



A look at redemption from a different perspective (1. Corinthians, 15, 10f)

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."

Dear readers,

Whenever I have time, I like a stroll through the bookstores. And I am amazed at the ever-growing number of titles in the economics department dealing with such things as *motivation training*, *personality training*, *human resources development*, *capacity for teamwork* – to include all the promoting processes that go with it. What helps the individual to make the very, the absolute best of him/herself? Abilities, talents, which up to that moment were lying dormant ... how can they be developed?

Actually, what we have here is a typically Christian subject, since Christ Himself in one of his parables spoke about talents which a man entrusted to his servants. The biblical word "talent" in its original meaning described a monetary unit. Using this term has become so natural with us nowadays, that hardly anybody would connect it to its origin, to where it came from.

In my work with families and adolescents I am always amazed at how much joy, confidence and growth in self-esteem follow whenever people try out something new and – after some time of training and exercising – find themselves rewarded by success. E.g.:

- Mothers, who, after long years of child-raising, want to 'get back on the job' and pass through their computer training successfully;
- Young adolescents who – for the first time – take on the role of interpreter at an international conference;
- Pupils who – after years of preparation – come out as winners during table-tennis championships;
- Completion of an apprenticeship with distinction, conferment of a degree/diploma; passing the driving test.

At first glance, all that has nothing to do with God, and the majority will frankly admit that the measure of success (of a project) will depend on the measure of effort put into it. "The Holy Ghost won't shed its blessings into bottomless holes", those were the words of one professor trying to make us go forward in our studies. But at second glance, all our efforts to reach out for the best in our lives have something to do with God after all. Because - after all - it is His will that we may "have life and have it to the full" (John, 10:10).

Naturally, most students, when they believe in God, will do their utmost in praying - prior and during the exams. The Holy Ghost is expected to give them strength when it's their time to face the challenge of having to pass through the tests.

And yet – the same students freely admit that they would feel guilty if they would turn to God only in case of need. That is why the prayer of thanksgiving and praise – no matter what the occasion – should always come first in man's relationship with God.

Unfortunately, this circle of curiosity, of wanting to try something new, of applying an effort, of reaping success, of gaining self-reliance and self-esteem followed by desire to learn even more ... a circle which is totally natural in its own right ... is sometimes liable to disruption: Feelings of insecurity, for example, lack of self-confidence, of endurance, periods of doubt, a trend towards comfort and phlegm ... all of these can work together, producing that very *downward spiral* which – unopposed – leads into embitterment and self-contempt. An

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individual caught in that spiral tends to accuse the others, the environment and even God as the ones solely responsible for his misery.

And even humbleness, if misunderstood – combined with the wrong idea of what is meant by atonement and the Imitation of Christ – can lead up to devastating forms of *self-sabotage*.

Also, the Church's concern for the poor and weak is sometimes apt to conjure the erroneous idea in the minds of young adolescents in the sense of "efficiency plays no part in the ecclesiastic environment." By the same token, it is possible that in fighting idolisation of the *achievement principle*, too much weight is put on the whole issue, the result being that the individual's mere desire to become efficient is considered as something negative to begin with.

And then there are those testimonies of mature Christians whose hearts are filled with amazement and gratitude at what for them is 'God in action', their own share being small and 'nothing much to speak of' (they say), *although*, in fact, they have done their utmost in serving God and the family of man. That, too, can be misunderstood to the effect that ... all I have to do is wait for God to work his miracles on me.

Giving up self-sabotage

Perhaps in view of all the many possible as well as actual, everyday misunderstandings, it becomes clearer what Nietzsche meant when he said: "For me to believe in their saviour, the Christians would want a more *redeemed* look on their faces." In my function as a clerical or spiritual escort, I witness quite often how Christians find themselves struggling – again and again – to get to the bottom of their individual patterns of self-sabotage in order to overcome them, by the grace of God.

For me as a pastor, one of the highlights in my work is when people – on their pathway towards inner freedom – have reached another milestone and then tell me so, joyfully...

- be it, that they have learnt to *'forgive and let go'*, at last, from the bottom of their heart,
- be it, that they have overcome certain fears,
- be it, that they are able to say 'yes' to themselves, to their partner or to their current life situation – freely and gladly,
- be it, that they can face challenges which they used to run away from in the past.

These steps in growth towards inner freedom also come under what is called "redemption" – as a facet thereof. *Redemption* is a lifelong process in the course of which God does His work with us while we have to cooperate with this redeeming, this rescuing Grace in an *enlightened* manner. With us volunteering on this enlightened approach, the knowledge and insights of modern psychology - as long as they are in accordance with the Christian image or conception of Man - may prove helpful.

The two sides of Redemption

And yet there are those others who clearly have second thoughts about accepting today's trends such as motivation training, personality training, human resources development, capacity for teamwork and the promotion thereof simply as optional forms of self-redemption. The rejection is based on the correct tenet which says that we have got to be redeemed and can no way redeem ourselves!

