

Hopeful Living



Time - Attention - Tenderness

One time we had a Parish Council meeting on district level; child care was provided on premises during those hours. All of a sudden, a four-year old girl came rushing into the conference room through the patio door which had been left open and ran up to her mother. "What's the matter, dear?" the latter asked, and obviously a little alarmed. "I love you so much! I have got to tell you this now", so the little girl's answer. "I love you too", the mother said and gave her daughter a big hug. After that she ran out again, back to her play with the other children. This little scene lasted, maybe, fifteen seconds, but it was so important for the child – in this particular mood – to tell her mother how much she loved her!

I once heard of a situation that seems to say the very opposite. There was this father, who – on that particular day at the office – had taken great pains to get home earlier for a change, as he had made up his mind to spend more time with his children in the future. Once at home, and after a hearty welcome, he suggested to his boys to play a game of foot ball – *together*. But none of the three felt like. They had been all absorbed – prior to their father's homecoming – into something, each according to their own liking. There was no need for their Dad, nor did they want him now. And, of course, that's what left him totally frustrated. And although he didn't say anything he couldn't help it that the wildest reproaches began buzzing through his head like "... There I take off just to be with you and you don't even appreciate it! So why shouldn't I stay in the office until it's your bedtime? Obviously, you don't need me, after all!" Thus feeling sorry for himself, he gave vent to his anger while having a cup of coffee in the kitchen which his wife had made for him. She – feeling somewhat superior to her husband – was about to comment the situation something like that: "There you see ... children are no machines which you can control by press-button" but she withstood the temptation and – bending over the table to him – came up with the following suggestion: "Then why not make use of the time and have a good talk, just the two of us, while those monsters are so wrapped up with themselves that they leave us in peace?" No bad idea, actually, and yet – switching to something else so abruptly can be difficult. In the present case, the anticipation of proving to himself that he was a good father after all, had been on his mind all the way home ... and now? Nothing! So much ungratefulness! – After some grumbling he found himself giving way to his wife's positive perspective, however, and they had an enjoyable conversation. And when the boys came into the kitchen later for something to eat, the youngest of the three conquered his Daddy's lap quite spontaneously. Obviously, the sons were not even aware that their behaviour must have hurt their father. Supper was followed by "carpet time". That was fun they haven't had in a long time. Dad on the carpet and his tomboys on top of him! And they all had a great time until Dad - with a powerful gesture – put an end to the show and off they went, all red-faced and sweaty, straight into the bathroom. Then, another 'special treat' waited for them: A bedtime story from Dad!

The three mainstays in interpersonal relationships

These little snapshots from everyday life make one thing clear: Children need their parents when *they* think it necessary. And that must not be at a time which their parents have set aside. It is a similar thing with many businesses and services: Specialists are on standby so that in case of a customer calling, the latter will be given expert assistance. Depending on the size of the business, this standby-service may be offered 24 hrs. "We are always available for you, round the clock, seven days a week!" Isn't that something? Smaller enterprises may not be able to afford such service, but then there is an answering machine connected telling the caller when to call again. That is minimum standard nowadays. Quality of service is judged by availability, quickness of (re)action and reliability of what is offered.

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What is considered as normal practice in business, has to be re-discovered, where personal relationships are concerned. The latter are subject to the same rules.

For this reason, dear reader, I would like to take you on a mental walk, thereby reflecting on three mainstays, important to all types of human relationships:

Time – Attention – Tenderness.

It is these three which are the life force of any human relationship ... and not only of the one between humans but between man and God as well. By investing time, attention and tenderness into one's relationship with God, the result will be an even closer relationship, yes – friendship even ... with God. And as a rule, God will react to this appeal of the soul and He will answer by letting man feel His', God's love and care – ever present.

At first glance this may all seem natural and crystal-clear, so that there should be no problem at all, but in real life things are different.

Here an example: I am on the road with my car for about 50 hours per month. So why not make use of the time in the most positive way? For that reason, I have read a few passages from the breviary – the liturgy of the hours - on tape. I play the tape when autobahn traffic is quiet. And I try to listen with my heart and mind, of course, while keeping a safe distance to the car in front of me and an eye on his brake lights, and so I pray. This gives me the feeling of making good use of my time on the road. When I walk to get to a certain destination, I may use the rosary quite often for my prayers. Using the time in a constructive and efficient manner is something always on my mind. And yet – there is a limit to everything. On the autobahn, you may run into situations, for example, which demand full concentration for a few moments ... *and that* suddenly. The prayer tape runs on. But that has nothing to do with dedicated prayer anymore.

