

## *Salvatorian Family – an unusual view from the perspective of the third branch*

---

### *The metaphor of the Salvatorian tree*

---

Let me start with a metaphor. When I look at the Salvatorian Family from the point of view of today so I can discover a more or less young tree. You will say now that is clear, because this depends on your profession. And you are right because my profession and my Salvatorian vocation have developed together over a long time side by side. So I want to invite you to follow me into this picture so I can give you an understanding of and maybe a feeling for this tree:

I think most of us will agree that God has planned something great with John Baptist. It is not for nothing that the HI. Spirit met him as a child, put a special seed in his hand and set an idea of this tree into his mind. For a long period of time Baptist did not really know what to do with these gifts and how to apply them. But the soil was already prepared; the conditions from outside and the climate were ready. And yes – you are right; John Baptist has never seen or recognized his vision in the shape of a tree. As you know it was not so easy for him to explain the profile and its character to other people, because they had a complete different image of God and the church. An image of a universal plant which is growing on each soil, whether dry or wet, whether fertile or barren and able to cope with any weather did not belong to this “holy field”. And furthermore it was not really spectacular with fine blossoms and/or juicy tasting fruits - much more only simple and universal – for all and for nothing.

The original branches of the tree intended by Fr. Jordan absolutely did not correspond to the classical teaching doctrines of the Catholic Church. That’s why they were cut back immediately to the chagrin of Fr. Jordan. The one of the Laity was cut back completely, because it seemed quite unnecessary. A tree had to stand like a tin soldier – upright, grown straight, according to the picture of human imagination. - What else?

Meanwhile we and the church gained more wisdom. We discovered that the nature, and in this way even God’s paradise, does not accord our imaginations. It does not fit into our limited dimensions. Something we classify hastily as valueless has awfully well its own value in God’s plan.

In keeping with the spirit of the time it was generously allowed to establish a second branch in addition. However the first attempt of this second branch had to be cut away early by other circumstances. But it was treated with care, got roots and exists as an independent offshoot today – the Addolorata sisters.

So after a while our tree got a second branch again, which followed with success the first one, - just at a different side. Each of them had to dodge a little bit the other one. So they learned to tilt to one side, because otherwise they would have hindered each other continuously - for instance taken

away light and water. Later as this danger was banned, they grew towards each other and discovered again their common roots.

The climate in the form of the spirit of the time had continued to change. A fresh breeze had embraced the tree - and left behind some little branches and leaves broken. The tree itself was not deterred. It knew what its task was and was able to fulfill – therefore time to remember the original shape. So at the branching point of the two branches new buds appeared. First only a few, then more, which together formed a new common branch - and this third one started to follow the other two.

If we take a look at this plant with the eye of a gardener now, we can be very happy about it. Its growing power and its will for development are great. The only thing we have to recognize is that its shape still does not match the original shape.

Now it depends on us, the members of the three branches, to aid the tree to recover his original shape as good as possible. But it has to be clear that we cannot undo interventions of the past. We cannot go back before the first cuts were made. What we can do is to take care and to build up a shape very similar to the original through the now existing three main branches. Therefore we need mutual consideration, tolerance and aid between them – as far as possible. Each branch has another direction to the sun and with that another point of view. As each branch is different as is the supply by the tree. They do not have the same requirements and possibilities. So that the youngest branch is able to develop in the same way as the towering elder ones, they must not be cut down, maybe just a little bit curved aside. And yes, you are right – this can be a little bit unpleasant or sometimes slightly hurtful.

Of course each branch is able to exist without the other two, no question. Much more a question is: - What do we want to have together? This living universal plant, which was given to Fr. Jordan in his early days; this plant, which develops all its magnificence and effectivity through the interaction, gaining its perfect shape - which will mature to a powerful tree? Or do we want to have a lovely, cut back, partial barely ornamental plant, which never will come to its full development?

### *Living in the present - What is important today?*

One of the biggest challenges of today is to find ways to evangelize in a form that is understood. We have to accept that our world is like a permanent moving ball. Science, technic and economy surprises us with new realizations daily. Our world has got “smaller” – but in the same way the challenges and tasks of our daily life have multiplied.

Important and unimportant news, advertisement and the several possibilities of communication of modern media guide many people along the day. In the working world the pressure to generate more output without more money on is increasing. In some areas people are forced to work

overtime. In others we find stagnation or recession over months or even longer. More and more people are caught by fear about their future, which is underpinned by reports of job cuts, money savings, job loss, etc. From the distance it looks like a big win. But if you come closer you will recognize upset that it turns out to be a kind of rat race - where ALL are part of it without exception – only in different ways.

