

Following the healers for free
A community dedicated to the Jesuan way of healing¹
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Five years ago a registered charity organization named after the saint Anargyroi Kosmas and Damian was established. On October 26th, 2006 some women and men met for a service at the Cologne Church “St Maria Lyskirchen”. They founded a community of charitable service and gave themselves the name of the saints Kosmas and Damian, the Anargyroi, the healers for free (that is what these are called in the Orthodox Church). This name characterizes the subject and the vocation of this community. They want to dedicate themselves to the Jesuan way of healing just as the Anargyroi Kosmas and Damian did 1700 years ago. To venerate these and to be named after them means to do as they did: to follow Jesus’ way of healing. Meanwhile the community has become a charitable non-profit organization recognized by civil law and registered in the diocese of Essen. At present there are 23 members from nursing, therapeutic, social and pastoral professions. Two of them are members of a religious order and two of them are catholic priests. Some more people are interested in joining. So far two communities exist, one at Essen and one at Cologne. Once a month they meet for a community service, have a meal together and discuss questions under consideration. What is most important: all members are engaged for free in the practical work at the projects of the community. Being called “community of Kosmas and Damian” at present means, to be engaged practically and without charge in one of the projects of the community (apart from their personal profession) and to take part in the spiritual life. But let us come back to them whose names stand for the programme.

Who are Kosmas and Damian?

The brothers lived as Christian healers between from the third to the fourth century. They are supposed to be born in a country that belongs to Turkey today. They were buried at Kyrrhus, in the present North Syria, 70 kilometres north of Aleppo. This is testified in a Coptic manuscript from about 324. Already during the fourth century, which means very soon, their veneration was known and it found its way west via Constantinople. It all started at Kyrrhus and in the north of Syria where people hoped to be healed. Shortly after their death Kosmas and Damian became patron saints of the sick and later on patrons of all healing professions. According to tradition the East Roman emperor Justinian was healed in one of the churches at Constantinople dedicated to Kosmas and Damian. In consequence he encouraged their veneration all over the East Roman empire. In the fifth century pope Felix IV. dedicated a big church to Kosmas and Damian, erected in the centre of the antique city of Rome in the area where the Forum Romanum used to be. This church was situated near a place that once was dedicated to Castor and Pollux. It was built on the ruins of an antique library building. Kosmas and Damian came from the east to the west. The centre of veneration north of the Alps was the bishopric at Essen. And so it is up to the present day. This means their veneration found its way from Kyrrhus via Constantinople and Rome to Essen. During the middle ages a widespread tradition of communities named after Kosmas and Damian existed. Their veneration became insignificant during the 19th and 20th century.

Historically the two saints cannot be dated with certainty, but one thing is sure: they worked as Christian healers. This was their charisma. According to one of the traditions, the Syrian

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one, they treated people in hospitals or in surgeries. The legends handed down tell us in colourful stories about their healing activities. One line of tradition also speaks of their death as martyrs. The Orthodox Church venerates three pairs of brothers. According to scientific investigations the different traditions go back to mistakes in copies. Historically they all refer to one pair of brothers who worked as healers. By critical analysis you may conclude that Kosmas and Damian really existed as men of healing.

Kosmas and Damian the healers for free

In Greek the two brothers mostly were called “hoi hagioi anargyroi”, which means those who treat without silver, that is for free. This is a term you will find on many icons representing Kosmas and Damian. It is a short name to identify them up to the present day, a term of genre used in the Orthodox Church for twelve figures of healing, among them Panteleimon (Pantaleon) who is venerated in our country. The most decisive fact about Kosmas and Damian is: they realized and lived the mission Jesus gave to his disciples “The kingdom of heaven is near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.” (Mt 10, 7-8). The reality of God as dawning on us today is associated with the gospel of healing. Kosmas and Damian show to us - as many others coming later have done - that caring for the sick is the essence of following Christ. Stories of healing and of the driving out of demons form an enormous part of the gospel of St Marc. We want to understand better this mission for healing. This is a central idea of the vocation of our community. Therefore our regular meetings always have a biblical subject. Last time we dealt with “healing in the gospel of St Marc”.

Calling Kosmas and Damian “hoi hagioi anargyroi”, that means those who treat free of charge, becomes a sting at a time when any professional act in nursing and medicine is controlled for having the money to afford it. Without question this also has a socially legitimate base. Though being well informed on how our social system works it cannot be accepted that government insurance and its pay alone determine the Christian way of healing. This does not mean to be naïve but to develop alternative ideas.

What does the veneration of these two saints mean today?

