

## So Many Years of Solitude



*“When I write something I usually think it is very important and that I am a very fine writer. I think this happens to everyone.*

*But there is one corner of my mind in which I know very well what I am, which is a small, a very small writer. I swear I know it.*

*But that doesn't matter much to me.”*

*- Natalia Ginzburg, ‘My Vocation’.*

When I was to meet Fr. Adalbert Ludwig Balling for the first time, I was nervous. I asked myself two questions: why in the world did I make an appointment with him in the first place and what in the world was I going to talk about? For a moment I began to wonder whether to take back my declared wish to meet him. But it was too late, for he had said yes and had turned to start making his way to his room, slowly, as if burdened by the weight of my wish. Walking along the corridor from my room to his office a little later, I sank into panic, for different reasons, but mostly because of – of all possible things – his name.

Adalbert Ludwig Balling. You couldn't be familiar with such a name if you grew up in Lagos. It had sounded intimidating from the first day my eyes ran through that name on shelf after shelf in a library in South Africa. I remember thinking: “this name has weight.” Like Nicolaus Copernicus and Ludwig Bolzman. It was the name of someone I would never meet in person, I was certain. It was, I also thought, a name with which one could lock and secure something: an idea, an invention, an intellectual space, so much so that when a friend told me his Facebook account was at the threat of being hacked, I suggested AdalbertLudwigBalling1930 to him as a new password. “No hacker's mind would ever go that direction,” I told my friend, who replied, “makes a lot of sense. Thanks.”

Since I told him I would be writing this in an article, he asked me to suggest a new one and I gave him another confrère whose name carries equal weight. Speaking about the weight of names, the name of Father Balling is a heavy one that has come to dwell amongst us. It is not merely your mouth that gets stretched at its pronunciation, it's also your mind. Book titles flash across your head in an instant.

The history of Mariannhill, biographies of historical figures from Abbot Francis Pfanner to Engelmar Unzeitig to Brother Nivard and so on. I cannot measure the intellectual stretch I received as a result of a sustained diet of Ludwig Balling's books during my formation program in South Africa, the many dates Bishop Khumalo made me to learn during history classes, the multidimensional analysis of events, the spiritual contexts there in. Balling's books were literally the staples for every student in formation and still are. I still do think of him as one of Mariannhill's living google searches. Put a word to him and you'll get back 20 sentences. He simply knows! He occupied shelves, occupied my novitiate classes, and would later occupy my small mind.

Which was why, the closer I came to his office that winter morning, the louder the noise in my head. "Anthony, those many thick books in the German language and English language you found in the monastery in South Africa dating back to the 90s, you are going to meet the author? You are going to meet the former editor of MariannhilZeitschrift, you are going to Balling's office, don't go and fool yourself, bla bla bla." For a moment I paused at the door, took a deep breath and begged my brain to shut up.

I knocked. There was no apparent emotion in the voice that said, "come in."

There he was. Fr. Balling was wearing a broad smile and blinking, slowly, behind his glasses, and I immediately wondered whether he had always been like this.

"Are you him?" I had nearly asked. In the house I grew up in in Lagos, there was a framed photo of an award-winning writer sitting with his chest puffed up like an aggrieved turkey, and another who had very long beards like his writing activities did not give him time to shave.

I once asked my sister why they are like that.

"They have written so many books," was her answer. And so I grew up thinking that the more books you wrote the grumpier you became. And you no longer had time for smaller minds, for long conversations, for chocolate, for anything. You just sat behind a high-backed chair and waited for deification to happen to your name. You waited for Wikipedia to pick up your legacies and teach the rest of the world to never dare forget you, ever!

Father Balling, who was very kind, spoke English, sparing me the burden of speaking German (I have to tell you that the language did make me feel like I was going on a fool's errand at the time). He asked me where I came from and how I came to know the Mariannhillers.

As we talked, I looked intently at him, and I saw that he was a truly generous human being, and I told myself that I was okay, that I could trouble him with my questions. All the reasons for which I wanted to meet him began to come back to me. I wanted to know just how comes he has written books of over 100 titles. Yes I would come to know about his huge adventures of meeting the famous Joshua Nkomo of Zimbabwe, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Albert Luthuli. His meeting with Nelson Mandela to whom his first words of introduction was, "I am a Mariannhiller," and then he had asked Mandela how he was able to forgive so much. I would learn about his resilience as a Missionary in Zimbabwe which earned him an indefinite ban from the country by the then government of Rhodesia. I would come to know how he became editor of Mariannhill Zeitschrift – something he had not expected all along during his early years of ministry.