In other words – there is simply a barrier to our constant urge for efficiency in that a situation arises where I cannot take care of more than one thing at a time. God – so it says in the Old Testament more often than in the New – is a jealous God. For me, this strictly human bad habit can mean only one thing in the light of God's perfection, namely, that God wants us to give him part of our time as well, and - that we give it to him freely.

Here an example: A man reads his newspaper. His wife wants to tell him something. Without putting his paper down, he says: "Go ahead, I am listening". That happens more often than I would have thought at the beginning of my pastoral activities. This man's wife thinks she is not being taken serious ... and she is justified to feel like that while her husband is simply trying to combine several activities in a way he thinks effective: reading while listening. One thing is done by the eyes, the other by the ears. Why shouldn't that work? Yet he doesn't realize that his brain has got to process the different sources of information whereas any emotional reaction to what he read or listened to would definitely have to come from his **heart (!)**

For myself and my strive for efficiency, I can say that I quickly got over the habit of opening programmes on my computer or calling up files etc, while I was engaged in a telephone conversation. At the beginning I was mistaken to believe, that the person on the other end of the line is not aware of what I am doing (on the side) while talking to him. But that is not true. It does matter a great deal that – especially during a telephone conversation – I am all ears and all here.

Having time means to be at another person's disposal – completely and unrestrictedly

I don't know how you feel about it. From many talks in the past I have learnt that I am not alone (with this kind of experience). The urge to attain efficiency will meet its limits, where the aim is the establishment of personal contacts, because: The act of giving my attention to

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someone – *giving it fully* – would also include what I call *respect* in the sense of: It is *your* turn now – or – you are all that matters to me at the moment.

When I want to talk to my *Superior* (German: Provinzial) and this cannot be done while taking a walk together but he asks me instead to come to his office, then I can expect that he will not answer the telephone during that time but will have the answering machine activated. And yet I have learnt it to be the other way round. I remember the time of a family retreat which took place at a youth hostel; church services were also held there.

The parish priest who was in charge at that time, new about this forthcoming event. I had also given him a phone call after my arrival. But I was eager to go and see him in person since I had never met him before. We finally settled on a date which wasn't easy at all, but I got a hearty welcome and was offered a snack even and yet ... in the middle of our talk he received a call from a former fellow student and I ... was forgotten. The chat lasted 15 minutes at least. Somehow he did not manage to tell him: Please call back later because I am having a visitor."

Sure, he did apologize later, but I still felt furious inside. I had been considering whether I should walk out, as I wasn't in the least bit interested to hear the details of their past college times. This priest definitely *did not intend* to hurt me and yet ... he managed to do so. What he did just isn't done! And that is something that has to do with sensitivity and with style.

But – as the saying goes – people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. I remember the following occasion: I had been giving an evening lecture in a small town on the German-Austrian border and spent the night at the home of the family who were the organizers of the event. The next morning, I had breakfast with them and found myself a complete stranger in the eyes of the two preschoolers there at the table. It took a while for them to get over their shyness, gave me a look and started talking to me. I clowned around with them and they appeared quite at ease. Then it was time for the mother to take the older one of the two to the Kindergarten. I guess she expected that she would have to take the younger one as well, who more than likely would show no inclination to stay with a strange uncle that I was! But surprisingly for her and an honour for me, the little fellow said: "I stay here. The 30 minutes investment into building a confidential relationship had paid off, obviously. The boy ran to fetch his picture books from the nursery, so I would read them to him in the living room, where I had spent the night. When I entered the living room myself I could see that my handy phone had switched to a foreign network due to the stronger signal and that I had an unanswered call waiting for me. I tried for a while to get back into my home network and find out who the caller was. There, all of a sudden, the boy said: "I go with them, after all". No two minutes fumbling with my phone were sufficient to cause a freshly set up bridge of trust to go to pieces. Obviously, the handy meant more to that stranger – blown in out of nowhere – than me ... that's what the little fellow must have felt and that's what led to his prompt reaction. All in all - no big deal. The world hadn't come to an end over it. And yet it had been a lesson for me how necessary it is to practise a sensitive hand when dealing with relationships.

