



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

Fifth Dialogue on Science – 9 to 11 October 2006
in Engelberg, Switzerland

Welcoming address

Abbot Dr. Berchtold Müller

Contact:

Benediktinerkloster

6390 Engelberg



Ladies and gentlemen, I bid you a warm welcome to Engelberg and our abbey.

The future of energy, the question of the resources that will be available to us in the future, is a vital issue. We invest a lot of time and money aimed at stimulating business and growth, and at the same time improving the quality of life, even though the ever greater exponential increase in the consumption of energy and resources poses a serious threat to our quality of life.

There have undoubtedly been many successes in the improved use of energy. But as soon as there is a power cut, or when smog lies over the central regions of Switzerland, or when the price of heating oil and the cost of petrol rise, then more and more people notice not just how important this question of future energy and resources is. But also that our "system" cannot survive without new, innovative, efficient and reasonable responses and solutions.

We are in the process of restoring the abbey church and the inner courtyard. After about 270 years, the yard was in need of renovation. The interior of the church was last renovated around 1877. During the preparations and in the course of this renovation work, the construction history of 1730 and the renovation of 1877 were reviewed. Fortunately, we still have excellent documentation on both projects: contracts, plans, journals and bills are all available.

An astonishing piece of information to emerge from these documents is the amount of energy that was used for this large project in this remote mountain valley – where there was not even a navigable road until the 19th century.

On one hot August day in 1729, the old abbey burned down. The very next day, the abbot and chapter decided to rebuild it and make it even larger and more beautiful than its predecessor. A search was made for the master builder and the craftsmen who best matched their expectations. And although the new abbey does not conform to the baroque style that was current at the time, it does display its own characteristic style and balanced dimensions.

The construction of the new abbey took ten years and required huge efforts. The master builder was responsible for the craftsmen, who he preferred to recruit from Vorarlberg. The abbey organized the provision of materials: stone, lime, wood, vast tree-trunks for the roof-



truss and the floor beams, nails and several tons of copper and tin, plus a little silver for the bell-founding.

Apparently, there was already a sawmill there providing hydro-power at the time. The slate slabs for the corridors and tens of thousands of rounded slate tiles for the roofs were ordered from Engelberg farmers, who understood a thing or two about stone masonry and produced the tiles on a piece-work basis. The result is impressive, even by today's standards, and led to an imposing, stable construction.

The history of the building is an example of how achievements and improvements in quality of life were entirely possible in a pre-industrialized world. And this was achieved with the application of a lot of human energy and resources from the surrounding area, without the use of machines that consume non-renewable resources and energy. This building is not of course a model for the future. But when the era based on wasteful use of energy and resources comes to an end, then a look back at history can serve to encourage and point out that innovative and intelligent solutions are possible. And also that the use of energy and raw materials can be managed in a very much more economical way than we have been used to in the past. And that more consideration should also be paid to the impact on the environment and the limited nature of resources. Perhaps there are - we certainly hope so - some innovative, intelligent and discriminating solutions along the lines of less wastefulness and a more sustainable quality of life.

In the discussion and search for such possibilities I wish you every success and lots of enjoyment.