

Hopeful Living



Because you are worth it

Dear Reader,

perhaps you have made similar observations with regard to people/couples you know: When partners face difficult times, the trend of development goes into two different directions, obviously: Some try to put up with their partner, who at present seems to have become a nuisance to them, with an extra portion of patience and endurance, but – you can tell from looking at their faces and hard-set mouths – in truth, they feel mighty sorry for themselves. And as each of them keeps a secret account by which they watch over a 'balance of justice', so to speak, they easily come to the conclusion of being used or cheated, even. This makes them feel weaker and eventually – with the burden growing – bitterness surely follows. And there are those others, who – while having to cope with a similar burden – manage somehow to remain at ease and – with the burden growing – become stronger within themselves.

A glance at Life

Johann Sebastian Bach was not allowed to develop his creativity inside a *protected zone* of leisure and privacy. Rather – he often found himself wrestling with the Council of the City of Leipzig. Sometimes, the fight went about housing issues, quite frequently about money, whereas – at other times – it was about the number of concerts, the latter including controversies with musicians and singers.

Where is the difference in coping? Why does the same outer environment make one person feel weak and the other - strong? Why does the one decide for withdrawal and quiet suffering in seclusion from the world while the other becomes more passionate and brave? It must not always have to do with outside conditions only.

A friend of mine – father of six children – had the following clue: "It's not about enduring but (all) about giving ... (in the sense of) ... "because you are worth it, I am ready for this sacrifice." And that is an inner dialogue that takes place here. In the worst case, i.e. if something is done for the sake of politeness or for the mere preservation of peace, meaning that the person concerned does something which he (or she) *does not want to do in the first place*, then as a result there will be a rise in nervousness, accompanied by the recurring question: "Why in the world, am I doing this to myself?"

Thus, if a person is unable to make a particular sacrifice which is placed before him, then he (or she) will feel victim him(her)self while the other one is to take on the role of a scapegoat, making life as hard as possibly can be. What's so treacherous about this attitude is that he (or she) who feels victim to the given situation, will – more often than not and perhaps quite voluntarily and unknowingly - submit his freedom and responsibility to the very individual which he thinks guilty or at fault. And pretty soon he will find a devote listener to whom he can pour out his heart, who will readily agree with him in coming to a verdict on that *monstrous beast* for having been so wicked. One's own share in the problem, one's own role in the conflict is thus blocked out, blurring the view against what could be done, what could be changed and so ... the same mistake will be repeated over and over again until it has turned into a typical pattern of behaviour.

For that reason I see to it that – whatever the problem in a partnership – *both* partners are present in the sitting and speak their mind on equal terms. In this manner – by hearing them both – I can try to convince them that the way *is not* one of wanting to change one another but to begin working on one's own character. In other words: Each shall make use of the

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freedom given to him as God's most precious gift and with this freedom take on responsibility for one's own emotions and thoughts.

After this look at present-day life let's take a look at Jesus and at what He has to say: (Mathew 5, 38-48)

(The following is adopted from the New International Reader's Version)

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye must be put out for an eye. A tooth must be knocked out for a tooth.'—(Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21) ³⁹ But here is what I tell you. Do not fight against an evil person.

"Suppose someone hits you on your right cheek. Turn your other cheek to him also. ⁴⁰ Suppose someone takes you to court to get your shirt. Let him have your coat also. ⁴¹ Suppose someone forces you to go one mile. Go two miles with him.

⁴² "Give to the one who asks you for something. Don't turn away from the one who wants to borrow something from you.

Love Your Enemies

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour.—(Leviticus 19:18) Hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But here is what I tell you. Love your enemies. Pray for those who hurt you. ⁴⁵ Then you will be sons of your Father who is in heaven.

"He causes his sun to shine on evil people and good people. He sends rain on those who do right and those who don't.

⁴⁶ "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Even the tax collectors do that.

⁴⁷ If you greet only your own people, what more are you doing than others? Even people who are ungodly do that. ⁴⁸ So be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Jesus gives up his life – and he gives it freely

Every so often in my talks I come to realize that these words by our Master Jesus are misunderstood ... just as though Jesus wanted to say: Put up with everything that comes your way! Speaking in this way, all he wanted was to *make clear* what Divine sovereignty and Divine freedom is all about. So, it is not an issue of *reacting* (to the environment and their demands) but much rather a case of *answering an inner impulse followed by action ... independent and uninfluenced*. Whenever King Herod had ordered the killing of John the Baptist, Jesus found safety himself by going to Galilee, and he reprimanded the Pharisees with the intent to make them realize – and overcome – their self-made prison of subjugation under the letter of the law. And he came up with surprising solutions whenever trapped for answers ... be it the Emperor's tax or the temple tax issue, be it the case of the adulteress. Only towards the end of his life, when faced with the conflict: How am I to cope with the rejection of my mission, the aim of which is to redeem? At this point he made his decision – a *free* decision -

to keep his word and stand by the People of God which is all mankind while respecting Man's free will. For him, this involved the necessity to die. And the message of this dying is: All your meanness, stupidity and blockheadedness will not induce me to renounce my having said "yes" to you – once and for all times. You may kill me because I am not going to make any use of my omnipotence, but – my 'yes' remains 'yes'. Because I respected your freedom, I

