

# Hopeful Living



## We chosen instruments (Acts, 9:15) What makes living and working meaningful?

In the Acts of the Apostles, we learn about Ananias in Damascus having second thoughts at the idea to take up contact with Saul who was persecuting the Christians. But the Lord dispels his concerns in telling him: "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel."

A young adult having applied for a job forty-one times and finally found one, gave an enthusiastic report after her first few days in the new employment, finishing up with these words: "Now my life has a meaning once more. Now I know that I am needed."

This young woman hit the nail on the head by expressing what many of us have experienced in a similar way: *Being needed, playing a part, filling a role – for others – that is what builds up and strengthens our self-esteem.* On the other hand, our self-worth suffers when we feel that we are becoming a burden, when we see no way in which to engage or commit ourselves, when we become jobless or sent to retirement at an early age and have problems finding a voluntary job or a hobby that suits us ... something where we can put our energies into. In times where the unemployment rate was low, where the question – at most – was "where" and "what" but not "if at all", people wouldn't talk near as much about self-esteem and what a fulfilling, a downright satisfying job would do for it. It seems that in times of any mass-scale ailments, *en masse* questions keep swarming people's minds as well. Amidst these phases of doubt, *freedom* can be found when God tells us: "I need you".

These three words are the meaning of God's message to Ananias: God *needs* Paul. With him and through him, God wants to achieve something for which Paul, obviously, is the one most suited. His entire life history is nothing else but preparation for the *service* which he is now meant to take upon his shoulders for God's sake.

### Instruments matter

Maybe, you have been through a similar thing yourself: As a person with practical talents you suddenly find yourself in a situation where something is broken that wants repairing, and with your faculties you could easily manage, *but* – in the whole house there is not a single instrument or tool to be found by which to do it. Something like that can get me mad and quite irritated. All I need is a cross-tip screwdriver, but – where to get it?

And yet, I have known the opposite case, thank God. Once, having switched to a larger size skiing boots, the ski binding had become loose. I was happy when at the lower terminus I came across some tools (on chains) by the help of which the trouble could be fixed in no time.

Once I found myself on an autobahn side strip – exhaust pipe broken – when finally one of the "yellow angels" arrived. I was amazed to see the wealth of appliances and tools those emergency vehicles carry along in order to give preliminary support to get the breakdown car at least moving and back on the road again.

The most fascinating thing, however, were the scenes in a movie I saw – "Apollo 13" – in the course of which a team at the ground station had the challenging job of putting together a new air filter of the materials available to the astronauts so the latter wouldn't have to die from carbon-dioxide poisoning. After several attempts gone wrong, the guys on ground finally succeeded in sending the instructions for assembly over the radio – and it worked.

Examples as these make the creed "We are God's chosen instruments" appear in a different light!

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I know, of course, that in ancient times slaves were called "talking tools". Being named in this manner, they were at the same time denied their status as human beings. Such associations, however, have a potential – at the bottom of a person's soul – to cause this very soul to *reject – rightfully reject* – the term 'tool' or 'instrument' being used in this connection (with people). If – on the other hand – we take into account the (truly enormous) rating and role accorded to special machinery and tool making in large enterprises, then the understanding – (which goes along with this application of the term) – will be a different one.

A frequently recurring question in this context reads: "Why does God *need* people? After all – He *is* omnipotent! The way He does things is the best one anyway!"

## God relies on man

Yes – it is one of those things about our religion, those totally incomprehensible, totally incredible things, namely – that the Almighty God should limit himself in *His Omnipotence* and rely on *us humans* and *our cooperation* for putting into effect *His* salvation plan. He wouldn't have to do that – really not – but since He has obviously made up His mind that it should be like that, He stays with it ... to the very last consequence. He neither takes on the role of a fire department nor is He to be seen as an insurance company of some supernatural origin ... in case we humans have made a blunder. The law of cause and effect established by Him – He keeps it in force and has no interest to suspend it all the time. Of course, there are miracles – in the true sense of the word – which mean an overriding of the laws of nature. There *are* such things as spontaneous healings, not to be explained by today's state-of-the-art medical research. But in everyday life, such immediate, corrective interventions of the Divine should be understood as the exception. Fact is: God *is* in action ... *all the time* and – as an adolescent once put it – likes to be the habitual meddler ... always interfering. Looking at it that way ... *everything is His doing*. Nothing ever happens without His outspoken will and permission and yet ... we can never say – neither beforehand nor in retrospect: Well, this was forty percent my doing and 60 percent God's doing. For coming closer to the truth we have to resort to some paradox statement: It was hundred percent my job and hundred percent God's.

