



SIEBENQUELL

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**Reflection on John 1, 29–34**

# **Becoming Storytellers of Life**

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QUELLENANGABE: ROSEMARIE MONNERJAHN 2011

In the course of our lives we will repeatedly be asked to give witness. People want to know how we cope with faith in our daily lives, what we really believe, whether we really believe, why we even bother to believe at all. Usually it is rather uncomfortable for us when we are in this situation. We notice that it is hard for us to give an answer, that this addresses a very private part of our lives. Often we simply feel helpless.

Here John the Evangelist gives us a great help in his tale of John the Baptist. The Baptist is expected to give witness to Jesus (cf. Jn 1, 29-34). In my opinion, nothing is more refreshing than the twofold statement of the Baptist, »I myself did not know him«. He speaks here of the very personal experience of his journey of faith. Here there are no pre-formulated answers, no finely crafted theological statements. John demonstrates that witness is neither an examination of our biblical acumen nor a mere repetition of what others have said. To give witness means becoming a storyteller of life.

For witness is deeply personal. We cannot hide behind rhetoric or the faith formulations of others. It is not a matter of short and simple answers, of a yes or no answer. When people seek witness, they need our personal faith story. Clean cut cate-

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chetical formulas will have no effect. That is merely information about faith. The only thing that can serve life and faith in this instance is if we tell the story that bears the title »How I arrived at my conviction«.

For John the Baptist witness is a story, an unfolding of the journey he has taken, a sharing of the experiences that formed and fashioned him. Included in this is his twice repeated statement, »I myself did not know him«. Only thereafter does he tell the tale as to how he got to know him. John is a storyteller of life. He does what all storytellers do. He describes processes and steps that have led him to life. Witness, like stories, should never prematurely rush to the final conclusion, but should instead articulate the adventure.

This, however, demands something of us. I cannot tell a story of life without contact to my innermost processes, to my feelings and impressions. I need the ability to notice how life is changing and developing in me. I need an unrelenting honesty with myself. If I circumvent or ignore the difficulties and persistent doubts of my faith story, then I have nothing authentic to say. Everything that is part of my journey is a part of my faith, a part of my story. To this I should give witness. This is an authentic story and authenticity always finds an echo in the hearts of men and women.

If authentic self-knowledge is the first step, then it leads to the second, namely, the ability to deal with the complexity of my life. We do not immediately and completely recognize everything that moves us. Our lives are complex and our motivations are complicated. This cannot be reduced to the lowest common denominator. The advantage of this complexity lies therein, that if we take it seriously, it will make us modest. Then we will not overwhelm others with formulations that no one understands but everyone repeats. Then we will not succumb to the pressure to formulate the faith »once and for all«. Then we will search, make attempts, keep talking, and remain creative. Then we will tell the stories of our faith.

Recently I was asked to write a recommendation for a young, female teacher who was seeking the Church's permission to teach in her schools (the *missio canonica*). I was taken aback by the accompanying letter of the Vicar General. Here, in painstaking detail, I was given my marching orders as to what I needed to consider. I sat down and wrote a list of the ten people who helped me the most to find and follow my path of faith. On this list stood the names of the 10 greatest faith witnesses in my life. I then applied the criteria of the Vicar General to them and discovered that only one person on the list would likely receive such permission: not my great grandmother, not my mother, not my father and not my elderly confrere. Yet, these were the people willing to tell me their faith stories. In this case, I would rather stick to the criteria of John's Gospel and not those of the Vicar General. In this case, I would rather stick with the storytellers of life.

**Erik Riechers SAC**

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