



# *Apostles for Today*

*Prayer and Reflection - May 2017*

---

## **INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE**

### **An Experience in Airport Chaplaincy**

Today's apostle, as well as his or her apostolate, have to be quite flexible. We, members of the Union of Catholic Apostolate, have to approach our fellow human beings fearlessly, even if they are strange to us, even if they come from cultural environments unknown to us, even if they belong to other religions. We have to be open to dialogue, to talking with all. Our founder Vincent Pallotti would be pleased with this. "To be up to date" holds true in general, but especially for our apostolate. It does not mean falling into an unhealthy freneticism, but rather to live the apostolate calmly, prudently, and above all in permanent connection with God, in spite of all the new challenges.

For our pastoral work at the airport in Frankfurt we had a wonderful model for this, St. Mother Theresa. Each time she came to us, she had always an abundance of tasks to fulfil. But before she began, she first withdrew to silence, in our chapel, before the tabernacle. There she stayed in deep absorption. Then she came and expressed her matters in a calm voice. In the course of this, she never put down the rosary and at the end everything was settled. This would also please Vincent Pallotti.

Now to the airport chaplaincy. In 1972 the Bishop of Limburg/Lahn and our then Provincial Rector asked me if I would be willing to build up the first airport chaplaincy of Germany in Frankfurt/Main. No one had a clear idea of this. I moved to Frankfurt and from then worked on at the airport for 31 years. We had two rented rooms there. In one team-room, with a common telephone number, my Protestant colleague and I, plus two female employees, one Protestant and the other Catholic, worked together. In the course of time, about 30 volunteers joined us.

The second room was available for our airport chapel, having about 50 seats.

We called ourselves the “Ecumenical Airport Chaplaincy”, but from the beginning we were an interreligious chaplaincy, an interreligious ecclesial ministry, for our doors were open to everyone, be it Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist or atheist. And all were coming, and we wanted the dialogue with all. Unprejudiced acceptance of the other, also of the stranger, is in general an important precondition for an effective apostolate, yet it is indispensable at a major international airport. It was important for us to talk to one another *ad intra*, but also and perhaps especially *ad extra*.

Our founder Vincent Pallotti would also have asked for this.

On the first day of my work as airport chaplain, I stood in the big halls of this international airport as if in a modern temple, a big cathedral. First I had to learn what an airport is. Major parts of the business are underground, others on earth and the most important part is in the air, on its way. In all the three parts, there are numerous people, passengers, employees and also numerous visitors, who drop off or collect others, or just want to get to know the airport. (At Frankfurt Airport, daily about 150 000 passengers arrive and depart. About 80 000 people are working for them locally at the airport, plus about 120 000 persons with suppliers in the localities close by. “A major city without inhabitants”, since out of the many who belonged to it, no one was living at the airport itself.

The first target group were the employees, who would also be able to support us effectively and help us to come in contact with the passengers.

For my personal work, this meant concretely that initially, if possible, I had to be on the go in the airport all day, in order to visit the employees at the workstations, to get to know them and to become familiar with them. In this way I won many friends. Among those, were some who understood themselves to be apostles of Christ and who considered it as their task to take on responsibility for the people at the airport, especially for those in need.

Since our door was always wide open, we also frequently had curious guests who, as they told us, would otherwise not have dropped in. Thus it came about that at our round table, as we called our reception, the manager, who had been a bishop, sat together in dialogue with homeless people, whether living in hostels or sleeping rough, and thus got their problems directly.

And we let all of them feel that we are present, to be in solidarity with them in good times and bad. On our part, we did not ask about personal details. Those who wanted to share about themselves personally could do so. The

only questions we raised were if and how we could help. And we tried to do this as far as possible.

Many came who were not Christians, especially Muslims. They too readily entered into dialogue. Often there were informative topics which were of interest for the others present as well. During this it became clear, that we knew rather little about one another and that we had to come to know each other better. As early as beginning our work at the airport, I had placed a prayer mat in the entrance area of our chapel for religious Muslims. This possibility was at once accepted gladly. (Today for Muslims there are about 20-25 prayer rooms and niches close to workstations at Frankfurt Airport.)

One day an Iranian businessman came to our chapel in order to pray. Then he thanked us very courteously. When I remarked that it would be beautiful if we Christians were offered such a possibility for prayer in his homeland, he said that he personally would welcome this, but that the constitution of this country does not recognise freedom of religion. The example shows that it is necessary that we talk much more to one another and that we come to know each other better.

In the area of workplace chaplaincy, there were also many possibilities to show the employees that the Church is present for people and not the other way round. We were delighted that this also led some people to find their way back into the community of the Church. People expect us to take them seriously as mature citizens. If they sense this, then they become open to dialogue.

During these many years at the airport, I never experienced rejection and never received an unfriendly reply. On the contrary. Frankly, many people admitted not sharing our conviction, but respected it as long as we also respected their opinion. Then they were also ready to dialogue. This bears good fruit.

Another example regarding this is imprinted on my memory. For years, I had many good conversations with one employee about religion when I was walking around. One day I heard that he had died quite suddenly. When I tried to learn more about the place of his funeral, I heard to my amazement, that this man was a Muslim. During our many religious talks I had never become aware of this. Of course, also in this case, I had never asked him about his religious affiliation.

For us as Catholics, of course, our chapel with the tabernacle was the centre of our day, and daily Eucharist at 9.00 a.m. was the only fixed point in our very flexible schedule. For us it was our spiritual source of strength. For me,

personally, these hours of spiritual nourishment are among my most beautiful memories. There one could calmly bring everything before God. This chapel also brought us very gratifying encounters. I think for example of Frère Roger Schutz, the Prior of the monastic community of Taizé. Many young people always came to welcome him. After that he always asked me to celebrate Mass with him and the young people and to give him Holy Communion, for – he said – he believed in the real presence of Christ in both the bread and wine, and could see no objection to him receiving it. One day he wanted to give me pleasure at the end of Mass. He showed me his Catholic breviary, it was the breviary of the late John XXIII, which he had given him as a present shortly before his death.

A special problem that occupied us during almost all of these past years, is the encounter with immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Meanwhile, airport chaplaincy has become standard at all airports in Germany, also thanks to our cooperation and our “know how”.

For the future, we need even more closely intertwined networks for the apostolate in general, and especially for our apostolate according to the charism of the Union founded by Vincent Pallotti. For the future, it needs to be directed and practised more globally.

Airport chaplaincy is a meaningful area of apostolate, with growing importance generally and with a future. It is therefore very necessary to accompany these apostolic efforts in the field with the apostolate of prayer, with much prayer.

## **Some Questions for Reflection:**

- While we all agree that apostolate is worthwhile, what am I actually doing concretely?
- Am I really unprejudiced and open to dialogue with all – as equal partners?
- Do I pray intensively enough for the success of the apostolate of the Union?
- Do I have real conviction regarding my membership of the Union?
- As an apostle, how do I deal with setbacks, rejections and doubts?
- Do I have enough trust in God and enough patience?

*Fr. Walter Maader SAC and Irmgard Mader UAC  
Frankfurt – Germany*