

Hopeful Living



Holy City – here and now

(Joh 16:33)

Cities are attractive. City trips are top of the line in tourism. The city or town is a man-made – *man-formed* – living space with all its facilities that go with it whereas the rural area is becoming more and more devoid of infrastructure and the like. Cultural highlights, a variety of consumer goods, major sports events, the concentration of economic and political power, airports, underground railways and so on ... that, obviously, gives the urban areas – no matter how congested – their appeal and their interest. And that is by no means contradicted by man's longing towards unspoilt nature ... that *pull* felt when a weekend or holiday is near. On five days out of seven, however, we find ourselves in the firm hold of the city – the all-in-all of pulsating life.

And what about the city – as the living space preferred by many – is it also a place where to meet God? The biblical cities of Babylon and Ninive stood for the places with no God inside their walls. And yet, in the last book of the Bible which is called the Book of Revelations, St. John is blessed with his wonderful, God-given vision: He sees how the new, the *holy* city, descends from the Heavens onto the earth. And a voice says to him: "Behold, the tabernacle of God with men, and he will dwell with them and they shall be his people and God himself shall be with them and be their God ... And he that sat on the throne, said: Behold, I make all things new." (Revelations, 21: 3, 5)

Many reformers – be it in church or society – have drawn their own inspirations from this vision-based image of the Holy City. St Benedict, for example, when founding his monasteries, did so in an attempt to build a "Holy City" – one of manageable dimensions – in the *here and now*.

The founder of the *Schönstatt Movement* – Father Kentenich – wrote after his harsh experience of a three-year imprisonment at the Dachau Concentration Camp: "... The best (people) of all nations instinctively feel that we are on the very threshold of a historic change of secular scope and dimension ... in the course of which *all* are called to join in the creation of a new *world concept* ... where not as master builders and architects then at least by serving at the base of it all. While putting our trust in Divine Providence and in our vision of the future as resulting there from – we have been led toward this answer ..."

Side glances at today's economy

Let's take a brief side look at modern-day economy. Even there, much talk has been about "visions" over the last few years. This is not about religious phenomena; vision – here – means that an image is drawn up as to the future of a business. Henry Ford's *vision* was that every American should be able to afford his own car and thus – the line assembly of cars came into being. Ray A. Kroc, founder of Mac Donald's, had envisaged a restaurant where even poor people would be able to pay for a meal now and then. Lothar J. Seiwert is known to be Germany's leading expert on 'time management'. His advice to managers goes as follows: "At the beginning of any comprehensive time management, you have got to have a vision. A vision is nothing utopian, nothing abstract. It is something to be experienced by the senses, something to be manifested in *concrete* needs. By visualizing, we can question our innermost self, so to reveal to us our vision or dream of what an ideal future should be like as a release from the unconscious. Sabine Asgodorn, a well-known business advisor, writes: "Trusting one's intuition, trusting one's inner voice is given only to him (her) who is able to believe in a dream."

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This little excursion into the business world makes one thing clear: *Man* has learnt from the Church. It shows that people are able to adopt a downright Christian attitude towards Life's processes and come out successful in its application. What happens when we manage to recover this inherently religious talent and bring about its revival also inside our churches? Dom Helder Camera wrote the words to a canon which I sang many times already: "When you dream alone, then it's just a dream. When many dream together, a new reality begins. Let's dream our dream!" Bishop Camera's dream was about a social system with greater justice, inspired by what is understood as Christian social ethics. And there are many initiatives in Latin America dating back to him as the originator. Martin Luther King had his own dream of a world where black and white people would be living side by side together on an equal footing, i.e. enjoying equal rights. Bishop Camera had the gift that he could convince – and even arouse – many, leading up to social reforms in the end.

A glance into today's Church

After this little trip to Central and North America we may now ask ourselves: And what about the German-speaking countries? In the past, my team and I have arranged several sit-ins or retreats with the members of the Parish Council participating. Taking into account the differing sizes of the parishes concerned, what struck us most was the fact that among those partaking there was a clear inability to imagine, envisage – let alone, dream of – positive developments in the future. In most cases, the realistic analyses of what the current status appears to be, don't give cause towards any great hopes. With the number of church-goers on the decline, along with a fading interest regarding the holy sacraments, feelings of lameness, inferiority and sometimes even panic are quite common and have to be dealt with as a result. Ask yourself: What – do you think – lies behind the following statement: "We should lower the confirmation age to twelve... at that age we can hope to have a small hold on them still!"

In some cases it has proven helpful - if not more - when we could get the Parish Council members in charge to find out one thing for themselves: *What* does my faith mean to me? *Where* are *my* advantages as compared to an atheist's? *Where* has my faith helped me to cope with life more easily? In which way have prayers of praise and thanksgiving contributed to intensify my perception of the wonderful things I had? How did rituals and liturgies at the main stations of life such as weddings and childbirth add an additional shine and deeper meaning to the occasions at that time?