We discussed his researching on Father Engelmar Unzeitig for decades – even under austere circumstances in a communist environment where theologians and missionaries were suspect. Only a tiny percentage of human beings get to have such adventures in a life time. But the adventure that swoons me the most is his writing life. Have you ever imagined how many hours, days, months and years of solitude it would take to write a hundred books? For a man like Balling who carries the multifaceted identity of a historian and a priest and a journalist and a theologian, and who has invested much of his writing on the often contested history of Mariannhill, it must have felt like tilling the bone-hard ground with a pickaxe. He is now 90 and he is still tilling bone-hard grounds.

Most people think that a writer is a talented person who goes to his table and waits for the muse to come. People think that language is easily accessible these days, with the emergence of social media and a wide variety of dictionaries and self-help books on how to write, but at least old writers like Balling know that writing is still, in the words of Flaubert, a dog's life. Spending your working days putting words down, taking notes while travelling in a train or bus, or walking on the streets, telling people to repeat what they have just said during conversations just so you can pluck off that branch of the conversation and drag it into the scattered landscape of your unfinished manuscript or whatever you are working on.

For the most of my life as an aspiring writer, writing has also been a solitary business. There are days when you feel so happy about having written a powerful sentence and you want to go around hugging every object God has created (except cactus plants, of course). I mean those sentences that work multiple jobs of poetry and philosophy, sentences that people read and their spirits instinctively pause. But then there are those days you feel like slapping your laptop shut for watching you blank, or opening the window in your room and flinging your pen away. Almost on a daily basis, there is the constant doubt that anybody would read your work. There is the panic on remembering at the end of the day that you are a student and the time you should have spent studying for the next exam, you were writing “rubbish.” There is also the constant doubt that anybody would take interest in your work at all – who do you think you are? An advanced fantasy, a historical fiction, a drama series, or a biography; it makes no sense to choose one and decide this is what people want to read. It is this difficult and Fr. Balling still writes at 90. I am deeply baffled by this and full of admiration for him.

What makes the writing life worth living, says Peter Mayle, is the happy shock of discovering that you have managed to give a few hours of entertainment and enlightenment to people you have never met. I bet Father Balling has not met many confrères who have read his book and have never met him in person. I have the impression he would love to meet every young confrère who has read his books. “Ever read about Brother Egidius?” he would ask, “about Nivard?” And then his eyes would be radiant the very moment he begins to tell you who is who and when. I see in him, a burning passion to see the history of Mariannhill handed down to generations, especially in writing. I see a senior confrère who simply wants the younger ones to thrive.

On my second visit to Reimlingen where Father Balling and the other senior confrères live, I found Father Baling holding printed papers. I walked up to him and on looking at the papers, I found that they were my words. My article published on the home page of CMM German province. He had had it printed out.

“Here you go,” he said, “this is beautiful.” I was shocked. I nearly cried. I am not used to reactions like this, especially from a person like Father Balling.

“You read it?” I asked, my eyes must have shone.

“I read it. Everything.” He laughed, and I only smiled a wan smile. I took the paper from his hand, looked at my words again and I felt like a real writer.

I went to my room and texted my friend: Fr. Adalbert Ludwig Balling, the priest whose name I suggested for your Facebook password, read my work. He did! How amazing that the genius should even bother! This is a person whose writing has been read by Pope Benedict XVI and countless public intellectuals – and he took his time to read mine!

I had tingly glows all over my cheeks the entire day, even my neck and my chest.

I think this is what Father Balling has also done for so many people through his writing, putting tingly glows on their cheeks. Dead or alive, he picks up their names and he does something beautiful with them, something truthful, giving them a second chance to live. On reading his latest book, “Wie ich zum Bücherschreiben gekommen bin,” I came across a statement from one of his readers who told Balling in a phone conversation she would like him to live for 300 years.

“And he definitely will!” I quietly said to myself when I read that, for long after this generation, I am certain, Balling’s legacies will remain a priceless gift, standing the test of time and tilling bone-dry grounds for Mariannahillers across the globe. When I read Balling’s works or sit with him in conversation, I see a man of prayer, service, patience, selflessness and warmth, which made all the many years of solitude possible. And if Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez had not already used “One Hundred Years of Solitude” to title his wonderful novel, I would have used it in writing Father Adalbert Ludwig Balling’s biography eleven years from now.