Hospitality, Friendship and the Art of Reading

1 Adress: On Uncertainty

Ladies and Gentleman,

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be able to speak to you all here today. To do so in one's own monastery and one's own school is something quite special – especially in front of guests from all over the world! But at this point I already falter and hesitate.[1]

On the one hand, there is a great deal that unites us all: we are all connected in one way or another to Benedictine schools. We form a community. On the other hand, rarely has it been so unclear to me, whilst preparing a talk, who the intended audience for what I am trying to say will be. I have found it difficult to imagine who I should actually be speaking to. This is not a trivial detail. Considering who the listeners of a talk will be is very important to me during my preparation. I ask myself: Is what I'm trying to say perhaps too trivial for my audience? Or am I rushing things, omitting important steps in my reasoning, and will I therefore lose my audience's attention all too soon? The imagined listeners accompany me constantly as I prepare my speech. It is an anxious question as to whether one will succeed in striking the right note.

If I were to entrust the task of preparing the speech to an AI tool, I wouldn't have these worries. I would probably get an acceptable *result*, but the *process* of preparation – in which you were all already virtually present, even though we didn't know one another – would largely be lost. An algorithm would simply produce a combination of the statistically most likely sentences. They are always correct because they are, after all, the most probable; and that is why, under normal circumstances, they are not bad at all. They provide the *stability* of the predictable, but nothing new – no uncertainty. You, the audience, do not feature in them. Conversely, in the often laborious process of planning a lecture, one does try, as best one can, to offer the audience a *welcoming* place and to begin a conversation in advance. And in doing so, as a speaker, one oneself becomes a *guest* of the future audience. I hope that, with their expectations, they will welcome me warmly and show me a certain degree of favour. I hope that they trust me to be able to say something meaningful. If one does not leave the preparation of a lecture to tools that simulate intelligence, one already finds oneself in a situation of *hospitality*, but also of uncertainty: will I be heard?

The question of the audience therefore constantly accompanies me as I prepare a speech: I want to address people, not simply discuss a topic. The fact that, on this occasion, I was unable to picture the audience for my talk is also deeply connected to our theme, the motif of hospitality. An attitude of hospitality means, first and foremost, *not* knowing who potential guests might be. In chapter 53 of the *Regula Benedicti*, there is mention of "supervenientes hospites" who arrive at "incertis horis" (RB 53:16): this refers to unforeseen guests whose arrival is not known in advance. Benedict wishes to organise everything in such a way that the monastic community is well equipped to deal with these guests. The arrival of such guests is not an exceptional

[1] I want to thank Magdalena Lorenz for the translation of the lecture and Kurt Appel and Isabella Bruckner for many insights.

occurrence; they *are never absent*, as Benedict says (RB 53:16). He wants the monastery to be as well prepared as possible for the arrival of unexpected guests.

Not to be misunderstood: guests may well be known to us and arrive at clearly agreed times, but that is not necessarily the case. A spirit of hospitality must *also* account for the uncertain and the unpredictable. This brings me back to my speech: I am speaking to guests whom I do not know and whom I could hardly imagine whilst preparing: *supervenientes hospites* – guests who surpass our imagination.

It is interesting that Benedict evidently conceives of the monastery as a community which he trusts to be able to cope reasonably well with such guests. Admittedly, the monastery is designed like a city in miniature: as far as possible, everything one needs for life is to be contained within its walls. It stands for *stability*. And yet it is not a closed-off world. There are the guests, of whom nobody knows who they are or when they will arrive. Benedict includes them in his conception of the monastery: the guests who arrive unexpectedly and unforeseen.

2 On the title of the lecture: an echo

The title of this lecture is: *Hospitality, Friendship and the Art of Reading*. I would like to briefly explain how I arrived at the themes mentioned in the title. They echo the conference's motto: *Learning to Live! Stability and Hospitality – An Invitation*.

The motto consists of four parts:

- firstly, a stable anchor, denoted by an abstract concept: *stability*
- secondly, a moment of uncertainty, expressed through a very concrete attitude: *hospitality*
- thirdly, it refers to the importance of learning: *learning to live*
- and fourthly, it extends an invitation: *An invitation*.

The speech concretises *stability* as *friendship* and embraces the unpredictable aspect of *hospitality*. In the lecture, the aspect of learning is linked to *the art of reading*. The fact that we are meeting here to reflect together and will deepen this reflection in workshops is *our* response to the invitation – *An Invitation*. I would now like to invite you to continue together along the path of reflection that we have been following since the beginning of the lecture.

