

Learning from the universal Church – reflections on dialogue among local churches

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The missionary message of the German Bishops, *His Salvation for All Nations, The Mission of the Universal Church* starts with the words: “It is the mission of the Church to proclaim ‘the good news of the kingdom of God’ (Luke 4:43, NJB) to all the world. There is no better service that it can give to the world. When the Gospel is propagated among people, it causes the Kingdom of God to grow, an irreversible process which started with Jesus Christ. If, at the beginning of the third Christian millennium, the Church wishes to understand the signs of the time, then it faces a clear challenge in the face of increasing globalisation, which is to take the Gospel to the many nations of the earth and of course also to familiarise its own members with the Gospel.”²⁷⁵

The German Bishops’ Conference thus made it clear that it does not regard mission as something which has been completed and is now a chapter in Church history. Rather, mission is a central function of the Church in our time (and indeed at any time). What is more, it is in the very nature of this institution that “mission” should in fact be synonymous with “Church”. Mission has no expiry or use-by date and will continue until the Second Coming.²⁷⁶

Yet the specific form of this mission must be a matter of continuous and urgent endeavour within the Church. The background against which we are reflecting upon mission today is in fact determined by the globalisation of the economy, the media and culture. All these areas are becoming more and more densely networked on a global scale. Throughout the world local churches, too, are now becoming increasingly interconnected. Here in Europe we can learn more and

²⁷⁵ Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (eds.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche*, Die deutschen Bischöfe, no. 76, Bonn 2004, 8.

²⁷⁶ See also: Schick, L., Paulus, *In Christus – für Christus*, Bamberg 2008, 87.

more from the experiences of churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America. At the same time, those local churches are continuing to depend on the valuable experiences of our “ancient churches” in Europe. Increasing importance attaches to dialogue among the local churches on the five continents if the Church wishes to bear credible witness within a globalised world.

It is a well-known fact that, for many years now, the Church in Germany has been very keen to seek dialogue with the universal Church. The activities of aid organisations are good examples, as indeed are the manifold contacts nurtured by dioceses, parishes, religious communities and Church organisations. The Church in Germany is undoubtedly extremely active and may even be the most active church in the world when it comes to contacts and partnerships with churches in the global south. We donate a lot and we enjoy giving. On the other hand, however, are we actually prepared to receive? Do we believe that other churches have anything valuable to say or give to us? Do we allow any genuine dialogue among local churches on an equal footing? If not, we may be missing a great opportunity and ignoring some major potential.

Given that we are currently facing certain changes within Germany’s church landscape, it is vital that our pastoral work should include an awareness of the universal Church. Such a new mindset will not come about merely as a result of reflection, however. It must be enriched by individuals meeting on a personal level and having fellowship with one another. In fact, dialogue among local churches is primarily carried out by means of interpersonal exchange. To add further depth to these thoughts, it is useful to take a look at the two essential mission-focused theological documents from the German Bishops – their missionary message *His Salvation for All Nations*, mentioned earlier, and a message intended to stimulate mission-focused pastoral work: *Time to Sow the Seed*.

The universal Church as a learning community

When the German Bishops published *His Salvation for All Nations – the Mission of the Universal Church* in autumn 2004, it was primarily intended to underpin their theological position on mission. It was to be an episcopal message with a well substantiated theological answer

to two questions: What does mission mean today? And why should we ‘evangelise’ in our time? There was certainly a provocative element in it when the Bishops described mission as the best service that the Church can give to the world²⁷⁷ – on the grounds that mission means pursuing a form of freedom and a truth²⁷⁸ which the world itself is unable to give to itself. This is precisely what makes the Church’s mission so unique.

Mission is, of course, an essential part of Christianity.²⁷⁹ Like in the earlier message, *Time to Sow the Seed*,²⁸⁰ mission is seen as a task for every single Christian.²⁸¹ The reason why the Church is essentially missionary is because it shares in the Great Commission (Latin *missio*) that was given to it by the Lord Himself: “As the Father sent me, so am I sending you” (John 20:21, NJB). This sums up the entire theological rationale behind the Church’s missionary activities.²⁸² In order to be a sacrament of salvation and to demonstrate through its activities and its existence who the Father of Jesus Christ is and what He is like, the Church needs to proclaim its message of the Kingdom among all nations.²⁸³ This is the mission of the Church. And although this understanding of mission is obviously the same as in *Time to Sow the Seed* (2000), the more recent episcopal message *His Salvation for All Nations* does present an important additional thought. The earlier document was exclusively about the pastoral situation in Germany,

²⁷⁷ See also: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (eds.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche*, Die deutschen Bischöfe, no. 76, Bonn 2004.

