

„Encounter With God“

A few months ago I joined the community of sisters of St. Dié (in the Vosges, France). Elder sisters might remember the infirmary there, which was closed some years ago. On Wednesday we were surprised by an unforeseen event.

When I went to our chapel at about 6 a.m., a sister who was quite upset came towards me and told me, “Somebody is in the garden. He knocked and rang the bell, but I did not dare to open the door.” – “But what if the man or woman needs help?”

I opened and to my amazement I found a man who had obviously collapsed and was crouching at the doorsteps, his teeth chattering.

He was about 70, tall and slim, with a catheter attached to him. He wore nothing but thin pyjamas. His naked feet were blue with cold. The paleness of his face and his protruding, glassy eyes indicated that he was seriously ill. With the help of one of the sisters I picked him up, we sat him in a chair and wrapped a blanket around him. Taking his hands to warm them I tried to find out, if he had eloped from a hospital and why he had done so. His voice was weak and he was gasping for breath. He seemed exhausted and somehow confused.

When I told him that I would have to phone the hospital, where the staff would already be looking for him, he took my hands and said, “Sister, please, don’t send me back to the hospital.” Seeing his anxiety I did not insist on it and tried to calm him down instead. One of the sisters brought additional blankets and I wrapped him well so that he could warm up.

After a while I tried again, “Why did you run away? What happened?”

With some difficulty he answered, “Yesterday afternoon a doctor sat down at my bed and told me that I would die very soon. He urged me to sign some paper, but I refused. He said he would return. I do not want to give my signature. He will return. I do not want to go back to the hospital ... Call my wife to pick me up.” I tried to encourage him. I would not let him go home in the state he was in, besides the hospital would already be looking for him, and most probably the police would also have been informed that he was missing. I handed a telephone over so that he could call his wife, but he did not remember the phone number. After some time he told me his name and I found his telephone number in the register.

Finally I hit upon an idea. “We will call your wife and then inform the hospital. You will be taken back, but your wife will be waiting for you at the hospital and I will talk to the charge nurse. I will not let you down and I promise you that I will see to it that apart from the nurses nobody will be allowed to enter your room.”

He agreed, clutching both my hands.

“But how did you manage to get here?” (Later I learned that he had not left his bed for more than a month nor had he been in a chair.)

“I ran down the slope and when I had reached the bottom I was so exhausted that I thought I would die. Then I remembered that as a small child ...” He stopped in amazement, smiled and went on, “Oh yes, as a small child I used to visit my grandmother. She lived in Karlstraße and

nuns had a house there too. ... So I said to myself, 'Lord, help me find that house.' Then I started to look for the house of the sisters and I fell down here ... and you have found me ..."

At last the ambulance arrived. He asked whether they could wait till his wife would be there, but they were in a hurry. They told him that others needed their help too. So he agreed to go with them. To me he said, "You will come, won't you?"

"Yes, I will come" I hugged him and off he went.

Shortly afterwards his wife came and I told her what had happened. ... In the morning I went to the hospital. The nurses treated him and were afraid he might develop an infection because of his catheter. He was glad to see me ... When the charge nurse saw me she said, "You have been sent by Providence." After she had talked to the head doctor and to the man's wife, she decided to send him home the following day, and she organized palliative care for him. On saying goodbye I teased him a little, "It is not right to run away, but you have won."

He was happy. Two weeks later he died surrounded by his family. I attended his funeral and thanked God for his mercy. To me it had truly been an "encounter with God".