

# RETREATS ON THE STREETS

*Christian Herwartz and  
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**A**BOUT TEN YEARS AGO A YOUNG JESUIT asked if he could make a retreat in the community flat located in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin. The request provoked all sorts of questions. 'Where are you going to do it? There are so many people here, living at such close quarters: people who have come to us for help from prison or from psychiatric care, refugees, homeless people. There is no peace and quiet! And I've never given a retreat before.' But the young man just dismissed all the doubts and came.

There was no chapel where he could pray undisturbed. But that did not matter, because there were many living tabernacles in whom Christ was present during his retreat. The flat became an important place of meditation, where he could listen attentively to God's call and pray among strangers, the hungry and the sick.

At the time there were nine people living in the community. They were all happy to accept him, and he and his director (who at the time was a worker-priest) agreed to meet each evening after the director's work. The young man recounted his various expeditions around the city. He was struck by the contrast between the older buildings and the swanky new constructions that were being put up in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The vacant lots waiting for development became quiet places where he could meditate. The new skyscrapers on the Postdamer Platz provoked him to talk in the evenings about the blatant robbery being perpetrated by the rich. Each day the director would give him a biblical text on which to base his meditations.

During the retreat he often walked along the pathway that marks where the Berlin Wall used to be. He would walk with one foot in the West and the other in the East. And so it was that he meditated on the splits within the world and within his own self. Each day was full of new discoveries. But he found himself longing ever more deeply for the

answer to a question: what road should he take the following year? Should he work in a hospice for people with AIDS? One evening he wanted to go to Mass in one of the city churches, and travelled there on the U-Bahn, the underground railway. As he was coming up the stairs on the way out of the station, he encountered a beggar. He only saw the beggar for a moment. But that moment was enough, and all the questions within him were answered. Beaming all over his face, he came back to the flat and told everyone about the experience he had had.

It became clear that the community was a good place, indeed a privileged place, for a retreat. In a way, everyone living there became the young man's retreat directors. They represented for him the people to whom he wanted to reach out. He found in them a living presence of God, one that offered him assurance, an assurance he wanted to pass on to others.

This is not the only gift that the Kreuzberg community has received from a spiritual searcher. A priest came who found that he could no longer read and meditate on the Bible. It had become nothing more to him than a book that he needed for work, in order to preach. It no longer had anything to do with his personal life of faith. So he was given a story from everyday life for his meditation each day. Then he decided to go to a quieter house on the outskirts of the city for a day to meditate in silence. Before he went, he was sitting at the kitchen table, going over the day he had just had. While we were talking the doorbell rang, and a stranger entered—he looked like someone needing shelter. He came and sat down, while the conversation continued. After half an hour the stranger said, 'Right, now, let's go'—he too wanted to drive to the outskirts of the city and stay the night. So they both went off together.

The next day the two of them were tidying the house where they had been sleeping before returning to the city. The priest told the stranger that he should take the rubbish out to the bin; the stranger replied, 'take your own rubbish out'. The priest was immediately taken aback. 'Yes', he thought, 'I am always getting other people to deal with the rubbish that I don't want to carry'. He said goodbye to his companion, whom the community has never seen again, and came back to Kreuzberg for his daily interview. He had begun to pray for his own conversion, and on the last day of his retreat he was able once again to connect a story from the Bible with his own life.



*Buildings in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin*

### ***The First Group Retreat***

Then an older Jesuit arrived, an experienced spiritual director. He wanted not only to make his own retreat in Kreuzberg, but also to direct a retreat for Jesuits with members of the community afterwards. The homeless shelter in a nearby parish was closed for some weeks during the summer, and so the group could have a room with some mattresses to sleep in, and a kitchen. In the evenings it would meet, after a service in the church hall, for a meal and—to our surprise—to share thoughts about the retreat day. Nobody had planned to do this; everybody had intended to make an individually directed retreat with one of the two designated directors. But such openness had developed in this simple place that nobody wanted to withdraw with a guide into a mere one-to-one conversation. So the group remained together, and we discovered how helpful others' searches could be as we pursued our own. During the day the Kreuzberg director, who was a worker-priest, worked at a factory as a forklift driver and warehouseman. But in the

evening he could hear how the Jesuits on the retreat had sought an encounter with God.

