

Hopeful Living



**"And we know that in all things
God works for the good of those who love him"
(Romans 8, 28)**

Georg Bachler who later in his life made himself a name as hazard-loving mountain climber, grew up in Altenmarkt (Salzburg region). His home-town parish priest had made it a habit to bring the young lad – one of the altar servers – along on his extended mountain tours. Years later, he finds himself hiking the Himalayans. Bachler recounts: "It happened near the Makalu, some fifty metres before reaching my first eight-thousand summit, that I gave up and arrived at the basis with great effort. There, I was seized by what is known as a *peak experience*, caused by the extreme heights. I do all kinds of crazy things such as taking down the tent, cutting the strings and stuffing the whole equipment into my backpack. I begin do descend, unaware that I had lost my orientation. Only some 150 metres further downward, I gradually recover my senses from what must have been a state of trance, and I find myself eye-to-eye with a hopeless situation (as it seemed). For the first time in my life, I get a sense of ...Death. Now you are going to die. And in the same instance – I really don't know how to describe it – I am aware of an unexplainable power and motivation rising up from nowhere, saying: But not in this way! Not in this way! Not without resisting! I am going to try everything to get out of this!" And I swear to myself that I am ready to do whatever it takes in order to survive. I begin by climbing up, working myself up the tedious path to the tent area so to get back to the platform where I can set up tent once more. Somehow, I manage. Around 9 p.m., I crawl into my tent and feel safe. During the night, I get up several times to relight the gas cooker and warm my hands and feet against the flame. I manage to survive the night and I am lucky. The next day starts out under beautiful skies and I can start on my descent."

Later, he adds the following: "If I had judged my situation completely clearheaded in those days and had acted accordingly, then – I think – it would have meant that I gave myself up. Instead, I simply pretended that the conditions I found myself in, were the most natural thing on earth, and I pretended having not the least doubts regarding a positive outcome of it all. The more I held on to this attitude, the more energetic I became. And so I went from one little success to the next. I gained assurance as I got stronger, and so – I made it.

Don't give up – never!

What saved Georg Bachler's life in that extreme situation, was his mental strength which protected him from giving himself up. How do humans develop such mental strength? I once visited a man in his office. There was a poster at his door showing a frog caught halfway down the throat of a stork, but the frog had his front legs wrapped around the bird's neck which prevented him from getting swallowed completely. The writing underneath – just two words – said: "Never give up!" This poster served as the man's daily encouragement to face the complexities of normal everyday life. It hadn't been easy for him to set up his small business. And yet, as time showed, the one or other – at first glance – unsolvable situation could thus be mastered, in the end.

Sometimes in relationship counselling, the most important part of the job was - for me - waiting for the right moment and then try my best to encourage the couple in front of me to focus every effort on getting the *vessel of their marriage* which was stuck tight on a sandbank, back into open waters.

- Of course, they had to learn what is understood by 'constructive criticism',
- Of course, they had to learn to understand their partner in a more profound manner,

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- Of course, all this would want a certain measure of openheartedness, of not giving in to the temptation to see what was different not necessarily as something "not so good" - or even worse.

But apart from this improvement of the communicative faculties on both sides, **encouragement** was the most important thing in these sittings, and – it happened that the partners were able to develop this faculty ... once they discovered that the marriage sacrament includes also God's promise to see to it that His children joined in matrimony will find themselves blessed with success.

For me – as well as for my clients – this struggle for continuity led up to the realization of the enormous power of Paul's words in his message to the Romans, where it says: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him". (Romans, 8, 28)

A good conception to start from: God works for the Good

St. Paul wrote his letter to the Romans as an old, experienced man – not as a juvenile enthusiast, as un-experienced hothead. Up to that time, he had gone through a lot of hardship in his life. And then he writes: "We know..." He does not write: "It would be nice, if" ...or: "I wish that it were true if ..."

He writes because he is certain ... certain because of his own experience ... "*We know* ..." And then, the text goes on with the little word "all". And also here – no limitation is implied such as "most" or "very often". No. It just says: "*all*".

How much powerful hope did St. Paul demonstrate and get to work in his life!

How much powerful hope did this phrase awaken in people's hearts!

How much powerful hope – and thus power of hope – can we manifest for ourselves when we open up to the Apostle's experience of faith – wholly and trustfully?

The Church understands "hope" as one of the virtues. But it differentiates between the original *divine* virtues as are 'faith, hope and love' and the virtues acquired by Man such as, e.g., the four main or cardinal virtues: Wisdom, fortitude, righteousness, discipline and modesty. We speak of 'virtue' as a constant inner urge to do what is good and right. Virtues enable humans to do good deeds and - while doing so – give their very best. Virtues are both fruit and seed of moral deeds (see *Catechism No. 1803ff*).

This interaction between fruit and seed we should give a closer look now: The alpinist Georg Bachler whom I mentioned earlier in this meditation, frequently withstood the temptation to give up and always fought his way through. Thus, he acquired a certain degree of tenacity. In this critical situation near the Makalu Peak in the Himalayans, it was not just by mere will-power ... rather was it by *soul-power* – that from deep inside that *order* to resist aroused him and *that's* what saved his life in the end. This resistance was the "seed" or driving force towards his survival.

