

OF THE LOVE THAT IS “FOR
NOTHING”: IN HONOR OF
FERDINAND ULRICH¹

STEFAN OSTER

“He who can say ‘Yes’ to the Crucified out of the depth
of his heart says ‘Yes’ to a love that gives itself for free, a
love that can give itself away without
having to hold onto itself at all.”



Dear Ulrich family, dear sisters and brothers in the faith, all of
you who are friends, companions, fellow pilgrims, and admirers
of Ferdinand Ulrich:

Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the greatest theologians of the last century and an intimate friend and spiritual brother of our departed, wrote a letter to Ferdinand Ulrich in 1964 thanking the young philosopher for a manuscript. In response to this work, which dealt with the theme of power, Balthasar wrote the following: “How gently and yet relentlessly you again and again pull back every veil. We will have

1. This text was originally delivered as a homily for the funeral of Ferdinand Ulrich at St. Nikolaus Church, Mühldorf am Inn, on February 14, 2020.—Ed.

to learn to bear with you.² I have read Eckhart and Tauler and everywhere you carry forward that age in which the German spirit was born.” We will have to learn to bear with you! What a pronouncement on a young scholar from one who already at that time was among the most well-known theologians in the world. And Balthasar goes on to say, with reference to the two great mystics Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, how profound the thought of the young but already intellectually mature Ferdinand Ulrich appears to him. We will have to learn to bear with you!

LOVE: EVER AND ALWAYS

Dear, beloved mourners, in my personal experience of friendship with our departed, this statement touched on a golden thread running through Ulrich’s life. He experienced time and again that many did not want to learn to bear with him. He did not make it easy for one to do so—least of all in his writings, which were often so challenging to read. But this was also true of his person, as a man who never had any use for superficiality but instead sounded human abysses, including his own, and for all their obscurity would hold these abysses up to the healing light of truth. Even quite a few of his academic colleagues would not or could not engage with what he thought and said. Of course, if such an experience is a common thread through a life, then it is only a symptom, a nearly necessary manifestation, of a deeper ground that has still more powerfully impressed itself on that life. In the reading from the letter to the Romans we heard Paul’s conviction, which was also the conviction of our deceased: “Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. . . . He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” (cf. Rom 8:31–39). Ferdinand Ulrich’s principal theme in everything was always love: the Father’s love, out of which the world is created and kept in being;

2. *Wir werden lernen müssen, Sie auszuhalten.* Among several possible renderings of the German verb *aushalten*, which is central to Bishop Oster’s homily, “to bear with” perhaps captures best the intimate, challenging reception of and companionship alongside another person that Balthasar seems to intend.—Trans.

Christ's love, by which we are redeemed from our sins and are granted a share in the divine life; and the love of the Holy Spirit who enlightens, guides, and sanctifies us. Ever and always love.

THE TWOFOLD MEANING OF "FOR NOTHING"
[UMSONST]

And always and ever again the point is that this love is for nothing, in the double sense of the German word *umsonst*—as *gratis*, the gift without cost, or as *frustra*, that which is futile and altogether worthless. Such a love that is given for free means nothing in the eyes of a world of calculation, profit margins, leveraging of status, egocentrism. This world judges such a love, which brings me nothing in the end, to be all in vain, and simply "good for nothing."

Yet *both* aspects of one and the same love show themselves most deeply in Jesus, whom the deceased so often spoke of as "crucified Love." The disciples of the Lord, who fled the Cross on Good Friday out of fear and cowardice, must have thought to themselves, "Now all of that was to no avail, all of that was pointless, since he is dead and hangs there like the very worst of criminals." And in the same moment Jesus says with all the radicality of his surrender, "Yes, my death is wholly for nothing, a priceless gift for you, the deepest gift of love that God has offered to the world." He who can say "Yes" to the Crucified out of the depth of his heart says "Yes" to a love that gives itself for free, a love that can give itself away without having to hold onto itself at all. One who is touched by Christ feels that this love can only work in him if he too gives it forth in the same mode in which it was given to him—that is, *umsonst*, in the unity of *gratis* and *frustra*. This means that we must learn to bear with the Crucified—to endure him and to learn to live out this love together with him. Since I first came to know him, Ferdinand Ulrich sought never to say, write, or live anything that did not directly or indirectly refer to this same crucified Love. It is for this very reason that each person who engages with Ulrich as a man and as a thinker must learn to bear with him too.

POOR BEFORE GOD

By virtue of his immense philosophical intuition and gift it was also granted him as a philosopher to show that the crucified Love unfolds not only the deepest revelation of God, but, at the same time, the deepest insight into the reality of the world and of man. Created being, too, and the created life of the world, is originally given out of love, wholly for free. And man finds his way back into a freed, redeemed enactment of his life when he learns to live out of just this gratuitous love, out of a "Yes" to himself that is *umsonst*. This love is not grasped like a possession but can instead be given away—it opens itself, makes itself vulnerable, can suffer and endure others. This is a love that can trust here and now that the world's grounding source and root principle [*Urgrund*] is and remains love, and can do so even in the experience of global catastrophe and collapse. He who would live out of this love, who would find himself within the overflowing current of this love, must learn to let go. He must learn to become inwardly poor in order to be open to the wealth of this gift of love. This is why our departed had such fondness for the first beatitude of the Sermon on the Mount, where above all those who are poor in spirit, poor before God, are praised as blessed, as happy. One who would find himself within this mystery also learns that he must entrust himself to the Crucified, who for his part can open up the stony heart for the flowing-forth of love, and therewith for the experience of a joy that reaches deeper than anything the world could offer on its own.