The general voraciousness of richness and power was not so distinct and common over a long time as it is today. Our inborn hunting instinct impels us from one event to the next. The vast majority of the people are like robots in a working corset, while business and industry make every effort to support this. Wage dumping and dismantling of the social welfare state are signs of a reinvigorated capitalism, which exploits the humans and degenerates them to machines.

If you take a view on parts of the civil society, you can get the impression that they act like the famous goat running after the carrot on a stick in front of its nose. Some were brought to heel if they get various goodies, others have to fight for their life daily – but both act like on drugs.

And you will ask now, why do I tell you this here on a Salvatorian event about the topic of the Holy Spirit in our life? - Because this is the cardinal question of today - where have we left our soul in our daily world?

There is a tale of a group of hikers along the way in the Himalaya. With courageous steps some Sherpa chartered as the burden bearers followed a few mountain hikers from the West. Suddenly and unexpectedly the Sherpa stopped, took off the luggage and sat down. The mountain hikers didn't understand what had happened at this moment and asked: "Did someone have an accident? Is something else going wrong or is the burden too high? Are there possible other unknown troubles? What is the reason for this sudden stop?"

The Sherpa looked at the men from the West and responded: "We have to wait a little bit, so our souls can follow and meet us again."

Exactly that is what happens currently in our western civil society and in the societies connected on other continents. And this is not only a fact of our time. Let's go back in history and meet the young John Baptist Jordan. His social background was not at all like that, what we widely call wealthy. As far as we know, he was not only once fishing in the nearby river, instead of being at school, to bring something eatable home to his mother. During his apprenticeship, his time on the road as journeyman and later at the railway construction and the military, he always got in close contact with the real daily needs which were affecting a large part of the society. In addition to the material needs were the spiritual ones. Because who had to work at least 16 hours daily for a minimum of necessities, who really didn't have any kind of interest in philosophical/theological questions. The church attendance on Sunday was not enough, to overcome this deficit. Even the questions of the current life were other ones, than those pursued by the official church. Too big was the pressure

outgoing by state and church and the general opinion was widespread that the so-called "divine order" had to be maintained and was not questioned.

In these living conditions of different tensions John Baptist Jordan recognized not only the call of God to become a priest, but also that the people need affection and encouragements that give answers to their real questions and needs. And as diverse as these questions were, as varied, indeed universal must be the work that could provide answers.

This special spiritual vision which ripened in Fr. Jordan only found an adequate agreement by selected contemporaries. Also the church as institution itself had a negative opinion of such new and revolutionary ideas. Fr. Jordan had to experience this clearly and painfully with bitter setbacks and forced changes. However, if we look back, the Hl. Spirit, who is visible in all efforts of Fr. Jordan, cannot be force back by human regulations and limits. Fr. Jordan pursued his goal as good as he could, knowing that his efforts, just were only the beginning of a comprehensive process. This is mirrored in one of his last words:

„Others will come, they will remember our suffering and continue our work“.

Today we are confronted with the challenge to proclaim the gospel in a world that provides similar challenges than of Fr. Jordan's times but the language has turned into another one. People are still searching for answers on the burning questions of their life and time. Cute phrases or fine words alone will not help - they sound antiquated and unrealistic and do not touch the hearts.

The church – that are we – has to face the reality of daily life and find answers. Therefore the Salvatorian spirituality with its intrinsic universality is tailor-made for it. It's our turn to use it in the right way and to discover it as our biggest treasure.

What we need are mavericks, open-minded thinkers and joint-up thinkers, encouraged people who are questioning some conventions and test if they are still of relevance, people who are following the pope and discover the church as something new.

Furthermore a special question is: What is the value of faith? – What does it provide, what do I gain? Are there benefits for me?

Maybe this sounds like a provocation in your ears, but in a world which is governed a big part by acquisitive frenzy, envy and resentment, this has to be considered. Let me give an example:

In the eighties of the last century a countermovement raised against the general mainstream in Europe. There were some people who recognized that an ongoing process of unlimited growth could not be the measure of all things. Sooner as later we would reach the edge of the abyss. There were protests and among others the construction of hydroelectric power plants, which would destroy a large area of an alluvial forest, was prevented. During the negotiations the question came up - what is the value of a piece of nature? What is the benefit for an individual if a frog lives in the alluvial

forest or a scarce poplar tree?

