

*Kurier, 11 September 2004*

Today in Melk Abbey begins the Waldzell Meeting on the search for the meaning of life, at which Abbot Burkhard Ellegast is hosting Nobel Prize winners

## In Search of Paradise

*by Susanne Bobek*

"The code for the meaning of life is Paradise." The life-long search for real, pure love, "that ultimately can only exist in freedom." After a long pause, he says: "In essence, perhaps that which one does not have is paradise."

Abbot Burkhard Ellegast finds it almost "intimidating" that on this weekend so many "intelligent and famous people" are taking part in the first wisdom symposium at Melk Abbey. These include Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi from Iran, Nobel Prize winner in Medicine Günter Blobel, Nobel Peace Prize winner in Chemistry Kary B. Mullis, Rabbi David J. Goldberg from London, quantum physicist Anton Zeilinger, to name just a few.

Along with his successor Abbot Georg Wilfinger, Dr. phil. Burkhard Ellegast is acting as host of this event, to which many managers are coming. He is considered in church circles as shining exception and among the believers as one of the few, true pastors whom they trust. A man who never forgot that he, the son of the abbey's butcher, was elected three times as Abbot of Melk Abbey. A long period of a total of 26 years – until his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.

"I really struggled hard for my profession," admits Burkhard Ellegast openly. After the high school leaving examination in Melk, he actually wanted to leave: "I wanted to get married and have children. I fell in love often and know what kind of sacrifice that is." Aged 20 he joined the Benedictines as a novice and was not always treated well. "I was forced to study Latin and Greek." An older confrere had explained to him that the abbey still thought in centuries.

But through the comforting words of another priest, he came to a sudden realization. "Why are you so upset about the words of an old man? Why don't you change something." The later Abbot became one of the most popular teachers. "The school was authoritarian at that time. I didn't want that."

He can be compassionate, listen night after night and simply be there. The cabaret artist Josef Hader was one of his former students. They are still in contact. "Whenever they have a problem, they come to me."

Abbot Burkhard believes it is one of the most meaningful tasks to be there for the young ones, to be an example to them through one's own life. Everyone must decide for themselves what actions to take. The theologian sees human beings as a whole: body, mind and emotions are held together by the soul. The rational and material alone are only one-sided.

The advantages of a monastic life are that one does not have to worry about basic needs such as food. The 15 monks at Melk live in a part of the abbey that is not open to the public. They report directly to Rome and therefore enjoy more freedoms. "The Benedictines are democratic; the Abbot is elected for 12 years." An advisory council assists him.

When he is on holiday, Abbot Burkhard gets behind the wheel of his car and "follows the tip of his nose." This year the destination was Normandy. "I was drawn to this place, where human beings were destroyed so senselessly." At age 14 he saw the prisoners of the concentration camp Mauthausen in the camp outside of Melk as they were being herded barefoot in the snow. At that time he had begun listening to enemy radio stations.

Love thy neighbor, now in this moment. Be there for him. Today. "People in despair cannot just be told that the dear Lord knows what he is doing."