It is really not quite simple – neither theoretically nor in one's own daily practice – to find out what would be the correct balance between the ability to accept God's Grace and the ability to cooperate (with God's Grace) ... the balance between accepting redemption and being prepared to contribute to this end from one's own effort. In other words ... the correct balance

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between "Fiat Mihi" – "may it be to me as you have said" – and the powerful "Volo" as described by Ignatius of Loyola in his Handbook of Retreats.

Our dogmatic professor once talked about ways how to define, how to visualize the interaction between the individual's own initiative and the redeeming effect of heavenly Grace and he said that that would depend on the person's age. In younger years, emphasis would be placed more on one's own initiative whereas with growing older, a person would more readily open up to 'God in Action'.

When in 1912, Father Kentenich – Founder of the Schönstatt Movement – began working with young adolescents as their spiritual escort and mentor, he placed great emphasis on the necessity of independent action, of *initiative*. By staying in daily vivid contact he introduced them into the habit of keeping a written "spiritual agenda of the day" (comparable to a routinely controlled diary / translator's note). Based on the Jesuit tradition, he adopted that Order's custom of the so-called *particular examination*, the aim being the individual student's particular resolution ... something to be kept in mind by him and watched over by means of a daily written check-up. Father Kentenich thus invited his pupils to 'keep an eye' on their innermost desires, to listen closely to their inner voice, to *count* their life's blessings and in this way find out what is their personal, their very own *ideal*. This 'Personal Ideal' – represented in a personal symbol or motto – was meant to focus the individual's desires, thus representing the epitome of successful life. In those days, the term "self-fulfilment" had not become common usage yet. But it is exactly that what it is all about – however – with the Christian faith as its fundamental frame and foundation. In other words ... when I assume God as the Creator and Redeemer as *Oneness* – consistent and conflict-free - *then* the longings and desires within my heart are, in fact, the reflection of His will. Then they point out to me my vocation. And for me it is the best way to serve God in that I develop my potentials and place them into His service. True – what is called the original sin and what is accumulated over a lifetime in terms of *own* trespasses, obscure and encumber this process of self-awareness and self-realization in accordance with God's will. But it is a process only temporarily overshadowed ... not a process rendered impossible.

At the very bottom of my soul, intuition will tell me where to go or what to do to find fulfilment – true fulfilment – in life. It is a pleasure to witness the dynamics of an individual's soul transformation being activated ... a process that begins with people bringing into line the mass of their innermost longings and aspirations with the *art* of moving forward in tiny concrete steps, while at the same time developing discipline as well as flexibility in the choice of these steps. This – in the end – is what may be called a 'miracle of transformation in rates'. Hardly ever have I met anybody who – similar to St. Paul on his way to Damask - found themselves turned upside down and inside out momentarily. And even he – following his lightning conversion – had to undergo a number of instructions and talks with Ananias before ...*he is a chosen vessel, to bear Christ's name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel* (comp. Acts 9, 15).

Positive changes are possible – at any time

Quite a few times I came into contact with people who – by adopting Father Kentenich's spiritual instructions and guidance and translating those into their daily lives – found themselves rewarded with remarkable progress – both in terms of spiritual growth and healing. Once the youngsters have become grown-ups, this process often takes longer because by frequent repetition of their errors they may have achieved a certain perfection even with those and then find it hard to break from habits that have become dear to them. An

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exception from this rule may be found with the forty to forty-five year old ones, where considerable changes are met within a relatively brief period.

But no matter if 16 or 65 – changes are possible any time. I was sure surprised to read the heading of a title story of one November edition of the German weekly "Focus", which said: "Everybody can change – even at age thirty-plus". And the subtitle said: "An old dogma in psychology has served its time. At age thirty, the development of our character is by no means completed."

It was not so much the content of the article, which surprised me but the fact that a weekly magazine should deal with this topic in the way it did. Whosoever reads the biographies of our Saints - or other outstanding Christians, who have not been officially canonized as yet, with some attention, will find it quite natural that humans – by meeting God and keeping constant contact with him – will definitely change. Growth is a sign of liveliness, of vitality, but – there are limitations. And how I go about these limitations, which I have become aware of as my own, will determine in the end as to whether I am going to develop into a happy, content individual or an embittered cynic instead.

In working with adolescents, Father Kentenich came to witness that - influenced by his impulses and guided by his spiritual and religious support - a great number of these youngsters learnt to unfold their inherent natural powers – before anything else. Then, a point was reached – sometimes sooner, sometimes later – where the bar, i.e. the limit, couldn't be pushed any higher ... no matter how big the effort. A depletion of resources had taken place. Ergo - only when this perception of his own limits had become a painful reality, would the young pupil be ready to accept a form of love which was compassionate. And thus, it takes this very moment in time to fully understand that God's love isn't something which I have *to deserve* – through special effort. Only at that moment will I become aware of the freedom it can bring *to know* that I am accepted by God and that His 'yes' to me will – in the end – help *me* to accept myself, my *own* self. It may sound paradoxical and still: In accepting my own limits can I rise *above* those limits!

