



Places to meet Father

Dachau



Foto: IKLK

Solemn Holy Mass in the chapel of Block 26 in the concentration camp at Dachau – probably on Easter Sunday 1945.

From January 1941 it became possible for Holy Mass to be celebrated daily very early in the morning before the morning roll call. Only priests were allowed to be there, later it was restricted to the German priests. Here the prisoners found

- their dignity in the degradation of camp life,
- inner support in the constant insecurity and threat of the camp,
- comfort and hope in a hopeless situation,
- the gateway to life in the city of death.

The Hell of Dachau – the Heaven of Dachau

A retreat course for priests conducted by Fr Kentenich in January 1946 offers an insight into how he had coped with Dachau:

What made Dachau into hell? Not so much the *poena sensus* as the *poena damni*, the separation from God and the competition and enmity of the people. I could never understand the way hell was depicted, that the damned could torture one another, or how human nature could go crazy. Let others tell you how the Kapos, the most senior prisoners, tortured the other prisoners to an extreme: because they disagreed with their outlook on the world, and especially because they were forced to do so from above. The people who did not experience how you can live spiritually in one another, can and may talk about the hell of Dachau.

[...]

For me Dachau was not hell, but heaven. This doesn't mean that I didn't experience the same things as all the others, but these were only the *poena sensus*. You can bear with all sorts of things if things are in order mentally and spiritually. This is all the more true if you can keep in contact with places of the past from time to time. There were so many bridges that repeatedly united me with the places of the past.

Then, a place becomes heaven when you have spiritual experiences. Did we have spiritual experiences in Dachau? Very many! So Dachau became a home. I am telling you this because it is an example of how we have to educate our people. I have to create a home for the soldiers and prisoners returning home. Did we have a spiritual home in Dachau? We concentrated on the ancient ideas, our Schoenstatt ideas, and we worked so much for them that we have to say that everything else is spiritual homelessness.

Of course, those who did not concentrate in this way, if they gave into the ideology and rhythm of the camp, they naturally experienced a large measure of homelessness. Spiritual homelessness: We had such wonderful groups, we were conscious that we were at home in so many noble people. We experienced the Family in a very profound way just where we were. All this was a constant imperative to surrender ourselves to God and the divine. So the hell of Dachau was only a theoretical, not an existential, concept for us.

Fr Joseph Kentenich, Battle for True Freedom, Priests' Retreat 7-10 January 1946, published as manuscript.

How can we meet our Father?

That was the most important question during the time of our Candidature as the “Pilgrim Cross Course”. Otto Maurer found the answer in books about our founder in Dachau and in “*Heavenwards*”, the Dachau prayers, but above all in the suggestion that we set off on pilgrimage from the Ingolstadt shrine to Dachau. This wasn’t the first such pilgrimage he had made. For us it was important to carry all our personal things in a rucksack and to travel with faith in Divine Providence. So we set off.

On the way we prayed the prayers in “*Heavenwards*” pilgrimage fashion, enriching them and apply them with our thoughts and petitions. In Dachau we met Fr Heinz Dresbach who led us around the camp. At the priests’ block, Nr 26, we found a stone marked with a cross. Suddenly we had clarity: This living faith in Divine Providence, our Father’s profound trust in God in these extreme conditions in the camp, had to be carried to Moriah (the central house of the Priests’ Institute). The spirit of Dachau had to be part of the foundations of our Father House. So from Dachau we set off for Moriah. The house was being built at the time and we invited everyone to join us on our pilgrimage from Dachau to Moriah. Our course ideal suggested to us: As pilgrims of the cross we build Moriah Patris.

Today the chapel with the Dachau altar is almost a pilgrimage goal in our house. Blessed Karl Leisner saw to that. In our community you cannot overlook Dachau as a place to meet our Father. Even outsiders who want information about Moriah via the internet encounter the Dachau altar.

The inner connection to the Dachau spirit is austerity, the spirit of poverty and love for the Cross. We wanted to crown the pilgrimage picture with a Dachau crown that is simple, austere, and made with means available in the camp. If it isn’t on the way, you can find the pilgrimage picture in the Pallotti Room in House Moriah.

We are all familiar with how close our Father was to heaven in Dachau. The prayer, Father, look upon our Family (*Heavenwards*, p. 122-130), shows how well he knew the circumstances that all too often drag us down. A suggestion: Let us unite ourselves with him and his prayer in the Dachau circumstances of our own lives.

- When I am buffeted by life's wild storms, and passions wreak havoc in my soul ...
- When the world wants to allure me with its pleasure, and my heart is exhausted, overwrought and parched ...
- When my nerves play tricks on me and failures cool my zeal ...
- When all my great plans are frustrated and the world around me wildly bares its fangs at me ...

As we pray these words he shows us our home in the community. Similarly he was at home in Dachau.

Heinz-Martin Zipfel



The Dachau altar in the „Priester- und Bildungshaus Berg Moriah“ in Schoenstatt

References:

Heavenwards – translated by Fr Jonathan Niehaus

Fr Jonathan Niehaus, *A Movement in Chains*