Somewhat later, Teresa, a Notre Dame sister, asked whether she and some of her community, along with a few friends, could make a similar retreat. Two women and two men from a group of religious in Berlin who were working to support asylum-seekers were ready to direct it. Accommodation was found in a cellar in St Michael's parish, which is used as a homeless shelter in winter, and we were also allowed to use the parish rooms. The direction took place in two small groups, each guided by a man and a woman together.

The experiences of the retreatants were quite overwhelming, and led to a request for similar retreats the following year. About five retreats have taken place in the last few years in different German cities, and also abroad. This has happened because there were people with listening skills, and with direct knowledge of social exclusion, who were prepared to guide people with spiritual curiosity towards finding the things that they needed to confront, like Moses before the burning bush. The burning bush has appeared among drug-addicts, in a soup kitchen, in a mosque, in a playground, at a memorial to the German Jews, in front of a prison, or by a lake which resembles the place where a friend died. The reports that retreatants give about their days each evening are often like stories from the Bible, which likewise tell of encounters with Jesus at specific places, situations and times.

### ***Take Off Your Shoes***

The experience of those first participants had been inspired by the story of Moses and the burning bush. Moses was told that he was on holy ground, and he took off his shoes. It was as though he had gone into the sanctuary of the temple and removed his shoes out of reverence. Wearing shoes was—and still is today in some parts of the world—the privilege of the relatively rich. When Moses took off his sandals he was therefore also putting aside his social position, his pride, and the resource that would enable him to run away. Moses had to lay aside everything that hindered him from listening and meditation.

Furthermore, there was nothing in that desert place but a mere thorn bush, nothing that demanded reverence. This was not an important place, culturally, aesthetically, economically or spiritually. Thorn bushes were part of Moses' everyday environment, no more

than a nuisance. Nevertheless, this one bush attracted his attention: it was burning but was not burnt up by the fire.

Moses' perceptiveness, Moses' response to God's call, led to a moment of new awareness of his people's sorrow, and to the beginning of a sense of liberating mission. Likewise, when people make retreats on the streets, we can hope for a widening of sensitivity and for a new sense of vocation. But the burning bush, the holy place, will be different for each individual. God is waiting in the city to reveal Godself to each person in a way that is always unique.

### **Getting Started**

How do we begin a retreat on the streets? Here is an approach that we have developed. There is nothing indispensable about it—you do not have to do things this way for the reality of the resurrection, the presence of Jesus, to become manifest. But it is a form that is often chosen. Through it we can hear God's own prayer, something that is always with us, and somehow tune in to it.

On the first day we ask retreatants to do awareness exercises, and specifically to call to mind the forms of anger or sadness that they regularly feel. There is a pattern to these spontaneous experiences. Some people cannot get annoyed but become sad instead; others are driven into a rage by 'this kind of thing'.

Why do they feel sadness or anger? Because something is not happening in the way they would have liked. Their hopes for what life should be like have been dashed. They want others to behave differently; they want to behave differently themselves. They have a *yearning*.

This yearning is particular to each individual, and it is very significant: it fuels their hope for a better world; it expresses their personal hunger for the justice that is indispensable to human life. Jesus glorified this hunger in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled' (Matthew 5:6).

Who put this longing, which we did not conceive for ourselves, into our hearts? It is a gift, just as our whole life is God's gift to us. It is in this longing that God's own reality is being expressed in us, entrusted to us. In this longing, God is showing us one aspect of the divine abundance. If we acknowledge the anger or sadness we feel in



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certain situations, this can open a way for us to discover the divine presence latent in our longing. Usually there are one or two aspects of an experience that are particularly important for us. These can become clearer for retreatants in their evening discussions together.

How can I respond to the God present in my yearning? One possibility is to use the language of my longing as a way of addressing God. And in the end, it is only in personal prayer that I can discover how my longing and my quest are throwing me back on to God.

