

Like a Play Written by God*

Michael König

Michael König was born in 1947 in Munich, Germany and graduated from the School of Dramatic Arts. In 1967 he started to work as an actor at theaters in Munich and Bremen, and in films with R.W. Fassbinder, G. Moore (German Federal Award), P. Zadek, and H.J. Syberberg in 1969-70. This was followed by calls to Schaubühne Berlin and Kammerspiele Munich, and a number of films, some international co-productions and awards at film festivals. He is currently working at the Burgtheater in Vienna. M. König stresses that he is a very fortunate and very happy husband and father of four wonderful children.

I am an actor and right now I work at the Burgtheater in Vienna. In order to describe the enormous enrichment that my life has gained from the life and teachings of Blessed Josemaría, I have to outline briefly the circumstances in which I met him.

Professionally, I could relate a successful career as an actor. I have participated in quite a lot of famous productions at the Schaubühne in Berlin, starred in numerous movies, and won a few prizes. At the same time, I once felt attracted by the so-called “1968 student movement” and got infected by its ideological components: Marxist materialism and class hatred, a merely psychological approach that simplified complex issues, and radical emancipation from all “roles” appointed by God. War was declared on the “dust of thousand years”.

But the result of this movement did not lead to happier, liberated or more fulfilled people, but into a desert of boundlessness and fashions, where everything refers to everything and nothing to nothing. Everything became of equal value, especially the human being in his characteristic conditions. The human being’s hopes and fears, moments of joy and despair were no longer regarded as expressions of individuality but as typifying tools of a social, political-economic

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or psychological determination by class, as formerly they had been determined by race. A totalitarian idea of freedom aimed to destroy any kind of binding distinction of values and meanings with the tool of relativism.

I realized that the explosions of evil in the twentieth century, especially the murderous excesses of National Socialism and Soviet Socialism, and nowadays the widespread massacre of unborn children originate in the human rebellion against our Creator and hence in trying to gain self-redemption. This led me to feel the necessity to turn again to the God of the Holy Trinity and His Church, to return to a life in conformity with the model of Christ.

I came to this decision together with my wife. However, my conversion soon put a great strain on me. There was not only the attitude of my contemporaries for whom a Catholic, loyal to the Pope seemed to be a dangerous imbecile, but also my experience of shallowness at some parishes within the Catholic Church.

I wanted to put the Christian vocation into practice and I looked for a spiritual path that would lead me closer to Jesus Christ. After a few failures I came across *The Way* by Josemaría Escrivá. Even before this, I had read some books about “Opus Dei” and its founder, stimulated by the magazine “Der Spiegel”. The rampant hatred of these works led me to think that this must be quite a significant matter. As if they were written just for me, I read the founders’ epigrammatic sentences: «Don’t have a ‘small town’ outlook. Enlarge your heart until it becomes universal — ‘catholic’. Don’t fly like a barnyard hen when you can soar like an eagle» (*The Way*, 7).

I came across sentences like «You have the obligation to sanctify yourself. Yes, even you! ...To everyone, without exception, Our Lord said: Be ye perfect, as My heavenly Father is perfect» (*The Way*, 291), and: «I’ll tell you a secret, an open secret: these world crises are crises of saints. God wants a handful of men ‘of His own’ in every human activity...» (*The Way*, 301). Also the beauty of nature and art were touched on: «Consider what is most beautiful and most noble on earth... and what delights the flesh and the senses...the world, and the other worlds that shine in the night — the whole universe. And this, along with all the satisfied follies of the heart, is worth nothing, *is* nothing and less than nothing, compared with this God of mine! — of yours! Infinite treasure, most beautiful pearl...humbled, become a slave, reduced to nothingness in the form of a servant in the stable where He willed to be born...in Joseph’s workshop, in His Passion and in His ignominious death, and in the frenzy of Love — the Blessed Eucharist» (*The Way*, 432).

I felt “detected”, found out. Not in the sense of an embarrassing exposure but in a way that deeply called for my return to a Christian life, without illusions or excuses. Indeed, in the writings of Blessed Josemaría, I found clear, demand-

ing, and inspirational considerations deriving from his profound knowledge of the possibilities and weaknesses of the human being. I found words that reached out into the most hidden caverns of the soul with their tremendous love of God and His created beings.