Thomas von Aquin in this connection uses the terms "God as the primary cause" and "Man as the secondary cause" when referring to this mutual approach and interaction of divine and human activity. Therefore, Man is more than a piece of driftwood in the stream of God's will and omnipotence. Man, too, is *cause* himself. He is free to accept God's plans - or - to stand up against them. And even if we do something that's bad or evil, we have to be empowered by God, so that we *can* do it. If He would say "no" to us, we would momentarily drop into nothingness, into oblivion. We would simply cease to exist. From all that we may get an idea as to what kind of strain and tension God has to put up with when – on the one hand – he calls us into being and keeps us going, while on the other He becomes witness to our not-responding to His salvation plan. This is the price God has to pay ... ever since He decided to let us have our own free will, so to make us more in His likeness - more than any other creature could ever come to be.

## God's alliances with Man

As God did not want to be acting on His own – ever since He created us humans – the *Covenant* idea keeps reappearing like a 'golden thread' in the History of Man's Salvation. Every so often God chooses people with whom He enters into an alliance, who are then given a particular mission by which they are meant to help God and mankind at the same time. *Thus*

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Noah is charged with building the *arc* so to secure survival of man in his lineage.

Abram gets instructions to leave his home in Chaldea because God intends to give him new lands to live on with his offspring, which will be numerous.

At the burning bush, Moses is given orders to guide to freedom God's people, which had been enslaved by the Egyptians for so long.

Mary is asked if she is ready to become the mother of the Saviour.

St Francis is entrusted with renewing the Church by going seriously to work about Jesus' words regarding poverty.

In summer 1914, Josef Kentenich comes across an article about the coming into being of a place of pilgrimage in Italy ... *solely* due to the prayers and intervention from a lawyer, and intuitively he becomes aware of God calling him to start on a similar project at Schönstatt.

Edith Stein – once Jewish and later atheist – while staying with friends reads the biography of Theresa von Avila in one night. Conversion and vocation coincide and she makes up her mind to enter the Order of the Carmelites.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta riding a train on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1946 from Calcutta to Darjeeling, has time to read the book by Charles des Foucauld, titled "Desert Call" and she who was at that time already member of an Order, is suddenly "*faced*" with her new vocation, i.e. to enter a life of service for the "poorest of the poor".

This list of testimonies could be continued endlessly.

No matter how unique each professional path ... the common thing about all these histories of vocation could be expressed as such:

*God says: "I need you. Be my instrument and help me with your faculties and experience to accomplish the work for which I have chosen you!"*

## **God – an ingenious developer of human resources**

Let's take a look at Moses: Although of Hebrew origin, he is raised at the Egyptian Pharaoh's palace. Later in his life he takes refuge in the desert which turns out as a kind of survival training for him. When faced with his vocation, his meanwhile developed faculties will prove of great value such as: His contacts with the Pharaoh's court, living and surviving in the desert... There is only one thing which he lacks, i.e. the mastery of speech. But to God this is no problem. There is his brother Aaron to make up for this weakness.

God is unlimited – also where it comes to developing human resources. *He knows today* where in some thirty or forty years' time he needs whom. He – God Himself – takes care of the training and education of the one chosen by placing him amidst adequate conditions, and then – quite suddenly – he will call on him: "I need you!"

We don't know, how many people have overheard such divine summons, or have lacked the courage to respond to them. Only in retrospect, we learn that wherever people followed the call, the Impossible turned out as possible all of a sudden, disaster and misery were transformed into blessings, while people who were willing to do as God told them, managed to rise above themselves.

*Vocation* is not limited to living in an ecclesial community or to priesthood. There is also a *vocation for matrimony*. God selects two people, he makes them meet and he wants them to make each other happy and whole. The marriage sacrament enables the partners to give evidence to each other of God's gracious and compassionate Love. God appoints them as His instruments, so that they assist each other on the path to salvation and help to create a *climate* of their own – meaning an environment in which children can grow up to become joyful adults with a positive attitude to life.

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## Every profession is also vocational

Not only marriage ... *every* profession is – in itself - *vocation*. What matters here is that we discover the in-depth dimension of the term. In whatever we do – we are God's co-workers. And because we do our work also for God, *every* activity means *cooperation with God*, means *worshipping or serving God*.

The problem is that whatever our work may be, we are at risk of losing this divine linkup. It can happen that the scope of our job activity becomes diminished in width and depth, in which case we get the impression that we are totally on our own – and alone.

This is the point where a "self-made" state of being and feeling under pressure has its origin. For that reason, it is not only good but necessary that we take time off ... time dedicated to seek and renew our contact with God. In other words, we must renew and reinforce the *thread* which connects us to Him again and again to keep it from tearing, so that it will be our hold – *our stronghold* – in critical lifetimes.

