



Living In Faith Today

Statement by the German Bishops to the Parishes

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Lord!

We listen with particular attentiveness to the call of the Lord during the Easter penitential period: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Mt 4:17). Jesus’ call is both an exhortation and an encouragement. It is an encouragement because God is already working among us now. His love begins to change the hearts of people, and hence the world. God Himself enables us to repent because we do not have to rely on our own strength alone, instead trusting to what God does in us. At the same time, the Lord calls us to take seriously the call to repent and to profoundly seek God’s will.

(1) There are indications that we are in a transitional period in the story of our Church in Germany. We are faced with challenges which relate to the changing role of religion and faith in God in a society which has become more secular. The change in lifestyles questions many things which were taken for granted – particularly in our religious life and established traditions. What was customary and what has been vital in the past falls away, frequently to a shocking degree.

The cases of sexual abuse by Church staff members which have been discovered recently form an important topical background for the increased need for a discourse within the Church. The actual questions, however, are admittedly more profound. They are caused by the split between the Gospel and today’s culture, which Pope Paul VI once referred to as the drama of our time.¹

It is this central point which we need to tackle and study with these questions: Is it really true that God’s Word continues to be “Light and Life” today? That God’s commandment does not make us as people small, but grants dignity to our lives and gives freedom? Does the Good News really have the power to change our lives now, “in anticipation” of God’s coming new Creation? What does it mean to live in faith today? What must be kept absolutely central if the

¹ cf. Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii nuntiandi”, 1975, No. 20.

Kaiserstraße 161
53113 Bonn

Postal address
Postfach 29 62
53019 Bonn

Tel.: 0228-103-0
Ext.: 0228-103 -214
Fax: 0228-103 -254
e-mail: pressestelle@dbk.de
Home: <http://www.dbk.de>

Published by
P. Dr. Hans Langendörfer SJ
Secretary of the German
Bishops’ Conference

community of believers wishes to convincingly be the “Light of the world” and the “Salt” which gives life its taste in a changing culture?

(2) In many ways, crisis periods are special periods of grace. They turn our view to what is essential. They call us to engage in reflection and a new decisiveness, particularly also in view of a lack of courage and of resignation. Something new frequently grows during crisis periods which had previously not been considered.

Quite a number of proposals are currently being made as to how the future of our Church could be secured. These suggestions frequently reflect a profound closeness to the Church and a concern about the future of faith in our country. Many people are troubled by the question of how to maintain pastoral care, for instance, in view of the shrinking number of priests. The key concern here is how the next generation can find a path into faith and the Church. We would like to thank everyone who is reflecting on the appearance, the tasks, services and offices of our Church and seeking paths towards renewal.

It is understandable if certain statements become exaggerated in an excited debate. Some things have not been entirely thought through, whilst others are contradictory. Above all, some “Church visions” which are disseminated today need to be emotionally “disarmed”. The work of the Spirit of God is recognised by its fruits, not by emotions. It is nonetheless a matter of acknowledging our intentions and assessing the facts behind the arguments that have been brought forward.

There are voices demanding that one should grant broader admission to the priesthood. This is frequently reasoned by pointing to a pastoral crisis in our dioceses. Others call for the Church to recognise new living arrangements which are becoming the norm in today's society. Still others hope that the Church will create greater opportunities for co-determination beyond the existing structure of councils and organs. There are those who criticise a society which is too much occupied with itself and which, it is said, simply suppresses God's claim and His call. Others, in turn, wish to remove from the demands made by the Gospel all allegedly period-specific manifestations and make it “fitting” for our perceptions today. There is an expectation that the Church has to become more transparent in its activity and to orientate itself in its own field according to standards which are also natural in a secular society. And finally, we cannot ignore those voices which would like to leave everything as it was and which even claim that the plight of the Church is caused by Her not being true enough to Her own heritage and mission. This brief overview of the problems presenting themselves already makes it clear that there is an urgent need to enter into a debate.

The path taken by the Church through time doubtless includes a continually-renewed willingness to repent and to engage in both internal and external reform. However, what is

really a renewal of the Church which corresponds to the spirit of the Gospel? What is this repentance which the Lord demands of us?

(3) In this situation, characterised as it is by concerns, questions and strain in our bishoprics, we bishops would like to take the initiative for joint reflection. We can see a real danger that we may quarrel so much in our Church that bridges are broken down and the existing unity is lost. We are aware that it is difficult to talk to one another across barricades.