Afterwards some resourceful scientists were working together with interested economists to calculate the value of these creatures. And suddenly a frog, a fish, a tree and so on corresponded to a defined monetary value. It was made clear to the economy now about which values were spoken and that sustainable management not only pays off, but is the order of the day.

This example shows that a large part of our civil society is thinking only in numbers and money. Things seem to be worthless if there is no real numeric value allocated. But there are things that cannot be expressed in numbers but include much value – for each human. For example a clean environment, drinkable water, healthy food, good education, perspectives for the future etc. Therefore adequate livelihoods and developmental opportunities are important, because they increase the value of a whole society and everyone will have a benefit from that. And not at least humans need perspectives in their life for being alive. In Mathew 4,4 is written: "One does not live by bread alone, ..." – with this line we come back to the old question how humans do define themselves.

Today – after the Industrial revolution we have to add: - and the work isn't the only sense of a human's life. Not for nothing a group of occupational physicians and psychologists share the opinion that meaningless work- and consumer world is the reason for increasing "burn-out-syndromes" of many people.

According to that it seems that we often have left our soul too far behind us. - High on time to find new ways for the future.

### *Attempting to find a reply - Let you be ignited ...*

Thinking of the fire and flame in Fr. Jordan's zeal in mission and how it mirrors to us today – it reminds me on my commitment as Lay Salvatorian, and what the relevance is from my point of view.

The 8<sup>th</sup> of December is a Holy Day for all members of the Salvatorian Family. Most of them renew their commitment or their vows – and someone makes it the first time. To make it easier I will use the term commitment, because it is more familiar with the Lay Salvatorians. I cannot rule out that you, the religious Salvatorian sisters and brothers, will explore here some conformities – and in other fields some differences then.

However, most of us know more or less what is meant with a commitment. If we have a look into a dictionary so we will find also some other synonyms: pledge, vow, assurance, guarantee and also responsibility, liability, etc. All these try to describe what is meant with commitment – and yes: Lay Salvatorians have to make a commitment – but what is it good for?

Fr. Jordan – our esteemed founder, asked at one of his appeals at a chapter: how can a preacher ignite someone, if he isn't burning by himself. That is also a question for us Lay Salvatorians, because we want to be Apostles of our time in our surrounding, in our neighborhood. But for burning by myself and igniting others it is necessary or required that I have to let ignite me by others. That means that I have to open my mind and to admit myself into the mystery of God. I have to become sensible and alert to his call.

If I get the feeling that this small flame of the Holy Spirit starts burning in me, I must not extinguish it only because I have the impression that my life would be easier, more comfortable and peaceful without following this call. Of course a commitment has some rough edges – it might be scratching, it might give rise to questions, provoke opinions – which could get very uncomfortable for me. It is a challenge, but no immovable hurdle. It depends on my personal attitude how much I feel ready to take over this task – once more and once less. And with that I have always again the question on my table, can I accomplish this task? Will I really be able to live my commitment? Starting from several reasons in what number of cases I will not have success?

And then there are moments where the heaven touches the earth. Moments of feeling, God guides me. He is with me on the way. My confidence will not be disappointed and he will carry me over difficult areas and situations on my path. These are moments when other ones can imagine God's presence, moments of mystic where I am able to feel and experience his closeness. Moments in that even those who are more reserved towards the church recognize, there is something that is carrying me and touching me deeply. It's something, what triggers emotions as warmth, joy and motivation. Something I would like to have more of it – something is smoldering in me.

Since several years the Feast of Immaculate Conception has been celebrated in our Salvatorian Family in Austria. At the beginning we celebrated at the same time – but one after the other. We the Lay Salvatorians always used our candles. It was and is a tradition and it has a spiritual background. For us the celebration of the 8<sup>th</sup> of December is a living sign of the Salvatorian spirituality. Once a year the "personal ignition" gets a real expression. Outgoing from the flame of one of the candles at the altar or the Easter candle, the symbol of the resurrected Christ, the candles of the Lay Salvatorians get ignited. Thereby the flame is forwarded from one to the next until each member has a burning candle. With this ceremony the solidarity in the community and the "becoming ignited" and/or reignited is expressed. The candle consumes itself during the burning like Christ used himself in his love for mankind. This love has to catch us and has to be spread then. "Others will be attracted if they see how love is present in our communities" - Fr. Jordan wrote in his Spiritual Diary. This is a mission also for our communities today. The Austrian Salvatorian Family has evolved and since some years we all together renew our commitment at the same time with the same words – and everyone with an ignited candle!