## Ways of cultivating our relationship with God

It is – I think – impossible to keep God in mind all the time and everywhere, to talk with Him, to look at Him (with the inner eye) and to make little sacrifices of love to him. But when at the beginning of an activity and after finishing it, we take the time to contact him – be it in the form of a little fervent prayer, an offering expressed in the two little words "For You" – then it happens that all the trivialities of the day gain a significance of their own. They become the little pieces which in the end constitute a large mosaic. Applying this to the Lord's Prayer which many of us pray several times a day, the quest "Thy Will Be Done!" gains a new – widened – quality: "Thy Will Be Done *through me!*"

It is simply much more fun to do sawing work with a sharp-toothed saw, to drill holes with a freshly sharpened drill, to work with a computer program that functions as it is meant to.

I think we can rightfully assume – children-like – that *it is* God's pleasure to have us as *His instruments* to rely on. Then, during the Sunday Eucharist, we may joyfully – and also with a grown sense of self-worth – bring our week's labour together with the paten before God: This I have done for you, to Your Honour and for my fellow men's well-being.

Furthermore, I am conscious of another motivating impulse - a propellant indeed – to our natural, innate desire for growth and development, for qualification and mastery, namely the wish, to become a particularly useful instrument in God's hands. During the Year 2000 World Youth Day in Rome, the Pope's message to the masses of youngsters was: "Take courage to become the Holy Ones of the new Millennium." This is the goal of a life-long development process put in a nutshell. In other words, we could say: "Have the courage to become God's tools and as such as perfect as can be."

## Think small steps! Go slowly about things.

The path towards this aim begins with a first step and it consists of many little steps to follow this first one.

Some time ago, approx. 90 adolescents had come together in the Schönstatt Centre on the "Liebfrauenhöhe" for the celebration of a 'liturgy night' (Youth Vigil). As my confrere told me, there was a great atmosphere already among the team members who had been charged with preparations for the night. The feeling of being ... "We", the common aim of wanting to show young people the direction towards a fresh and joyful "link-up", so to speak, with their faith, with the Church, by way of heart-warming, deep-going experiences and emotions ... *that was the inspiring drive* behind the team members' work.

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There *are* youngsters, juveniles, who once per week take a minibus through the City of Vienna to visit street people at certain places, providing them with a hot meal and taking the time off for the one or other talk with them.

There *are* youth groups who, after watching the movie "The Passion of the Christ", walked up to cinema-goers after the presentation, offering time for a discussion.

During my time in Stuttgart, our housekeeper had made inquiries as to my likes and dislikes with regard to meals. She was already 82 at that time, and yet – she simply enjoyed working, thereby placing great emphasis on quality. And every so often she managed to make people happy ... in her own personal way.

These examples should make one thing clear: Being an instrument, it does not matter (so much) *what* you do but *how* you do it.

An ardent craftsman with whom I had the pleasure of working together on several occasions, once said to me: "When I do something, I do it well, because - when I enjoy what I am doing, I am content and my customers are happy same as I."

And so – striving for quality is, in fact, a prosaic form of charity or of loving one's neighbour, because ... even if I never get to meet my customer, knowing that he appreciates my products, knowing that I have contributed to his quality of life in a positive manner - no need for him to be annoyed – that's what makes me happy also ... without the proof of feedback. In other words – the mere effort to do quality work constitutes in itself a very unselfish way of loving (one's fellow human beings).

As a rule, I can expect that ... whatever God demands of me is what I can do best. Again, that means: God wants my commitment in whatever makes me happy, in whatever I can do joyfully because it gives me fulfilment. The times – thank God – are over, where members of religious congregations were placed in positions for which they were hardly qualified, for the simple reason to teach them humbleness. And yet – conflicts of interests can never be totally avoided or excluded. A highly qualified woman once told me about her inner struggle with regard to becoming a mother – or not. On the one hand, she did not want to wait until the so-called biological clock has entered its last phase, on the other, she felt very much engaged in her job. "You'll always find plausible reasons why it's not the time and place to get one's desire to have children fulfilled. And before you are aware of it, the clock will have stopped ticking." Then, when she had finally become a mother she discovered totally new sides, aspects, about her, giving her joy and fulfilment in a measure she would never have thought, existed.

## **Failures are normal**

Being God's instrument does not mean, therefore, to glide – seamlessly and smoothly – from one success to the next. There are such things as dead ends, failures, invisible walls. You imagine how to serve God in the best possible way, but there *is* no visible way, no direction to follow. There is the case of a kindergarten teacher who would love to have children of her own, but she finds no suitable partner to whom religion means as much as it does to her. And there is the master - with an excellent talent of handling his staff, by the way – offered a step up the ladder, but the new position turns out to be mostly desk-work.

