

"Reimlingen: Where the clock ticks differently"



***The Still Time*, by Galway Kinnel**

“So it surprises me now to hear

The steps of my life following me

So much of it gone

It returns, everything that drove me crazy

Comes back, blessing the misery

Of each step it took me into the world...”

St. Joseph’s Mission House in Reimlingen is an off-white building with rooms so many I became dazed at the mere thought of counting. Built in the 1930s, she has politely adjusted herself to modern renovations, like an old woman buoyed by her children to wear makeup, use an I-phone, take selfies. It’s in the way the tiles lie waiting on the floor like newcomers who are cooperating well in a new firm, or the way in which the new off-white paints on the old, rough walls seemed like talcum powder on an old man with rashes, yet gentle and comfortable in the skin that is his.

I visited for seven days. The priests and brothers in the house, retirement had transformed them, slowed them down. Their ages ranged from 75 to 90, some bound to wheel chairs, some moving with the aid of walking sticks, with a tendency to bend the upper part of their body forward and downward. For a moment it began to seem to me that they all looked alike, as though having lived full missionary lives and now living together – had made their faces uniformed, matching one another in a certain humanity that is steeped in the similarity of their biographies. They even sounded alike – gentle voices laced with history and faith, every word falling like benedictions. From their rooms to the chapel to the dinning they gently followed one another like the seasons of a year, day following night.

The day I arrived, the first of seven days, I found two of them discussing over a table set with staples for tea break. Whenever they made reference to time they didn't speak in years, they spoke in decades. The bigger of the two who had bags under his eyes, talked about something that happened thirty years ago like it was last month. The other said, "but recently...", and his recently was "only fifteen years ago," slightly waving a hand inconsequentially to show how recent. On the night of that day, at supper, Father Bruno who sat on the table across from my table, came over to our table with a big smile. Leaning on the edge of a chair he said, half-silently, "fresh greetings from Brother Mark," the way a father would say to his son on the eve of his birthday, "I have a big surprise for you". He put it as "fresh greetings" as if the brother in question had been sending greetings for many years and suddenly stopped and went into hibernation, then decided to start afresh, hence the word "fresh". I didn't know the brother he was talking about, but I was happy, I could feel my face opening into a naive smile.

The other old confreres received the greetings with shiny eyes and mouths opened into an "o", obviously joyful. Such a flippant thing, I thought. When did I ever feel my eyes shine because somebody sent greetings? Who even sends me greetings by the way, a fresh one at that? What does it even matter whether it is fresh or not fresh! Only now did a realization dawn on me: none of these old priests had facebook, or twitter, or Instagram accounts, which was why a greeting could be "fresh". Which was why it was such an eye-shine-worthy, big deal. Did you know? The conversation on the table changed instantly. They switched from talking about the fresh bread to talking about this brother who sent fresh greetings, whoever he was. Sometimes I laughed when they laughed until I lost count of how many times I laughed without understanding what had been said, why it was said. But I laughed, and the thought of this actually makes me laugh as I write this. Sometimes I understood much later after my brain had had to reboot itself, and laughed privately when I got into the privacy of room. Or in the bathroom during a shower. As a young Mariannahiller, there is a part of me that desperately wants to see them happy, see them express the presence of peace and health.

And so they discussed the greeting, shared it amongst themselves like it was an August meal and they did not want it to finish quickly because it just might never come by again. Then they began to link the greetings, not to exotic things but to ordinary experiences: a mail, a letter, a 'recent' visit that was ten years ago. Indeed ordinary things mattered here.

I would hear them the next morning asking one another the most ordinary of questions, wie gets dir, "how are you?" And "how are you" was not a greeting in Reimlingen. It was an actual question, a show of real care, a conversation starter. I liked the culture of "how are you" except that sometimes when I asked how are you I had been kept for thirty minutes, half-regretting that I asked. "Wie gets dir" could be replied with, "I didn't sleep well" or "it is still waist pain" or "that medication is working", if the reply was not a full-fledged gist that could be the length of a novella. However, that simple question sounded important for the first time in my life. A question I hardly asked my colleague back in our seminary in Wuerzburg. A question that has become hackneyed, a waste of one's talking time during a lifetime that is already going to be too short. Here, it wasn't always "fine" that was the answer. It was sometimes "not really" and it was the truth. It wasn't so much about the asking, it was about the time spent on the question, the many conceived things it uncovered and the details it recovered.

They had, also, a spectacular patience with themselves. Once, I saw a priest narrating a story to a brother. The brother stooped low to listen to the priest as if the priest suddenly had his mouth relocated to his chest. After the entire gist, this brother said he couldn't hear anything. He had waited for the priest to finish telling the entire story before saying he had heard nothing, absolutely nothing. So the priest started afresh, I mean all over again, this time almost shouting so that the brother could hear, "...that was what happened during my work in Mtatha, I had had to wait a few decades to overcome it". He chattered on, forever in the German language. And he was funny. When it came to the brother's turn to speak the priest couldn't hear anything, either, so the brother started afresh, and it went on like this.