It is very important to come together to some spiritual events and celebrate feasts with real signs that touch our hearts and provide new strength. As long as we give enough space to the Holy Spirit in our life and in our communities, as long as we are open for his fresh breeze for new developments our souls will be close to us.

That the Holy Spirit is present and working with the Lay Salvatorians is not a question, because it's to recognize in the development – that's at least my point of view. Units grew together, people learned good to know each other, found out that they are on the same path. Some international meetings took place, more are planned and mutual visitations took place. Lay Salvatorians take over a lot of Salvatorian missions. As we were called from the Vatican office to tell them something about our worldwide missionary activity, we were able to answer with over 40 different activities made by 10 units.

### *What is important – what is needed for the future?*

Let's come back to the metaphor of the tree from the beginning. As I thought about the future of the Salvatorian Family, it was soon clear for me that the vision of Fr. Jordan, grown out of his experienced life, is very similar to the tree-metaphor. Therefore it's very important, I think, to discover and to promote the vividness of the whole vision. Of course we have to be aware of our roots and our branches. Fr. Jordan has planted the tree – he has made the beginning. In addition it's necessary to develop Fr. Jordan's vision now and to adjust it according to the requirements of the current time and the current place. And yes – we are encouraged to bring up completely new ideas in the mirror of the Salvatorian spirit. Therefore we have to use the current ways and possibilities, which each time and development generate.

### *A view of the third Salvatorian branch*

Today there are some differences among the groups of Salvatorian laity. To a certain extent the groups of Salvatorian laity are different. On the one hand we have the Lay Salvatorians, who are following according the statutes of the ICDS and make a commitment. On the other hand we have different groups who adorn themselves with the cover of Salvatorian laity in several units. But here we have to pay attention, what is really in the box. Sometimes Salvatorian laity is the label on the packaging but does not match the content inside. For example there is a group in Germany, who is connected with the Salvatorian fathers in Lochau. The members of the group call themselves "Jordan"- group. We met the group a few years ago and had some intensive talks. They see themselves as a prayer group who does not detect any deeper relationship to our founder. With the name "Jordan" is not meant Fr. Jordan, but the river Jordan as the place of the baptism of Jesus in the Near East; but they were considered as Salvatorian laity by the local SDS-community. Also in other units we can find groups who are related to a Salvatorian religious and outgoing only of this

reason they were wrongly called "Lay Salvatorians". Most of these groups are great working parish-, prayer- or "Sharing the Holy Scripture"- groups. The members are wonderful persons but without a vocation for Lay Salvatorians. This vocation was not given to them or they did not discover it until now. If you will ask now what the difference is between these two entities of laity, the answer is very easy:

Lay Salvatorians have a vocation and they will also exist on places where no Salvatorian religious is nearby. They will fulfill the Salvatorian mission as Apostles of our time at these places. For that they have to make a defined initial formation program and afterwards an ongoing formation. Therefore the process of clarification about the belonging to the Salvatorian Family is so important. In this context we would like the two other branches to take this into account. A note on this point: In our document "frequently asked questions" FAQ's of Lay Salvatorians we have described the different stages of belonging to the Salvatorians Family very well.

In this context one of the important tasks of the Lay Salvatorian branch for the immediate future is to establish real communities. Even if these communities do not live under a real common roof in most of the cases, community can be expressed by specific habits, e.g. in our common charism and spirituality and devotion, in common prayers at the same time, etc.; and we fundamentally see each other as brothers and sisters.

If we want to commit ourselves with a real YES to the Salvatorian community, then we want to be a part of it with body and soul. This implies also to start to become heart and soul with our Lay Salvatorian sisters and brothers in the group, in the unit and also around the world.

So we have to take on the challenge! And of course it's clear that we will not reach the goal overnight or even in the next 14 days. However, it's a starting point of an adventure. And yes - not each one will become one heart and one soul with everyone. That's in our nature of being human but should not discourage us. You will see it's possible with many - and that is a good beginning. If we trust in the Holy Spirit much will turn out well.

#### *Up-to-date with modern media*

The equipments of modern media are supporting us at these efforts. Especially Internet offers a wide range of possibilities to be promptly in contact over bigger distances and to live new kinds of community. Internet forums and blogs allow sharing several formats of media right up to video communication. Just on the education sector previously unknown and varied possibilities are available now. If Fr. Jordan and Fr. Lüthen would be alive today, we would find their video clips on YouTube or Facebook.