The German Bishops' Conference is therefore launching a discussion process for the coming four years which is to lend a theological profile and solidarity within the Church to the path of faith of our Church in Germany into this new Century which is starting. In order to take up an image with which we are familiar, we must begin our "spiritual exercises" together, starting with the bishops through to those who are considering turning their backs on the Church in annoyance or disappointment.

This discourse process is to be about a more profound clarification and ascertainment in relation to the witness of the Church in the world and Her mission to people. This includes promoting the debate within the Church on the search for God and the paths which are important today of witness (Martyria), through prayer and veneration of God (Liturgia) and the contribution made by the Church in helping in today's society (Diakonia). This discourse demands a certain spiritual openness on the part of all those involved.

We will not create a large number of new, additional events to be the motor of this process, but will instead make full use of the existing fora that are available in the bishoprics for discussion and encounter. At the level of the German Bishops' Conference, this discussion will take place in the following manner:

- The Bishop's Conference will organise a larger annual meeting on a chosen topic. It is to bring the faithful together from all areas of the Church and motivate them to tackle this annual topic. The annual topics are as follows:
 - 2011: Launch "Living in faith today: Where do we stand?"
 - 2012: Diakonia of the Church: "Our responsibility in a free society"
 - 2013: Liturgia of the Church: "The veneration of God today"
 - 2014: Martyria of the Church: "Bearing witness to faith in today's world"
 - 2015: Conclusion and celebration of the anniversary of the Council
- Two projects have been agreed in the joint conference held by the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics on the topics: "Priests and laity in the Church" and "The presence of the Church in society and the state".

- A number of major church events is to promote the discussion process, such as the visit by the Holy Father to Germany in September 2011, the 2012 and 2014 Catholic Conventions, the National Eucharistic Congress in Cologne in 2013 and a number of major celebrations and pilgrimages in the dioceses, such as the Holy Robe Pilgrimage (*Heilig-Rock-Wallfahrt*) in Trier in 2012. All that is to flow into the commemoration of the anniversary of the Council in 2015. A launch event for the discussion process is planned to take place under the motto “Living in faith today” for 8 and 9 July 2011 in Mannheim.

(4) Our discourse is led by the certainty that God’s Spirit is working in the Church. Our Church in Germany is rich in spiritual talents. Belief, hope and love are specifically demonstrated in countless lives. There is in our midst the diverse, practical holiness of everyday life. There is wisdom, flowing not solely from the mentality of doing, but which also knows about paths to God and fellow humans known solely to the heart, for instance in simply being there for others – for God’s sake and for the sake of our fellows. These lives are an illustration of the “freedom” for which “Christ set us free” (Gal 5:1).

It is becoming ever clearer: Today’s central issue is Christian faith in God which must take on substance and profile, particularly in view of a new, sometimes aggressive atheism. We must also seek to understand the features of the Church’s public witness in a society which is becoming more secular. It is a matter of thinking about how our participation in the holy liturgy can become more spiritual and hence more inviting to those who are seeking and who are interested in faith. The future of the Church in our country will be decided by whether there are among us, and among our youth in particular, Christians who are willing and able to provide information and who gently but deliberately bring people’s attention to the Gospel.

It is a matter of course that we are seeking answers to today’s questions on the basis of the revelation and teachings of the Church because this is the only way we can remain in the truth of our faith and in the community of the Universal Church. This does not prevent us from engaging in a responsible theological and spiritual discourse on serious problems, but it does impose boundaries on us, given decisions which are binding. The impetus provided by the Second Vatican Council, the witness of faith of the Saints and the leadership of great pastors will be able to provide us with a helpful orientation in this discourse.

Sisters and Brothers,

Some of you will already know this by experience: There are local churches in other parts and countries of the world which have much less than we do in material terms, but who are nevertheless more cheerful and more confident in their faith. Nothing in our country is actually stopping us from being Christians with all our hearts and confidence, other than our sins. And the Scriptures remind us of this: “in whatever our hearts condemn”, ... “God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.” (1 John 3:20).

17 March 2011
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PRESS RELEASES
OF THE GERMAN
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

We would like to ask you to take up our initiative to engage in a discourse as well as you are able. We ask you for your prayers for a positive development in this process. A new time poses challenges for us. It is God's time, too. We wish you God's blessing for this Easter penitential period.

The German bishops gathered for the spring full assembly

Archbishop Dr. Robert Zollitsch
President of the German Bishops' Conference

Paderborn, 17 March 2011