The old Mariannahillers in Reimlingen could not gossip successfully, there was no way. Sometimes it was the speaker himself who didn't hear himself well. Almost all of them already knew enough to be good and charitable with loud talking, wanting the other person to hear as well, to have no need for clarification in the first instance. I carried this in mind when I went to Father Lud's office for a long conversation. I shouted like somebody was sitting on top my head, yet I had had to repeat myself many times. He was patient, patient with himself first, then with me.

For seven days in Reimlingen I curiously waited to see old priests argue. But they didn't. Instead they side-stepped disagreements, supported one another's opinions. As if any debates could stretch one or two muscles and lead to health complications. As if disagreement might end up in them being rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. On my left in the dining sat a not-very-young brother who was not very old. Let me call him brother K. He told me that I ate very little, that I needed to eat a lot more. I disagreed, told him about my righteous hatred for cheese, "I can't eat cheese in my dear God-given life", I said with my eyes rolling at the memory of cheese. Father B who sat across from us said, with a fast nod (it surprised me he could suddenly nod fast), "you really should eat very well so that you can grow up". Then he laughed at what he thought was a joke, I laughed because he laughed at so ordinary a sentence, a sentence he made himself, his very own joke.

Many years back, these priests and brothers would have argued and disagreed about things, their vocabularies ranging from finance to general chapters to formation to Vatican news to theology and liturgy. I thought: these men were once leaders – former provincials, bursars, parish priests, formators, teachers, even writers. It surprised me to know that the most silent of them was leader of a Charismatic movement. Now they were talking about simple things: a fresh greeting from an unseen brother. Tasting a particular kind of bread for the first time. The temperature of the coffee and milk. Again, ordinary things. And they were neither competing for anything nor comparing too much. They were not as invested in creating good impressions as they were in simply living out the best they could in their old age. Each of them, although similar, were distinctly themselves, taking consolation in their work in God's vineyard. There is so much to learn from this. We young people are so fast, we always want to see the end of things. We want to graduate at eighteen, be ordained at 25, become professors at thirty. We praise speed more than we praise process.

There was this brother whom I thought couldn't speak. I took for granted his voice had gone away with the passing of time. He had been communicating with gestures or distinct murmurs for the first three days until he stopped one day at the corridor and said, albeit with difficulty, "Anthony you sang beautifully at mass this morning". I stood there and watched his face as though mine reflected in his. So he even knew my name! He had a face like he did not know his own name. And it did make me think about how old age hides identities in folds of grey, keep people's stories hiding in the thick clouds of history.

After supper I observed the priest who sat behind me. The way he went about collecting cutleries as though Germany would be divided into two again if he didn't. It was so important to this priest that every cutlery went back to where they came from. I could tell, he would not go to his room and sleep well if a tea spoon spent the night in a cupboard with cooking spoons. The way he wiped the dishes! "You should put those other plates there. Let us say that these plates are Catholics. The other ones, they are protestants, so we leave them there", he said in English, smirking, while another brother cleaned the kitchen sink until you could see your face reflected on it as if on a mirror.

I am afraid of growing old and yet I am afraid of dying. I want to see tomorrow but I am not sure about my wanting to see the end of the following days after today, I am talking about the days after many tomorrows. Being young is real fun, it was obvious in Reimlingen for those seven days where my being the youngest Marianhiller in the house was incontestable, unrivaled. They must have thought: "he is such a baby" whenever they asked my age and I said twenty-eight, and they smiled a sagacious smile that said, "he hasn't even seen anything yet". Twenty-eight is the amount of years one of them worked in a parish before being transferred to another one and another one, and here I was talking about twenty-eight as my entire lifetime.

My vitality had never been so obvious to me. I was jumping steps whenever I went up to another floor or came down. A brother who stayed close to my room always paused whenever he heard my footsteps, as all of them did when they sensed me coming from behind, shifted to the side for this energetic creature from Africa who was on a visit. And I overtook him with a smile and a speed, enjoying it. But sometimes I reached my room and realized that one day it would be my turn to slow down and allow others pass by, if such a time would ever come. Because life is a journey towards slowing down. If we do not slow down, life will definitely slow us down, or even stop us. In life, we move so fast only to arrive at a spot where we have to helplessly wait, and wait, and wait. Sometimes I felt unhappy about having overtaken an old brother down the sweep of stairs, then I quietly wished he had been faster. Sometimes I realized I had not needed that much speed, and I was rushing to my room to go and do nothing but press my phone. Here, it is as though the clock ticked relatively quietly but not sharply, as if indifferent, as if the things that mattered were already there, had already happened. As if the universe had finally learned to take solace in the here and now. What the clocks in Reimlingen said was this: Let us not always pretend as if we are rushing to anywhere. Let us pretending that time is against us.

And because this building – if it could talk – had stories to tell about the evenings of many missionary lives, the assertion from the clock seemed even clearer now as dawn glowed around the building: let us not pretend as if we really have to rush, as if all of life's moments are ours and ours alone.