

# Hopeful Living



## Christians enjoy God's Company

Following a class on spiritual retreats, one of the participants commented: "That was real good ... to take the time and opportunity to find one self able to enjoy God's nearness." Ever since that day, I refer to this particular experience in my lectures, and some of the reactions are quite amazing: "I have never thought about my faith in this manner!" or – "Up to now I have more or less just looked at the price I had to pay as a church member, *whereas now* – I find that my faith gives me *Joy* – and *that* is new."

And yet – the *life process* referred to here is by no means *new*. In fact, already Paul wrote about it in his 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 2: 9 f: "...And we say unto you ...the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. And God has revealed them unto us by his Spirit." What is meant here is not a promise of happiness waiting after death but to be experienced in this life - here and now. The overall context makes this clear.

### Enjoying requires leisure

Ignatius v. Loyola left us this formulation: "It is not knowledge nor is it *more* knowledge what satisfies the soul ... rather is it the tasting and savouring of the things divine.

The "tasting and savouring" addresses the senses, and it is about these when we speak of enjoyment. Enjoyment calls for a certain amount of leisure, of being at ease. Enjoy something "hurry, hurry" simply doesn't work. Enjoyment includes the feeling of pleasant anticipation same as letting it *linger* for a while longer and – of course – the knowledge of being undisturbed.

Several times in the past I have arranged weekend retreats for wine growers. Apart from the hours set aside for prayers and lectures, Saturday night saw the professional tasting and savouring of their home-made wines. Since some of the participants had been functioning as jurors at prize-giving ceremonies, they were able to give pretty detailed commentaries. I was amazed to hear about the wealth of tastes and flavours opening up to him who is a true connoisseur and that for me was truly instructive. A similar experience I had through contacts with a meat producer; he is retired meanwhile. I was very impressed, learning about what people working in the sausage and other smoked-meats business have got to keep an eye on.

In music-loving Austria, much is done for young people so they may find a more direct or even intimate approach to music in all its expressions – to include the classical one – and so they are guided to learn to play an instrument, join a choir or - in an in-depth listening process - become familiar with various musical works.

No matter in which way and through which media *enjoyment* is experienced – be it the ear, the eye or the gum – proper training will always enhance the experience.

### And what about enjoying the Divine?

Over the history of spirituality, there have always been communities, fellowships or individual convents that had become famous for their mystics – both male and female. Among the most famous were: Theresa von Avila and Johannes vom Kreuz (Carmelites), Franziskus and Bonaventura (Franciscans), Gertrud von Helfta and Mechthild von Hackeborn, Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, Brigitta of Sveden, Nikolaus von Flue – to name but a few.

All these religious geniuses had one thing in common, namely, that God blessed them with intense ("peak") experiences, so that they became deeply aware of God's nearness, God's greatness, God's love, wisdom, omnipotence and even of God's plans ... and all that of a reality that filled them with joy, yes – a soul-felt joy. And yet – this God-given experience was never an end in itself ...rather did God choose this channel to pass a message to the believers at that particular time. And in times which are so much focussed on the individual's



successful performance as in ours, it gives much comfort to re-discover God's mercy as, for example, Sister Faustina\* (1915-1938) was blessed to do.

Some mystics were able to give a precise description of their path to this joyful experience of the Divinity – such as Theresa v. Avila and Johannes vom Kreuz. Subsequently, many have tried to follow on this path of soul development and ... they have reached their goal.

However – God is unlimited. Sometimes, he sheds his favours and takes people by surprise like in the case of St Paul when on his way to Damascus or the French atheist André Frossard. Others have searched and struggled for a long time before God finally revealed himself to them. Some have run away from God like Charles de Foucauld but have found their way back via a chain of experiences, talks and meetings. Edith Stein was a believing Jew, then became an atheist and in the end adopted the Christian faith and joined the Order of the Carmelite.

## Experiencing the Divine at first hand

So we can speak of an age-long and manifold tradition within the church, where individual Christians experienced the reality of God at first hand, so to speak, and not without bearing witness to what they had learnt, while more often than not this led to the foundation of communities which were characterized by a very special type of piety and devotion.

