

Barefoot in Munich

Can God be found on the streets of Munich? Munich, of all places, a city of wealth, pride and power with its designer stores and business headquarters?

It was Father Christian Herwartz SJ who encouraged us, a group of men from all over Germany, to believe just that. He had practiced 'Street Exercises' in Kreuzberg, a neighborhood in Berlin famous for its rebellious spirit. So we met in St. Martin's Lutheran Church, slept on the balcony of the sanctuary, met for breakfast and prayer in the mornings and then set off individually into the bustle and noise of the streets.

Cities are the deserts of the 21st century. Brick and concrete walls radiate the loneliness that pervades these places, just as the rocks and sand did when the desert fathers moved away from the centers of worldly Christianity to find God afresh.

There are no strict rules to follow during street exercises. Our biblical guideline was Moses in the book of Exodus who went beyond where he had been before (the grassland) to encounter a burning bush and the voice of Israel's God who tells him to take off his shoes. In the same way, we went to places where you would not go if you came as a tourist or on some sort of business. The leaders handed us a list of places like soup kitchens, accommodations for refugees, food banks, AIDS care, mosques and Buddhist centers and Jewish places. But walking around, taking random turns was just as good, or asking locals where they thought God would be found. This, Christian made clear, was not a project to be executed and completed.

Late in the afternoon we would return from our journeys to celebrate the eucharist and share a meal together. Afterwards, we gathered in groups of five or six to tell our stories: places we had seen, people we had met, fears, anger and longings we had felt, and their echoes in our spirit. Most of the time, this was the moment when things started to make sense to me.

One day, I passed through the Glockenbach Quarter when I saw a surprisingly inconspicuous sign pointing to a bailiff's office. I followed into the third courtyard, retreating from the sounds of cars and trams for a few moments. I climbed the staircase and sat down in the dark imagining the conversations going on behind the glass door: People in embarrassing debt, families struggling with increasing costs for living and housing, the ubiquitous appeals to spend more money I had seen on the billboards and in the shop windows. A couple with a baby came out, seemingly agitated as they descended to street level. Obviously, bailiffs do not need to advertise. The system creates the demand for their services automatically. Taking off my shoes, I had learned, means to allow myself to be touched by the pain and confusion or whatever is there.

In his wisdom Christian had asked the group to watch out for our anger. Whatever upsets me, has the potential to reveal my desires – the deeper intuitions of how life is supposed to be. I discovered a yearning for a place free from the pressure to move faster, speak louder, satisfy every appetite or be more productive. Just as Moses needed a name for God, we turned our insights of the day into a name for him. My words were 'You, who created beauty, who becomes

human like myself and takes me to a place where I can play and breathe freely'. It turned out to be the secret rhythm for the rest of the week.

Unlike some others in the group, I was not drawn to any of the church buildings that Munich is littered with and who share in the city's preference for a slightly monstrous architecture. Most of them looked like oversized clothes that no longer fit their owner - like an old skin that a reptile has shed and left behind, like the imprint of some weighty object that is no longer there. Congregations nowadays rarely fill the space inside. Maintaining (or even heating) the building absorbs massive amounts of energy. I was reminded of the tower of Babel that was built because people were afraid of their insignificance and smallness. Perhaps some theologies of sacred spaces are just that: evidence of our inability to discover God in this chaotic, diverse, restless and sometimes antagonistic world?

I sat down on a bench surrounded by beech trees that seemed like pillars of a green cathedral, the cool October winds passing between them: Open skies, no walls, inhabited by a multitude of living creatures that move and sing and breed new life.

In our evening conversations we realized that every now and then we had been talking to angels. Not in the metaphysical sense of the word (at least they seemed to be real people of flesh and blood) but in the biblical sense of a divine messenger. Like someone stumbling onto a movie set with no idea of the screenplay saying something and disappearing without waiting for our response but giving a new and unexpected twist to the story, perhaps even pointing to a theme that lies still in the future. So the movie director decides to keep the unintended footage and includes it in the story. Similarly, several of us felt that they met strangers who spoke truth to us without even knowing what their words would mean in the context of our particular quest.

One afternoon I went to a Turkish mosque in an industrial estate south of the city center. There was a bookstore and a little cafeteria. Four men sat there watching news on Turkish TV. After a while, one of them invited me to their table and poured me a cup of coffee. Occasionally we would exchange some phrases in German, then they continued commenting the news in Turkish again. When Israel's prime minister showed up on the screen, I learned that German swearwords were also part of their active vocabulary. I felt a bit insecure – until it hit me that this is how they must have felt many times among people like myself. Finally, one of them picked up the conversation again and it turned out that two of these four had lived in my home town for a number of years. We did have more in common than I had expected. When the broadcast was over, they rose from their chairs and we said goodbye.

As Christian activists, most of us had to resist the occasional urge to launch social projects among the strangers, homeless or alcoholics or any other group with visible, tangible needs. Only then we discovered how they had become *our* neighbors, sharing whatever they had, gracefully allowing us to come out of our position (and posture) as the socially privileged. Much to my surprise, there had not been a single moment when I had not felt perfectly safe during that whole week.

Our evening conversations were full of laughter and tears. Looking at each other's faces and body language we could see the changes that had happened. We shared some of our stories

with the congregants of St. Martin on Sunday morning that ended our time together. I left with a deep sense of divine presence, infused with hope, breathing freely.

God, I have learned, can find me even in a place like Munich, if I adopt a contemplative view of life. As Richard Rohr once wrote, contemplation '...keeps the field open; it remains vulnerable before the moment, the event, or the person – before it divides and tries to conquer or control it. Contemplation refuses to create dichotomies, dividing the field for the sake of the quick comfort of their ego.' (1)

Looking back, I wonder what church would look like if we would stop treating it as a project; if we would stop trying to fix people to make them like us (so that we feel better about ourselves?); if we would stop to hide behind our ancient – or even fairly modern – walls and routines; if we walked our streets 'barefoot' – with receptive hearts, discerning and welcoming whatever God sends our way?

(1) Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now. Learning to See as the Mystics See*, 2009 Crossroads Publishing, p. 32.