Learning to talk about Faith and the experiences that go with it

Once we have gained clarity on the "extra values" that faith provides, we can also find the words to communicate them. Jesus also mentions the treasure hidden in the field and the precious pearl that has but to be found. However – if I want to talk about faith in this way, then it doesn't make sense to remain objective and aloof about it. For *then* I must venture out onto the *field of experience*. In such case I become witness myself. And this is something people – in general - tend to avoid. Objective truths offer a much easier hiding place. On the other hand – when it comes to giving away my experiences to others then, at least, have I to unveil my soul to a certain degree. That is what many people are afraid of. In times like ours, where all aspects of life are freed from taboos, a new taboo has emerged and is upheld especially among Christians: own religious experiences are not to be talked about! On the other hand – many bible circles and prayer groups have come into being where to talk about religious encounters, insights and the like is totally natural. When I can expect that what is precious to me will be looked upon with respect, *then* ... opening myself to others becomes much easier.

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We from the Schönstatt Movement have started an initiative under the motto "trace hunting". In a four-step process named "Remember – Recount – Discover – Answer", a path is shown as to how participants can discover the "God of Life" - the "God of our Life" – *together*. And indeed – the most diverse church groups have come up with good results while going after this "trace-tracking": Group members experience a growing sense of closeness with one another, and even God ceases to be the "Forever Inconceivable", the "Forever Unapproachable", but instead is discovered anew – as "The One, Forever Present in this World", the One, Forever Near ... and of course, as the One Forever Hidden from Man's Eye and so – we can easily overlook him also. But whoever – at the end of the day - takes a look back at that day with a loving heart and open mind, will find numerous instances witnessing God's tenderness.

Praying in this way at night for a while will also help open the door to the vision as described by John in the Book of Revelations.

The Book of Revelations

(Chapters 21, 22) (The following text is adopted from the King James Version)

Let's take a glance at one of the Book's highlights:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

And I, John, saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away.

And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write, for these words are true and faithful.

And he said unto me, it is done, I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

He that overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.

And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,

Having the glory of God, and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal;

And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel:

On the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates.

And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

And he that talked with me had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof.

And the city lies foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal.

And he measured the wall thereof, an hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel.

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And the building of the wall of it was of jasper, and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass.

And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; every several gate was of one pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass.

And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.

And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.

And the nations shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it.

And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there.

And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it.

And there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defiles, neither whatsoever works abomination, or makes a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall serve him.

And they shall see his face, and his name shall be in their foreheads.

And there shall be no night there, and they need no candle, neither light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light, and they shall reign for ever and ever".

Look at the good things and cut down on lamentation

Dear readers,

Perhaps there isn't enough time – at this moment in time – to absorb this vision given here in its whole fathomless depth. And yet I would ask you to re-read this text – the Book of Revelations, chapter 21 and 22 – and get an idea of what it says. I myself find it fascinating. God wants to live here with us – in our very midst. He wants to permeate this City - this man-made living space – with His Divine Nature and offer it to us to dwell in. And this has already begun. At the end of all times, the Perfect will have defeated the Imperfect in this process which has been underway for some time.

Wherever people make the effort to treat themselves – and everybody else as well – in a more humane way, they will find themselves living in a 'Holy City' ... even today. Don Bosco in his days in Turin was not only aware of the youthful bums, which many people in town complained about. But in the face of this deplorable condition he heard God's voice that encouraged him to do something about it. And he decided on this path – despite all menaces from those who resented his intervention and disregarding the efforts of well-meaning *confrères* to have him put into an asylum. He stuck to his vision which was to establish a home for youngsters where they could grow up to be happy, free and strong fellow humans.

Why not ask yourself for a change: Where is my tendency to complain? Where am I focussed on the negative when analyzing things?

And then the decisive question: What does it mean to me: "Holy City – here and now?" In other words: What can I contribute so to help this holy city grow and expand all around me? I *cannot* change others. I am not into politics myself. But I can give it a try to start loving the people around me. I can begin with telling others what gives *me* hope. I can list up the good things that do happen but are more often than not drowned in a flood of negative news reports, and I can make those the main theme of my talk.

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And whoever finds this too demanding, may, for the time being, concentrate on not letting any negative subjects enter in his (her) everyday "small talk." One way to begin with would be to say "thanks" more often than in the past for all the good I have received from people up to this juncture. I can more readily than before *appreciate* in words the good things I observe within others. I try to be happy for other people's successes. St Paul advised the Romans to "rejoice with them that do rejoice" (Romans 12:15). I know from experience how much discipline it takes to do what sounds so utterly simple – especially when you are not a sunny boy by nature. But I have also made the observation that it does me a lot of good as well as the people I meet, when I keep working for a positive climate. And it makes me very happy indeed to witness how catching and transforming such a climate can be. And it is your right – no doubt – to take a big detour around notorious kill-joys and "mental climate polluters." But it is also important that we link up with those who are willing to work for a more humane world to become real.

A mutual exchange of experience can inspire us and give us the courage to strive for the holy city's manifestation here and now – and to do this in the face of resistance and failures whatsoever. Paul, who carried the Christian faith into the Mediterranean cities as the first 'missionary', hits the nail on the head when he says: "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Romans 8:37) and ..."I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

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