Let's have a short dream for example. What would you think about a little Salvatorian soap opera? – No? – Don't be afraid, but the idea could be interesting. In short episodes the challenges, realities,



ups and downs of members of the Salvatorian Family could be illustrated. Furthermore that these are all normal humans like you and me – and really not living one step closer to heaven. It could be shown how a lived faith is challenging in our daily life and how a good interaction between different religions could be possible. –

Ok – this was only a short day dream, a kind of a clip to show you the possibilities. However how fine or not it would be – the biggest challenge is the overcoming to use it because the best devices and installations are without sense if they are not in use. Whereby the use must not be only passive. At this area it is still necessary to do a lot of persuading.

A question in this context: How many pages of the Salvatorian Family in the Internet did you visit already? How many from other units? If I have aroused your interest now in this subject, so I will refer to the last Valentine's Day's action of the ICDS. There we offered a kind of a little Internet - scavenger hunt. You will find it in our UPDATE section under Valentine's Day. We are going to do it again with other destinations next February.

In this context I will make a remark on one of the biggest and known challenges of each international community. I think you know it – it's the barrier of language. Our founder Fr. Jordan was blessed with a fantastic talent to learn languages. Unfortunately the most of us – his children in spirit – did not inherit it or got it in the similar way. In this field we need much more common efforts and mutual support between the branches of the Salvatorian Family.

There are many Lay Salvatorians among the world who could make valuable and great contributions, who have precious visions and start worthwhile projects but cannot share them with the international community because of the language barrier. But if all the branches work together the linguistic challenge will be overcome. Many Salvatorians speak two or more languages and would be able to support translations. Many thanks to those who mount to that task already.

### *Give space the third branch*

Thinking about more cooperation between the three branches in the future it would be a good idea to pay more attention to the use of possible synergies and to uncover hidden talents. Today we often do not really know which talents or competences the members of the Salvatorian Family embody and have. Mainly because we have never asked, or perhaps there was no real interest until today. In this field it would make sense to build up networks and cooperation. This would not only strengthen the feeling to be one family, but furthermore it could also save money. The leadership teams can make only some efforts here and give motivations to overcome these hidden borders. To prescribe or give a command would be the wrong signal and would not have any effect.

In context with cooperation between the three branches the term „on equal level“ is often used in common parlance. This is a good and eligible claim – despite of good intention from all sides, it is

often not so easy to be reached in reality. Let me remind you on the picture of the growing tree. A third branch is on the way now to reach the place in the sun and needs enough space for a good development. The elder branches have to take into account that the young branch needs enough space, therefore it's necessary for them to bend a little bit aside. What does this mean in reality?

Outgoing from our different experiences, practice and ways of life we have to respect the mutual different points of view, because this can be sometimes a starting point for real differences. It does not depend on things more or less well done, it depends on the mutual respect and tolerance. So in this field, I think, we have something to learn together, to have patience and to trust in the Holy Spirit.

Another point is the financial possibilities. The elder branches own much more solid ones than the ICDS. We have to strengthen the awareness in all members of the Salvatorian Family that the work of the ICDS affords money. We do a lot of things without getting money because it's our vocation and we like to do it. But at the moment the monetary possibilities are very limited, we have to act carefully and proactive. We have to act and to plan very economically and cannot catch up with the other two branches with some projects at the moment.

The third branch shows all signs of a good development – if it is free to grow and it's allowed to. A more growing together of the three branches in cooperation and building networks in the future is not only wishful, it's a vital necessity. Each one of us is part of this plant named "Salvatorian Family", which was seeded by Fr. Jordan and is rooted in the Holy Spirit. If we are a part of the foliage catching the sunlight, we are also able to withstand storm, wind and rain and are thus able to nurture the tree with essential substances. Our tree is great and unique by allowing each one to change and find the right position and to act where it is necessary.

The tasks of the future will not get smaller. Much more we will be called to protect the life in all its manifestations, wherefore the protection of the environment is important in the same way, with the same effort. The questions about clean drinking water, healthy food, education, getting real perspectives of life, adequate social and hygienic standards, medical care, etc. will be asked daily anew. And behind also: where are we coming from and where are we going – so the question of God. In this way let me finish with a transformed word of Fr. Jordan:

"As long as there is one person on earth ... - we do not have any moment to rest, to bring our flame, our faith and trust to our next, with the words from the 1. Letter of Peter in the mind:

Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, ..."