



SIEBENQUELL

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**»Under the ashes a fire slumbers.  
Awaken it to life, until your heart  
burns for God. «**

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QUELLENANGABE: PHOTO BY WIL STEWART ON UNSPLASH

Several days ago a colleague and friend wrote me an email with a request for my help. She was preparing a celebration for Ash Wednesday and was considering what kind of formula she could use for giving the ashes. She wrote me: »By no means would I like to use the usual form. Can you help us to use a good formula?«

Her wish found an open heart in me. For 30 years I have tried to rehabilitate Lent. In the early Church the season was still referred to as »a holy springtime«. Today, every trace of this is lost. Until this day our speech is about penance, conversion, fasting and abstinence, which is in and of itself, nothing bad. But any and every motivation and reason for doing so is missing. Thus, penance, conversion, fasting and abstinence have become ends unto themselves. We practice them as if they were in and of themselves the goal. Thus, this grey, heavy, and sad feeling of Lent develops. For 40 days, joy is either banished or suppressed. And afterwards we have more or less proven, that we are tough and we can take it (at least for 40 days). This is not truly a preparation for Easter, because we have not practiced what we should have practiced, namely, a renewed appreciation of life.

This also has consequences for us. Either we surrender to the joyless season without really being convinced that it can be a suitable preparation for the feast of Easter joy, or we ignore the season altogether and carry on as if nothing was happening. That is also dangerous, for do we really believe that nothing is necessary to restore our appreciation of life?

As a response to this email, I took up an experience of Celtic spirituality and wrote the following formula for the start of Lent: »Under the ashes a fire slumbers. Awaken it to life, until your heart burns for God.«

This formula takes up the Celtic tradition of *grieshag*. This the practice of being a keeper of the fire, externally in the hearth, and internally in the heart. My cherished and still sorely missed friend John O'Donohue describes this practice in his book *The Four Elements*

»In country houses the fire was smooed each night. The coals of the day's fire were smooed in its ashes. This sealed them from the searing of the air that would urge them to glow and vanish. »Smoo« is a lovely word. Its sound captures exactly the powdered smother of ashes that quenches and slows the desire of the coals to go up in flames, yet holds them alive and kindled. The day's work over, the colas are banked inside the night ashes and live until they are called to warm a new dawn. In some houses the fire was literally never put out. The same lasted from generation to generation. It is a beautiful image of the warmth of a family continuing over generations. Around that fire most of the sacred and turbulent life of that family took place; it is interesting to think that the one fire that warmed their lives was literally never let die.« (p. 107)

This would be a fashion, worthy of God and worthy of humanity, to initiate a »holy springtime«. We could become keepers of life, by taking all that slumbers us, our energy, warmth, dreams, light and joy, and awakening it anew and calling it back to life. We are quick to speak of our losses, usually with sadness and often with regret. It makes us weary and resigned to always talk of that which once throbbed with life within us, but is now no more and long gone. »Under the ashes a fire slumbers. Awaken it to life, until your heart burns for God« is the possibility of understanding the preservation of the embers »as the refusal to grow cold once and for all.« (Joan Chittister)

In this way, we could treasure life and at the end of 40 days, love and fashion the world with more joy, life and desire, indeed, with renewed fire.

**Erik Riechers SAC**

*Vallendar, February 15th, 2018*