

Who was Monrad?

I have been bishop in the diocese of Lolland-Falster now for more than 6 years, and my wife and I have lived in the bishop's house in Nykøbing which bishop D. G. Monrad had built in 1850. Although the bishop's house has been renovated several times, it is still influenced by Monrad's artistic and aesthetic sense. Several of the rooms are decorated with wall and ceiling paintings by Constantin Hansen and Hilcker, in the so-called Pompeian style, and there is also a bust and a single portrait painting of Monrad, all of which help preserve the memory of him.

Living in this beautiful house is a daily joy. We try to share the joy with others by having an open house every so often, where the public has an opportunity to see the rooms, and where there is always an opportunity to hear about and discuss Monrad. Who was this man? Most people know that he was a politician, priest and bishop, but who and how was he as a person? Views are often shared, and sometimes the debate can get quite heated. Especially when we talk about the big question: To what extent was Monrad to blame for the defeat in 1864?

Currently I have a three month sabbatical in which I'll be trying to learn more about Monrad. And already at this point I think I can safely say that he - as a politician and as a priest - is more exciting and inspiring, but also far more antagonistic than I knew in advance. So if people have trouble understanding Monrad today, it is quite understandable – because that was also the case while he lived. Then as now opinions were divided, ranging from prostrate admiration and infatuation to endless contempt. Some people were annoyed with Monrad's coarseness, his vanity, self-confidence and conceit, while others fell for his charm, compassion, vast knowledge and great eloquence and work ethic. Monrad was fully aware that he was a complex man, but he saw it more as a human basic condition. He never tired of reminding his surroundings that the human soul is a dark deep which the individual does not and never will comprehend fully. "The heart is a large, complex world - its different regions are ruled by different, or even opposing forces." His good friend, the poet Christian Richardt put it this way, at Monrad's funeral: "... that from whence the human will sprouts, more often resembles an onion than a root. Like the onion with its layers of leaves, it has several parallel motives that only jointly produce the decision and choice." So trying to understand Monrad as a person is like trying to peel an onion. Or, as Jes Fabricius Møller concluded in his excellent article on Monrad brought in KD in July where he quoted historian Paul Engel Toft's word that anyone wanting to understand Monrad fully "must himself have felt the weight of the Cross on his shoulders and the wounds of the nails burning his hands."

Seen in this light there is only one who understands Monrad, namely the Lord! This was also Monrad's own opinion and comfort. One of his favorite scripture texts was first Corinthians Chapter 4, where Paul says: "For me, it does not matter whether I am being judged by you or by any human court, yet, I judge not even myself .. the only one who judges me is the Lord."

Therefore, Monrad actually didn't care about people's opinion and what they said and thought about him. He writes at one point that he even finds a certain pleasure in trouble, too: "They are my touchstone, the test which proves whether I have freed my soul's peace from man's judgment, and whether I put myself so low that no-one else could easily put me any lower."

This indifference to the judgments of others may sometimes seem very arrogant, but there is no doubt that when Monrad felt above people's judgments, it was founded in genuine humility, and what he struggled for and found comfort in was the firm belief that the judgment belongs to God. He was not interested in there being given any special consideration to his episcopal status. In one of his letters he writes about a vicar: "It

seems to me that he puts too much weight on my episcopal dignity, and it bothers me. He seems to be thinking too much about himself; he does not forget himself for the idea and the cause."

For Monrad it was all about forgetting yourself, about engaging 100% and fighting for the cause. This was something he had great respect for, even when it came to his political opponents, and he would cheerfully throw himself into political and theological debates with vigor, biting sarcasm and subtle irony that many of his opponents feared. It has been said about Monrad that he didn't crush his opponent with a club, he chopped him to death! But it was always the cause which was the important thing. He writes somewhere that when he began his political career 40 years earlier, he made it a firm rule never to attack any man's character, and instead to always stick with the individual utterances or actions **without drawing any conclusions about the person's character**, and he continues: "I think I can truthfully claim that I have never broken this basic rule." Whether all his political and theological opponents would agree about this is probably doubtful.

