

# Hopeful Living



## Ample fruit (compare John 15:5)

A short while ago, I received a letter. Therein it said that the circulation figure of the Austrian Schönstatt-Journal "Family – a Vocation" has been raised to 8000. I can remember that in 1992 the number of copies ran around seven hundred. An eleven-fold increase, that means, and – what's even more striking – it is an increase in a field where many papers, journals etc. have no other way but to cut down on their numbers of copies. Even an atheist would not hesitate to call such a growth in numbers a *history of success*. Another example: In 1984, there was *one (!)* family from Styria (Austria) to join a Schönstatt Families Seminar. In the year 2002, some 2010 visitors had come to Styria to participate in a total of 125 activities and events.

But normally it isn't all that easy to explain or define when "pastoral care" can be called "successful". For example, let us take a look at the number of Sunday church-goers. In many parishes, visitor numbers on so-called "Counting-Sundays" have been on the decrease over several years now. A fact which makes it harder on both full-time personnel and Honoraries (= voluntary workers). A politician once remarked to his local parish priest: What's the matter with you church folks? We would be happy if we could motivate as many people to join us at our weekly party get-togethers." This comparison with another country-wide institution made this parish priest realize that success or failure is also a question of perspective.

This reminds me of talks I have had with parents who tend towards guilty feelings because their children's development went in another direction than the parents had been hoping for. And this disappointment is then accompanied by this one – ceaselessly – recurring question: "What have we done wrong?" And it is this which takes away all the fun. And they suffer ... be it the fact that one of the children doesn't want to go to Church on Sundays any more or has gotten married to a partner from a different creed – or lives with a partner without thinking of getting married ... or be it that one of their children (or more) got a divorce ... the list is endless. And again and again the haunting thought keeps coming back: "What in Heaven's name have we done wrong?"

### Parents have a right to make mistakes

This, quite often, reveals another tendency – namely, a *felt* responsibility in a measure which is excessive. Just as though parents are responsible for their grown up children's doings! Where this is concerned, I can confirm that in most cases the parents (I talked to) have acted in their best knowledge and belief, always bent to pass on to their children what was most precious to them: Moral values such as righteousness, trust, solidarity, sharing, religious virtues like a living relationship with God which finds its expression in prayer, in attending the Church service, in faith and hope, in compassion and in love. Of course, all parents have a human right to make mistakes – also with regard to education. But the time will come where the parents must realize: "We have passed on also that which we ourselves consider most valuable. What you do with it is your business and your responsibility." Strangely enough – many parents don't succeed to let go of their children in this sense. Moreover – many want to be more successful than Jesus himself was. When we look at the earthly life of Him as God and Man in one person, then we cannot say that he was particularly successful. When he is about to give away to Man his most precious gift, i.e. the Eucharist – and also explains it, it is them who turn away from him, saying: Your talk is unbearable. In this situation where everything seems at stake, Jesus – being in full control as usual – asks the Twelve: And

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what about you – you do not want to leave too, do you? (Compare John, 6, 67) Jesus granted his disciples this freedom, and so, Peter felt free to say: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup>We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6, 68f)

If anybody understands something about religious education, it must be Jesus. And yet he, too, was not what could be called very successful – at least not with regard to the period of his earthly life. That is something which parents should always keep in mind, so to keep them from wanting more in their over-ambition than Jesus himself.

## What matters most is Love – not the clean slate

When, on the other hand, we see how many young adults get involved with the police and wind up in court, how many rely on community workers and other social helpers for continued guidance and support, then (I think) it can be considered a success if grown-up children go after their daily jobs, find partners quite naturally and have nothing to do with neither the police nor the social services. That shows that a whole lot of values and of – what could be called – practical life-management, have been passed down after all. That, too, should by no means be overlooked! That is something to be glad about! It is obviously due to the innate, humble nature of such "successes" that they make no headlines. Of course, one can expect more and more, and yet parents – with their boundless ambition – won't see an end to their claims. That is why there is freedom in the effort to look *behind* these psychological mechanisms and not become enslaved by them. Another psychological mechanism, by which parents easily feel miserable, is the for ever recurring question: "What do the others think of us now?" Along with this goes the issue of honour and reputation. Naturally, it feels good to know that neighbours, relatives and the nearby environment think well about one's family. But in the end, isn't my good reputation in both God's eyes and mine really all that counts? And God makes it clear to us that to Him the most important thing *is* Love and not the whiteness of one's coat. When we recognize our littleness, our state as creatures, then He will enfold us in His Love and Mercy, yes, then our mistakes and failures – once confessed – will make Him love us even more. And our reaction to this merciful love is our loving Him in return – with a thankful heart. And ***that is what matters most.***

