

Excerpt from "Trauern und Trösten: Eine Hilfe für Seel-sorger und Betroffene" („Grieving and comforting: a help for counselors and affected persons“) by Roland Antholzer, CLV 2006 (pages 40 to 46)

What is devotion?

...

Once again, what is devotion? I have said: the letting go of one's life ambition in favor of our Lord Jesus. It is certainly more than giving God money, or time, or my spouse, my children, my professional ambitions, my securities, etc. Devotion is not giving something to God – however much that may be – but giving everything to Him. Surrender means giving myself, including money, time, spouse, children, professional ambitions and securities. All obedience presupposes self-denial, and all self-denial in turn presupposes surrender, surrender of one's desires and interests, needs and rights. The more clearly my life is surrendered to the Lord, the easier it will be for me to walk in obedience to Him. I will have already paid the price of obedience, which is the surrender of my own desires, lusts, habits, rights and demands.

God wants to see our outward life and our inward life on His altar. Of the outward life Romans 12:1 speaks: *“I beseech you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”* It is of the inner life, namely of our heart, the center of our personality, that Proverbs 23:26 speaks: *“My son, give me your heart, And let your eyes observe my ways.”*

The question of devotion is closely related to the central problem of man, the question of identity. The problem of identity had its beginning in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve found their identity in God before the Fall. He was their security and meaning. Through the fall and the associated separation from God, therefore, fundamental needs arose: above all, the needs for security and meaning, for a new identity. The loss of security is found in the statement *“I was afraid,”* the loss of meaning in the statement *“and I hid myself”* (Genesis 3:10). Since then, man has strived to satisfy these needs. By satisfying these needs outside of Jesus Christ, man creates a multitude of problems for himself. He wants to make sure of his identity from man, instead of identifying himself with Jesus Christ, the source of living water, who himself wants to be his security and meaning. Because in reality there is only one place where man could find his true identity and solve his identity problem permanently: with Jesus Christ!

Whoever identifies himself with Christ also makes himself like Him in relation to His death and

resurrection. He will say with Paul, “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 3:10). “To know Christ” in the biblical sense involves identification, means not only to better understand who He is, but also to become one with Him (and His death). Those who are willing to do this can say:

“For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:19-20). He gave his life right into death and has *“put on Christ”* (Galatians 3:27). Devotion, then, means taking note of reality (“I am crucified with Christ”), claiming it in faith for oneself personally with all its consequences, and giving expression to this faith in concrete situations through appropriate action (as Abraham did).

Devotion as grief work done in advance

I now claim that devotion is something like a mourning work done in advance. For us as Christians, the question arises: Does the mourning process always have to take place as it is described to us by the experts? The description of mourning work on the last pages is a result of empirical research. It can be said: This is how it happens for most people. But: Does not the Scripture tell us that the spiritual man cannot be judged by anyone (1 Corinthians 2:15)? If we assume that the spiritual man is one whose actions are decisively due to impulses of the Spirit of God, i.e. does not have his source of motivation in himself, then we understand why it is impossible to grasp the actions and reactions of spiritual men in law-like “if-then” relationships. What is typically human may be defined in this way (and even there are only probability statements), but the Christian who is under the influence of God's Spirit cannot be judged in this way. That would mean that we could investigate God Himself with our empirical methods.

If we take this seriously, then we must also ask ourselves whether a Christian who is under the influence of divine power and grace must have the same trouble in coming to terms with his grief? I do not want to be misunderstood in any way. I did not say that a Christian does not grieve! Never would I say such a thing. The Christian faith has nothing to do with fatalistic resignation to fate, nor with apathetic equanimity or stoic serenity. For a person who thinks he must shut himself off completely from the unpleasant will no longer be touched by pain – but also by joy and happiness. He will put on an emotional armor that protects him from injury, but also makes him a prisoner.

Martin Luther, the reformer, rightly opposed such an idea. He said: "They want to make vain stones and blocks out of us, that one should stand there tearless-eyed, it would fall even father or mother, son or daughter. But this is a fictitious virtue and not the divine will." Of course, the spiritual Christian will also mourn, he must mourn! The question is only whether he does not have some more ahead of the non-Christian, whether mourning must be for him as laborious a process as I have described before.

I mean, "No!" No because the Christian has the possibility to carry out a very essential part of the work of mourning in advance, so to speak. And – isn't it true? – what one has done before, one does not need to do afterwards! I think that the devotion to Jesus Christ can also be understood as a work of mourning, and I will try to make this a little clearer.

As we have seen, grief work is essentially about accepting a loss that has happened anyway. In this context, the term "loss" can be understood in a broader sense than just the death of a loved one. Illness also belongs here since it also represents a sensitive loss of well-being or of previous integrity. Illness can change and limit the possibilities of life even more seriously than the loss of a person does. The young competitive athlete can no longer pursue his sport or hobby after his motorcycle accident in which he lost a leg. His chances with girls have dropped significantly, and he also has to completely reorient himself professionally. Don't we think there's a lot of grieving to do?

But may I ask a provocative question? What do we Christians have to lose? Prosperity? Reputation? Health? A loved one? Yes! And no! If we live in total surrender, then we will not claim ownership of all this. Then we will be aware that all this is given to us only as a loan. The real owner of our life is Christ. So, He is also the owner of our wealth, our reputation, our health and our human relationships. If we have already let go of all this and put it into his hand, then surely a loss of these things will be easier for us to bear. By surrendering our lives, we have basically already said "yes" to the loss of all that belongs to this life. The painful process of mourning, which consists precisely in admitting and accepting a loss, has already preceded it. In surrender, we have already done the work of mourning. If our autonomous ego is on the cross, then we have also given all independent claims, legal demands, wishes, goals and plans to death.

Now this does not mean that the loss of a loved one would not be a painful experience for us. Certainly, we would also be challenged to leave the cross in this situation. But at this point we would be challenged to consciously place ourselves on the ground of the

devotion we have made. And the peace of God would fill our soul despite the pain. Of this I am certain!

Paul Gerhardt put it this way in one of his songs:

Why should I grieve? I still have Christ! Who wants to take him from me?

Who wants to rob me of the heaven that the Son of God has already given me in faith?

My goods and blood, my body, soul and life are not mine; it is God alone who has given them. If He wants to return it to Himself, He will take it; I will still honor Him with joy.

If He sends me a cross to bear, if fear and pain enter, shall I despair? He who sends it will turn it around; He knows well how to end all my misfortunes.

Whoever knows something about Paul Gerhardt's life story also knows that this man did not write such song texts at the green table. This witness of God went through many experiences of misfortune. During the Thirty Years' War he lost four relatives within two weeks: his wife and three children. It was precisely because of the severity of this blow that he was given this song, which we would not otherwise have. Countless people have been comforted by it since then. All these painful experiences have not touched his trust in God. Rather, all this has only strengthened him in faith and moved him to renew his devotion. If we are already ready for total surrender, then we are prepared for all conceivable experiences of misery. On this foundation our faith will have the victory!