

**Homily given by Fr. Stefan Tertüne, SCJ, provincial superior of the German Province of the Priests of the Sacred Heart (Dehonians).**

**Centennial Celebration, Lower Brule, SD, July 30, 2023**

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I am still under the impression of the smudging ceremony. Very beautiful. It confirms my conviction: Whenever I go to other countries or cultures, I am not forced to learn from the others. No, it is an absolute opportunity to learn how others try to live, try to believe; it is absolutely enriching and broadens the horizon. Thank you for that.

I am a foreigner in this country. I come from far away. I know almost nothing about your cultures, little about your history. Yes, I have read something, talked to one person or another. But what does this mean if you go from one world to another world?

Similar, yet quite different, was the situation of the confreres who began the ministry of the SCJs in Lower Brule 100 years ago. Fr. Matthias Forman was a confrere of the German Province although he himself was a Luxembourger. One big difference between him and me: Fohrman came from a bitterly poor Germany. After World War I — caused and lost by Germany — Germany and also German religious communities, were bitterly poor. For the German Province, the situation was threatening its existence. And so, the idea came up to send Fr. Fohrman to the United States with a fundraising mission.

Soliciting funds for Germany from American Catholics shortly after World War I was not easy. The Sacred Heart priests were absolutely unknown in the United States. Many religious congregations were on begging tours; often Fr. Fohrman was forbidden to beg for support and to collect money among American Catholics. It was a very difficult job, often frustrating.

Three years of itinerant begging, and then the news that Bishop John Jeremiah Lawler of Lead, South Dakota, would entrust him with a pastoral assignment. On Palm Sunday, 1923, Fr. Fohrman took possession of the mission church here in Lower Brule. St. Joseph Indian School in Chamberlain, South Dakota, began to receive children in the fall of 1927, only four years later.

To minister with and among the Lakota people in the 1920s was not an easy job. Fr. Fohrman and the first Sacred Heart priests had absolutely no training and preparation for this, no course in cross-cultural training, no mission theology studies, they knew almost nothing about Native Americans.

But maybe their hearts were somewhat prepared. That's what comes to my mind if I think of these beginnings here in Lower Brule and of the first reading we've just heard, of what Solomon asks for and

what God grants him: "a listening heart, an understanding heart so that you may know what is right." An "understanding heart", some translations say "a listening heart".

This is a spectacular gift for a leader like Solomon – and not only for him. In the context of our celebration, I think that's exactly what is necessary and needed wherever SCJs and their associates go. From our founder, Fr. Dehon, we often repeat the motto: "Go to the people." This gives a direction, but the history we remember today, and the biblical texts tell us: It is not enough to just go to the people! The big question is: HOW do we go to the people? And the Bible says: go to the people, but go to them with a listening heart. Not so much with a teaching mouth, but with a listening heart. A heart that takes people seriously, their worries and their hopes, their faith, their attempts to live. One hundred years ago, this was not so much articulated, but it was lived by our confreres, sometimes more, sometimes less.

I look at the example of Br. Matthias Schaefer, perhaps known to some of you. Br. Mathias came in 1935 and was active for over 40 years in St. Joseph Indian School in Chamberlain, some 30 miles away from here. He was a simple shoemaker originally. Here in South Dakota Brother Mathias Schaefer learned a variety of Indian crafts, songs and dances and taught them to the children, and occasionally even performed them for visitors. He conserved cultural artifacts, and his collection became the start of the Akta Lakota Museum in Chamberlain. He truly had a listening heart, a heart that created proximity, a listening heart that starts a process of transformation for the better, for the good. And so, Br. Matthias really became a blessing to the people and to the Sacred Heart Priests' mission. And was blessed himself.

Of course, in 100 years there were fellow brothers and people whose hearts were not listening. Who heard themselves first and foremost. And who wanted the people they met to simply become like them. Today we call this violence.

So, what can the Gospel we just heard tell us about our celebration today? Today in the Gospel I hear the joy about a very precious pearl, for which everything is given away. I hear about a very successful fishing, about a net full of fish of every kind. And all this has to do with the kingdom of heaven. Does this have something to do with 100 years of history, does this have something to do with our present?

I think so.

For Jesus, we Christians are people searching for the kingdom of heaven, on earth. We are to search for the exceedingly precious, for which we would give away everything else, which fills us with great and deep joy.

I hope and I think that in the course of time many confreres have received exactly that in their commitment here in South Dakota: the experience that their commitment, their contact with the people here on the ground, their discovery of new cultures, that all this has become for them, in a

perspective of prayer and faith, a wonderful treasure that has filled them with deep joy, the kingdom of heaven.

And I pray and hope that all of us gathered here can understand ourselves as searchers for the treasure of our lives, for the kingdom of heaven, for the reason of deep and profound joy; that we can connect the words faith, hope and love with concrete people, concrete action, concrete experiences.

And in order to find this, we do not primarily need an instruction manual, a map, good advice from a coach. We need an understanding, a listening heart. "God give us a listening heart, so that with Your grace we may recognize, nurture and share what is precious in our lives."

Amen.