3 The Calling to Friendship

Let us begin with the motif of friendship, which we must associate with stability and distinguish from hospitality. Let us recall: as a primary characteristic of hospitality, we emphasised that we cannot know for certain which guests will arrive at our doorstep, or when. It may be that a guest turns up just once, unexpectedly, and then leaves just as quickly and suddenly. There may be a relationship of hospitality in which one does not even know the guest's name or where they come from. All these are conditions that are entirely unsuitable for a relationship of friendship.

Friendship requires a level of stability. Friendship cannot exist without choosing the other person as a friend. Likewise, one must also allow oneself to be chosen as a friend by the other person. A friendship must grow. Perhaps it is the case that, at some point in a friendship, one

can no longer say exactly when it began. In any case, friendship does not arise unexpectedly, as the arrival of guests might: *supervenientes hospites*, as Benedict said.

We have thus produced an initial translation of the conference's motto: friendship and hospitality now embody the two poles of the title – the stable and the unpredictable.

The next step is to ask what friendship and Christianity have to do with one another. The historian and theologian Ivan Illich counts friendship amongst the Christian vocations and distinguishes it from the prophetic vocation: "The vocation by which I try to live today I would call that of the friend rather than the prophet."[2] We are probably more familiar with the idea of a calling to a particular way of life. But a Christian calling to be a friend or to friendship? What could this imply?

Illich shows how, with Jesus and early Christianity, a new understanding of friendship came into the world. Friendship now exists not only amongst equals, but across all manner of barriers. In his letter to the churches of Galatia, Paul writes: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28) The fundamental distinctions upon which all ancient societies were founded are breaking down. They do not disappear entirely, but they lose their ultimate significance. They can no longer provide reliable guidance. This shakes the very foundations of social order; yet new forms of freely chosen bonds emerge. Illich sums this up as follows:

> Jesus zerbrach den Rahmen, der die Bedingungen einschränkte, unter denen Freundschaft zustande kommen konnte, und das führte dann in der abendländischen Geschichte dazu, dass in der Kirche neue, selbstgewählte Lebensformen zustande kamen, in denen Freundschaft praktiziert werde konnte.[3]

It is now possible to choose anyone as a friend, not just members of one's own group. Friendship no longer presupposes the homogeneity of a community. Illich sees in this possibility of newly chosen forms of friendship a fundamental impulse for Christianity. The monastic movement that emerged within Christianity can also be understood in terms of friendship. However, Illich sees a betrayal of this idea when communities based on freely chosen friendship become institutions; I believe, however, that something of this impulse towards friendship has been preserved in monasticism and in the areas of responsibility of monasteries. One of the domains we are concerned with is the school. This leads us to the question: can the concept of friendship be applied in concrete terms to Benedictine schools or, more generally, to the field of education? I shall elaborate on two aspects of this.

Firstly: friendship is linked to stability. One chooses someone as a friend and allows oneself to be chosen as a friend. Bonds of friendship are supposed to correspond to a long duration: certainly, friendships can come to an end, but an end is never anticipated in advance. This speaks to a form of reliability and sustainability that the educational process requires. The philosopher Hegel argued that education involves a disruption of natural consciousness. The metaphor of natural maturation and growth is insufficient for conceiving of educational and formational processes. In this context, we must *also* speak of a disruption or alienation. To avoid any

[2] Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future*, p. 170, vgl. Isabella Bruckner, *Freundschaft als christliche Berufung*.
[3] Illich, *In den Flüssen nördlich der Zukunft*, p. 173.

misunderstanding: this disruption must not emanate from a strict, unyielding teacher, but from the subject matter itself. Without stability, learners cannot venture into the uncertain and open space in which their own certainties are shaken.

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel addresses the subject of education in the chapter *The World of Self-Alienated Spirit*.[4] For him, education is linked to a form of alienation. First of all, we must note that the Enlightenment idea that everyone should receive a professional school education represents an immense progress in the consciousness of freedom; yet it also entails a far-reaching alienation. Anyone who enters the state- or church-organised education system leaves behind their natural embedding within family and clan, where skills and rules for living together are passed on to future generations by parents, and wisdom by grandparents. This form of transmission does not, of course, simply cease in modern, enlightened contexts, but it is no longer an endpoint or a goal: *Those who enter the school system find themselves in a context where everything is problematised, every piece of knowledge must be questioned and intuitive understanding is put to the test.*

> To give a simple example: in our experience, a light feather falls to the ground more slowly than a heavy hammer. The hammer has a greater mass, so it falls to the ground more quickly. Heavier objects therefore fall more quickly. In physics class, under conditions we could not replicate at home, we are shown that in a vacuum, objects fall at the same speed. The gravitational acceleration is independent of mass. This finding runs counter to our natural intuition.