Venture forward with ease

In the Catechism, we read: "Virtues enable humans feel at ease, secure and willing to live a morally good life – and live it joyfully. The virtuous character does what is good – out of his/her own free will.

No matter, if the issue is to survive,

No matter, if the issue is to accept and say 'yes' to life as such,

No matter, if it is just about doing what is good (and right)

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The precondition for all this will always be a certain amount of training so that in the decisive moment our condition – both mental and volitional – will be strong enough not to forsake us.

Now there are people who seem to have been born with what is called a *sunny disposition*. And there are others – reckless and light-headed – who throw all caution to the winds and – faced with real dangers – bury their head in the sand. There are superficial people who tend to delude themselves about human life tragedies by looking 'the other way' and running after distractions. This meditation has *not* been written for them. It is my quest, rather, to reach those who suffer under the burden of their lives, who are haunted by doubts, whose life's disappointments threaten to defeat whatever self-trust and confidence in others is left. It is especially for the latter that the Apostle's words "... And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans, 8, 28) can become the door-opener to the Light.

Holding on to hope when times get harder

As for myself, I had given up my theology studies in 1975 because (I felt) I had lost my faith. And I had serious doubts as to my abilities to ever take on a job that would get me into contact with people. Five years later, I was ordained to be a priest. In retrospect, I am thankful for these difficult years; they help me – today – to show empathy towards others going through difficult and challenging phases, empathy and understanding. Something like that you cannot study or learn. At the same time, I do hope that I won't have to undergo something similar – a second time. Today, I can look back at those years as a kind of training section, during which I was prepared to become a better, a more *fruitful* counsellor and pastor. And so I can say that 'God worked for the good of me'. So, it turned out for me a first-hand experience that Paul is right. And of course there are those other situations – also for me – where I find it difficult to comprehend God's salvation plan (let alone the idea behind it). Then I get stuck and cannot 'let go' and wear myself out over God's inconceivability. And once in a while, I manage to believe nevertheless – blindly, so to speak – that somehow behind

all this misfortune and misery that has come over a seemingly innocent victim, *God's hidden rescue-plan is at work* ... even though I cannot see such plan for the time being. And it is this positive assumption which helps to restore my mind and soul. A woman whose husband is struck with alcoholism once said to me: And it *is* possible to pull oneself up from the mud with nothing but your own strength to hold on to ... just as Münchhausen once did. What she meant by this was: When I manage to refrain from harbouring all those destructive and contemptuous thoughts in my mind and become more attentive to the little joys and pleasures of the day, *then* this will make me feel better – definitely. When I cherish the hope, consciously, that my husband - after his withdrawal – will stay dry from then onward, then there will be less of a risk that my thoughts of fear may conjure up a relapse.

Self-fulfilling prophecies

Evidence has been provided by psychologists that a sort of mechanism exists within the human soul which can be named as "self-fulfilling prophecy". In other words: By focussing my thoughts fearfully on a particular catastrophe that might happen, I *make it* ... happen. If – on the other hand – I visualize (or envisage) my future as a sequence of positive events, then ... chances are that *it will* turn out positive.

Father Kentenich, Founder of the Schönstatt Movement, found himself for three years prisoner at the Dachau Concentration Camp. Being thus caught on the brink of death, he

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wrote prayers - and put them into rhyme – which can help us to master critical situations by letting *Hope* 'take over'. After all, he had to expect that the Nazis would not just kill him alone but smash to pieces the entire Schönstatt Movement. In those days of deepest sorrow and distress, he realized what to him appeared to be a parallel to Abraham's sacrifice. Abraham is ready to return his son Isaac – the Promised Child – to the Inconceivable God. In a similar way, Father Kentenich is prepared to hand over to God his foundation which he calls his "child" ... to place it at God's feet. Let's have a look at the original text:

*Take to thy heart thy work - thy hands' creation,
Take to thy heart the Child to which my love belongs ...
Leaving it with you, I gladly will devote to it my songs...
Its future path is yours, its future place and station
Thou wilt decide ... and yet I ask: Let thy Grace preserve it ...
Let me love it, let me serve it ...
Wilt thou accept as ransom the childlike prayers of a trusting heart
Then half-hearted, idle phlegm - I vow - shall have no part!
Will day and night put forth my trustful plea ...
That thou would grant this loving child your miracles to see.*

This text confronts the reader with a double road: On the one hand, there is this willingness to say "yes" to something which is anticipated as utterly terrible and impossible to bear; on the other – there is this latent hope for a miracle to happen. When sitting or talking with cancer patients I notice *one* thing: When the patients have entered into this phase of struggling with their illness on an emotional and at the same time mental basis, *then – all of a sudden* - some deep-felt inner peace will end this fight.

Prior to his transfer to Dachau, Father Kentenich managed to have a prayer of thanks smuggled out of his Koblenz prison; in this prayer he started out from his release as an established fact, and he asked the Schönstatt Sisters to pray it every day. That reminds us of St. Paul who said to the Philippians: ⁶"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." (Philippians, 4:6). Another version even reads something as follows: "Thank the Lord – just as though your prayers have already been answered ...".

