the story.

In this context, to-day's reading from Isaiah has become very meaningful: 'The Lord gives strength to those who are wearied and tired. Those who trust in the Lord will find their strength renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles' (Isaiah 40: 29,31)

I would also like to bring to your attention a quote from to-day's reading from St Paul: "Though I command languages both human and angelic—if I speak without love, I am no more than a gong booming or a cymbal clashing. And though I have the power of prophesy, to penetrate all mysteries and knowledge, and though I have all the faith necessary to move mountains—if I am without love, I am nothing ..."

Father Len is well aware, even though he has three doctorates, that he is nothing without love. He feels called in this world to spread the message of love and to teach people to live peacefully with each other. And he tries very hard to practice what he preaches. That was the very reason why he founded the Institute namely to help people rediscover the power of love within themselves and to make them aware that each one is created in the image of God.

Father Len chose the Trinity as the symbol for the Institute, the divine role model for human love and relationships. "There is no greater love then when one gives one's life for his friends" (John 15:13)-words that we heard in to-day's gospel. It is in our daily relationships that true love is put to the test. And it is precisely in these daily relationships that we are often deeply hurt. Instead of loving people and using things, we love things and use people.

For instance: We often consider things like 'my car' or 'my computer' as more important than 'my partner' or 'my neighbour'. Another example: A mother who wants to make sure that her house is always clean and tidy, can easily forget when children make the room untidy that the happiness and creativity of a child is more important than the need to have a house that is always clean and tidy. Rather than recognising and acknowledging the good in others we often grumble and criticise. That is why Father Len Kofler has written an important book "Healing Relationships" with a message of hope for a broken world.

Now I want to reveal to you a secret wish of Len, our jubilarian: deep down in his heart he wishes that one day one of the Bishops or Cardinals who attended the course in the Institute of St. Anselm, will become the next Pope..... because then the Institute could be given an additional name and be called "The **Papal** Institute of St.Anselm".

Although Pope John Paul the Second never visited the Institute, the following passage from one of his encyclicals resonates very clearly with the vision of the Institute of St.Anselm: "What the world needs now, are heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who know the depths of the human heart, who can share the joys, the hopes, the agonies, the distress of people to-day ..."

Like many of us were happy, so was Father Len Kofler when the first encyclical of Pope Benedict the Sixteen was all about love.

Len has often told us that he hopes that one day these words will be written on his tombstone: "He loved people". But before that day comes he hopes that God will still give him enough strength to enable him to continue to spread the message of love for many years to come.

On the occasion of the Father Len's fortieth anniversary to the priesthood Hilda Ausserlechner from Kartitsch wrote: "May God grant that your message of love always finds an open heart. God sent you into the world to bring love to human kind and to teach peaceful co-existence. May the Lord reward you with his abundant love."

Now I want to mention two people who have come specially all the way from England: Thalia and Claire who have been a tremendous support for Father Len; Thalia for 28 years and Claire for the last 10 years. And they are the ones who have been able to challenge Father Len to slow down when the work was getting too much for him. I want to thank them publically, because it is largely due to them that Father Len is still in such good health.

My prayer for to-day is: "May God give you health and strength for many years to come, so that you may be able to continue to guide and accompany people in their search for love, healing and inner peace."

Therefore I invite you to pray with me for missionary Leonhard Kofler, when I recite this priestly blessing from the Old Testament:

"THE LORD BLESS THEE AND KEEP THEE."

"THE LORD MAKE HIS FACE SHINE UPON THEE AND BE GRACIOUS UNTO THEE."

"THE LORD LIFT UP HIS COUNTENANCE UPON THEE AND GRANT THEE PEACE."

**"Long live Father Len Kofler!"**

To conclude I like to quote the words of the hymn which Father Len loves very much and which we will sing together at the end of to-day's Eucharistic Celebration:

**"Holy God, we praise Thy Name.**

**Lord of all we bow before Thee.**

**All on earth Thy sceptre own,**

**All in heaven above adore Thee**

**Infinite is Thy domain,**

**Everlasting is thy reign. A.....MEN!**