²⁷⁸ The same point was emphasised by Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter REDEMPTORIS MISSIO, in which he pointed out the continued validity of the Church’s missionary mandate: REDEMPTORIS MISSIO *On the permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate*, Announcements of the Apostolic See, no. 100, Bonn 1990, 39.

²⁷⁹ See also: Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Die dogmatische Konstitution über die Kirche “Lumen Gentium”*, in: Rahner, K./Vorgrimler, H., (eds.), *Kleines Konzilskompendium. Sämtliche Texte des Zweiten Vatikanums mit Einführungen und ausführlichem Sachregister*, Freiburg i. Br., 123-197.

²⁸⁰ Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (eds.), “Zeit zur Aussaat”. *Missionarisch Kirche sein*, Die deutschen Bischöfe no. 68, Bonn 2000.

²⁸¹ See also: *ibid.*, 5 and 15ff. (Chapter III) See also: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (eds.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche*, o cit., 35f.

²⁸² See *ibid.*, 11 and 36.

²⁸³ See also: Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, o cit., 123, no. 1, Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche*, o cit., 35f.

and the phrase “universal Church” was not used in it at all. *His Salvation for All Nations*, on the other hand, emphatically highlights this global aspect from the very beginning: “Missionary activities in our own country and in the international community can only grow if they work together, and they will derive mutual benefits through an exchange of experiences with other local churches, particularly those in the global south. The more we open our eyes, hearts and hands to the universal Church among the nations, the more we are enriched and strengthened, both as individuals and as local churches.”²⁸⁴ And a little further down we read the following comment on Pentecost, when the Church was born: “From the very first moment of its existence, the Church has spoken all languages and yet it has always been one in the Spirit. The Church did not become universal by gradually spreading from one town to another or from one country to another. Rather, it has been universal from the very beginning – through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is either ‘Catholic’ or it is not.”²⁸⁵

The words “universal” and “missionary” represent two essential features of One Church. It lives and derives its energy from both these sources. Madeleine Delbr el once said: “If a church does not evangelise, it de-evangelises.” In the same way it is also true that a church which does not want to be universal will fizzle out in provincialism and reduce itself to a purely national church. This even prevents it from being missionary towards its own members. *His Salvation for All Nations* does not therefore seek to formulate a new missionary understanding. This kind of renewal had already been successfully achieved by *Time to Sow the Seed*. Rather, the more recent document reminds us of the close relationship between the missionary purpose of the Church and dialogue among local churches.

Forming an awareness of the missionary character of the universal Church

His Salvation for All Nations has a chapter entitled “Ways and Methods of World Mission”, divided into three sections, in which the authors explain what it means to be the universal Church. “The mission of the universal Church needs a head, a heart and hands that must work

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 9.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

together in the same way as in the human body.”²⁸⁶ As the universal Church, we are continually part of a community that learns together, prays together and provides mutual support. Moreover, it is important to set the right priorities: after all, we can really only pray for one other and give each other mutual support if we know who the others are and if we have actually met them. Unless we truly know each other’s situation, any help we offer, however well meant it may be, will remain useless and may even do more harm than good. It is only through intensive dialogue with the churches in the global south that we can genuinely begin to understand one another. Let me provide some examples.

The 7th German-African Bishops’ Meeting was held in Germany from March 28 to April 2, 2011. The meeting, which was attended by 20 bishops, focused on the issue of African migration to Europe. This meeting had already been established as a tradition, held for the first time in 1983. Since then it has taken place at different venues, in different forms and with different delegates. Yet the basic intention is still the same and has proved its worth: to deepen relationships among local churches in Africa and in Germany through regular meetings among bishops. Direct dialogue helps to foster mutual understanding for the challenges of the Church in the face of the urgent problems of our time. Such dialogue makes it possible for Church representatives from Germany and Africa to see themselves more profoundly as members of the “One Catholic” Church and, as such, to work throughout the world towards the growth of “the Kingdom of God” as “a matter of (...) the saving justice, the peace and the joy” (Romans 14:17, NJB) and also to engage in advocacy and support for the victims of today’s global conditions.

