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Resignation, Critical Loyalty and Hope



Although you might not be able to imagine it, 36 years ago I was a young man, just recently ordained. On the day of my ordination a confrere, who despite his advanced years read widely and deeply in theology, gave me a book from the Austrian pastoral theologian, Paul M. Zulehner as a present. It had just been published a few months before my ordination and was titled »Wider die Resignation in der Kirche: Aufruf zu kritischer Loyalität« (trans: »Against Resignation in the Church: A Call for Critical Loyalty«.

In the summer that followed, I made a trip to Germany to visit and celebrate with relatives, friends and confreres. Naturally, I also visited our Mother House in Limburg, celebrated the Eucharist with them as a newly ordained priest and reconnected with confreres whom I had not seen since my years of study in Germany. In the course of my stay, two confreres noticed the aforementioned book I was reading.

The first of the confreres, in his mid-fifties at the time, remarked caustically: »This is hardly an auspicious beginning to your priestly life if right from the start you read the heretics.

The second confreres smiled when he saw what I was reading and told me it was a marvelous book. »Right now, you are young. But the temptation of resignation will come with the years.« His words were prophetic.

Later that day I went to the evening meal in our grand refectory. In those days we still had a strict hierarchical order among the tables. There was long table for the brothers, another one for the priests, a third for students and apprentices in the house, and a fourth for those with special dietary needs. At each of these tables, a strict hierarchical order was also kept. At the head of the table sat the confreres who had the most years of consecration, and then the order worked itself down to those who had the least number of years of consecration.

From force of habit, I took a place where I had sat for the many years I when I still been a novice and a student. I took my place at the foot of the table where the brothers ate. They immediately informed me, that I was no longer permitted to sit there, since I was a priest. From the neighbouring table, where the priests ate, I was informed that I now need to come and sit with them, for I was now ordained. I politely refused and remained seated where I was.

The elderly confrere, who had lauded my choice of book, got up from the priests' table, and took a place next to me at the brothers' table. He reached into the pocket of his habit (the number of pockets in our habits remains one of the great mysteries of the faith until this day) and pulled out his copy of the same book. Then he smiled at me and said: »If I had read this when I was your age, I would have had the courage to get up and sit down at this table years ago.«

I read that book many times. Nearly 15 years ago it finally fell apart. I have read many works of Paul Zulehner since then, but it is this book I loved and appreciated most keenly and still miss the most. For indeed, as the years passed, the temptation of resignation has arisen, and the challenge of critical loyalty has become more acute.

Over the course of the years, the general malaise of church life and the vitriolic polarization within it have often sapped my strength, but they also have made the challenge of critical loyalty considerably more difficult. This is hardly surprising. What I have learned over the course of the years, is that I need to focus not on the critics, not on the complainers, but on those people who have a hunger and thirst for the fullness of life. I steady my focus on those men and women who genuinely desire something for themselves and the people they love, something that aid them in forging and fashioning a purposeful life.

I confess, I admire them, their passion and their purpose, their drive to forge and fashion a civilisation of love by pouring themselves into the world, in whatever manner and in whatever place they can. I have been privileged to be a part of their lives, as they struggled to raise their children, teach their pupils, serve their neighbours, give generously of their time and their talent, to make »justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream« (Amos 5, 24) These people have helped me avoid resignation and inspired me again and again to fight the good fight, finish the race and keep the faith. (cf. 2 Timothy 4,7)

36 years ago, I chose to listen to the smiling confrere rather than the caustic one. I found it to be a life-giving, life sustaining choice. Thus, I have maintained that practice ever since. It is the biblical practice of choosing life: »I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curs-

ing. Therefore, choose life, so that you and your descendants may live.« (Dt 30, 19) Therefore, out of biblical, critical loyalty, I choose those who choose life, rather than those who merely choose to criticize death and curse, but, ironically, never end up choosing life.

I choose to listen to those who choose life. It is to men and women such as these that I have lived my critical loyalty, for whom I preach and write most passionately. Whenever I encounter them, accompany them or live with them, I see the face my smiling confrere, his tenderness, kindness and supportiveness. They are the reason I can still say, without resignation and despite a critical loyalty, that I still love the Church, the People of God.

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