A similar thing happened a few years ago. I and a group of approx. 40 adolescents were *en route* together on a pilgrimage. That one particular day, our path led us through the Harz Mountains. I was having a conversation with a young girl when we came near a row of raspberry bushes looking very ripe. I suggested a short stop to her and treat ourselves to some berries. She rejected the idea, however. Only the next day, she told me that she had been mad at me because she had gotten the impression that I had been more interested in the raspberries than in what she had to say. Having dwelt on what seemed *to me* rather superficial topics but that with a growing feeling of confidence towards me, she was ready – (so she told me) – to go into deeper issues although she felt highly inhibited and fearful as to

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whether I would understand her or not. Having no idea how serious she was about her problems, I had unknowingly slammed the door in the face of her readiness to confide in me. Fortunately, the next day held another occasion to continue on our conversation and the various other issues, as we were still *en route* on our pilgrimage.

But there are times where there is *no* second opportunity, and that is then followed by the verdict: With that one you can't talk! There is one verse in the Bible, which I find especially challenging ... inviting me to do some soul-searching. It is in the Book of Revelations where Jesus Christ says: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Revelations, 3:20). Christ, then, is the one who becomes active out of his own judgement in order to make contact – with me. Am I awake enough, am I sensitive enough, and am I free enough so to become aware of this gentle, low-toned approach of the Christ and open my heart towards Him in reaction? God's Commandments are but the bottom limit of tolerance – the minimum requirement to man – wherein He reveals His will. Much more interesting and full of surprises is the so-called 'still small voice.' St Augustine was well aware of this problem when he said: "I fear the God who has passed by". In other words: When God has knocked at my door a few times but I have ignored it, then an opportunity will be gone.

What would have become of Mother Teresa, had she – who had already become a member of an Order and a teacher – while travelling to New Delhi *not reacted to God's call* to look after the poorest of them all? It would have remained completely unnoticed. She would have continued her life as a well-liked teacher and serving her Order with efficiency. But what God had envisaged for her, what *he* wanted to see accomplished *through* her – *that* would not have taken place.

Now it is fact that – apart from various distractive influences from the outside – there do exist what one may call *inner obsessions*. In particular those individuals who have a tendency to brood over matters, may become so completely caught in a problem that they are no longer aware of whatever may be around them and so they become unable to realize that their current problem is just about a trifle – maybe. Again and again, parents tell me how helpful it is when they both take the time to discuss any problems concerning their relationship at an early stage in order to be free – heart-wise and mind-wise – to deal with any questions and problems their children might come up with. When a person is caught in a crisis, help or advice can only be given to him (her) who is involved with a similar problem or crisis. Other than that, the obsession with one's own problems may be so intense that anybody else's need or sorrow is far beyond one's own perception.

A well-trying ritual: Place your troubles in the mug

Thus - for me, in order to devote myself to somebody seeking my help or advice – I start off by praying: "Dear God, please take care of this or that, of such and such!" Only then am I ready to turn to him (or her) whoever needs help and encouragement.

While in Austria, I ran across the following tradition: In some families' homes where they have sanctuaries, I found a tall mug in the room with the words written on it "They are out of wine", and there was a notebook and pen next to it. The family members would write their small and bigger troubles on the sheets of paper and put them in the mug. And where they were "at war" with themselves, at war because of personal failures and limitations, because of negative moods and irritations ... that too went into the mug for disposal. Sometimes, this happened in silence, discretely, and at other times only after a sharp debate. And when all aspects of a matter had been discussed until there was nothing left to say ... when ideas and arguments began running in circles – so to speak – then this was the signal to quit (for this day) and throw what was left unsolved into the mug as well. The times where each family member would seek refuge in a hideaway and feel sorry for him(her)self have become much

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shorter, thanks to this tradition. The time thus gained could be dedicated to more pleasant things, helping heart and mind to relax.

I have tried it for myself and found out that pleasant experiences are easy to digest; I needed no mug for them. But when dealing with the negative ... with emotions that affected my heart in a paralysing manner, like some poison, filling it with fears and worries, with self-accusations and with anger ... the 'mug and paper' ritual helped to set me free. I then *knew* that the past was in God's gracious hands and that my heart and mind was free therefore, to work on the present. I was able, once more, to give my attention to people or concentrate on a new task.