Nevertheless, though we are here in a space where no one can mediate between me and God, spiritual guides and fellow retreatants can make suggestions. Often other people can recognise what is crucial in my yearning before I can, and it is important that they are able to name what they are sensing, not only respectfully but also courageously. In my experience such suggestions should always be addressed directly to the person, using the word 'you'; in that way, they help the person to place themselves personally before God. If the suggestion initially seems somehow to fit, then they can begin to use it in their prayer, and the next evening they can talk about how the prayer went.

## ***Yearnings, Names and Scriptures***

The effort to sharpen awareness and receptivity can help to open our inward eyes to what is happening in us and around us. If we stay with our longing, we can see how it reflects an attribute of God that we are being called to express particularly, an attribute that may be focused in a name for God that is somehow special to each of us as an individual. Three examples from religious tradition can help us understand this way to personal prayer.

### *The Story of Hagar*

Hagar was the Egyptian slave of Sarai, the wife of Abram, and her story appears in the book of Genesis, chapter 16. Sarai finds that she apparently cannot become pregnant, and she gives Hagar to her husband as a surrogate who can provide him with an heir. But when Hagar conceives, the two women come into conflict. Hagar becomes so angry at Sarai's treatment of her that she flees into the desert.

Here, then, we have a yearning: Hagar's yearning that both she and her child be respected. Initially given to Abram 'as a wife' (Genesis 16:3), she finds that she has become insignificant in the eyes of both Sarai and Abram. And this yearning is satisfied. In the desert Hagar meets an angel of THE LORD at a well, who tells her to return to her mistress. But to strengthen her on the journey, the angel promises that she will give birth to a strong son, who will stand up to his brothers. Hagar gives God a name: 'El Roi', the one who sees. She marvels that she has looked on God and yet remained alive (v.13). Her son is named Ismael, which means: 'God had heard'.

### *The Story of Moses*

In another biblical story (Exodus 2-3), children's names again express much about spiritual yearnings. During Israel's exile in Egypt, a married couple from the tribe of Levi have a son. But Pharaoh has commanded that all Israelite boy children must be thrown into the river. The parents place their son in a basket which floats on the water, and he is saved by the the Pharaoh's daughter. 'I drew him out of the water' (Exodus 2:10), she says, and therefore calls him Moses, which means 'to draw out'.

Brought up as an Egyptian, Moses becomes estranged from his own people. But as adult he encounters his kinsfolk working as slaves, and kills an Egyptian who is beating one of them. He flees into the country

of Midian and finds refuge in the family of Jethro the priest, marrying his daughter Zippora. Moses' pain at this exile, and also his gladness at being allowed to live as a guest in a foreign land, is expressed in the name of his first son, Gershom ('ger' means a foreigner settler).

Then a divine name becomes significant. Moses' yearning for belonging, for a homeland, is reflected in the name for God that he is given at the burning bush: 'I AM WHO I AM .... This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations' (Exodus 3:14-15). This name affirms God's abiding presence for the people. The frustrations of Moses' exile are taken up into God, and are thus liberated for a creative use: Moses becomes free to accept his role as liberator of his people.

### *The Hundredth Name*

Muslims often incorporate one of the many names of God found in the Koran into the names that they give their sons. 'Allah' appears, for example, in the name Abdullah, which means 'servant of God'. Parents hope that their sons will express in a special way the divine characteristics suggested by the name—God's mercy, or royal dignity, or holiness, or peacemaking. Muslims remember the 99 most beautiful names of God in prayer, often using a string of pearls which resembles the rosary. According to a mystical tradition, God's hundredth name is personally revealed to each individual by God, and people take a forty-day retreat to meditate and to discover the name which is also their own. The names learned from the Koran and the special name personally revealed to them belong together.

### ***The Prayer of the Name***

During one of our group retreats, a young woman spoke about the anger that she felt when people in her district were neglected or ignored. Seeing people treated with contempt in social situations always made her furious. It was easy to understand her desire, her yearning that everyone should be accorded their own proper respect.