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wanted to win you through my deeds, through my words, through my humanity. It was never my intention to overwhelm you in a way that you would not have been able to say 'no'. Being as it is, I have no other choice but to keep my word I gave you and pass through the Valley of Death unresistingly. John, the Evangelist, gave special emphasis to this 'freedom aspect' in Jesus' life and suffering: "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." (See: John, 10:18).

If it's our desire to obtain divine perfection to some degree – no matter how weak an effort that may turn out in the beginning – then it is important that we keep remembering our God-given freedom that makes us free to accept our everyday burdens without indulging in the role of 'victim to circumstances' too much and feeling sorry for ourselves all the time. In order to get our inner self back on the right track quickly, it is good to have a few simple phrases handy, by which we remind ourselves that it is freedom we strive for – and no dead end.

The theme of today's meditation is such a brief reminder: *"because you are worth it!"* It doesn't really matter if there is a subliminal undertone attached to such a confession ... something of the sort of: "... I wouldn't do this for somebody else but because it is *you*, I do it. Because you are my son, my daughter, my marriage partner ... I do it.

It sure is strange: When people are in love, they seem to have a natural and spontaneous inclination to be generous about each other and may not even think about anything they do in terms of "sacrifice" but in everyday life that sure follows, the listing-up and account-keeping seems to take over. Our ancestors created a term for such people, they called them "mercenaries". For fear to come off badly, a secret book of account is kept, so to speak, with all the comparing that goes with it: What have I done for you? What are you doing for me? Ignatius of Loyola was aware of the danger such attitude meant for an individual's soul. He left us a prayer which says: "Eternal Word, Only Begotten Son, teach me the true greatness of heart. Teach me to serve you as you deserve to be served, teach me to give without keeping records, to fight without minding the wounds, to work without searching for rest, to give myself to a cause without expecting any other reward but the knowledge of having fulfilled your holy wish." (Gotteslob 5/3)

The message of the ring

Father Kentenich, founder of the Schönstatt Movement, definitely held Ignatius in very high esteem. When detained at Dachau, Father Kentenich wrote a meditation in the form of a poem. Each verse, in which a certain life situation is described, ends with the refrain:

"Then, my ringlet will make rise my inner self above ...

For at last has come the time for me – to love ..."

As a piece of background information, I would like to comment something on what seems to be a very strange text indeed – at first sight. It is customary with women communities within the Movement, for each female – upon receiving the *Eternal Consecration* - to be given a ring by her Community which is to remind her of this hour of giving herself up ... of entering in God's Service. The ring – an ancient human symbol – also constitutes a treasure to married couples.

This symbol of never-ending love, of unwavering fidelity, of a continuous state of *two selves having merged* for ever, has the power to address the deepest layers within an individual's soul - *provided*, he (or she) opens up to it. Thus, what is needed here is more than a mere intellectual understanding, more than a conscious decision to say: Alright; that is now what matters and there is no other way. Because that would surely cause mutiny deep inside, would cause pain to the individual's very heart. That cannot be the way, rather – *what the ring means* is the uplifting of the diverse urges and drives, all of them. Argumentations are hardly fit to reach the bottom layers of the soul whereas symbols can. And so - this ring on

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my hand speaking to me from the outside, as it were, speaking to my passions, my innermost driving forces, i.e. the energy sources of my being ... this ring says: "Now the hour for your love has come!" In other words ... now my love has to prove itself so it will stand the test. Now it's going to show if I am ready to move on and away from a kind of love which may have been very well self-centred and egoistic also, to a love which is prepared to give, to invest, to get involved. Being impressed by a person's merits and advantages, by handsomeness, charm and lively temperament, followed by falling in love with the person ... all of that may very well go along with pleasant feelings but still it's a feeling which is very self-centred in the sense of: I feel enriched by enjoying this person's company and – should this person have earned some fame, become a celebrity even, it will surely feel good also (to be in that person's presence). But ... that must never be all. It will never be sufficient, it *is superficial*. It may play a certain role at the beginning of a relationship but – as the shared biography takes its course – it is important that the love is placed on a more solid foundation. In this context, let's take a look at how Father Kentenich, while imprisoned at the Dachau Concentration Camp, came to meditate on this topic and its different aspects in the following way:

