SEARCHING FOR A CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING. 
RITUAL, AND MEDITATION AS NECESSARY PART OF 
PASTORAL WORK

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“The mystery happens in the main station” (Joseph Beuys)

More and more people claim to be suffering from “Burnout-Syndrome”. This syndrome is often connected with a feeling of a loss of meaning. The following article discusses non-verbal oriented religious forms such as ritual and meditation as helpful for a reconstruction of meaning. It shows the relevance of this approach through ritual and meditation for different aspects of pastoral work like, for example, worship in old people’s homes.

In a strange meeting in a Benedictine monastery in the southern part of Germany, eight women and one man came together to be quiet for one week and to meditate in different forms—a form of monastery for a certain period of time. The people had invested quite a lot of money in order to spend their vacation kneeling on a small chair in meditation for five hours every day, not talking at all during the whole day—a tough form of self-chosen exercise. In the group there were several teachers. Asking the people about their motivation for being in the monastery and practicing tacit meditation, interesting perspectives emerged concerning the situation of our whole society: Several people claimed to suffer from “Burnout-Syndrome”, especially the teachers (Hillert 2006). Even young people in their early thirties were suffering from the syndrome. Often personal crises like an illness or the death of a person who is very close or an upcoming or already finished divorce opens up old psychical sores and traumatic memories. For several women these memories are a result of experiences of sexual abuse or mistreatment. “Burnout-Syndrome” was the main reason why the group members went to the monastery and meditated. The background in terms of the belief-systems that the people came from were also interesting: Some were of Protestant origin some did not have any religion or came from a completely different cultural background. The keyword “esotericism” was mentioned and joss sticks were lighted.
Already in the nineteen-sixties the leader of a construction firm in Munich—G. Höpner—developed the idea of a form of monastery for a certain time. In Buddhist countries politicians and leading figures in society used to and still go to monasteries before making important decisions. The goal is to find distance to everyday-life, to focus and concentrate by contemplation. Thus the idea of offering people an opportunity to leave everyday-life behind, was developed by Höpner together with the Benedictines of Niederaltaich. A lot of monasteries and communities—also of Protestant origin—offer these opportunities now (Oschwald & Milovanovic 2003). The Protestants are trying to activate all their capacities of leftover monastic communities in order not to fall back behind Catholics in a spiritual way.

A similar situation can be seen when looking at pilgrimages and their increasing popularity (compare also Söderblom this volume). Modern people walk long distances in France and also within Germany—often under difficult circumstances like heat and rain, they sleep in simple pilgrim hostels and often they are not even religious. Also Luther was very critical about the popular pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela a lot of modern people are not even interested, “if a dead dog or horse is buried there” or not—the way itself is the goal. Hence the most popular way of the pilgrims—the way of St. Jacob—that crosses the main part of central Europe to Spain—still is popular and highly frequented. Also the Protestants try to take up the traditions of pilgrimage and are developing own special routes for pilgrims. For many weeks the report of his pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela Ich bin dann mal weg [I’ll be on my way then] by the German TV-entertainer H. Kerkeling was leading in the book bestseller lists in Germany (Kerkeling 2006). Kerkeling did the pilgrimage because he had collapsed as a result from a life with too much pressure and strain in television business which also resulted in a breakdown of his health.

On “Burnout-Syndrome”

The diagnosis of “Burnout-Syndrome” seems to be rapidly growing (Hillert & Marwitz 2006). A lot of teachers claim to be suffering from this disease. Like an epidemic disease the feeling spreads, that courses of life as managers, house owners, mothers, teachers and even pastors start to be in deep crisis. From a psychological-psychiatric perspective the diagnosis of “Burnout-Syndrome” cannot clearly be defined. It is