Escrivá also wrote about the way to achieve such a life; he provided insights into our fallen state, life as a child of God, virtues, prayer, and the sacraments. Here was a way to find the unity between life and faith in the midst of daily life activities. Blessed Josemaría writes: «All honest professions can and must be sanctified. No child of God, then, has a right to say: I cannot do apostolate» (*The Forge*, 707).

The thought of how to carry this out in my profession intimidated me. There are surely only a few areas in our society where secularization is as widespread as much as in theatre, film, and television. The realm of the Sacred, realities which exceed human possibilities, are often considered only with the language of criticism, satire, and mockery. Whoever is exposed as being “religious” or merely Catholic is considered to be provoking, if not insane. Sins — they say — make people interesting, whereas virtues make people narrow-minded. Almost everything, even the most absurd monstrosities are worthy of belief, but the Christian religion and its Church are not. The deconstruction, the negation of the existence of truth, that is strictly speaking the negation of God have declared their ghostly nihilism also in the theatre as a criterion for contemporary productions. I felt completely powerless. How could I sanctify myself, my work, and other people in such circumstances?

That was when I heard the consoling story of the time when the Founder felt the great indifference to God in the city of London: «As I viewed the entire panorama one more time [...] I lost my composure somewhat and felt incompetent and powerless. *Josemaría, you can't do anything here*. Without God, I could not even pull a blade of grass from the ground. My whole, miserable weakness was so apparent that I almost grew sad — and that is bad. Why should a son of God be sad? He can be weary, like a faithful donkey pulling a cart. But sad? Never! [...] Suddenly, in the middle of the street, where people from all corners of the world were crossing paths, I felt within me, in the depth of my heart, the motion of God's power. I felt him reassuring me, 'You can do nothing, but I can do everything; you are weakness, but I am strength. I shall be with you, and that will have an effect'» (P. BERGLAR, *Opus Dei. Life and Work of its Founder Josemaría Escrivá*. Princeton 1994, p. 233).

Why shouldn't it be possible with God's help to incarnate His spirit on stage, in front of the camera, in front of the microphone, during a meeting with colleagues? Why shouldn't the Lord hear us when we implore Him with prayer? There is no place beyond the reach of the Holy Spirit.

Is it possible for the actor — being on stage and memorializing in front of God the dispositions, emotions and love of human beings in such a way that it «happens, here and now»— to become a gift for his or her partners, the author, the audience and God? «Each work means sacrifice, all poetry is the maid of anámnesis, in the original meaning of the word of the Old and New Testament: to recollect or present in front of God an event of the past in such a way that it becomes effective here and now...in the sound of a verse still echoes the sound of breaking the bread» (Botho Strauß, about David Jones).

It could be the highest aim of the artist to seek the intense contemplation of God, to become a child playing in front of God, to find Christ in one's roles, in one's colleagues and in oneself. «To believe means to fathom the core of what we only knew» (N.G. Dávila).

God revealed to Blessed Josemaría a path that provides the spiritual capacities to undertake the struggle for holiness. One surely cannot begin to live immediately this boundless, childlike mature confidence in God's mercy and love, constant self-discipline, the ability to divest oneself of one's sins, this putting on of the gown of virtue, and this living in the constant presence of God in order to finally become crazy with the love for God. But it is a way that surely prepares us to understand and to realize the plan that He has in mind for us. Theatre has a special opportunity to retrace its origin to religious cult, to become conscious of its inherent vocation to be the entry to religion. To quote N.G. Dávila again: «The approach to religion via the medium of art is not the caprice of an aesthete: the aesthetic experience carries the tendency within itself to expand into a presentiment of religious experience».

Every important work of art is an *opus metaphysicum*, directing one's thoughts in the vertical direction, towards Heaven and Hell. What a task! «The world is cold and seems to be asleep. You often look upon it, from your vantage point, with a glance that would set it on fire. Lord, may it awaken! Channel your bursts of impatience and be sure that if we know how to keep our own lives well lit, we shall set every corner of the world alight, and the way it all looks will change» (*Furrow*, 297).