Someone in the group suggested that her name for God might be 'you, who are looking at me with love', and she decided to use this as a starting-point for prayer. The next morning she went straight out to a hospital and just looked at the people smoking outside the door, with their wheelchairs, their plaster casts, and their drips. And in this



context, as she was thinking on the names of God in the manner of Muslim tradition, she was shown a way in which she could talk to God in her prayer. She sensed that the name personally entrusted to her was ‘the one who sees beautifully’. And in this name there was a task given her by God: to recognise how God saw people as beautiful and then to pass on this message to others. This name, affirmed by her prayer, went with her not only during the retreat but also in her everyday life. As time went on, the name was extended: ‘you, the one who is already looking at me and teaching me love’.

When we pray using a divine name in this kind of way, whatever the name is, the question obviously arises: what is it within me that is provoking this particular invitation from God? How am I to fulfil my task of making this divine attribute visible? How can I draw on my new way of seeing in such a way as to glimpse a little more how God’s abundance is being unfolded among the people around me? How can I see the desires and initiatives within them? How can I praise God for all this?

The name is entrusted to me; its reality expands, and becomes ever clearer to me. As such, it becomes an opportunity for me to address God personally. It also gives me a hint as to how God might be speaking to me. For this particular young woman, that name was ‘you at whom I am looking lovingly and whom I am teaching to love’. But perhaps God’s name for me is shorter and more specific.

What is important at the beginning of a retreat on the streets is to enter into a prayerful dialogue, and to begin to get some idea of how I personally can enter into real communication with God, how God can call out to me and how I can call on God. If this prayer is in our hearts, we can then open ourselves up, and go out to look for the place where God is waiting for us in order to lead us into a deeper communion. There we can hope that prejudices and fears will be healed, so that we can see new paths of union with God and learn to walk along them—paths along which our longings will be taken seriously.

### ***‘What I Desire’***

Sylvia made a retreat on the streets of Fribourg, in French-speaking Switzerland. She spoke of how a bronze statue of a weeping woman in the city centre had helped her to confront her own experience.

Begging is forbidden in Fribourg, and the labour office claims that 'everybody finds work; we have things under control; there is no poverty here'. So why is the statue weeping day and night in a city whose problems have all been solved? And why am I still crying, although there are no problems in my life?

In the days that followed the retreatant used these questions to uncover her own wounds.



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Walking through the city she came to a brothel, and she approached it as though, like Moses, she was taking off her shoes in reverence. She saw that the women, who were mostly black, wanted to hide themselves from her; she saw their misery and pain at the fact that others did not respect them. Then she recognised her own wound: how her identity, her sense of self, had been violated when she was a child. A few days later she discovered a relief of the black Madonna in a church. This Madonna was just as beautiful as the women from the brothel who were at the mercy of greedy men. Indeed, she herself was one of them.

During her time with her guide, it became clear to Sylvia that she would be able to experience this healing solidarity more vividly if she expressed it by a gesture. On the last day she brought roses to the three places where she had been moved to tears, and she

The Weeping Woman, by Franziska Koch  
Rue de Romont, Fribourg

encountered another surprise. How could she give a rose to a statue and ignore the harmonica player in the wheelchair? She felt embarrassed, and gave the man a rose as well. He looked up and smiled at her, with tears in his eyes. 'These ten days have saved me a year in therapy', she commented that evening.

Sylvia's roses were a way of acknowledging that what is at stake in this kind of process has nothing to do with one's own achievement. It is rather, very simply, about a readiness to be drawn



into a gift—the gift that we receive as we recognise how people who are very different from us are nevertheless part of our primal wounds and longings. An openness to the demands placed on us by others' needs gives me a quite direct access to my own needs—needs that may have been repressed for years. The encounter with God does not depend on my repressing my dark sides; on the contrary, it is often through my wounds and scars that this encounter happens at all. People are often called to attend to their wounds and change as a consequence—even if they have been repressing those wounds for many years. Moses, as he encountered God, simultaneously became aware of his own experience of having been uprooted and of his people's misery (Exodus 2:11-15).

God surprises us in the unexpected, in places where we would never have thought God might be. When suddenly we realise that we have far more in common with someone who seems quite foreign to us than we ever imagined, then a sense of solidarity grows, even a feeling

of unity, and God is present. Or as the Jesuit journalist Luis Espinal, murdered in Bolivia in 1980, put it:

Lord of the mystery ... you are so close that it's wrong for us to leave our homes and go far away in order to seek you.