Anyone who embarks on the path of education is torn away from natural contexts and learns to question everything – even one's own origins, one's nation, one's culture, and even God: Hegel speaks of the *"alienation* of the natural *being"*[5] Through education – the German "Bildung" is maybe more accurately translated as formation – the individual becomes alienated from their natural embeddedness and *forms* themselves into what they are in and of themselves. It is not the knowledge passed down in private contexts that counts, but rather reality is understood as a universal whole. Through learning, one acquires this reality and moulds oneself in accordance with it. Education can relate to all aspects of our natural interaction with the world and our natural embeddedness within it, and subject them to critical scrutiny. Education is the entry into a new, greater reality, but also a profound form of alienation. Through education, we both gain and lose something.

This process of disruption has certain similarities with the disruption Illich refers to when he says that Christianity dissolves all naturally given orders: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28) To ensure that this process of upheaval brought about by education does not lead to chaos, an environment of friendship is needed in which one can venture into a process of learning. The challenges in this regard are undoubtedly very different in various countries and contexts. That is why I cannot be more specific here. However, it should hold true for all contexts that a primary aim of Benedictine schools is to foster spaces of friendship in which one can expose oneself to a process of learning.

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[44] Hegel, PhdG, S. 362–398.
[5] Hegel, PhdG, S. 364.

Secondly: I spoke of the impulse of friendship in early Christianity and monasticism. If Benedictine schools have preserved any of this, they should also place a whole new emphasis on the concept of *free choice*, which takes on new significance in our time. In many areas, AI tools can now deliver outstanding *results*. Achieving them requires little education. What is missing, however, is the *process* that leads to a result. When I think about this lecture: it would be easier if a computer's automatic text-to-speech function were to read out a lecture written by AI tools. You wouldn't even need to be here yourselves; instead, you could have your AI tools summarise the lecture and then instruct a programme to draft a short thank-you email to the conference organisers. Technically, all of this would already be possible without much effort, but I would feel that something was missing – for example, the uncertainty and doubt during the preparation stage as to whether what I am saying here will actually be suitable for my audience. I mentioned this in my introduction.

Perhaps, in future, education will be much more closely linked to free choice – much like friendship. Education will no longer be necessary to achieve specific results; however, people will consciously choose to seek out experiences and embrace the disruptions to their natural sense of being grounded in their knowledge. It will be a conscious decision to embark on a path of education in order to learn in friendship with things and people. Anyone who wants to learn a musical instrument has to practise for years; with Suno, you can create pieces of music with just a few commands, without having practised for a single minute. That has to do with mere output, not with friendship. When I think of the people for whom I am doing it whilst practising an instrument or writing a lecture, that is an act of friendship.

Benedictine schools must foster a sense of friendship: it enables us to choose to embark on a journey rather than merely deliver results. It enables us to choose to forge a bond with those we are addressing. We do not learn and write merely for ourselves, but for the many other people we choose as friends. Christian schools should nurture this calling to friendship.

4 Places of Hospitality

In the preparatory documents for the conference and during the opening Mass, we read and heard the story of Saint Koloman. It is a tale of refused hospitality and the failure to welcome a guest, which culminates in death. This constitutes a dark chapter in Austrian history. Shortly after the stranger's execution, miracles took place, and Koloman was elevated to the status of patron saint of the nascent state of Austria. The first saint of the Margraviate of the Babenbergs, who is buried here in Melk, was executed. Before he could become a patron saint, he was denied hospitality. When we celebrate Koloman as a patron saint today, we are called upon to return time and again to the question of hospitality. We can never leave this question behind us.

The guest is a curious figure. *Friend* and *guest* follow a different logic. A guest may be a friend, but may also be a complete stranger. The person most familiar to me may become my guest if I invite him or her; but my guest may also be someone whose name and background I do not even know. A guest may return regularly or irregularly, or turn up just once. A relationship of hospitality may extend over a long period of time, or it may be brief and fleeting. One can refuse hospitality, but never force it. It is based on a radical freedom.