Prayer, too, is an area where it is somehow vital for us to know one another. A few months ago I had an opportunity to visit the Benedictine Convent of Keur Gailaye in Senegal. When I spoke to the sisters, I was asked quite a few questions about the situation of the Church in Germany. I realised that many of the things we took for granted were totally new to them. Finally, their Mother Superior thanked me for visiting them and said she would now pray differently about the worries and concerns of the Church in Germany.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 55.

I feel the same. As I meet and talk to people at the local level, the life of each church begins to have a face which influences and accompanies my prayers. What I once said about individual Christians is also undoubtedly true of the universal Church: “A Christian today must have a Bible in one hand and a daily paper in the other and must bring the two together.” A daily paper is ‘instructive’ for a Christian, as it teaches us about the joys and concerns of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. Yet the depth and width of real life can only be experienced in its entirety when we go there ourselves and *learn* about people’s lives in person. Again and again, we can see the proof that by being a learning community we add depth to our fellowship as a community of prayer and mutual support. But the same is also true the other way around: It is only by praying together that we can truly see the foundation of our Catholic community. It is through prayer that our “communion with Christ” is renewed and that our activities as a missionary universal Church can fulfil its meaning and purpose.

A learning community means knowing who the others are, and this is mutual. Such a community is already in evidence through numerous partnerships and meetings among different congregations and among dioceses. It is also realised through the wide-ranging educational work that is conducted by aid organisations and missionary societies in Germany. For instance, during Advent last year German Catholics learned quite a bit about the situation of the Church in Brazil through the *Adveniat* campaign. Children who took part in various carol singing initiatives now know more about child labour in Peru. And the *Misereor* campaign in 2011 taught us about the desperate lives of slum dwellers in mega cities in the global south. In each of these cases a learning process was triggered which led to a deeper level of awareness in Germany and to a wider understanding of what it means to be a Christian. However, such experiences only become tangible and specific through contacts with the universal Church – the kind of contacts that are forged year by year through the campaigns of aid organisations. The guests who are invited to the campaigns from the countries concerned are therefore very important. With their singing performances, film evenings and talks in local churches, schools and groups, they give us an idea of their local churches and what it means to live and work in those countries. We should therefore do our very best to broaden and deepen such contacts at all levels. These contacts

create genuine community within the One Church – a community that is marked by dialogue among local churches and by an awareness of the universal Church.

A learning community leads to an awareness of the universal Church

In 2009, a delegation from the Universal Church Committee visited the Church in South Korea. The main purpose of the trip was to enter into dialogue about the pastoral concept of “Small Christian Communities” which is so widespread in South Korea. This idea was discussed in depth with bishops and other Church leaders in the Korean dioceses. However, what left a lasting impression on us were our visits to the Small Christian Communities themselves and meeting Church members in person, in their homes. We were deeply impressed by the religious vitality and missionary self-confidence of these Korean Catholics. Their Small Christian Communities are clearly contributing to the revival of congregations, enabling individual Catholics to share information about their faith in everyday life. Yet it became obvious to the delegation that the Korean experience could not be applied directly to the situation in Germany. Outside their original context, these communities cannot be set up as new pastoral structures in our own dioceses and parishes. Nevertheless, we learned something very valuable in Korea. First of all, we realised that increasing economic and technical developments within a country do not automatically lead to secularisation. South Korea is currently undergoing a process of dynamic modernisation, but at the same time also a religious revival. Secondly, and most importantly, we learned for our pastoral work in Germany that, just like in Korea, Christians must be encouraged to enter into dialogue about their own faith again. The starting point of all mission-focused pastoral work must be to enable Christians to tell others about their own faith. In Germany, too, Small Christian Communities might make a major contribution to overcoming the religious speechlessness of so many Catholics, although they are not the only way to produce proactive Catholics. Our meeting with Christians in Korea was certainly an encouragement for us to keep an eye open for opportunities as to how the German Church, too, might become more mission-focused at the grassroots level.

Particularly it is the churches in the global south – often minority churches with very few financial and human resources – that can