If parents could but follow this path and find peace in the end ... how much embitterment and misery would vanish from our communities! How much ease and inner peace would fill this place instead! So it has nothing to do with the wickedness of our time, the low-quality media, the ungrateful children which make us feel so bad but it has *everything* to do with our coping with reality, with the fact that in trying to cope we got somehow caught in a dead end. Whosoever has learnt to accept reality without having any reservations, will experience a kind of inner peace which is indeed profound. And so, an apparent failure of upbringing, of education will become the *thorn in the side* (as the saying goes), forcing its bearer to accept reality as it is. The result then is quite often a deep-felt humaneness, coupled with an enlarged tolerance which must not be mixed up, however, with a downright submission to the spirit of the time.

## He who laughs last laughs longest

A proverb says: "He who laughs last laughs longest." That, surely, applies also where the issue of education is concerned. As a pastor, I had more than one opportunity to witness people getting more religious as they grew older or – in a few rare cases – were ready to convert while already on their deathbed. Very gradually, there comes this experience in people's lives where they realize that certain goals which they had run after in their youth or

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as young adults, lose their attraction and importance. Let me give you the following "picture" as an example: Each time when a wall against which a person has placed the ladder of his (her) desires and managed also to climb that ladder full of inner zest and vigour only to watch this wall collapse at some time, a new phase of questions, of questioning oneself, begins: What makes sense in my life, gives it its meaning? Success, money, prestige, power, health ... all of this one may find crumbling away as one gets older. Thus, at the end of this search – hoping to come up with a new meaning and life-fulfilling ... whatever, many find – or find their way back to - God. Knowing about the great probability of such a search process to take place, parents who are worried about their children gone astray, may find new hope and subsequently transform their worries as to their children's salvation into trust: "Lord, we have had so many proofs from you, showing us that your ideas, ways and means are endless and boundless. Do keep our children who seemingly or in fact have drifted away from you, safely in Your Love and guidance, so they may find you. Help them to recognize and behold you as the One Merciful and Loving God, so that at the end of their life they know: "No matter how diverse our earthly pathways ... *we all* come home to our Heavenly Father."

Some parents will have to wait till they are called to Heaven, before they become witnesses to their children's – or grandchildren's – conversion. The lesson to be learnt while here on earth, says: "Never remain stuck in a state of constant worrying or looking backward in self-accusation but grow to maturity, empowered by Hope." The priest who worries because none but old people come to his church and keeps asking himself what will become of his church in the future – once all these elderly will be gone, *overlooks* that all the missing grown-ups who – for the time being – seem to have much more important things than God to busy themselves with, will become elderly and old as well, and then it is their time to ask ... Therefore: "He who laughs last laughs longest!"

Against this background, one extreme demand would definitely be to expect from a priest that he spends his time waiting for his church members to get older! And so, many efforts are undertaken to address children and adolescents, to approach young families and the middle age generation.

One Sunday around Christmas, I noticed some seven-hundred people flocking up to the *Liebfrauenhöhe* – the Schönstatt-Centre south of Stuttgart - where to celebrate the Nativity. This simple liturgy with plenty of music and songs - along with a beautiful story and a children's procession to the manger – was something new in those years. Meanwhile, families come from afar, not minding the one-and-a-half-hours car ride ... so much they enjoy it. The desire – especially around Christmas time - to do something which uplifts heart and soul – seems to be a strong force and motivator. Yet many would find it much too challenging to initiate something of the sort for themselves. And so, they get in their car and just take a *plunge* – so to speak – into the magical atmosphere of this liturgy. Biscuits and tea await the visitors at the end of the ceremony, making this wonderful afternoon as complete as can be.

## **Rituals help to make room for the longing heart**

This example with the ceremony at the manger is just meant to show, that – with some intuition for people's needs – people may also be reached. Of course, all this requires some time, some getting used to as is normal with all innovative ideas. But ... "word will go round" and past Christmas' participants will bring along more people next year. And so, let us give it an introductory period of – let's say – five years and resist temptation to expect a speedy success "in numbers" from an event which was indeed a novelty 'in its own right'.

