

Hopeful Living



With Him

(Romans 6, 4 – 8)

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. ⁶For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with,^[a] that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

⁸Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

(From: New International Version)

Dear readers,

A surgeon once told me how happy he is about the way his team cooperates when in the operating theatre. There are times where there is practically no need for words at all. Everybody knows what he – or she – is meant to do. Things are more difficult whenever newcomers join the team, in which case many more hints and corrective steps will be necessary.

A similar story in this sense comes from a married couple who say that – with their children growing older - they find it necessary to match their educational method (their style of upbringing) again and again and that a brief glance – something like a code known only to them – is sufficient for demonstrating *oneness* (in attitude) towards their children. Also - as parents - they experience this kind of teamwork as a source of joy.

I for my part once witnessed how a team of roofers managed to tile a whole roof in practically no time at all (for me hard to believe). Each move would fit. They were a well-practiced team. A Schönstatt Sister of Mary with whom I had been working *for* and *with* families in the Czech Republic over a number of years, told me how she managed to give guidance and support to couples caught up in especially difficult situations. Spontaneously, I thought: Well, I would have done exactly the same. A young woman who had been given spiritual support by one of my confreres and who has been seeing me because of the latter's transfer, once said: "That is exactly what your confrere advised me to do". And her situation was not even routine, nothing that you run into every day.

Both times I was happy to learn that – without the possibility of foregoing, mutual consultation – our way of dealing with the said issue turned out to be identical. In situations like these I get an increased feeling of mental nearness, of affinity – no matter how great the geographic distance. It is such a comforting thought.

Of course, I know the other way as well: We - (that is me and my co-workers) – go through all the steps of a given process or project, we exchange opinions, share notes while working, find an agreement where necessary and feel highly rewarded when – at the close of a weekend event – participants find our team as one 'having done a good job'.

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Teamwork experience with God

What is possible between us humans in the way of team experience, applies to our cooperating with God as well. Only that I myself have taken a long time to get this truth into my head and into my heart. And I notice that this connectedness with God has a tendency to fade away in everyday life. From many talks I know that I am not alone, that I am not the only one to feel like this. Apart from a few religious geniuses, this ever-active tie with the Divine is the result of a year-long process of growth.

Of course, I remember that prior to class tests and school exams I said my prayers. That's the same, isn't it, as asking God for support and help. Another word would be "cooperation". The Holy Spirit won't settle down on emptiness. In other words ... we have learnt as we were supposed to, we have done as well as we could – (perhaps sometimes a little less) – and then we asked the Holy Spirit to step in. This tradition has not changed much over the last 40 years, it seems. Even today, pupils and students are most serious in their praying just prior to and during exams, and they ask their parents to light a candle at the family altar or home shrine. Today same as in those days, pupils – when caught in border situations – recall the possibility of seeking cooperation with God. Today – same as in those days – it is by no means natural to take refuge to the Omnipresence and Omnipotence of God and take care of every day's little and big jobs in deliberate coordination with Him.

The founder of the Schönstatt Movement was well aware of this human weakness, and he proceeded from that. It was a matter of great concern to him to show up a way to define Sunday life and workday life as something closely connected and to be careful not to reduce *holiness* to a mere benchmark for *religiousness*. In one of the Schönstatt classics – the book "Workday Holiness" written in 1937 (nowadays' term would be: Workday Spirituality / translator's note) – he writes:

Since (any kind of) work undertaken in the perspective of an objective *world order*, includes sharing the eternal work of demonstrated love of the Lord-Creator, man in his daily, his workday mission will find no rest *until* his score of daily duties reflects what should be the worker's (every worker's) highest goal, namely: **continuous working with God and for God.**

These two - for him – constitute an essential part of his spiritual pathway, i.e. implementing, *carrying* God's love into everyday, "workday" situations and locations, thus creating, so to speak, a sanctuary of the Heart which – amidst the hustle and bustle of the big city – leaves him focussed and secluded, providing him with more and more efficient protection than the outer walls of a convent could ever hold."

"With Him" – experiences

The point is that: Working with God and working for God must be a "continuous" process. The biblical basis for this concern is to be found, inter alia, in the letter to the Romans, which has been chosen as a starting point for this meditation. The Apostle gives us a list of several statements which all contain the little word "with":

- We were therefore buried **with him** through baptism
- If we have been united **with him like this** in his death
- We will also be united **with him** in his resurrection.
- For we know that our old self was crucified **with him**.

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- Now if we died **with** Christ,
- We believe that we will also live **with him**.

