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Justice, Peace and Reconciliation

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The doorbell rang. When I got to the door Harald was standing there again. After eight years he was back to us at Notel. I felt the need to breathe deeply because I realized that I was getting furious. Harald's story is part of a pattern; after a certain time they all come back. I invited him into my office and took time with him. I would have preferred to be at work in the kitchen rather than experiencing such feelings of frustration.

When he came for the first time to Notel, Harald had a severe drug problem. He strained our nerves; we were constantly worried about him especially because during a program of drug rehabilitation he had suffered epileptic fits. But we also prayed and laughed together. After some years with us he simply disappeared.

A few years ago I met him in a methadone distribution centre in the Cologne. He was looking good and had responded well to replacement drug treatment. He had already married and had a child. He was confident about his future. With his O-Level and his training as a male nurse his prospects were good.

Then the relapse came. His marriage broke down and the grandparents were caring for his child. He literally was left standing before the ruins of his life. His drug habit returned and he was expelled from where he was staying. Back on the road again he was sitting in my office in Notel … “I only want to tell you that I am back again.”

Hard not to lose faith in him

While I was listening to him my thoughts strayed to a talk on a Spiritan spirituality of justice and peace which I had recently heard. There it was emphasized that in going to the poor we were not going in the first place to perform a task. Rather we go to be with the people, to live with them, to be side by side with them, to listen to them and to share our faith with them. Respect and love are central to this relationship.

Harald was now making a call on me and on Notel. As a former student of the Pallotines, the spirituality of Notel was important to him. If we were first on his list as he again hit rock-bottom surely he expected that we would not lose faith in him, that we could offer real solidarity to him at this most difficult point in his life. He was not asking us to look for accommodation for him, nor to solve his problems. All he really wanted was that we offer time and presence. He remembered the time when we had given him a home and when we had faith in his future.

I recalled other things said during the talk on Spiritan justice and peace spirituality. There, mission was presented as a crossing of cultural boundaries and a movement to individuals and groups of the poor and underprivileged. Borders and frontlines in such a mission are constantly moving and as they do, so does our frontline of mission. I found it difficult to accept that Harald had relapsed and fallen again. My ideals of a “respectable” life, responsibility for his child, moral values needed to take second place just at this moment. In first place was Harald and his feeling of being totally abandoned. The demand on me was to listen to him and to try and relate to him with respect and love.

Beyond my familiar boundaries

During the talk on Spiritan spirituality of justice and peace it had been remarked that to be engaged in mission did not necessarily mean to go far from home but to go on a journey in the name of the Gospel and of God’s Reign, a journey which brings us to and beyond the boundaries of our familiar world.

Now I can say that mission means exactly that here in Notel. Harald has led me to the boundaries of my own life. If I want to be with him I need to cross the boundaries of my own life and world. Even still I feel anger taking over again when I realize how powerless I am to resolve Harald’s addiction and weakness of will power. How is it possible that this man could let himself fall so far and let himself go? But now also I begin to see more clearly what the real meaning of the word “mission” is. My anger is found side-by-side with Harald’s confidence. Harald is back in Notel and it is good that he has found his way to us. We are bound together by our shared humanity, sibling children of God.

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