Kosmas and Damian as healers following the way of Christ give an example to us. To venerate them therefore means first of all to do with determination what they did: following the Jesuan way of healing. But not that only. As disciples of Jesus we confess in our credo the resurrection of the dead, the mysterious and vivid communion with them who lived before us and those who will come after us. We Christians depict reality in a different way from the usual one. Life does not end with death. The difference between life and death is replaced by life and more life because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Norbert Schuster) Therefore it makes sense even today to be sure of the “friends in a different world” and to place ourselves under their protection and to honour their image by doing what they have done. Therefore in each community service we sing the beatitudes in honour of the two saints while offering the incense. By doing this we make obvious: they are not only a spiritual counterpart but we walk together with them on our way following Christ.

The essentials of the community of Kosmas and Damian

The community decided in their constitution for five characteristic features which may not be altered, not even by the community itself. Meanwhile we understand these characteristic features as our vocation for our time.

1. Veneration of the saint Anargyroi Kosmas and Damian by doing what they did (therapeutic charity service).
2. A life according to the holy scriptures of the first and second testament.
3. Participation in the services of the community in the tradition of the orthodox and western churches once a month.
4. Eating and drinking together according to the meal tradition of Jesus Christ.
5. The engagement of the community and its members is social and without charge (the principle of the Anargyroi).

Whoever wants to join the community must be prepared to take part in their way of following Jesus Christ. This includes practical engagement in therapeutic charity work, meditation of the Holy Scripture and taking part in the monthly community gatherings. The community is open for all Christians who try to realize in their lives the five characteristic features of our constitution. You may be a member as long as you want to and are able to realize these five features.

The engagement of the community

Assistance to the sick at Damascus

Since it was founded the community has been in contact with the parish of St Cyril in the old town of Damascus and with the fathers of St Basil who work there. In Syria there does not exist any form of social insurance that can be paid for. Any illness therefore means a massive financial crash even for middle class families. The community supports people who have fallen ill and are in difficulty to raise the necessary costs of treatment. These people either belong to the parish of St Cyril or are known there. The two priests at St Cyril are discrete mediators.

A café for drug addict men and women on Sundays and feast days

During the winter months the community runs a café for drug addict and homeless people in Cologne. They do this together with the "Notel" (this is a place where homeless drug addicts may spend a night (ww.netel-koeln.de). The homeless are enabled to warm up, to drink something and to have a warm meal at times when other supporters in town are closed. Most of the cakes handed out there are baked by members of the Cologne parish of St Maria in Lyskirchen. Members of the community, honorary helpers and professionals from the Notel are on duty every Sunday and on feast days. This project was at test to find out whether members of the community are able to deal with drug addicts. But we also planned to do something else.

Notel Kosmidion ,

a flat for sick homeless drug addict women and men in Cologne

Since October 2008 the community has been engaged in the flat Notel-Kosmidion. It is part of the foundation of the Spiritan fathers at Dormagen-Knechtsteden. How did this come about?

A member of the community has been in charge of the bed place for homeless drug addict men in Cologne for many years. Again and again they had to let people go back into the streets in the morning though they were ill and should have stayed in bed. When at the beginning of their foundation the community considered a suitable project they realized there was a gap in the care for the needy. We did not want to be rivals of other institutions caring for the poor, but wanted to do something no one else had done so far. The Spiritan fathers put the flat at our disposal. The full-time workers in the Notel organize everything and take care that the drug addicts are treated with professional skill. All day long one of them does the background work. The Cologne Medical Service is located in the same house. They decide about an indication for acceptance, and they guarantee the medical and nursing care. All day long members of the community, and honorary helpers as well as people drawing a fee look after the sick in two shifts. The members of the community usually are present twice a month at the Kosmidion. All of them are trained in nursing or some other therapeutic profession. Meanwhile the community also finances a mini-job for work in the flat. As the Kosmidion represents a new concept of care it has been observed scientifically and evaluated by the German Institute of Applied Nursing Research. (www.kodako.de, Kosmidion). This observation has been financed by the community. Meanwhile this goes without saying: Homeless drug addict men and women in Cologne who have a flu, cannot walk, or have to stay in bed after hospital treatment are - if they like - sent to the Kosmidion flat by the Medical Service. The Kosmidion flat with its five beds is a place of rest and protection and it is always well occupied.

Kosmidion was the name of the healing centre at Constantinople. It was also the place where Kosmas and Damian were mainly venerated in the eastern world for centuries. Today this name of the place at Cologne Victoria Street reminds us of the Jesuan myth of healing which the two Anargyroi lived up to. People working at this project start work in the evening with praying Vespers, later on Compline and Laudes in the morning. The community members on duty in the Kosmidion take part in these church prayers in the morning and at night. So we and our guests are included in their praying.

Kosmidion – health care for illegal immigrants

The Essen community which was founded last year considers health care for illegal immigrants. They want this idea to become concrete in the months to come.

After five years we look back in gratitude on our way given us as a present. And we are encouraged to go on.