show us how to be a mission-focused church. The universal Church can enter our pastoral horizons – both new and old – in a variety of ways. However, what is so vital and indeed essential for survival, is that the universal Church should actually get there in the first place. As a Church we are called upon to evangelise and to have a ‘Catholic’ existence, as expressed in the decree *Ad Gentes* and the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, two major documents issued by the Second Vatican Council.²⁸⁷ If we forget either of these aspects, our witness will become obscure. The path towards the universal Church necessarily leads via a learning community. It is the only way we can become a *communio* – i.e. community – of people who know about one another, pray with one another and take responsibility for each other. Personal contact among local churches is an essential component in forming an awareness of the universal Church. The importance of dialogue between local churches has been expressed very aptly by the Rt. Rev. Joachim Wanke, Bishop of Erfurt: “Anyone who has ever visited parishes in the so-called ‘Third World’ or indeed in Eastern Europe will have noticed a certain naturalness and matter-of-factness about being a Christian, something which is very rare in our country. (...) We can be genuinely ‘enriched’ by people who are often materially poor, yet totally real in their joy and simplicity. Having met such people, I feel far more clearly than I when I’m at my desk that we are missing out on something as Catholics in Germany.”²⁸⁸ Again, this shows one thing very clearly: an awareness of the universal Church is formed through personal encounters with people in their own environments.

Missionary spirituality

Meeting the universal Church can enable us to develop that missionary spirituality which is mentioned as a fundamental requirement for all missionary activities in *Time to Sow the Seed*.²⁸⁹ A glimpse of the universal Church gives us “self-confidence with humility”: we

²⁸⁷ See also: Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, o cit. and Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Das Dekret über die Missionstätigkeit der Kirche “Ad Gentes”*, in: o cit., 608, no. 2.

²⁸⁸ Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (eds.), “Zeit zur Aussaat”. *Missionarisch Kirche sein*, ocit. 40.

²⁸⁹ See: *ibid.*, 11.

experience a Church which is often small and poor but which lives out its faith with pride. We experience a Church in which, despite all adversity and failures, the Gospel has asserted itself and is alive. The Church is growing and, surprisingly, is spiritually professed in regions where it is neither powerful nor rich. Moreover, the very fact that a person belongs to one of the biggest religious communities in the world can make them self-confident.

A further aspect of missionary spirituality is serenity. “Peace and serenity, despite of all the inconsistencies of life, becomes a fundamental attitude enabling Christians to assume a critical distance from everything that is commonly believed and practised but which threatens to obstruct any wider and deeper view of life.”²⁹⁰ This is precisely what an awareness of the universal Church can contribute, as it opens our eyes to the realities of other nations and congregations. By focusing on the universal Church, we experience a change of perspective that prevents any lack of realism. It gives us a clear view of things in an increasingly globalised world. Anyone who is aware of the concerns of their brothers and sisters in the global south can proclaim the Gospel with greater credibility, because it makes such a person a “believing yet critical prophet” with regard to the prevailing conditions in our society. Also, a universal Church perspective can lead to inner peace about the conditions of our own local church, so that – although we are still serious about problems – we do not become resigned or hopeless in addressing them.

Missionary spirituality receives depth through personal prayer. It is nourished by a living community of prayer and worship. Nowhere else is the universal community of prayer among Christians more evident than when we celebrate the Eucharist. This is when the entire Church gathers around the Lord’s Table to hear His Word and receive His Body. When we meet the universal Church, we become aware of the wealth and diversity of liturgical traditions, yet also of the unity and fellowship that characterises our one liturgy. This is where all the believers are gathered around the table, only to be sent out again: “Ite, missa est” – Go out, you are sent! We are sent by Christ to use this present time for sowing the Gospel so that all nations can partake of God’s salvation. As we allow ourselves to be seized and sent by Christ

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 14.

at the Eucharist, the celebration of Mass can be for us the “source and climax of all evangelisation”.²⁹¹ This is precisely how the Church becomes a sign and tool of salvation, and this is how the Eucharist – that place of most intimate connectedness with the Lord and of the greatest depth and serenity – becomes a place where we open up to our neighbour and we are sent out to reach the nations. The universal Church is always present when we celebrate the Eucharist with the Pope, the bishops, anyone who has been appointed for ministry within the Church and indeed with all His Redeemed.

The episcopal message *Time to Sow the Seed* reminded the Church in Germany that it must be a missionary Church. The twin document *His Salvation for All Nations* shows that this missionary focus rests on the foundation of the universal Church. To achieve this, it is indispensable to form an awareness of the missionary character of the universal Church – something which is only possible if we give space to dialogue among local churches worldwide and at all levels and if we – that is, all Catholics throughout the Church – see ourselves as a learning community. In this way we can lay the foundation for a renewal of missionary spirituality that will prompt us to contribute to evangelisation in missionary and developing countries and to use this new pastoral space fruitfully in our missionary activities for the purpose of re-evangelisation.

²⁹¹ Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Das Dekret über Dienst und Leben der Priester* “*Presbyterorum ordinis*”, in: o cit., 568, no. 5.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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