Happiness – the reward that follows upon effort

One verse in the above-mentioned thanksgiving poem says:

*"Where Man's heart's strivings – mundane and earth-locked – lack the Divine,
Wilt thou, God, graciously uplift, transform, and make it thine".*

What does he mean by that? We with our ideas about fortune and happiness tend to imagine something like a 'land of milk and honey'. In doing so, we are not aware that our happiest moments quite often were those that followed as a sense of reward after having accomplished a difficult or strenuous task. Father Kentenich knew about this problem when he put into words his ideal of Man - the *New Man*:

"The *Ideal (of Man)* delineated here is to be seen as 'forever old' and 'forever new'. *Forever old*, because it has been strived for over the centuries; *forever new* because Man's nature – under the bondage of what is called the "original sin" – is always on the lookout for compromises with a tendency to get comfortably settled and be content in a levelled state of mediocrity".

When now – looking back in retrospect – we count our blessed moments, then we realize, that the price, often, was very high. A cheap sensation of happiness – of the kind that one

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can easily get – is likely to vanish – to evaporate – in no time. When we find ourselves caught in a situation which we experience as being very painful and the cost of it all intolerably high, then, indeed, we are helped by looking forward to the happiness that lies ahead of us – once the achievement preceding it, has been made. Then we will be able to say 'Yes' once again to the price required. Then we may feel – intuitively – that the respective situation has made us just a little bit braver, a little more patient, humane, compassionate and enduring. And that – again – is something to be happy about.

As on 20th May of the year 1945 Father Kentenich returned to Schönstatt after an adventurous trip through occupied Germany, he was met by a rejoicing, exultant crowd. The longings and desires, the dreams and visions of 1942 had at last become a reality. And yet, the enthusiasm was not allowed to last. Although – having gone through the hell of Dachau - his own spirituality had passed the "test of fire", stood the "test of time" during this highly appalling, extreme situation, the one or other "ecclesial" person in charge found this whole thing rather conspicuous. Too much psychology, too much emphasis on the role of relationships between humans, too much worshipping of the Blessed Mother ... an atmosphere of mistrust had developed which culminated in Father Kentenich's dismissal from office and his banishment to Milwaukee, USA.

Fourteen years he had to wait over there, before he was finally rehabilitated. And all these years had been twice as hard on him, since it was a cross laid upon his shoulders *not* by the enemies of the Church – like in times of National Socialism – *but* by the ecclesial authorities, i.e. by his very own Church. All his efforts and struggling for clarification and justification ended up fruitless but were answered by an additional rebuke, by referring to him as being "unreasonable" and "stubborn". No earlier than at the time of a spiritual breakthrough brought about by the Second Vatican Council, did those responsible recognize the "pioneering achievements" of this misunderstood prophet. And thus, on 22nd December, 1965, Pope Paul VI welcomed him in a private audience to receive his official rehabilitation. Where, now, did Father Kentenich "see" the good in all those highly difficult phases of his life?

For one thing, he pointed out the necessity for the individual Schönstatt Communities and their administrations to gain greater independence *due to and because of* his absence. No way to come back and ask their founder how he would have decided in that and that situation! On the other hand, the solitary character of his Milwaukee environment provided him with the opportunity to reflect about his manifold experiences in a more profound manner and record them in writing. Had he stayed at Schönstatt, he would have found himself *torn up* – so to speak – by the routine of everyday business. His last three years which he was allowed to spend at Schönstatt give ample evidence for this assumption.

The way we look at reality is of greater importance than reality itself.

And so, it's not only reality itself that matters, it is also our interpretation of reality. Whether something is unbearable or not, often depends on our innermost attitude towards it. There are parents who can cope with their baby crying in the night, who talk to it in a comforting manner, who take it up and carry it around in the bedroom till it sleeps – once again. Others – and thanks to God, they are few – mistreat their little children and tell the Court afterwards that they couldn't bear it any longer.

Young adolescents suffer, as a rule, when their partner – girlfriend or boyfriend, respectively – abandons them. The majority is able to cope with such emotional hurts rather well because they tell themselves: "That is part of the adventure of loving, part of the risk. But I will find

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somebody who suits me." Others are so deeply shattered that they may even think of suicide and – should it come to the extreme – may even give it a try.

No matter what the problem is ... we are free to follow Paul's teachings in that we strive to see also the Good in our everyday reality. Because then we can rely on our ability – even in complicated situations where darkness seemingly obscures the way – to count on God's will to redeem and to save - wholeheartedly. While detained at Dachau, Father Kentenich drew up the image of God's gracious hands clad in gloves that were made of iron. These iron gloves symbolize our immediate reality as we see it – a reality which hurts. God's gracious hands stand for *my* positive acceptance in something I believe and trust in. The time it takes for this inner struggle, the number of relapses ... all that then is secondary. We are confident that we have chosen the right path for ourselves to make the best of our life ... **not** by our own efforts and resources **but** in that we listen and react to a God who is Almighty, whose Love and Grace is continuously with us.

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(Ins Englische übersetzt von Katharina M.)