Apart from this rich tradition, there were – and still are – certain trends under the influence of which people's faith becomes reduced to mere decency, the fulfilment of one's duties, making sacrifices, a strict moral life and all that formalism that goes with it. Yes, these trends may very well coexist in one and the same parish, which often leads up to considerable strain and stress. But for clarity's sake: I *don't* mean to say that faith is possible without morals. Meeting Jesus led many people to *re-orientate* their lives totally, radically. Conversion goes hand in hand, normally, with the acquisition of a more humane conduct and attitude. But it all begins with meeting up with God. It is this encounter which gave people the strength to break away from old, destructive and self-destructive patterns of behaviour.

The experience of being loved unconditionally – and nothing else – enables humans to rise above themselves. Paul gives us a first-hand description of this soul process when he writes in Galatians, 2:20: "...Nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the son of God, **who loved me and gave himself for me.**"

In the further course of this meditation I don't intend to use the words 'mysticism', 'mystic' and 'mystical' any more. They stand for realities which - in their sublimity – lie far beyond modern man's every-day usage. But one thing we can keep in mind: I am free to think about God. I can talk about Him, I can write about Him; that is *one* possible track by which I can approach God. And – I can experience Him ... in various ways and intensities I can get in touch with the countless attributes of this Infinite God.

## Experiencing God instead of talking about Him

In this meditation about how to enjoy God's company, the idea is not so much about *contemplating* as it is about *experiencing* God and about digesting the experience. In times where the event experience has become so much the focus of attention that we even talk about an *event society*, we should not hesitate to activate an 'event link' with God. Of course, there are those "old stagers", i.e. traditional pastors who view this trend of an "event-oriented" clergy with great scepticism. And they are correct in observing, that parish members who get all enthused about organizing and celebrating a long liturgy night are not likely to participate in the regular Sunday-morning service next day. It is true that some may develop a spiritual "sweet tooth" this way and then be on the constant lookout for "specials"

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to consume and – in the worst case – drop some derogatory remarks regarding the good old "daily bread", offered to them in their parishes.

While I am fully aware of developments of that sort – however undesirable and risky they may seem – I would nevertheless speak in defence of any attempts aimed at helping people within the Church to find what could be named the 'in-depth religious experience.' Let us take a glance at a variety of "methods".

## *1. Nature trips which can lead us to the Creator-God*

A few years ago, I spent time in the mountains with a group of young people. Having reached a summit one night, we set up camp right there under the open sky and early next morning headed out for the next higher mountain top so to be there in time for the sunrise. As we stood and waited, I had to ask for silence more than one time but – eventually – those moments spent in waiting for the light seemed to have a magic of their own, and everyone in the group was overwhelmed at the sight of the sun coming up over the horizon.

Another group - another experience. For me, a starlit winter's night without man-made means of illumination provided the setting for this notion, this intuitive awareness I felt of the limitless grandeur and quiet beauty of a starry night sky.

Presently, I find myself at the Baltic Sea, walking along the shore every day. Whenever – after passing over a sand dune – I get an open view of the sea in front of me, I just stop in my walk and take it all in ... this boundless horizon all stretched out before me. And also while I am walking, I take these stops, these halts, from time to time, just to look round ... at the waves, at the sky ... and I get an idea of what it could mean when we say: God is infinite. And I have made the following observation: When I manage in the mornings to keep my usual curiosity as to the latest world news under control, and take the time instead to quietly tune myself to my shore-walk experience, *then* everything becomes more intensive even. Or when – due to the backlight effect of the setting sun - the sea-washed pebble stones have this particular sparkle, *then*, you feel, you are left speechless at so much beauty.

God's creation – the way it is laid out and conceived – not only makes sense but is also beautiful. Now – while I am on vacation and at ease – I take the time to enjoy. And deep inside I am beginning to feel closer to the Lord-Creator who has planned and provided all that ... *for us*. Father Kentenich in this context created the term "attachment to matter as prophetic messengers". By my loving nature in its manifold forms and appearances, I become *attached* to her. And when I am conscious of the Creator behind it all, then – for me – the stars, clouds and ocean waves become little prophets, witnesses, so to speak – whether mute or audible - of God's greatness, omnipotence and, in particular, of God's sense for beauty. Paul, in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, points at this possibility to find the Creator via the creation.

## *2. Becoming witness and mediator of God's redeeming grace.*

However important these nature trips may be for me personally – my best recuperation I get outside – my preferred place where to meet God is and remains my fellow man's heart. Sure – being a pastor, I find myself in a privileged position. For ... what profession is there, if any, which predestines its holder to communicate trustworthiness – encouraging people to be frank and outspoken?