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Another simple ceremony can be described as equally successful. It is held at Erfurt Cathedral every first Friday in the month and is an invitation to people who wish to have their departed ones entered into the "Book of Life". There it is of no importance if those participating see themselves as Christians or as Atheists. Everybody is invited to join in. Organ music, psalms prayed and the ritual of lighting a candle help mourners who may otherwise find no outlet for their feelings and emotions, to cope with their loss and perhaps find a way back to faith and religion as their future guidance and stronghold.

Apart from the Eucharist ceremony, we need many other *non-sacrament* rituals in order to create a space or location for this new, wide-spread longing for depth and emotional expression. Much arguing, much controversy surrounding the admission of Non-Catholics to the Eucharist could be spared, much discord and disappointment due to a lack of priests for conducting the Holy Mass could be avoided *if – we could but get away from the 'monoculture' of the Eucharist celebration and instead return to a diversity of ecclesial, liturgical activities and events.* The Liturgy Constitution of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council declared the celebration of the Eucharist as 'source and summit' of all liturgical activities. In many places, however, the mountain is gone, and the summit is all that's left!

I am amazed in how many parishes prayer groups have been formed which meet on a weekly basis ... be it for the Rosary, be it for singing hymns of praise or to worship the Eucharist. People have discovered that in this hectic world of today it simply feels good to find rest in God's presence, to place one's worries at *his* feet, to focus on *his* greatness and glory and – at the same time – hold one's daily little annoyances at arm's length for a while. This tells me that in the field of liturgy, a new freshness, a new spirit and vitality is under way and that means fruitfulness.

Whenever, apart from the liturgical mission, I think of another important field of what comprises pastoral care – namely the field of ecclesial (religious) escort to include the individual-counselling session – *then* – success and fruitfulness for me means any of the following, e.g.:

- Somebody manages to cope with his life and fate after three or four counselling talks,
- A caller has succeeded to overcome an inner blockage,
- Hopefulness has returned,
- Somebody has successfully cleared his mind from self-pity,
- The obsessive thought of having fallen victim to the 'wicked world outside' finally gives way to new perspectives,
- A person habitually negating himself and his/her environment "jumps back" all of a sudden – able to say "Yes",
- Fear is replaced by civil courage, response and opinion follow inertness, and the risk of becoming vulnerable is accepted.

Once in a while, a counselling session may turn out so strenuous for me and my "patient", that in the end we both feel totally exhausted. Then it may take hours before a notion of joy or even thankfulness over what has been achieved, comes up. And it makes me happy if, the next day, the telephone rings and a client says "thanks" once more for yesterday's talk. Sometimes it may happen that an awareness of joy and relief, of inner peace and trust can be felt already during the talk. That, then, is almost an experience similar to Pentecost – an experience of God's nearness making us "three". Then, the counselling office or the confessional has become a holy place, filled with God's redeeming influence and might.

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## What's good about failures

Now and then it happens that in spite of intensive talks, everything seems at a standstill in the individual's soul *until* - perhaps half a year later (or even later than that) – a real breakthrough occurs. At this point, I would like to differentiate very clearly between various categories – or attitudes, rather. There *are* those people who see in me the pastor who provides them with a pain-killer tablet – nothing more. In other words – they want to moan, to complain and get comforted; that's it. They *don't* want to change anything themselves. Such counselling talks are but a waste of time on both sides. My focus is to help people whose fight is an inner battle and while fighting, they feel *locked in* ... nothing moves. Often, there has been a shortage of love in their childhood years, and in searching for this love and affection later on, the price they paid were more hurts. Such 'cases' cannot expect healing to come overnight.

I notice about myself that it is especially these *tough situations* which cause me to go about praying in an even more intense manner. For me, it is important to understand the daily celebration of the Eucharist and praying the *Liturgy of the Hours* not only as one of my pastoral duties which have to be fulfilled – except during phases which are uneventful (or unchallenging), thus justifying the 'duty aspect' of it in a way - *but ...* as a highly conscious and deliberate act of praying *for ...*

And so, my praying becomes an inner struggle for greater nearness, for more *linkage* with God because ... separated from Him we can do *nothing*. And when the counselling talks turn out a failure and the individual in want for help actually blocks off being helped by his own resistance, then, indeed, this can save me from unintentionally adopting the ways of some self-sufficient guru. No matter how successful as a pastor, the requirement for spiritual reformation still remains: *He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes<sup>[a]</sup> so that it will be even more fruitful* (John 15,2) – (New International version).

