**Sermon on Romans 8:11 at the Funeral for**

**Former Thomas Cantor Georg Christoph Biller**

(September 20, 1955 - January 27, 2022)

St. Thomas Church Leipzig, February 10, 2022

The Rev. Christian Wolff (ret.)

Dear Ute, dear brothers and sisters, dear relatives, dear congregation,

What might have moved the former Thomaskantor Georg Christoph Biller to answer in a weak voice the question, which Bible verse should be written above his obituary? His answer was, „So nun der Geist” (So now the Spirit). We just heard the 10th movement from the motet, "Jesu, meine Freude," with the 11th verse from the pivotal 8th chapter of the letter to the Romans which is the biblical basis of this motet. How often Biller sang and performed these words shaped by Luther, which Johann Sebastian Bach set to music almost proclamatory and as if carved in stone – first as a Thomaner in almost all voice registers and then as choirmaster and finally as Thomaskantor:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christfrom the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%208%3A11&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-28113b)] his Spirit that dwells in you. (Romans 8:11 NRSV)

Truly this is a confession, a confession of life in the face of death, an Easter song for every day. Christoph Biller was a confessor type, one who put himself forward as knowing what mattered to him. I am not only thinking of the motet by Johann Eccard "Herr Christe, tu mir geben" (Jesus Christ, give to me) with which he began his years as a chorister in the St. Thomas Choir in 1965 and ended his tenure as *Thomaskantor* on January 6, 2015. I think especially of his small memorandum from 1998 about a "Well-staffed church music program." With it he tried to remind the city council of its responsibility for the oldest cultural institution of the city of Leipzig. With it, he also sowed the seeds for the musical education campus *forum thomanum*, which has since been established. Long before Corona, Biller was undoubtedly convinced that culture, music, education, and religious education were not a matter of course but had to be constantly fought for anew.

But—and this is also part of his life—Christoph Biller lived in the contradiction that runs like a red thread through the motet "Jesu, meine Freude" and the Epistle to the Romans: the contradiction between spirit and flesh, body and soul. A contradiction that we should not dismiss as an outdated dualism hostile to the body. After all, every consciously living person works through it. But in the case of those who go through all the ups and downs of human existence and for that very reason are able to produce something of artistic value, the contradiction comes to light in a particularly glaring way. Yes, Christoph had clear ideas about the right life, about the healing power of sacred music, and also about being a reformed church. In doing so, he sought to bring the "mortal body" to life - both his own and the body of Christ, the church. And so it was for his boys, the *Thomasser.* He was deeply convinced that this Spirit of God was able to give what we seek throughout our lives in counseling for church, politics, and culture: meaning, fulfillment, recognition, comfort, and direction. That is why he had the programmatic approach of returning the St. Thomas Boys Choir to its original task: to serve the *musica sacra* and thus to give glory to God and contribute to the recreation of the mind - and to enable children and young people to do so.

In the run-up to the jubilee year 2012 "800 years of THOMANA - believing, singing, learning" we agreed that new music, the new song, absolutely belongs to the jubilee. That is why five commissions for festival music were awarded. One went to the acting and composing *Thomaskantor*. Biller left no doubt that he would write a cantata for Easter. He believed in the resurrection to which St. Paul testifies so powerfully. He believed in the possibility that people can be transformed, renewed, by God's Spirit. He believed not in spite but because he had a clear awareness of the transience and fallibility of the body and because he knew from his own sorrowful experience that even if the spirit is willing, the flesh often enough remains weak. But he did not surrender to weakness willy-nilly because he trusted in the power of music, of the spirit. For him, The Easter music at St. Thomas became an answer to his own life’s question: "How do I get from darkness to light?" Based on the dark, very unwieldy seventh chord at the end of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, Biller's composition unfolds the message of the resurrection in the conviction that God's Spirit frees us to turn our lives around at the right moment. We humans, however, must live them out ourselves. Such a turning point opened up for him in 2005, when he really took off again. He broke through the darkness of a deep depression, found strength through his wife Ute, whom he met at that time, and led the St. Thomas Choir to sustained heights for over a decade - defying all challenges.

During this time one could be fascinated: There, as the weary boys of St. Thomas Choir frequently filed into the church for the Friday motet and found the St. Thomas Cantor, who found it increasingly difficult to walk, was already sitting in the crossing. But the moment he stood in front of the choir and the spirit that flowed from his facial expressions was transferred to each and every *Thomasser*, all exhaustion dissolved into nothingness, and everything chaotic and disorganized vanished from the minds of the boys. That was when resurrection materialized. There the spirit worked, which makes everything mortal alive. In these moments, a concentrated order was transmitted to the singers of his choirs and at the same time released the creativity inherent in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.

So today, despite all the sadness about Christoph's serious illness and much too early death, we can look back full of deep gratitude on a rich, musical life. In this gratitude, may everything that we owed each other, everything that we find difficult to understand and approve of in this past life, also be lifted up. I know from many conversations in recent times how much Christoph Biller was troubled by what he missed; how much he was aware of the fact that in a life that was filled with a mission, namely to serve the *musica sacra*, many things unfortunately fade out and fall by the wayside. For this reason, too, it was a matter of concern to Biller that we reflect on the verse from the Apostle Paul on the day of his funeral, so that we may not only be interested in things mortal and in tragic existence. Rather, we now let the Spirit dwell within us, which makes life possible for us in the face of this death. In the Bach cantatas, after all, it is not in order to renounce all that is worldly that dying is spoken of so frequently with the longing for God's new world; but, rather to experience and appreciate life in the midst of mortality.

In the anniversary year of 2012, Biller was asked by a journalist whether a boy choir dedicated to sacred music was not completely out of step with the times. Biller replied, "Yes, we are out of time, we are ahead of the times." Now he is truly ahead of all time, and we hope that in God's new world he will not only come to sit at Bach's feet, but that in the eternity of God's *shalom* all darkness will dissolve into light: "Lux aeterna luceas eis, Domine" (Let light shine on them, O Lord). . . and may a reflection of this light also fall on us, that all may be illuminated. Amen.

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German original:

<https://wolff-christian.de/aus-der-dunkelheit-zum-licht-ansprache-im-trauergottesdienst-fuer-georg-christoph-biller/>