LEARNING TO ABIDE

To be sure, if we do not wish to find our way into this inner place of entrustment to Christ, then we remain constantly subject to self-deception. Each of us also knows that we are then prone to display before everyone else our own personal ideals, as well as our own egotistical wishes and desires, all the while remaining imprisoned in the circle of our own I. And Ferdinand Ulrich could always point out where each person's temptations in living and thinking lay. He could put his finger on these temptations in personal conversations full of trust, by virtue of his charism

for reading the hearts of others. Yet he could do this too in a strictly philosophical mode of thought. Where are the pitfalls in a thinking that always prefers to secure or else confirm itself, that looks to celebrate its own conclusions? Or where concretely do we choose to avoid love and “make our own way”? Where do we refuse, whether out of convenience or out of fear, to carry a Cross that would cause us to mature? Yes, it is true: even when the professor was such a gracious friend and brother, nevertheless one also had to learn to bear with all of this.

LEADING INTO JOY

Yet there was also everything that made it easy for me to bear with him: his compassion, his fidelity in little things, his unconditional love for the truth, his attentive listening, his capacity really to be with those with whom he conversed. This includes his love for Christ and his friendship with the saints, especially with Thérèse, the little one of Lisieux, as well as his longing to speak with and act in the Holy Spirit. I have always sensed that it was never his wish that his interlocutor should fixate on him as professor, nor for his students or those he mentored to repeat his theses merely because they were his. He never wanted to win someone to his side or collect someone for himself. He always sought instead to behold reality together with the other, and so to come to understand what is true, what is good for the other, what leads to joy—even when self-knowledge brings pain.

A LEARNER: LEARNING TO LET GO

In this way, the wise man understood himself as a lifelong learner. Even on my final visits to him in the nursing home he spoke time and again such phrases as, “Now I must learn to accept this,” or, “I must learn now to let that go.” And when his intellectual powers diminished, as he himself sensed, he accepted that he would have to learn, out of love for Christ and mankind and the Church, to let even this go. And he always wanted to die out of love, love for the Lord, too. He had no anxiety before death, but often already had a longing finally to pass over beyond. But

if he was afraid of anything it was only "to have loved too little." Yes, dear professor, to understand you more deeply and existentially in such expressions, one must learn to stay with you, to suffer you, and with you to become poor in spirit.

THE MYSTERY OF VICARIOUS REPRESENTATION

And when I say, dear sisters and brothers, that he willed to practice his letting-go also for the sake of the Church, for all mankind, then a further mystery comes into view in the life of Professor Ulrich. This mystery belongs to the innermost center of the Church: the mystery of vicarious representation. Some among you may ask yourselves what it could mean when we say, for instance, that Christ died *for us*, that he has conquered sin and death *for us*. What do I have to do with the Crucified? Yet each of us is already acquainted in a purely human way with the phenomenon that my own sufferings become easier when a trustworthy person endures them with me, a person to whom I can confide myself, with whom I can share my wounds and sorrows. Such a man truly bears me up, and this act of compassion, of solidarity, costs him something too—time, power, patience. Christ has undergone such bearing-with for the whole of mankind in a compassion that brought about his own excruciating suffering and came literally at the cost of his earthly life. And in the measure in which we find our way into friendship with Christ we may experience how he holds us, shares our burden, suffers for us, and ever again forgives us—and does so irrevocably! Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

A PARTICIPANT IN CHRIST'S VICARIOUS REPRESENTATION

And this Jesus Christ also always provides us with men and women who take part in the mystery of his exchange-of-places and therein bear testimony to it. Ferdinand Ulrich was and is such a man. He had a unique share with Jesus in the life and suffering of mankind and of the Church, which he so deeply pondered and loved in the person of the Mother of God. And I am sure that he has helped many through his participation in the Cross of Christ, whether they know it or not. In the power of Christ he

bore the Cross in this world for many among us. When we shall see one another again in heaven, which I hope for all of us, then hearts and eyes and ears will truly surpass themselves when we are permitted to perceive who it was who exchanged places with us and compassionately fought and loved and prayed and suffered on our behalf so that we could be there. And I am very sure that many of us only then will recognize clearly how much, among these cobearers and intercessors, Ferdinand Ulrich was there for us. And he will remain this intercessor now and henceforward for many of us, perhaps even more so than before.

ASTONISHMENT BEFORE THE GLORY OF HEAVEN

Naturally he himself will now be granted this experience of knowing who it was who fought on his behalf so that he could be there. I imagine very clearly his reunion with his beloved parents, but also his encounter, at long last, with Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, the little Thérèse, and so many others. Or else his old companions on the way, for example Father Wilhelm Klein, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Father de Lubac, and many others. And yes, dear little pilgrim-brother Ferdinand, yes it now brings me much joy to think about when many of us will be together again and may finally meet the Lord and may behold his majesty and greatness and his humility and love—what a celebration that will be, what a joy! And when I ask myself whether we will philosophize forever in heaven, perhaps we will do so in this way: each of us will behold in astonishment always a new aspect of God's glory or the glory of heaven, and each may point out to others whatever he uniquely sees of this ungraspable inexhaustibility and beauty. Yes, that will be a feast, to be able to experience together with you the overflowing fullness of God's truth and love. Godspeed, beloved old friend, beloved spiritual father, beloved little pilgrim-brother of Jesus. And please continue to struggle and pray for all of us so that we may wonder and play and dance together in heaven, like children before the Most High, before our Father. To him be all glory today and forever. Amen.—*Translated by Erik van Versendaal.* □

STEFAN OSTER, SDB, is bishop of Passau, Germany.