Developing a sense for what is best in me

An example to clarify what is meant by this: There was this woman suffering over years from an urge to compensate what she considered as mental strain, stress and disappointments by (*over*-)eating. Her body's reaction, of course, was the putting on of excessive weight which is due to comfort eating. And this, in turn, provided one more reason to submit and get settled in negative feelings. Once this woman learnt to acknowledge her limits and was ready to tell herself honestly: "Better heavy than grumpy all the time", she had freed her outlook to see all the beauty within and around. This disciplined awareness her inner self - precious and beautiful - helped her to grow in self-esteem and self-confidence. After a while, she noticed that coping with tensions, disappointments and other hurtful emotions had become easier for her and that the urge for seeking consolation in extra food and snacks had left her. And all of a sudden, her renewed self-reliance made her feel strong enough to pick up jogging on a regular basis. And – believe it or not – weight reduction became absolutely natural with her. Sure – once in a while, there may be phases of struggling but all in all, the woman enjoys her newly won freedom and she understands very well the words St. Paul wrote in his 1st Letter to the Corinthians: "¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect."

No matter if the limitations faced at the moment are of a more physical or more mental nature ... no matter if a person is hooked on smoking or television – the road to freedom, the road to salvation, the road to fullness of life is mapped out along these stages:

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- Activation of all natural, God-given abilities;
- Realization (awareness) of own limits as painful;
- Moving one's focus from feelings of wretchedness to God's gracious love and joyfully accepting that Love;
- With a renewed sense of self-esteem as God's beloved child, a fresh start is now possible – the purpose being either to push aside any of those limitations or - to open up to other fields (of activities) where joyful fulfilment lies in store for me.

Adopting a more relaxed approach in dealing with (feelings of) guilt

This process can be made easier when undergone by the help of an experienced *soul escort*. Being caught up in the middle of such a process oneself, one often lacks what could be called a *comprehensive overview* (of the situation). Also, what is missing in these early phases of development – of a development spiral, rather – is the experience, and therefore, the impressions or whatever the individual goes through, can easily be misinterpreted. It is somehow similar to sports: When a person is serious about training, then the support of a trainer will not be looked upon as something that one can do without. And so it is especially during the second stage (see above passage) that the individual looking for help will appreciate being assisted by somebody reflecting the Invisible Love of an Invisible God in the way he acts and speaks. It simply feels good to have somebody on one's side who believes in the good in me ... *more* than I myself am able to ... at the moment.

It is obvious that such a process, in the course of which we place all our endeavours into rising above our limitations, cannot go on forever. Some things will stay with us. We are but human creatures and as such we are mortal. It happens that in our attitude towards others we fall short of what is considered as *standard* and fail to make up for it (which sometimes is not even possible). The deacon to be known as St. Stephen *remained* dead – even after Paul's Conversion. And yet it is part of our redemption that all these histories of limitation and of guilt *need not* paralyze us nor deprive us from courage once and for all times. Since God, the Almighty, the Unlimited, the *Forever Loving* God loves a poor fellow like me - and that even more so in the knowledge of my guilt and limitations (comp. Romans 5:20) – I should feel much more free and relaxed to deal with the latter in a less sinister way than I would otherwise. For comparison: We are something like a round ball with dents in it. Some of these dents can be smoothed out by the grace of God whereas others remain. And now God takes us into his hands, saying: And *I* can get you to roll anyway – dent or no dent.

Expressing, reflecting redemption and helping others to find it

We may formulate it this way: God offers *his* redemption, *his* salvation to every human being. Once this redeeming process has matured to a certain level in one's development, God will call on *us* so that we come to help our fellow brethren on their respective pathway to redemption. What Christ has offered to humanity when on the Cross *once and for all times* ... namely that immeasurable host of compassionate, of both divine *and* human love ... *that* we shall pass on. The chain reaction initiated by Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection continues and extends itself far into the future – through us. Only against this background may it become clear why to some Christians it seems to be a big concern to better comprehend the role of the Blessed Mother as one of a *co-redeemer*, as one to be worshipped as such. What is manifested in and radiated by her as the One completely redeemed from the outset, implies the one universal message, equally valid to all Christians: The more room we make for the ultimate goal of Redemption within our hearts, the better we can help others to find it as well.

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And so we may allow ourselves to be filled with wonder now and then, while joining Paul in his words of gratitude: "10But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect."

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(Ins Englische übersetzt von Katharina M.)