You are present among us, in each person; you are revealing yourself in all these things, fascinating or wounding.

Come, Lord Jesus. But in truth you have already come, you are already coming. Eternity has already begun. All we lack now is vision.

Meanwhile, with our eyes opened, we will seek you in all. We know that you are always revealing yourself, in every smile, in every problem.

Open, Lord, our ears, so that they become sensitive to your pulse in every human being.

May we not seek you only in church, but in the communion of the lorry and the street.

May we not just look at you on the crucifix, but in the crucifixion of the slums and the prison.

As you are present in our sisters and brothers, above all in the most poor and oppressed, may we be able to find you, O Lord.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Returning to the Past***

Paul was a member of a small religious community founded by one Brother John, who by this time was dead. Brother John used to go into prisons and found bible groups. In many countries, he knew the places where the drug addicts gathered, and he used to invite them to join him. 'All my people', he would say, 'have had a conversion experience, having come from situations where they are just not taken seriously as people who have hopes, questions about the good life, questions about God'.

Paul's reaction to the story of the burning bush was immediate: 'I know exactly where I should go. But I'm not confident enough in

<sup>1</sup> Luis Espinal, from 'Y Dios ...', in *Oraciones a quemarropa* (Lima, CEP, 1982 [1965]), available at <http://www.fespinal.com/espinal/castellano/eides/eies31.htm>.

myself to go there.’ But one of his companions offered to accompany him.

The following day they went together to the main station in West Berlin, and sat down near where the buses parked. They took off their shoes, and their dog lay down beside them. On the other side of the street, the rent-boys were waiting for their clients. After an hour and a half, they ended their meditation. They went to say a prayer in the church opposite, and then came back to Kreuzberg. In the evening, they were full of joy: ‘With the story of the thorn bush that was on fire but not consumed, we could stay in this place without anxiety. We’ll go there again tomorrow.’ So they did, and once again they came back content.

On the third day, Paul’s companion could not go, and so he went alone with the dog. Again he sat down near the bus stops and meditated. After three quarters of an hour, one of the rent-boys came up to him and rolled himself a joint. Paul could understand why—‘without that you couldn’t do what you do’. They sat in silence. Half an hour later, one rent-boy after another came up to him; in the end there were seven of them there, and they shared their life-stories. Paul talked of how he too had spent ten years as a rent-boy in that place, and later had come there as a client. After that he had spent some years in prison.

That evening, he spoke of this gathering where the buses were parked as a great gift. He had indeed offered to go back there. He could show the people there that it was possible to break out from the life of a rent-boy, though they weren’t ready to hear that yet. At the liturgy that night, he was even clearer:

Three days ago, I was very scared of going there. But now I’m ready to let myself be sent there by God so as to tell them about His love for us human beings, and to show them a way in which they can live with this love somewhere else. I still can’t hear God’s call—but I am ready to let myself be sent by Him.

### **God on the Streets**

‘If God is not there where else is He supposed to be?’, reflected one participant after a retreat on the streets. She had discovered that God can be found even in the most unexpected places—and perhaps indeed especially there. In the end, the central objective of a retreat on

the streets is to seek and find God in our own experience, including the raw social realities that are part of our lives, whether we like it or not.

If someone in the city asks retreatants on this kind of programme what they are looking for or whether they need help, the retreatants are encouraged not to get entangled in complicated explanations but to answer as directly as possible. They are told to say simply, 'I am looking for God'. Once a retreatant said this to a homeless person at the entrance of a shelter. The reply was simple, and said it all: 'Yes, He's here'.

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**Christoph Albrecht SJ** was born in Basel in 1966, and trained as an engineer before joining the Jesuits in 1989. His Jesuit training took him to Austria, France, Germany and Bolivia, where he worked as a teacher. He has written a doctoral thesis in pastoral theology on Luis Espinal entitled *Den Unterdrückten eine Stimme geben* (Luzern: Exodus, 2005). At present he is director of programmes at the Jesuit retreat house just outside Fribourg.