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I Saints/All Souls Bulletin?

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NEVERTHELESS I AM CONTINUALLY  
WITH THEE

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1 August 1954

*O Lord our God! We give thee thanks that we may meet in this hour to call on thee, to bring before thee all that troubles us, to hear together the good news of the salvation of the world, to give thee honour and glory.*

*Come thyself into our midst! Awaken us all! Grant us thy light! Be our teacher and comforter! Speak to each one of us in such a way that we may hear that personal word of help we need.*

*Show thy mercy to all who are gathered this morning as thy congregation wherever they may be! Keep us and them steadfast in thy word! Keep us and them from hypocrisy, error and distraction! Grant us and them insight and hope, a clear word of witness and joyful hearts! Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou dost hold my right hand.*

PSALM 73.23

MY DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, for you I will try, briefly, to clarify what we have here. You will see that each word is significant.

'Nevertheless' is the opening word. 'Nevertheless' means 'in spite of'. It stands for defiance. It is a war cry against a threatening power, a dangerous interference or affliction. These take the form perhaps of an almost irreparable loss; perhaps of 'circumstances', as we say, caused by others if not by ourselves in most cases; perhaps of one or more individuals whom we cannot stand because they are in our way; perhaps even of our own personalities, of ourselves such as we are individually.

All of you may have heard or even joined in the song:

*Unser Leben gleicht der Reise eines Wandrer's in der Nacht;  
Jeder hat auf seinem Gleise etwas, was ihm Kummer macht.*

Our life is like the journey of a wanderer through the night; and each one, advancing slowly, knows: deep sorrow is his plight.

Each one! Sorrow is your plight, and so it is mine. We suffer here within the walls of this house, and so do the people of this city, even of the whole world. Behind the sorrow of each individual there lies the sorrow of a world in disorder, of a harassed, dark and dangerous world. There also lies the sorrow of man as he is: not good, but haughty and lazy, a liar and a poor wretch, not well off, but living in misery.

What a great thing it would be were we able to throw in the face of all these adversities the defiant 'nevertheless!'

'Nevertheless I am' would then mean: in spite of everything I live! I will swim against the stream! I will not give in! I will not despair, I will not drown! Rather, I will persevere and, what

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is more, I will have confidence and hope! I will keep above water and not be submerged! Truly, he who could freely master his own great and small troubles, and the plight of the world and of mankind, might rejoicingly exclaim: 'Nevertheless I am!'

'Nevertheless I am continually' implies: at all times and in all circumstances, whatever happens, through thick and thin. Hence, not only occasionally, not only in the morning, but also in the evening when the darkness deepens and the night falls, not only in good times but also in bad times, not only when the good news pour in but also amidst the steady flow of distressing news, even in the grip of disappointment and dejection. As Luther affirms in the hymn you all know:

And were this world all devils o'er,  
And watching to devour us,  
We lay it not to heart so sore;  
Not they can overpower us.<sup>1</sup>

This is *continually!* What a man he would be who could say, and not merely say but think and experience it: *Nevertheless I am continually!*

Dear brothers and sisters, the Bible where these words are written is one great invitation extended to us all. Whenever we gather for worship, as we do right now, the invitation is addressed to us. As worshippers we can and we may repeat in our hearts: 'Nevertheless I am continually!' All of us are invited, the so-called good and the so-called bad, those who are happy and those who believe they are unhappy, the pious and the admittedly less pious if not downright impious folks. Do you realize that the Bible is a *book of freedom*, and that divine worship is a *celebration of freedom*? This is much more important than our beautiful Independence Day, the First of August, which we once again celebrated today in remembrance of 1291! In worship,

<sup>1</sup> From Martin Luther's *Ein' feste Burg*, translated by Thomas Carlyle.

my brothers and sisters, we celebrate the freedom to proclaim that 'nevertheless I am continually'.

But at this point we need to watch out. I would bet 100 to 1 that all of us, were it a matter of choice, would continue: nevertheless I am continually—*with myself*! I stand by my mind, by my opinion, by my point of view, by my rights! I stand by my aims and by my claims! 'Nevertheless I am continually' would thus imply reliance on our own strength in defiance of all and everything. A good friend of mine likes to quote his favourite saying from a poem by the Swiss poet, Leuthold: *Mein stolzes Herz, sei du dir selbst genug* ('My proud heart, be sufficient unto thyself'). Whenever he recites his favourite line I cannot help a chuckle. Such thoughts and such talk cannot be forbidden. We all are wont to such self-confidence at times. But let us get it straight in our minds that this is an impasse. Have you ever seen a dog chasing its own tail? Or heard about the Baron of Muenchhausen pulling himself out of the swamp by his own hair? Nobody believed him. We cannot believe in ourselves, and we cannot hold on to ourselves. For the harassed, the dark and dangerous world lurks in my own 'proud heart'. In what sense could we then say: 'Nevertheless I am continually with myself'? The Bible calls it *sin* when man wants to be with himself. Certainly where this is the case there is no freedom.

