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### *Fascination of Beauty.*

### *The discovery of God's beauty in prayer and adoration*



Augsburg House of Prayer (“*Gebetshaus*”) in Germany has become a national phenomenon. In an era of accelerating secularization and empty churches the initiative of some young catholic lay people has seen staggering growth. The ecumenical prayer conference “*MEHR*” started with 100 participants in 2008 and reached 12.000 in 2020 with an average age of 37. In 2020 *Gebetshaus Augsburg* started a national online prayer initiative during corona lockdown with around 1 million participants and huge coverage by mainline media. Their YouTube videos are watched multiple million times. What is the secret behind these rather surprising figures?

Some features of the phenomenon seem strikingly different from the emphasis mostly taken by the catholic church in Germany in the “post-Vatican-Council-II-era”. They might be responsible for the mentioned attractiveness.

1. Focus on God, no heresy of wrong emphasis
2. Fascination first, not morals
3. Personal spirituality, not ritual
4. Beautiful expression, no fear of generosity
5. Modern forms, no traditionalism
6. Personal, not formal
7. Striving for high quality, no tyranny of mediocrity

#### *1. Focus on God*

The question who God is and how we can get to know him is the center of our faith. It is precisely the reason for all of salvation history, especially

for the incarnation. Jesus became flesh to display the father: *“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may always see my glory which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world”* (Joh 17,24; NJB).

Knowledge about God is attractive to humans, because we have an internal hunger to know him. “God” is not an uncommon term in everyday language. Even in a secular country like Germany books about the existence or non-existence of God reach best-selling status. If we want people to adore, we have to make clear whom they are invited to adore. Adoration is a organic effect of a spirituality, that makes God the most important topic. This might sound like a commonplace, but a big part of catholic media communication and activism focuses more on other topics, that might also be valid, but of lesser importance in the “hierarchy of truths”. One could speak about a “heresy of wrong emphasis”: saying correct things in an incorrect proportion.

## 2. Fascination first

Conferences and media produced by Gebetshaus focus on the beauty and excellencies of Jesus. Christianity often is conceived from the outside primarily as a code of morals, a list of “do’s” and – especially! – “dont’s”. This is a real problem. Jesus did not die on a cross to make the moral load on guilt-strucken humanity even heavier. On the contrary: the gospel is about getting to know Jesus Christ in person. *“The Word became flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth”* (Joh 1,14). Both John’s and Paul’s theology emphasize the idea of being “struck” by the glory of God. Out of this encounter everything else flows.

Prayer need to be taught as a way of fascination, of deeper love for the person of Jesus Christ. The great masters of carmelite spirituality teach us, that this does not mean an experience of constant bliss and emotions. But they always make clear the end-goal of prayer life: the beatific vision, joy abundant in encountering God. All these topics are surprisingly unknown to both professing Catholics as well as spiritual seekers.

### *3. Personal spirituality*

Many Catholics don't have a personal, daily prayer life even if they happen to go to church on Sundays. Yet mobile apps for meditation are wildly popular amongst non-religious people. Hunger for spirituality is massive, but the church often fails to really train ordinary people who to live a spiritual life in a mundane life. "*Teach us how to pray*" (Lk 11,1) remains a highly relevant plea. Conferences, media, books that show in an easy and approachable way how Catholicism is a beautiful, fulfilling way to live a spiritual life will be sought after.

### *4. Beautiful expression*

We are living in a highly visual, aesthetic culture. People choose what to buy and where to go based on aesthetic judgement. This trend has been massively increasing over the last 3 decades. In Catholic milieus one can sometimes find a misleading concept of "poverty". The willingness to embrace a simple lifestyle is of highest spiritual value and was fleshed out by our most venerated saints. Still the same saints wanted churches and monasteries to be built in a beautiful way. Simplicity in lifestyle does not mean that aesthetics are not important. On the contrary: Catholicism has always testified to the incarnational character of our faith. God's glory was displayed in human form. Art has always been an important vessel of worship. Art always is a waste: it is something that is not necessary. There will always be a good reason to criticize Mary for wasting costly nard on Jesus' feet with the heavy objection, that the same money could have been spent better for the poor (cf. Joh 12). But true love always seeks beautiful expression. If we want to propagate adoration: let us use the best music, the most beautiful design, architecture, media etc. that we can afford, trusting God even in finances if we seek first his kingdom.

### *5. Modern forms*

Expressions and art styles have always changed with the time. As catholics we do hold in highest esteem liturgical forms, that are not simply changeable with the time. At the same time the church was always open to embrace new forms and styles, without changing the character of the sacraments. There is no sacrosanct musical style in the church. The fact that 99% of the music enjoyed by today's listeners is pop music must not be ignored. Modern worship music has proven to be a viable tool not just for evangelization but for fostering and sustaining communal prayer. We can't just speak about adoration. We need to flesh it out in a way that makes it easy for modern people to join, not building aesthetic walls in the name of tradition, that make it almost impossible for "normal people" to find access. The way 24/7 prayer is sustained in Augsburg for 10 years now and conferences are designed to bring thousands of people into prayer is closely linked to the determination to use everything, that provides a contemporary attractive packaging for the timeless content.

### *6. Personal*

God is interested in each and every person individually. Besides timeless liturgical forms that focus on the whole congregation and the „objective“ dimension of the sacraments we need a theology and methodology that pays tribute to the value of personal decision and personal encounter with God. Highlighted by the charismatic movement and similar movements in the church this aspect is far from being an exclusive characteristic of just a special stream within the church. In a secular age marked by "optionalization" of faith – being a catholic is just one out of many options how to live – the focus needs to be much more on individuals making individual choices. The way we speak about prayer needs to be personal: credible, authentic people need to talk about it and live it.

Social media and YouTube is a great tool for this. Our conferences, meetings, services need to be “designed” to make it as easy as possible to be integrated personally, to be known and seen by others, to actively participate even if there for the first time.

### *7. Striving for high quality*

God deserves the highest expression of worship. The way we express our worship displays the majesty of whom we worship. In the old testament God himself dictates Moses how to build his sanctuary, which is described in an almost puzzling length. Not just *that* we adore, but *how* we do it tells a story. When organizing something for God we should strive for the highest quality possible. This requires a constant determination to fight against the tyranny of mediocrity that so often characterizes church. If it is “just for the church” we settle in for a low quality that we would never accept in the business world. God deserves our best and there should be no excuse needed to do things in a real professional way.

### *A last thing: born out of prayer*

Again, it might sound like a common place but it is not. The heart of Gebetshaus Augsburg is not what people from the outside see. It is a simple prayer room where prayer has not stopped for over 87.600 hours. All fruitfulness flows from prayer and intimacy with Jesus (cf. Joh 15).