This type of counselling talks are by no means the exclusive province of a trained and ordained pastor. Marriage partners may very well serve each other as such 'points-of-contact' whenever the need to *talk things out* arises. And – their younger and older children will definitely appreciate such opportunities when they can "speak their mind" with parents, godfathers, godmothers and the like. Some family circles and Bible classes have managed to build up much mutual trust and confidence over the years, allowing for the most personal matters to be talked out as these circles are so much more than a mere discussion round for daily news and world affairs played up by the media. The personal nearness experienced during those hours, the mental and spiritual approach and inter-exchange, along with the awareness of familiarity and understanding resulting there from ... all that has to do with fruitfulness. This, in turn, has a positive effect on everybody's self-esteem.

## A mission for the priest: To help and promote the Christian 'Art of Living'

Another area where the question of success and fruitfulness keeps coming back has to do with preaching ... be that in sermons or in lectures.

Father Kentenich had come to the conclusion that teaching the Truth, hoping that Life would then unfold and take its natural course seemingly without effort, is not sufficient. Instead, what he taught and practised for himself was this: Only when I manage to fill with *light* the practical worth of any religious or spiritual truth, will I be able to touch the souls of my listeners. When I succeed to address the both conscious and subconscious - or latent - desires within my audience and at the same time manage to point out to them a way to *link* the restless, longing human soul with its Redeemer – *Christ* – only then can one expect that something is going to happen.

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I must admit that, when I was a student I often came across these ideas, but only when I had to preach from the pulpit regularly, did I begin to understand their meaning ... and then the feedback came from the listeners, accordingly. While in the beginning, my sermons were brief lectures – short and simple – they became closer to life, as the time went by. One of my confreres gave me a hint: "You are not supposed to train a bunch of theologians but people how to learn the Christian 'art of living'. In those days, it became clear to me what Father Kentenich meant when he talked about ... "Observe, compare, condense and apply".

The importance of pointing out a variety in design, a sufficiently wide range of multiple applications, to include a certain real-life practicality, is shown to me in the feedbacks I get. *In preparing* the sessions I concentrate on the possibility to converse with the couples who come to my office, on my ability to formulate the right questions so that they will tell me freely what their problem is all about and also what is good in their relationship and what has helped them in the past. For an intensive exchange of experience it is the striving people, the ambitious ones, who are most beneficial to work with. That is what I understand by "sensus fidelium" or the "sense of believing" (apart from the other five human senses) ... in other words – having the "good catholic nose". The Holy Ghost does not necessarily reveal itself to the masses but it reveals itself in people who are ready to follow the spirit of the Gospel to a certain degree of commitment.

## Long-term communities and project teams

A last area which I'd like to address here, concerns the qualification for the Apostolate. The History of the Church is also a history of a long line of community foundations – be they the Orders of the classical type, the many societies and associations of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the many ecclesial movements that followed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not to mention the numerous charity, politico-educational and social projects, the latter often backed up by some strong, inspiring personality. Many problems facing mankind today are too much for the individual. But when *one steps forward to convince* a group of others as to the urgency of an immediate problem, *then* the one or other task community will develop, out of which a Community for Life may result even. The Schönstatt Movement, for example, comprises 26 communities, legally independent from one another, however united by one common bond: Spirituality. For getting projects under way, members from the various communities will come together, joining hands for the common work.

Dear Readers,

I have pointed out to you the various fields, where the issue of success and fruitfulness seems particularly worth looking into. Sometimes God provides his People with the visible result, for them to witness in their present lifetime, whereas at other times, the seed has to drop into the soil and get rooted. Then it will produce ample fruit. Ever since the early days of the Church, it has been accepted as an assured fact that the blood shed by the martyrs provided the seed for new Christians to follow their footprints. This need not always go along with having to sacrifice one's life ... a life with many sacrifices along the way – sometimes much less spectacular – may still turn out extremely rewarding through its fruitfulness. And there are times where God will grant His blessings only many years later, such as in the case of Charles de Foucauld or what is known as the *Golden Book* of Saint Ludwig Maria Grignon de Montfort. Some things remain a secret of the Divine. Many others are a matter of ... ability.

*I am sure that God – by granting us success – wants us to venture further on, calls us into places where we can be even more productive, bear more fruit and all of that in a way we*

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*would never have chosen ourselves, let alone, dreamt of. Once we get ourselves going where God wants us to go, then He will receive us with open arms.*

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*(Ins Englische übersetzt von **Katharina M.**)*