

HONORING FR. QUENTIN HAKENEWERTH

by Robert Ballinger

The 2012 Rose Louise Ballinger Memorial Language Scholarship

Preamble: Each year I identify a person to honor who has made a significant impact on my life and career. In doing so, I intend to encourage college students to be alert to persons in their lives who have had or who will have an equally important influence.

This year's honoree is Father Quentin Hakenewerth, S. M.

I first met Fr. Hakenewerth while I was at the Marianist Scholasticate at St. Mary's University. During the academic year 1964-65 Fr. Hakenewerth was the chaplain at the Scholasticate. As a man of vision, Fr. Hakenewerth knew that the future of the Province lay in the "houses of formation" where young religious members were being educated and prepared to join school communities. Fr. Hakenewerth soon developed a reputation among the college-age brothers as a speaker with fresh, innovative, and well thought-out ideas. I, for one, hung on his every word and have long since assimilated his thinking into my spiritual and intellectual life. There is one talk in particular he gave that I remember as clearly as if it were delivered yesterday. In it, Fr. Hakenewerth explained the difference between *sympathy* and *empathy*. He said that when someone is suffering an emotional crisis and expresses that suffering to someone else, that person is hoping for healing. However what usually happens is that the listener *sympathizes*, that is, shares in the emotional discomfort. That identification with the sufferer does not help to alleviate the discomfort. On the other hand, a person who *empathizes* starts off by *sympathizing* in order to affirm the sufferer's plight and then begins carefully to ask questions to help the sufferer to raise the discourse from the emotional to the intellectual level so that the sufferer begins to realize a solution to the crisis. I remember the simple graphics Fr. Hakenewerth used to illustrate his explanation which helped me to visualize clearly what he was saying. Since then I have heard many people try to explain *empathy*: from the simplistic, in which *sympathy* and *empathy* are virtually synonymous, to the scholarly, in which *empathy* becomes complex and obtuse. None has matched Fr. Hakenewerth's explanation for its clarity and usefulness.

Over the years, I have used *empathy* as defined by Fr. Hakenewerth to help hundreds of students. I will cite two examples from my personal life.

In 1987 my wife Ginny began to work on a doctoral degree in Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development at the College of Education at The Ohio State University. By 1992 she had finished her course work and was working on the last chapter of her dissertation when she experienced a moment of crisis. She had wanted to finish her degree by the end of the winter quarter. When she realized that she was not able to do that, she "panicked" and felt that she was not going to complete her degree. Realizing how serious her emotional crisis was, I knew that the only solution was for me to empathize with her. After a long conversation over dinner at our favorite German

restaurant, she conquered her emotions, clarified her plans, and finished her degree that spring. When she returned full time to her high school, she was made the Global Languages Department Chair and inspired her colleagues to institute a proficiency-based language program that, after twenty years, is still in use today. Her success there led her to be hired by the Ohio Department of Education to be the state curriculum director for foreign languages. During her seven-year tenure she developed Ohio's first curriculum model for foreign language instruction, spoke to hundreds of teachers throughout Ohio, and was president of the National Association of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages for two years. All this and more would not have happened if Fr. Hakenewerth had not equipped me with a useful understanding of *empathy*.

The second example of just how powerfully Fr. Hakenewerth's words influence me today happened this past year. Although Ginny and I have been both retired since 2002, we still have a keen interest in educational issues. In January, 2011, we had just read *Waiting for Superman* which ends with a call to action. I have always been inspired by Ginny's remarkable accomplishment of instituting a proficiency-based curriculum for foreign languages in her high school. I believe that what she and her colleagues did has broad application to school reform. So, in March I made an appointment to speak to the superintendent of our local school district. I thought that he would surely welcome my offer to "reform" his schools. Although he listened politely, I could tell by his glassy stare that did not "get it." In fact, afterwards, he did not return my two phone calls, nor answer my two hand-written notes to him. My first reaction was to feel disheartened, rejected, and angry at him for not recognizing the gift I was offering him. After a few days of wallowing in my negative emotions, I realized I needed to re-think my approach. Instead of blaming him for not understanding my message, I needed to blame myself for not presenting my ideas better. So, after making an advice call to another superintendent, reading (that is, studying) two practical books on marketing, and spending two months crafting my improved presentation, I was ready to try again. I knew I could not go back to the superintendent. So I called a school board member and set up an appointment to speak to him. With a new approach, I knew within ten minutes that he "got the message." Ginny and I talked with him for two hours. He promised to champion our plan. He talked the superintendent into giving me a second chance to make my case. This time I introduced **A B Ready**, a team-approach to helping students achieve better grades so that they will be ready to do college work. Since mid-October, I have been working with twenty-five students most of whom have improved their grades and some of whom are now making all A's and B's. Some even want to recruit other students to join **A B Ready**; others want to tell middle school students so that they will take their studies more seriously. **A B Ready** is growing with the support of parents, teachers, and administrators. Again, all this would not have happened if Fr. Hakenewerth had not given me a clear and useful definition of *empathy*.

In honoring Fr. Hakenewerth, I want to thank him for being an educational leader, a man of vision, and a teacher. His words to me during his conferences formed my thinking and helped to define my mission as an educator. His influence on me has benefited countless more people. As my work with **A B Ready** continues, his inspiration will still have even more impact well into the future.

Written by Robert Ballinger, January 5, 2012