There are such phases of waiting and unsuccessful testing, trying this and that in order to find out: Where am I to go? That's where the doubting starts ... as to God's guidance.

Theresa von Lisieux came up with the following picture for herself: I am a toy ball in the hands of the Christ Child. At one time he presses me to His heart, at another he leaves me laying in the corner.

Bernadette Soubirous – the Lourdes Prophet – once said: "I am like a broom. God used me and puts me back into the closet."

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Whether toy ball or broom, the terms are an attempt to describe man's encounters with God, encounters not seldom overshadowed by darkness and pain, yet without questioning the basic, underlying God-Man-relationship.

Father Kentenich, while detained at the Dachau Concentration Camp, wrote a special "Instrument poem", wherein it says:

"Man's heart and will ... let them be yours,  
Undivided as your property ...  
Waiting for a call, a word of yours,  
Let's bend our knees in sweet humility ...  
Loving and serving is all the same ...  
It is the instrument's honour and fame."

Here, the conflict load of the individual's attempt striving to be *instrument-conscious* is expressed very clearly. Praying sometimes means ... struggle; struggling in letting "go" of the self and submission under God's will. Without such phases of surrender, our commitment would probably be too *ego-prone* after all, keeping us captivated in our favourite ideas. For Him to carry out his plans of surprise by which he catches us unaware, there is no other way, obviously, than to knock over – now and then - our small and limited fancies regarding what a fortunate life must be like.

Abraham, for example, having attained what we would call a ripe ("biblical") old age, was called by God to leave his homeland and set off for new territory. The people of Israel felt unable to cope with the insecurities a free life in the desert held for them and was longing for the fleshpots of Egypt, regardless at that time of the hardships of slavery that went with it.

Apart from these conflictive aspects which seem typical of this "instrument faith", there are also others ... hopeful, uplifting ones. Such hope is expressed in another verse of the above poem:

"Let the World, let Satan cast their net of fear ...  
Let stormy weathers rock the troubled soul from front and rear ...  
Yours is the power and the victory ....  
Your omnipotence will be ours to set us free ...  
Your heart's heavenly abode  
To us means safety – while on the earthly road.

While nursing this *instrument awareness* to my best knowledge and belief, I will be able to develop trust and confidence in the face of a mountain of difficulties ... because I have God's power to lean on. I know that it is *His* business waiting to be taken care of ... much more than it is mine. At the same time, such knowledge alleviates the load on my shoulders since there is no need for me to do everything on my own and – alone.

I have noticed that - in particular - parents of juveniles can find some peace of mind with this approach by telling themselves: We have given our children what we could. Now that we cannot be around them all the time, any longer, that we cannot protect them against all evil ... now is the time to entrust them with the Almighty God and the Blessed Mother.

And even in the face of failures, the 'instrument awareness method' can provide the key to cope. When – in retrospect – we can say that we have done as best as we could, and that it is now in the hands of God what will become of it, then such inner statements will help to ease the mind; such is also the message of the 'Morning Prayer':

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"Thou wilt use us as thy instruments each morrow  
And even if it were a yoke of suffering and sorrow,  
Whether failure or success ... it's to the Lord Above,  
That we bear witness daily, witness to His Love."

## **What counts is love ... not success**

In the end, God does not judge us by our achievements but only by the quality of love that we put into them. And what ever we have accomplished with a loving heart will be written down in the Book of Life. And whatever went wrong in the material world of mine ... it can't defeat the progress in my capability to love.

Dear Readers,

With the history of Paul which culminated in his special calling, God gives us an example on how the term "God's chosen instrument" helps us to describe the synergetic blending of both, divine and human action - so we can speak of *interaction* – and understand what's meant by it. Here, I have just briefly touched on the problem as how to comprehend God's Omnipotence and man's voluntary cooperation as a feasible *One*.

Examples have been given to describe the likely positive effects of an "instrument-conscious" awareness or attitude, along with the one or other hurdle that needs overcoming on the way. I am hoping and wishing for you that – based on this verse from the Acts – you may come up with a new understanding of your own personal *Life and Love Story with God* under the 'instrument' aspect and that you may find it a joyful experience.

At the close of this meditation I would like to pray with you the *Angelus*. It is dedicated to Mary following her destination to become the *Perfect Tool* with regard to the forthcoming incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. While citing her words we are ready to walk in her footsteps in that we open our hearts and minds to God's design and to whatever He wants to see accomplished through us – *His instruments*.

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*(Ins Englische übersetzt von Katharina M.)*