*When my soul's weariness yearns for its rest in death ...
When my sore limbs and body long for their last breath ...
When my heart's cup of sorrow feels it can hold no more ...
When streams of tears – suppressed – urge to the fore ...
"Then, my ringlet will make rise my inner self above ...
For at last has come the time for me - to love ..."*

*When my encaged bosom wants to break its fetters ...
When to my soul – turned wingless – nothing matters ...
When thought and mind go round the Self in circles
Where Man's communion resembles inert turtles...
"Then, my ringlet will make rise my inner self above ...
For at last has come the time for me - to love ..."*

*When the Blessed Mother's blessings seem too far away ...
The Bridegroom's path seems lost and Thy servant left astray ...
When kinfolk and brethren shut their ears on me, avoid my way ...
Won't see my worries, sorrows and have naught to say ...
"Then, my ringlet will make rise my inner self above ...
For at last has come the time for me - to love ..."*

These three verses may do as a sample. Father Kentenich left us many similar descriptions wherein the love seems on the verge of dying or – at least it may seem so to the human heart – has died already. And it is particularly at that moment in time, that an opportunity arises to oppose this inner fatigue and emotional draught. It is this moment of reanimation, it is this *"and still I do love you"*.

Comprehending a marriage crisis as a chance

It always hurts when I hear that couples who have been married a few months only, come to me indicating the wish to separate, and this is their reasoning: "We don't love each other any more, and before we start hating each other we have settled for a peaceful separation instead." In a social environment where fun comes first as a value worth living for, such intent is in itself logical. And it is here where the transitory nature of this new and yet by no means *new* lifestyle - from what is known of former epochs – becomes obvious. The 'fun value' of

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one's life must never take the role of an idol nor must it be placed on top of my value scale, because that place is God's place alone. Idolatry – as witnessed in the Old Testament – often went hand in hand with human sacrifices. Fortunately, nowadays broken relationships normally don't end up tragically in bursts of violence. But isn't it sad enough when people are confronted with their life plan gone to pieces, when they feel deserted, *let down*, when they take years for their wounded souls to heal?

And isn't it terrible when un-experienced couples have no awareness of – let alone access to - this maturing process innate to phases of aridity, of weariness and lack of feeling ... simply because there is nobody there to explain it to them? Sure, the troubles lining such a pathway cannot be lifted nor the burden eased, but whosoever is ready to give help could start off in giving courage: Go in and all the way through this (seemingly) dark tunnel for there is a way through! And isn't that an important apostolic mission also nowadays - the command of 'loving thy neighbour'?

Every silver or golden wedding celebrated in a parish is also a sign of hope and encouragement to the young searching generation who is bent on finding their lives' happiness in complete and lasting relationships but often fails due to nobody telling them what really matters ... once the stream of emotions has abated and partners are more and more felt as a burden.

On the other hand – it is wonderful for me as a family pastor and counsellor – to witness when couples after having gone through a few months of crisis, come back to me radiant and full of thanks for having been helped and thus saved from any stupid or irreversible rash action. And of course – other than in the case of, let's say *vaccination* – the effect is not life-long immunity, once a crisis has been overcome ... rather is this life-long struggle meant to lead us from a selfish concept of love to one which is unconditional. Again and again we find ourselves confronted with this lesson and have no way out but to master it. And each time it is experienced as painful and over-demanding. And still – there is this un-describable feeling of security, combined with a notion of assurance as to the future – when one knows how to deal with like situations.

Jesus is expecting quite a bit of us. His life rules are no instant powder which I just have to stir up once and it's already drinkable. Following his path towards perfection as intended for Man as God's image is something for people who are ready to '*stay with it*', who are ready to grow and are willing to leave the ease of their 'comfort zone' behind many times in exchange of meeting new challenges.

Mary knows the art of living

Let us look at Mary – the Lord Jesus' most faithful companion in the time of his earthly pilgrimage. She is the Queen of the Advent. In the hour of Annunciation she spoke her courageous 'yes' to the surprises which God held in store for her and she did not retract this yes – not even when she stood under the Cross. The one or other harsh reaction she got from her son could be explained, perhaps, in the sense that Jesus tried to prepare her for the forthcoming immeasurable sacrifice, thereby helping her endurance towards a life totally irrational and beyond all comprehension become even stronger. And so, she did not collapse under the cross but stood there at his feet ... stood there with another faithful, loving soul ... with John.

When during Advent time we pray the Angel Prayer or the Rosary, when we sing the Christmas carols dedicated to the Holy Virgin, then this is one of many ways in which we ask: Please, come and take us by the hand and make us understand the art of living as demonstrated by your Son! Guide us to better understand all the many situations this life

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may hold for us and enable us to accept them as our chance to grow in love ... a love which is unselfish!

In her words "Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord, let it be to me as you have said", we are faced with an attitude towards God that could also be translated as "*Because you are worth it.*"

P. Elmar Busse

(Ins Englische übersetzt von Katharina M.)