Quicker does not necessarily mean better

Apart from efficiency, another value exists that can easily delude us when our real aim is to build up a warm-hearted and stable relationship. This one has to do with "**speed**". Quicker means better. When a new ICE-section has been opened for traffic, and travel time between Cologne and Frankfurt has been reduced by another 20 minutes, then this can be called – success. And when – other than in GDR days, where I had to wait some 8 years to buy me a 'Trabi' - I can now walk into a car dealer's shop and leave it with a new car – (provided, I have no special claims, of course) – then this is very convenient, for me as a customer. When my copying machine which has become defective, out of order, can be picked up at the repair shop after two hours servicing, then this – for me – is high-quality service.

The same applies to the world of sports. But where human beings are concerned, speed, quickness, hurry ... all of this – quite often – doesn't lead you anywhere. Hundreds of times parents look at their baby with a smile. Thousands of times, the baby will be caressed, spoken to, syllable after syllable repeated over again until ... it will say 'Mom' or 'Dad' for the first time. *The growth of the soul is a slow process.*

Married couples who have started to set time aside at a fixed hour per week for a partnership talk, will take some time to realize whether or not there is some benefit to expect for their relationship. What's the use? A woman once commented after a few weeks - a little hopeless, with a touch of resignation. This shows that the *quality growth* of a relationship is also subject to and a matter of time with changes taking place almost unnoticed. *And yet it is important to stay with it.*

Here what a father had to tell, pointing out one aspect of *slowness*. The fact was that he had suffered from an arthritic condition of an ankle and thus was house-bound for two weeks. He was hobbling about at home but unable to go outside. I understand that he had been very much under pressure job-wise, and often was unable to get home to see his children before they were sent off to bed. Some 10 days passed, and then – all of a sudden – his 10-year-old daughter jumped to his lap spontaneously one day. In other words: 10 days of continuous physical and mental nearness were needed in order to make up for an estrangement between father and daughter that had had time to develop latently, unnoticed. It took all that time for the physical expression to follow as a sign of mental nearness regained. The daughter was not conscious of all that, and she had found no words for it neither. But the father had been a sensitive observer of this process and eventually found his explanation: The soul has no such thing as an integrated switch that can be pressed and de-pressed ... *at will*. Instead – the soul needs time and opportunities to develop roots which are deep-going. And ... the soul waits for physical expressions of love and attention which are both invisible. We are right to call such expressions signs of tenderness or signs of affection. Depending on their own upbringing and mentality – parents can have a hard time to show their affection to their offspring – freely.

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Tenderness – the visible sign of invisible love

And again it is God bearing in mind our very nature, for – it is Him who created us the way we are. With the sacraments, He bestows on us visible symbols perceptible by the senses, representing the divine gifts of grace as they are mediated to the believer. Baptismal water, anointing of the sick with oil, chrism and the laying on of hands, the stole over the priest's hands folded, bread and wine ... it simply feels good to experience all this with your senses. What is required, of course, is *faith*, so that the recipient of the sacraments will be able to meet God in an experience that involves his (her) entire being. As for the sacrament of matrimony - the basic idea of which is its continuity – the partners having wholeheartedly agreed to enter this union, will in every word that is spoken (during the ceremony), in every look that is exchanged, in every loving expression of their invisible love for each other ... *represent* - in a visible way - the invisible realization of Divine grace. It is wonderful to witness when couples come to rediscover this ancient truth of faith for themselves. For – it is then that the partner will indeed become the favourite 'place' where God can be met – *and found*. It is a deplorable fact, however, that all such signs and expressions of invisible love tend to become routine quite soon and gestures of attention – a soulless ritual after some time. Father Kentenich described this phenomenon in his own typical way: The human spirit creates a form. With time passing, the spirit will have gone out of it and the – *empty* - form will be all that's left. The same applies to all our other forms of expression which are subject to the physical senses, forms we have developed to illustrate our relationship with God and which have become dear to us. Moderate alternations and legitimate ways to add variety and freshness to our liturgy without depriving our original Catholic mass of its familiar character, new forms entering our common liturgical prayer ... all of this helps the soul to relive the magic of *how it all began*.

Time – Attention – Tenderness

With the above, I meant to encourage my readers to contemplate on the meaning of these three factors which – in my eyes – are central to interpersonal relationships. And this applies to *any* kind of relationship involving people ... be it the relationship between man and the Divine Trinity which is invisible, between man and his/her patron saint – (or any other saint, by the same token) – or be it the relationship with people in our environment, people we can see.

I would be glad if what is written here has given you an impulse – or inspiration even – so you may give it some deeper thought as to whom you might want to dedicate any of the "three" in the future.

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