No one, not even a dictator, can force someone to accept the hospitality they wish to offer. If someone forces another person to be their guest, that person becomes their hostage, but not a guest. If I do not wish to be someone else's guest, but am obliged or forced to do so, I am not a guest, but a prisoner. The gift that a guest brings with them is not intended to be an economic exchange along the lines of: "You, as the host, are spending a lot, so I am giving you something in return." Rather, the gift is, in its original sense, a gesture expressing that one is here of one's own free will and accepts the invitation to be a guest. The host, in turn, rises to his feet when the guest arrives to show that no seat is denied to him, the guest. He vacates his seat; the guest may choose any seat. In doing so, the host conveys that the guest is now assuming his own role (that is, that of the host). They step back from the position of power – that of the host, the patron – and cede this role to the guest. In this way, the roles are, as it were, reversed: the guest becomes the new host, whilst the host becomes the guest of their guest. In Indo-European languages, there is no negation of the guest; there is no such thing as an "unguest". Where hospitality is refused, the guest is the excluded one, but not the "un-guest". The guest then ceases to be a guest; he is merely an unwelcome other (like Koloman, who was mistaken for a spy). Nor is there an adjective for the guest: *hospitable* is a quality of the host, not of the guest. We could expand on these reflections, which relate to the philosopher Hans-Dieter Bahr.[6] I hope it is already becoming clear that the guest is a most peculiar figure. He cannot be captured by the concepts we are otherwise accustomed to using to categorise things. He eludes our attempts at classification. We might speak of an anomaly of the guest. Benedict spoke of surprising guests, whose arrival is difficult to imagine or anticipate …

The Bible shows great sensitivity towards the figure of the guest and the unusual nature of their presence. We need only think of the account of how Abraham and Sarah welcomed three strangers as guests (Gen 18). Something incredible happens whilst they are welcoming their guests: Sarah learns that she is to have a child. At this point, when the story of Abraham's calling would almost have come to an end after such a short time, it becomes clear that there will be another generation in the form of Isaac. (Hi)story can continue. It would be an oversimplification to say that God comes to Abraham as a guest. Rather, we must say: *In welcoming the guests*, God meets Abraham and Sarah. This is masterfully portrayed in the text: there are several shifts between three people speaking in the plural and one person in the singular: „They replied …", "Then he said …". In their hospitable reception of the three guests (in the plural), Abraham and Sarah encounter the *one* God (in the singular). Hospitality becomes a revelation of God.

I shall now turn to Jesus. We never hear him speak of his own home, the house where he lived; yet stories of hospitality are often recounted: Jesus is a guest in the homes of both the devout and the less devout. The evangelist Luke recounts such stories particularly often. I would like to quote briefly from the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19). It echoes the story of Abraham and Sarah mentioned above:

> 5 And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." 6 So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. 7 And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man

[6] Cf. Hans-Dieter Bahr: Die Sprache des Gastes. Eine Metaethik. Reclam, as well as the works of Kurt Appel.

> who is a sinner." 8 And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." 9 And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what is lost." (Lk 19:5–10)

Once again, something decisive takes place in a context of hospitality. We hear one of the most profound statements about Jesus' message: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what is lost." The word *today* in the Gospel of Luke indicates that something important is being communicated: *Today the Saviour has been born to you in the city of David*; *today you will be with me in Paradise*; and, as we have just heard: *today salvation has come to this house*. The essential message here is: "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what is lost". In doing so, Jesus recalls the story of Abraham and Sarah that we heard earlier: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." The fact that Abraham and Sarah would have a son was revealed in a situation of hospitality. The fact that Zacchaeus, a sinner, is also a son of Abraham is once again conveyed in a situation of hospitality. Time and again in the Bible, revelation of God occurs in situations of hospitality.

Let us now return to this place. We heard about Koloman and the refusal of hospitality. I would like to add another incident to this. In the Melk Annals, a chronicle of the abbey, there are six lines relating to the year 1517. Among them is the following entry:

> Septem fratres ordinis praedicatorum ethiopes de India maiori fuerunt aput nos et unus eorum | legit missam ad unam horam more et lingua caldeorum.
>
> Seven brothers from the Order of Preachers, Ethiopians from Greater India, were staying with us, and one of them celebrated Mass for an hour according to the Chaldean rite and in the Chaldean language.[7]

The arrival of the Ethiopian guests is recorded as one of two or three key events of the year 1517. It is thought to be the first account of guests from the African continent visiting the monastery in Melk. It is interesting to note that at a time when Western Christianity was in danger of fragmenting – the chronicle contains an entry on Luther for the year 1518 – whilst Western Christianity was in turmoil, monks in this monastery were celebrating the Eucharist in an Eastern language and according to an Eastern rite. Whilst preparing for the conference, this was a lovely reading discovery for me, which I wanted to share with you.