Monrad regarded the mixture of the theological and political involvement as something innate. His father and grandfather were lawyers, and the six previous generations were clergy men. On the other hand he clearly knew how to separate religion and politics. Christianity must not meddle in politics - and vice versa. The role of Christianity is to penetrate the politics like hidden warmth, like grace and truth. Monrad expresses his thoughts on the relationship between the Church and the State in an imaginary speech that he thought the State ought to make to the Church as follows: "I greatly appreciate true Christianity, where you are not only called a Christian, but where you actually are one ... I wish that true Christianity reigned in my parliament ... but I should not forget that there is a difference between you, O Church, and me. Thy kingdom is not of this world, my kingdom is of this world. You know very well, however, that when I have begun with my clumsy hands to work to promote the Christian cause, I have done more harm than good, for I have interfered in your business ... And I must tell you something, my good Church. Don't take this the wrong way, but seriously: You have a bad tendency to fall asleep ... You must stay awake. You are the one who must make sure that the sacred fire is not extinguished in this country ... You are the one who must make sure that the grace of baptism is acquired so that it will live in a true and genuine Christianity, so that its spirit pervades the national character, so that the spirit of Christ will live in the popularly elected. On you and you alone rests the responsibility, if this does not happen - for you, not I, is the Bride of Christ and the bearer of Christianity in this country."

Monrad's thoughts on politics and religion are still relevant and inspiring. In the political field, for instance, he made the observation that a minister should only be allowed to hold his office for one year. He writes: *"There is a big difference between a minister's job and all other jobs. When a man has acquired a farm, an estate, a shoemaker's or greengrocer's shop, an office job etc., he will remain undisturbed in his occupation, and he will gnaw the bone allotted to him by fate. But a Minister! He is surrounded by, if not hundreds, then at least a dozen voracious people who will watch him greedily and try to grab his bone. How could we give a minister peace to gnaw his bone? That is the big question which has tormented me. I know no better solution than the following. No-one can be a minister for more than a year. When a minister has been in his job for one year, he must resign. Anyone who has been a minister can only be re-appointed to the same post after a number of years (3? 6?) ... I admit of course that this proposal has its difficulties and that a man will often be prevented from setting in motion certain things, which he might be able to initiate, if he had a longer tenure. On the other hand, knowing that he has to resign soon might encourage the man to do his utmost to exert his power and energy during the time given to him. Which people have achieved the greatest feats? One must answer: the Roman. Well, the Romans achieved these feats with consuls, praetors and so on appointed for one year."*

Monrad fought to the last for the Church to have its own constitution, and he found it embarrassing that the Government was acting as a synod. "We could not deny that it has an almost comical touch, when we see an undenominational Parliament acting in all seriousness as a synod."

The church for its part must also be aware of its responsibility. On his appointment as bishop he wrote in a pastoral letter: "Time brings new and major tasks for the Church to resolve in our country as well; the more that the secular ties previously surrounding the church are loosened, the more necessary it becomes for zeal to replace the authority of the Law; the more radical the changes anticipated by the Church, the more vigour and energy is necessary if it is not to fade away; the more turbulent the times, the firmer and more sincere the Church must appear."

As a Bishop Monrad was both firm and sincere. He was an accomplished and highly esteemed preacher, with a warmth and fervor, without being "corny". He demanded that the priests should "preach the faith, even believers," and he writes about a pastor whose sermon he had heard: "He emphasized strongly the general sinfulness, without adequately emphasizing the difference between those who are on the road to perdition and those who are on the path to salvation."

Monrad found rest and strength in prayer and wrote the book: "From the world of prayer" which was translated into several languages and was reprinted many times. He was particularly keen on the 5th Prayer of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The sub-clause was important: It is only when we forgive those who trespass against us that we can believe that God will forgive us. Monrad initially released a little book on this subject and was met with fierce criticism. But as he said, he was completely baffled as to why he should be criticized by fellow Christians for sticking to Christ's own explanation (Mt 6.14 to 15)! Therefore he later decided to write a major 763 page thesis about this one issue, and in this he argues his case clearly and convincingly by drawing on the Church Fathers and Luther.

Monrad's life was changeable and unpredictable, and so too was his posthumous reputation. And he didn't even have a grave site. It was destroyed many years ago when Nykøbing cemetery was closed down, and a few years ago a supermarket was built on the site of the cemetery. The following quote by Monrad might be a fitting comment on this:

"It is a short-lived peace that we grant the deceased. It should last till doomsday, but lasts only a dozen years. Then the grave is dug up, bones are thrown about, and the remains of the deceased must give way to the new occupant. It is curious to see how custom dulls people's feelings, even in those with the most sensitive disposition. If you cannot afford to let the dead keep their homes, maybe you should remove all the remains from the graves due to be disturbed that particular year in one go and then assemble them in a common grave. That might be within people's means. Then even the poor who cannot afford to pay the stipulated fee for the maintenance of graves would know where the remains of their deceased loved ones rest."

In other words we don't know where Monrad's grave is. But one thing is certain: He is not forgotten. And certainly not here in the bishop's manor.