When people come to me, it is normally because they have a problem ... with themselves, with others, with the world at large. The one may have the obsessive idea of having no other way out but by committing suicide, another one may have become estranged from his (her)

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marriage partner, a third one may feel at a complete loss as to the future – job-wise and otherwise. By taking these generalizations further, we will eventually arrive at one common denominator, namely: What we really suffer from is our own state of mental bondage, our lack of redemption as well as that of our fellow men, of society in general. Thus, when providing pastoral escort, (my) first steps might be as follows:

- Helping the person concerned to escape from his/her self-pity;
- showing the person concerned that looking for scapegoats won't get him/her any way further but taking on responsibility instead is what is needed;
- or – I encourage him not to run from himself but face the challenge. To say 'yes' to reality, 'yes' to what is ... seems to be impossible, seems beyond the abilities of the one seeking help and advice.
- Some people obviously do need a little compassion and encouragement in their present pain. And the next step would be to definitely let go of someone loved or of a project that failed.
- Helping others who wish to progress inwardly, mentally or spiritually, yet feel at a loss as how and where to begin.

## **The world needs more pastors**

In this passage, I deliberately use the word 'pastor' instead of 'priest'. Fact is that we all can be pastors for each other. Many Christians are definitely gifted by nature in that they pass on to others what they have experienced, what they have worked hard for in the course of their lives, what they have suffered and what has made up the essence of their praying. And a large number of Christians have undergone additional training so to become even more competent. Sure – for me being a priest, there is my function of administering the sacraments given to man by Divine Grace. To me – administering the sacrament of penance holds the most intensive experience. And therefore, a remarkable interaction or synergy exists between the two: the pastoral administration of the sacraments on the one hand and the instrumental – or personal – mediation of the gifts of Grace on the other. And because of that there is no reason why we should prefer the one over the other.

Regarding myself, I have been transferred back to Germany after eleven years of service as a pastor in Austria. On parting, I received many letters from people wherein they told me in which cases in particular I had helped them to find their path to greater freedom, inwardly. Some things I was conscious of – others I had long since forgotten. And I enjoyed these testimonies of God's work of redemption within the souls of his children, and I read them in humble gratitude. And the question remains unanswered as to who really helped whom ... who gave more? Father Kentenich, Founder of the Schönstatt Movement, on the occasion of his 25<sup>th</sup> priesthood anniversary, gave the following – approximate – formulation: "When you want to know where the secret of over-rich, over-abundant fruitfulness lays hidden, then I am to tell you: "It is in this deep, mutual linkage or tie between the souls. And with regard to your former question ... "Where does all the wealth of the heart and of the spirit come from?" ... my answer to you is: An individual who loves, who places his love into the heart of God ... will – to a certain degree – have a share in the boundless, immeasurable love of the Divine. And if something does not make you poor by sharing it, then it is this loving ... the warmth of an open heart. And I want you to know ... all of you who have been demanding things of me – whether outspoken, whether in silence - ... I want you to know that if it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't have become what I am today. You must not underestimate this one particular item, this one chain of thought. Once again: If you want to know the source of wealth – the wealth in spirit and love ... you have it here. And I wish and I pray to the Almighty God that he may provide future generations with as many chances to be

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of service to human souls as I have had them. The greatest wealth comes flowing back to him who devotes all his strength to serving as many souls as possible."

Looking at myself, I cannot, of course, speak about all that with the same intensity as Father Kenterich did, and yet ... what is going on here, the process as such, I have experienced that too. People who have put demands on me have also made me grow ... and for me, it meant enrichment. And I can honestly say that I enjoyed it. ... And it did me good. There are some of these over-engaged, highly altruistic 'love-your-neighbour-characters' around, who – with all their idealistic unselfishness - completely lose track of what they are given in return. No wonder that their "batteries" are depleted in no time because they are only fixed on their giving and forget to see what's coming back. I can't help wondering how it is that servants of the Church who are full of ideals and highly motivated in their work, often end up embittered after three or four years? The explanation, perhaps, lies right here.

