

Rosa Benesch

I can also practise compassion in the world

I was born – as I was told – on 8 October 1935 in Matzen in the Allgäu region. There were eight of us children, four girls and four boys. I was the fourth of the girls. On the eighth day of my life, I was baptised Catholic and given the name Rosa. We lived in Matzen, 3 km outside Eisenharz. I went to nursery school with the neighbour's children. On the way to school, we passed four crosses. The first was at our neighbours' house, the second on a hill from where I could see our house in the middle of the other houses, surrounded by forest. The third was in a small hamlet. Finally, a large cross with a crucified Jesus stood near the Eisenharz round chapel, the Stephanus Chapel. Even today, the traditional blessing of horses takes place there on the day after Christmas.

A childhood overshadowed

When I was four years old, I had a terrible experience: I was knocked over by a young cow. Since that accident, I have stuttered. It has had a profound effect on my life.

My father had a Bible. For a while, he read from it in the evenings. That impressed me, and one day I took it to my room. I read from it until my father called out, 'Turn off the light!' So I put it back in its place. I didn't understand much.

Unfortunately, Father did not go to church on Sunday. It was important to me that at least our mother could go to Mass, and I assured her that I would vouch for my purity. When Father actually came and wanted to hug me, I stopped him with the words: 'No, Father, I want to go to the convent.' He let go of me immediately. I was very happy. I remember my mother's love with gratitude. When we children were in bed at night and Father scolded Mother, she remained silent. She rarely said anything.

After the old priest died, we got a youth pastor. He gave me a book about „Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus“¹, which moved me deeply for a while. But then I forgot about it again. Anyway, this book was about life in a closed convent, which is very different from the open convent I later entered.

¹ Thérèse of Lisieux, nun, mystic, 1873–1897

I lived at home until I was 21. My three older sisters all had jobs. I heard from a school friend that the Franciscan Sisters were looking for a maid for their branch in Altshausen. I got the job and worked there for several years. During this time, I also got to know three young deaf people (at that time they were called deaf-mutes). Finally, I was no longer the only one who had difficulty speaking!

Life in the convent

Finally, a letter arrived from the Franciscan convent in Reute. They were willing to take me in despite my speech impediment. I cried with joy. My parents were both very proud of me. In the convent, I was first a candidate, then a postulant, then a novice, after which we took our temporary vows. Three years later, the vows were final. In the photo, you can see me on the day I was clothed as a sister (2nd from the right). I learned all the work that had to be done in the convent by watching, including the night watch, which later became one of my duties.



There were some things in the convent that I could not reconcile with my faith. I already had a Bible at that time. I had difficulty with the rosary, but I loved „the Way of the Cross“².

I also had problems because of my stutter. The sisters made fun of me and mimicked me. Even the superior mimicked me, but when I let him know how hurt I was, he realised that it was not nice to mock someone like that. He came to me and asked if I was still angry with him.

One of my duties was to close the windows in the dining room at 9 o'clock in the evening. Once, this led to a brief conversation, but as soon as I mispronounced a letter, everyone laughed, including the Mother Superior. I had a sentence from the Bible in my head, from Matthew 25: 'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' So I went there, copied the verse and placed the note on the Mother Superior's seat: 'And the King will answer them, saying, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me"' (Gospel of Matthew 25:40). When she encountered me during the day, I had to go with her to the office. She had no understanding for me. I prayed silently that I would not say anything unkind to her. So I just said, 'I know I'm no saint, but neither are you.' Soon after, she had to undergo a second operation and never woke up again.

² A special route within the monastery grounds with various stations commemorating Christ's suffering.

I was indeed no saint. Once I gave a young sister a hefty slap because she was mimicking my stutter. Only gradually did I begin to reflect on my behaviour. I wanted to ask her for forgiveness, but I never saw her again.



Once, the cook went into the cold store with another sister. Later, she left the cold store alone and locked the door. Fortunately, there were workers nearby who heard her knocking and calling. They understood what was happening and the sister was freed. However, she has not spoken since. She was eventually taken to the psychiatric ward in Rottenmünster until she recovered.

And then I have this other story: The sisters sometimes had a lot of fun together, which an older sister couldn't stand. Being cheerful did not fit in with her idea of holiness; she was always very serious. Once I said something nice to her. At the next Mass, we were both sitting at the back of the chapel and when the priest asked the sisters to shake hands before Communion, she stuck her tongue out at me. I was completely shocked.

My decision was made. I can also practise mercy in the world! I knew from a friend who had left the convent after seven years that you have to write to the superior to request release from your vows. So that's what I did.

At language school

After leaving the convent, I looked for a language school. I wanted to finally learn to speak properly. The unemployment office and the pension fund ended up paying for a three-month course in Meisenheim in the Palatinate on the Glan. The Kopfklinik was very close to our building. I was the oldest student on the course. I had hope again: I just had to practise hard. The language teacher saw things differently; he wanted to get rid of me and dismissed me after a few weeks. Indignant, I said to him, 'I'm not leaving until I can speak!' He looked at me in surprise, astonished at my courage.

Shortly afterwards, a 19-year-old girl who stuttered even more than I did came to the speech centre; her mother was an alcoholic. The speech therapist put us together in a pair and gave us some good advice: we should go for lots of walks and practise speaking slowly. We should draw out the letters very slowly, just as he had shown us. That wasn't so easy. The most difficult letters were SCH, B, P and W. But after three weeks, I took the plunge: I stepped up to the microphone in the training room and gave my prepared presentation. I was so focused on reading everything without getting stuck that I didn't even notice if anyone was there listening. What a huge weight was lifted from my shoulders when I finished without stuttering. Many people who knew me

were happy for me. I can only thank the Lord Jesus. I can also testify to this to the people around me for God's glory.

Another decision

My expectations of life in the convent had not been fulfilled. And now I made another decision that turned out to be wrong. I married a man who, after 18 years of marriage, sent me away with the words that he had never loved me. And yet God guided me during this time as well. I thought about my life so far and realised that I had not found happiness either in the convent or in marriage. I had not followed Jesus wholeheartedly and had not served him completely. But you can only have Jesus completely or not at all.

In 1986, I left the Roman Catholic Church. I knew it was necessary if I truly wanted to follow Jesus Christ. He had captured me, my certainty was firm. I came to Jesus beneath the cross, he washed me clean with his precious blood, he bore the punishment for my sins. He gave himself completely, and now I too was serious about my devotion.

I cannot give theoretical explanations about rebirth, but I know for certain that He loves me. I also experience His guidance to this day. I am deeply grateful for the support of genuine, Bible-believing Christians who stand by me with great devotion, even now in my old age. With them, I have been able to attend many Christian conferences, at the IABC in Stuttgart, at the „Arche“ in Ebnat-Kappel in Switzerland, but also the Sunday fellowship with brothers and sisters in Crailsheim is very precious to me.



God is the giver of all good gifts until we reach our destination. To Him be thanks and worship.

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