In the Bible, the book of freedom, we read differently: 'Nevertheless I am continually *with thee*.' My friends, picture for a moment a man groping in the dark who suddenly sees a light, or another who is starved and suddenly receives a piece of bread, or one who is dying with thirst and is offered a cup of water. This is what happens to us when we leave behind the 'with myself' and break through to the conviction: 'nevertheless I am continually *with thee*.'

What kind of a 'thou' is this? Is it a *man*? Yes, indeed, someone with a human face, a human body, human hands and a human

language. One whose heart bears sorrows—not simply his own, but the sorrows of the whole world. One who takes our sin and our misery upon himself and away from us. One who is able to do this because he is not only man, but also *God*, the almighty Creator and Lord who knows me and you much better than we know ourselves, who loves me and you much more than we love ourselves. He is our neighbour, he is closer to us than we are to ourselves, and we may call him by his first name.

Do you know who he is? The hymn already quoted gives us the answer:

Christ Jesus is his name,  
The Lord Sabaoth's Son;  
He, and no other one,  
Shall conquer in the battle.

Brothers and sisters, we are now all invited to talk to him instead of talking to ourselves. We are at liberty to say to him: 'Nevertheless I am continually *with thee*.'

At this point your question will surely be: But how can we accomplish this? Let me hasten to answer that *we* cannot do this. Yet there is something much more excellent than what we can do. Here it is written: *Thou dost hold my right hand*.

Therefore, I hold on because *you* hold me. I am continually because you are with me. I say 'nevertheless' because you say 'nevertheless' to me who is unable to say so in his own strength and undeserving of your assurance. You say 'nevertheless' to me who is what he is, has done what he has done and does what he does, who is perhaps a doubter, a man of little faith, if not an atheist. Because you hold me, I say: 'Nevertheless I am continually with thee.' I say so because evidently my sorrow is not my own, but yours; because you have taken my sorrow and the sorrow of all mankind to your heart, have borne them in your life and

vindicated them in your death on the cross; because 'in soul and body, whether I live or die, I am not my own, but I belong unto my most faithful Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'.

You hold me, and therefore I am bold to say: *Nevertheless I am continually with thee.*

One more thing remains to be considered. The text states: *Thou dost hold my right hand.* The right hand is man's strong and skilful hand (provided he is not left-handed). It is the hand to work, to write and, if necessary, to fight with. We give the right hand of fellowship when we greet one another. The right hand symbolizes ourselves, indeed ourselves where it counts, where we mean business, where our heart is. We are not asked to extend the right hand of fellowship to the Lord God. There is no need for it whatever. The gesture is belated. *He* holds us by our right hand, he takes us seriously where it counts to be taken seriously. This is our situation. I shall never forget how one of my sons, long since grown up to be a missionary in Indonesia, asked me as a little boy: 'Do you know who Mr Essential is?' 'No, who is he?' 'He is the heavenly Father.' God proves himself as Mr Essential by letting us be essential in his sight, by holding our right hand with his right hand. We are not even asked where to put our right hand. Impossible to hold on to him in a non-essential, off-handed way. Our right hand is no longer free. He holds it! It is already in his own hand!

Let me conclude with a question. Who are you? Who am I? The answer is: one whom God holds by his right hand, on whose heart and lips God has laid the confession of faithfulness and the great comfort: *Nevertheless I am continually with thee.* Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. Amen.

*O Lord, our God! This is thy unspeakable glory that we may call out for thee 'O Lord, our God, our Creator, our Saviour'—that*

*thou knowest and lovest us all and desirest to be known and loved by each one of us—that thou seest and governest all our ways—that we all come from thee and go to thee.*

*We spread out everything before thee—our cares, that thou wouldst care for them—our anxiety, that thou wouldst still it—our hopes and desires, that thy will be done and not our own—our sins, that thou wouldst forgive them—our thoughts and longings, that thou wouldst purify them—our whole life in this our time, that thou wouldst lead it to the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.*

*We remember before thee all the inmates of this house and all the other captives around the world. Be thou with our loved ones at home, with all the poor, the sick, the distressed and the afflicted. Enlighten the thoughts and govern the actions of all those in our land and in all other lands who are responsible for justice and order and peace. Let the day break through Jesus Christ, our Lord, in whose name we pray: 'Our Father . . .'*