How very close a bond must have existed between Paul and Jesus Christ that made him find words like these to describe what he felt in his innermost heart! Yes, and there is a verse which expresses a similar idea with even greater intensity: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2, 20)

My former home-town Bishop, Hugo Aufderbeck, liked to preach about three little words: "for – with – in". And, habitually, he placed before us the Latin version as well: "pro - cum – in". With his repetitions he left a deep imprint in my mind and soul. That did not mean to say, however, that – just because it was a very important aspect – I had no problems living it. But what dawned on me was the insight, that it would be impossible for me to see – and deal with – Sundays and weekdays, times of prayer and times of action – *separately*. What really mattered was not so much the individual exercise, the one or other prayer ... but the development of a principal attitude that went along with a recurrent effort to seek God's nearness.

When, at age sixteen, it happened to me that I fell in love – first time really in love – and my thoughts kept circling around the girl again and again; the love I had had for God up to that time also underwent a process of regeneration in that it became more spontaneous, freshened up by a touch of natural directness and ease, less mind-controlled. All of a sudden, doors inside my soul had opened, allowing access to an interior I had no idea, existed. With the phrase "I love God", an inner sound-box started vibrating, so to speak, and that was something completely new. Faith – from that moment onward – was more than a mere assumption of (certain) elements of faith, of beliefs being true ... rather was it – for me – a living, a live relationship. The elements remained important for me all the same, and even more so as we were continuously exposed to atheist mental manipulations, challenging us to justify our faith in the face of *Reason*. The way things were, it evoked feelings of superiority among us Christians whenever - in discussions with our atheist fellow students - we found that our arguments were the better ones. And yet the other dimension of faith – i.e. the personal relationship with God – outweighed any other influence, and so I was led to the decision of wanting to become a priest.

Christians are meant to be pious, but clever also ...

When I was a student of theology, I noticed – with some concern – that I found it much too hard to think about and contemplate God all day long. I simply "had to" approach the matter of God as a "matter", as an idea, as an object of research ... for fear that I could get torn up inwardly. Of course, I continued to go after my ecclesial duties together with my fellow students such as celebrating the Eucharist, joining the Bible class, keeping up individual hours of prayer, confession, meditation... But all this was much more than what I really needed in order to work on my personal relationship with God. All the putting-on, the bantering and teasing, along with the manifold discussions between the pious and the "clever" theology students, truly reflected this almost inextricable tension, and so it happened that at one time I found myself with one group, and at another time with another. Thank God we were not without guidance – good, spiritual, working guidance – which helped us to cope with this situation in a constructive manner. And so, it was definitely possible to seek for simplicity in one's daily praying routine while at the same time try and get to the bottom of the secrets of the One and Unfathomable God with all the ambition of man's limited understanding. There is freedom, no doubt, in admitting to oneself that – as believers – we are definitely *allowed* to be a little heretic in our everyday practice, in that we cut a small

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piece of the 'Big Cake' which symbolizes God's boundless wealth, that small piece being sufficient nourishment for us in our present phase of growth, and which – for that very reason – is of great value to us for the time being. Things may get precarious and in contrast with the catholic ideal *only*, when we begin to declare *that* which helps us to get by in our everyday spiritual duties as the ***one and only thing that matters*** on the theoretical, the teaching level as well ... thereby denying others their catholic understanding or way of life in their own right. The history of spirituality holds ample proof on how new communities, orders and religious movements have continued to come into being every so often, their main focus being the one or other particular statement made by Jesus. ... Or - St. Francis, for example, and his three verses from the Bible dealing with poverty, or Chiara Lubich and her chosen quest that – by Jesus' words – all *shall be one*.... to name but a few.

Just as between husband and wife, togetherness can be lived in manifold ways while people don't fall in love with just anybody who comes along, Christians are free to live their Christian creed in whatever style they choose and take into their lives different traits or facets of the Divine Lord Jesus Christ *and still* be truly catholic – united into one boundless community. Unfortunately, in the course of church history, a narrowness of heart and mind among individual Christians has repeatedly split up people, led to *schisms* from which we are still suffering – even today! Thus, accentuations and polarizations of values led to claiming absoluteness, the result being the formation of ditches, splitting up society: "That's not it!" "Your faith *is not* the *true* faith!"

There is hope in observing how Christians – members of diverse churches – are striving to re-discover in their own – maybe neglected but still existent – theory and practice whatever accent or focus they may have in common with each other.