## **Avoid seeing only what went wrong**

For the protection of personal rights' sake, much must be handled confidentially and with discretion. Nevertheless, I sometimes wish that this quiet, this unspectacular and yet constant workings of the Divine, expressing themselves in man's redemption, and the way how He – God – envelops us in this process, would become more of a central theme within the Church. There is – especially among those who feel responsible for the creed and the Church – this particular way of seeing only what's negative. In other words: They focus their attention primarily on everything which seems falling apart ... on everything which appears out of order, on divorce numbers and suicide rates, and then ask themselves, wondering, their faith suddenly overshadowed with doubts: "Where is God?", while the spectacular meanness is shouting even louder. But God is in action, continuously, even today. We need but free ourselves from our habit of looking only at the negative and become aware instead of the ongoing processes of healing and growth. That is not to say, however, that we fall back into the other extreme and be so naïve as to underestimate the doings of the devil, the chaos-worker, the enemy of man - or even deny them.

## **Families experience "becoming free" as an aspect of redemption**

Enjoying God as one who is forever active, there is one field of this divine manifestation which has become especially dear to me during my eleven years of doing family work: It is that of matrimony as a type of union which lives from ... redemption. God has created Man as male and female meant for each other and has given matrimony a sacrament status, so that both partners may assist each other in acquiring the deliverance of the soul. And it is amazing to see the magnitude of all these processes of release, brought about through that particular loving and compassionate acceptance of one's partner who may be unable to accept his (her) own flaws or weaknesses. Witnessing, how couples have changed – not overnight but in the course of several years, how they have become more free, more balanced, more resilient and stronger ... is a real experience and a pleasure to enjoy. Of course – over the years of me working as a family advisor or coach - there have also been failures. Marriages broke up in spite of one partner's maximum efforts because the other would lack understanding or insight, would give in to resignation beforehand, would have fallen victim to his (her) own urges and drives and was unwilling to sign responsible for his (her) behaviour.

And yet – the stories of success outnumber the failures. And when I look at all the shiny eyes, the radiance returned to their faces, giving testimony of a new and stronger self-esteem coupled with joyfulness over oneself and one's partner ... then I cannot help but feel happy for them. And in face of such histories of ... should one call it "rescue"? - a promise given by

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St John appeared to me in a new light: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John, 10:10). Where people cooperate with God's gifts of Grace in an enlightened way, this promise will come true.

What has been said here goes hand in hand with a particular aspect of enjoying God – an aspect on which I like to contemplate in the following.

### *3. The experience of loving and being loved*

God is Love. And to express his love for us, he often chooses his creatures, i.e. our fellow human beings. And while it is our desire to love Him back, we find ourselves referred to these others, our neighbours, again and again. Is it not written in the Gospel: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me?" (Matthew 25:40). What it means is this: God is not jealous of the love we give to our fellow men. Especially in dealing with our neighbour, it is the love that counts. When the baby cries at night - depriving his parents of their sleep, when children make their parents look ridiculous or refuse to walk in the direction their parents want them to, then it may be hard for them to say: And I love you – nevertheless. For – it is our patience, our tolerance, our compassionate love which grows, whenever the loved one disappoints us, hurts us or sticks to his (her) own free will. It is a funny thing to see how God at times brings people together, so that the narrowness of their love which – at the beginning – may well be of the egoistic sort, will gradually give way to a love which is mature and unselfish. I remember, for example, the case of an ambitious male (student) and an impulsive girl (also a student) who had fallen in love with each other. After they got married, she would often reproach him for his stubbornness while he would throw words at her like: "And you are a messy slob". It proved to be a tedious lesson for both, to accept one another for what they were ... different. And it was one more tedious process to deliver one's own inherent potential of strength from its fetters on the one hand and its exaggerations on the other. Today, these imprints in character are still noticeable – clearly noticeable – but after this process which reformed them both, they have come to acknowledge what they mean to each other. And they are now both willing to pay the price – no matter how often – for what they gain by being with their partner, by the enrichment which is theirs. But now, this is not done grudgingly or with a hue of self-pity ... rather with a twinkling eye, accompanied by a groan: "You sure demand a lot of me, you sure do." God the Creator has furnished this world and also us, his creatures, with all these manifold polarities and contrasts, so that 'Give and Take' must be learnt by us – over and over again.

Sometimes it may be strenuous ... to love. And it may be also strenuous at times to allow ... being loved by somebody. By learning to cope with both realities, *Love* – and with it *God* – can be experienced with joy.

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