

A mirror of the soul

Body and soul sound together in the voice. When I pay attention to it, I begin to treat others and myself with greater empathy.

But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.

John 10,5

Vadimas, my Lithuanian brother in the order, is a trained church musician and choir leader. The human voice delights him; you can hardly stop him when he gets going on the topic. In a fascinating manner impulses from the brain move along the nervous system to the vocal chords and set both of these muscles vibrating with the assistance of the breath. Because of that the voice reveals our mood immediately, reveals whether we have an unpleasant or a comforting feeling in our stomach. The largest portion of the tone does not however originate in the larynx, but rather in the resonating spaces of the head, the breast and the stomach. Great singers imagine that they are inhaling air through the floor and the feet and that their tone lies above their head so that the whole body resonates. Whoever takes voice lessons experiences that it is not only about physical training or musical education, but rather that a holistic development of the personality is necessary in order for the voice to develop melodiously. It is correct to say the voice is the mirror of the soul. Vadimas was really amazed, however, when a blind man said about the alto in the choir: "She has such a beautiful face." He had heard it in her voice.

As a Jesuit Vadimas cultivates a special friendship with Jesus. For this reason he can imagine Jesus' voice precisely. Relatively deep, calm and colourful, or so he believes. He supports his opinion with words from the prophet Isaiah, about whom it is said: "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets." (Isaiah 42,2) Certainly Jesus was capable of speaking with volume and power, but that is different than screaming. Demagogues like Hitler, Stalin or Mao Zedong employed their screaming in order to intimidate or indoctrinate the masses. Jesus' voice also moved the people. This was, however, completely different; he allowed them to share in his innermost being so that his friends had the emotional security of knowing him. The sheep in the picture of the shepherd follow him out of intuition, "because they know his voice" as they flee from foreign voices. To know Jesus' voice means to know Jesus himself -- which sounds one of the basic themes of the Gospel of John.

The voice is the vibrating proof of the unity between body and soul. With every spoken word we convey much more of ourselves than just the content of what has been said and every attentive listener can feel our mood within himself. Vadimas gave me an exercise in order to return to myself, when the demands of everyday life overextend me. Alone in the office or during a walk, I lay one hand on my lower stomach, the other one on the breast. I allow the air to flow into my stomach, sum a tone that is pleasant for me and feel how the chest vibrates. The exercise is good for me. Perhaps it will even help me find the right tone.