Not "either or" but "as well as"

For comparison – let's take another look at married couples. With all diversity in styles, there are certain constants which can be taken as clear *quality indicators* for a relationship, though perhaps not as absolutely safe criteria to go by, such as:

- Seeking physical nearness and exchanging gestures of tender loving care;
- enjoying frequent eye contact – the scale being from friendly fascinated;
- talking to each other and being good listeners at the same time;
- giving time to each other;
- expressing fairness in arguments and debates, while being ready to forgive instead of keeping a safe distance or withdrawing into one's "sulking corner;"
- Not minding an expense, now and then, in expressing one's love;
- Enjoying things together, common activities, projects etc.

It is these quality markers of any good relationship between couples which apply also to man's relationship with God.

A relationship which finds its regular expression in

- celebrating the Eucharist, thereby seeking and finding God's physical nearness
- looking up to Him with a loving heart, e.g. in the Eucharist prayer
- talking and listening to Him with the same loving attitude, e.g., during prayers and Bible studies
- putting time aside for these "encounters"
- struggling with him, same as Jacob and Job did and even Jesus on Mount Olivet, instead of keeping one's distance
- making little sacrifices out of love for Him
- working for Him and with Him.

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Keeping up the "Relationship"

Apart from these direct forms of staying in touch, a myriad ways of indirect encounters exist which confront us with His divine attributes present in His entire creation - including man. No matter if direct or indirect ... any deep relationship with God does need caring and an open heart. It is possible – without even noticing – to withdraw from God slowly, gradually ... simply by neglecting this "staying in touch". By the same token, it is possible to become connected to Him on a deep-felt basis ... just as slowly and gradually. Caused by a sudden blow of fate, one can fall into despair and start doubting His love, while – on the other hand – a personal, vocational experience can lead to an intense God-Man-relationship.

"There are as many ways leading to God as there are people", Pope Benedict 16th, then still Cardinal Ratzinger, once said.

Having taken this spiritual tour around the subject, I would like to give you the one or other impulse on how life *with Him* – Jesus – can grow in quality.

Life's tempo too fast? Counter with *more fast and fervent prayers!*

From my daily practice in giving religious guidance to many devoted Christians, I know about the great importance of quick, informal prayers. For the very busy, it is often not possible to set aside time for prayers on a regular basis. However, when they manage to pray – during these, their lives' daily rush-hours – no matter how hurried, while embracing the bulk of their daily activities in a single call to the Heavens, a feeling of continuous fellowship with God *will* result – after all.

Religious signs and symbols at my place of work do help *me* – just by looking at them – to keep up an awareness of God's nearness and omnipresence.

Decorating one's home with your favourite prayers and favourite verses from the Bible or making up a personal folder to go through in prayer ... all such activities can often bring back memories of deep-felt events which gave us an idea of God's Greatness and Beauty.

Contemplating about the day at night-time and recalling its pleasant moments and encounters is a way to recognize and bring to mind God's handwriting.

Using intervals and times which are less *work-intensive* for giving extra time to God may provide the necessary *niche* in which to seek God's restful presence.

Accepting an adverse or irritating situation of the day full-heartedly can prove an optional way to show one's love for God, one's deep veneration.

Keep up the awareness: I am God's co-worker!

Of all the manifold ways of looking after and maintaining this "*walking with God*" I would like to recommend to you one way in particular: Keep up the awareness: I am God's co-worker! What does this mean in detail?

It means: Give all your professional and private activities this in-depth dimension! Superficiality is no good and just makes us nervous. It leads to a feeling of emptiness within the heart which we then try to fill with needless or even harmful information garbage; but that doesn't work.

Always try and do – whatever you are doing – with your whole heart and do it as good as possible as you are capable of at the moment without getting caught in super-perfectionism. Thus, our efforts to do a quality job turn out as the reflection of divine perfection and beauty.

Don't take errors or failures too seriously but trust God's compassionate Love! That releases the burden and protects you from excessive sadness.

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Look out for like-minded people! Exchanging and sharing thoughts with Christians who are on a similar way of spiritual development will give us courage and enhancement to our capacities. Becoming God's co-worker is easier in a team than as a loner.

Give it a try in drawing near to the most perfect, divine co-worker there ever was ... the Blessed Mother! In contact with her we find it easier to build up a close – and eventually stable - relationship with God.

Coming to an end I would like to point out to you the last words – words of praise – of the Eucharist Prayer:

"Through Him, with Him, in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, Almighty Father, forever and ever, Amen."

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(Ins Englische übersetzt von Katharina M.)