Can Benedictine schools be places of hospitality today? Could hospitality be something that unites Benedictine schools across all continents? How can we create places of hospitality in these unstable times, when we are surrounded by so much uncertainty? Would that be the primary task for Benedictine schools? From Abraham and Sarah we learn that God's presence is revealed precisely through hospitality. God's presence is entirely unobtrusive; there is no need to speak much of God here. And yet hospitality can ensure that the story of God's covenant continues: from Abraham and Sarah to Isaac and finally to Zacchaeus.

5 The Art of Reading

[7] I would like to thank Sebastian Pittl, Gottfried Bichler and Magdalena Weber.

So far, we have been discussing the calling to friendship and places of hospitality. I shall now turn briefly to the third point: the art of reading. Ivan Illich, whom I mentioned earlier, writes about early depictions of Christ with a book or scroll:

> Kein einziger vorchristlicher Gott der mediterranen Antike hat das Buch oder eine Schriftrolle in der Hand. Hierin ist Christus einzigartig. Er allein hat göttliche Autorität *und* hält eine Rolle. Er *ist* das Wort, und der *offenbart* das Buch. Das Wort wird Fleisch im Buch. Das Schreiben wird zur Allegorie für die Inkarnation im Schoß der Jungfrau.[8]

In early depictions, Christ is closely associated with the book. The same applies to the Apostles and other early Christian authorities to whom texts from the New Testament are attributed. Later, Mary is also depicted reading from a book in various situations. Her mother, Anna, taught her to read. When the angel Gabriel announced the birth of the Messiah to her, she was reading the Psalms or the Book of Isaiah; she read after the birth; she read whilst sitting on a donkey during the flight to Egypt. Ivan Illich demonstrates how a secular culture of the book developed from the religion (or religions) of the book: „Die universale Liebe zum Buch wurde zum Kern der westlichen säkularen Religion, Unterricht wurde zu ihrer Kirche."[9] Schools and universities take on an almost sacred character and were structured similarly to monasteries. Reading became – beyond the Christian religion – an act of secular piety. Today, however, according to Illich, this era is coming to an end. The book has been supplanted by the screen. This development is irreversible. There is no point in fighting against it. But Benedictine schools have the task of preserving something of the culture of the book, which is also the culture of Christianity.

In the Christian tradition, reading is linked to friendship. At the beginning of the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, the evangelist Luke addresses Theophilus in a spirit of friendship. Paul, who was closely associated with Luke, also writes his letters in a tone of friendship. With Luke and Paul, a Christian practice of writing out of friendship begins. Writing and reading become an act of friendship – a friendship that can extend far beyond death. We choose an author with whom we feel a connection and, through reading, enter into a friendship dialogue. When we write, we do not do so for an anonymous (academic, ecclesiastical …) *community*, but for people with whom we wish to enter into a friendship. In the Middle Ages, a rich body of literature emerged, particularly surrounding Hugo of St Victor, „die besagt, daß Wissen ohne Freundschaft, die sich am Wissen des Freundes erfreut, unzureichend ist".[10]

Learning to live today probably means more than just learning how to formulate good *prompts* and arrive at *results*. Learning to live also means learning to read. It is about preserving something of the culture of the book. Reading takes time, but it will time and again lead to unexpected discoveries. Texts welcome us hospitably and invite us to step into a network of friendship. Texts invite us to become part of a network that spans the authors of the past and the potential readers of the future.

[8] Ivan Illich: *Im Weinberg des Textes*, 131.
[9] Ivan Illich: *Im Weinberg des Textes*, 7.
[10] Ivan Illich: *Im Weinberg des Textes*, 32.

6 What remains for Benedictine schools: an invitation

At the end of my talk, I would like to invite you to set aside some time over the coming days for reflection and dialogue in friendship. We began with a moment of uncertainty, as is essential for educational processes and an attitude of hospitality. Let us ask ourselves, bearing in mind the very different contexts from which we come: How can Benedictine schools create a space in which people are willing to embark on the adventure of education? How can we encourage people to make a conscious choice to set out on a journey – that is, an exodus – from their natural immersion in knowledge and habits? How can we help to foster a community of people who recognise that knowledge without friendship is insufficient? How can we extend hospitality to one another across the ages, through our engagement with authors who lived long before us and with readers who will live long after us? How, in the process of education and reading, can we extend hospitality to people across the boundaries of countries and continents, social classes, genders, and so on? Could an event such as this conference serve as an encouragement in this direction?