



SIEBENQUELL

The Rarest of Stories



SOURCE: PRIVAT

When I was a student of narrative theology, I was taught to take the story seriously. When we encounter stories of special significance, which are particularly inspiring, we put them aside in a special box. Even if we did not understand exactly why they moved us, the key was to put them aside in a special place to make sure that we would hold and cherish them until the time when life and inspiration would give us cause to go back to them, to interpret them, to understand them, and of course to tell them. That has been a practice of decades in my life.

However, there was one very special lesson in regard to stories which I have never forgotten. My beloved teacher told us, that on occasion, we encounter a story of the rarest value. That story would strike in so unique a fashion, that we would know two things immediately. The first is, that we had never heard a story of its kind before. The second is, that we would be unlikely to ever hear a story of this kind again. When I asked him how I would recognise a story of this kind, he replied very simply: You will know it when you hear it.

32 years have passed since then, and I never once experienced story of rarest value. To my delight, if also to my surprise, last month I heard that rarest of stories, and I knew it. That same day I wrote to my beloved teacher and

told him what I had heard in very short summary. He wrote back to me back and said: »Now you know what you have to do: write and tell! «

This summer, I was privileged to be invited to spend a day with my colleague Rosemarie and two of her most cherished family friends, Karl and Romy Paller. Karl Paller is a passionate and accomplished musician, the founder and conductor of Cantores Corde, and the initiator of countless musical projects. Romy is herself a musician and teacher, deeply involved and committed to music. Spending the day with them was a sheer pleasure, rich with the type of conversations which John O'Donohue used to describe »the type that rolls around your heart and imagination for weeks and months on end.« There are so many delightful memories of that day, each of them worthy of a story.

The pearl of great price came at the very start of the day. While drinking coffee and sharing a few stories about where we came from and what we did, Karl Paller quietly mentioned that he had commissioned his daughter, Fabia, to compose a Mass. There was nothing dramatic about the way he told the story. He recounted it in a very matter of fact tone but hardly had he finished, I already knew that I had heard the story that I had never heard before, of the kind I was certain I would never hear again. For the rest of the day, I returned to that story, ask more questions about it, repeatedly expressed my astonishment about it, and was doggedly determined to learn a match about it as I could. Both Karl and Romy were very gracious in the face of my continuous return to the story. They answered my questions and were very open and willing to let me share the story.

Fabia Paller is herself a musician, composer, conductor and teacher. One day, her father commissioned her to compose a Mass. She accepted her father's commission and challenge and began to work her way through the creative process involving, liturgy, biblical storytelling and musical composition. Her father and mother maintained an avid interest in her project through the creative process. Her Mass, the »Missa brevis Maria Magdalena«, then had its premier in the parish church named after Mary Magdalene.

The story captured my imagination, mesmerized me and has not let me go ever since. It is rife with wonder. Let me tell you why it is for me that once in a lifetime encounter with a story.

During my theological studies, I read of many Masses commissioned by nobility, archbishops and religious communities. But until that moment in the café, I had never heard of a father commissioning his own daughter to compose a Mass. I had read of such commissions in Church history books, as a thing of the past. For the most part, the person who commissioned the Mass wished to be known as a patron of the arts. But here was a father, who was not only the mentor of the artist, his own daughter, but of the artistic talent simmering within her. It was a moment of unveiling to me, to hear the call of a father to his daughter, because he saw even more in her, and dared to ask her to bring it to birth.

Then there is Fabia Paller herself. To receive a commission from her own father was to wager considerably more than Mozart receiving a commission from an archbishop. It was an adventure of trust and confidence, of finding the confidence in herself to do what her father was already confident she could do. It is one thing to meet the expectations of a client, but altogether another to rise to the faith our parents place in us.

Furthermore, this was an intense and profoundly challenging experience of storytelling. Fabia had to delve into the classic elements of the liturgy, such as the Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus and Agnus Dei, and then interpret them in and through her music. She had to find and create the tone, rhythm and speed that would capture and express what the ancient words were saying to her about God, believers and faith. But unlike a theologian, she did not

have the luxury of remaining within the same medium as the texts, namely, the written word. She translated their meaning into the language of music. No homily, lecture or story I have ever written demanded so much of me as the composition of her Missa brevis.

Fabia eventually turned to Mary Magdalene and found her inspiration in one of the most fascinating women of the Gospels. She has often been underestimated and frequently maligned by theologians and preachers and thus relegated to the side lines of the Gospel story. Yet, in John's Gospel, she is the first proclaimer of the Gospel, the first witness of the resurrection, a woman of uncommon courage in a moment, when the others lacked any demonstrable courage whatsoever. Like Mary Magdalene, Fabia possessed the perseverance to bring to completion, what others did not even venture to do.

Moreover, she composed a work of proclamation that is dependent upon many other people. There are the singers and musicians needed to carry out and perform her musical interpretation of faith. When I get up to preach, I need only rely on my own voice. She needs to entrust her work into the hands of others, to fully express what she has created and wishes to say. In many ways, it is the fullest expression of our faith, for it wraps personal faith into a commitment to community.

This Missa brevis is a profession of faith. We get up and recite the Creed together. While doing so, we can comfortably hide in the crowd. But here is a woman, who wrestled with faith and God, interpreted what she experienced and heard, gave it form, colour and sound, and then presented in public for all to hear. I have heard preachers hide behind the faith of the Church, so that in the end, no one could know if any of what they proclaimed was also their own personal profession of faith. It is possible to quote great theologians, Papal encyclicals and even mystics, without putting yourself on the line. Fabia Paller could not do that when her Mass was premiered. Her experience is akin to that of the four Gospel writers. While each of them used the same deposit of faith, they interpreted, forged and fashioned it as their own personal testimony of faith. We never just proclaim the Gospel, but the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Everyone hearing the Missa Brevis Maria Magdalena, would know it expresses the faith of the Church, but it is also the Gospel according to Fabia Paller: born of her creativity, fired by her imagination and forged of her personal talents and gifts. The moment the first note of this Mass rang out, there was no place for her to hide. That is in and of itself a boldness of spirit that I cannot but admire.

Her mother, Romy, was herself so enthralled by the music of her daughter's Mass, that she commissioned her to write a Credo for it, simply so that she could hear the beautiful words »Et incarnatus est« in the musical language and interpretation of Fabia.

This was my encounter with the story of the rarest value. I had never heard a story of its kind before. I know it is likely, that I will never hear a story of this kind again. I knew it when I heard it. Yet, that fact fills me with gratitude, for Karl and Romy who were the storytellers, for Fabia, who dared to become the heart of story and for all three of them together, who permitted me to tell you the story.

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