

“Mutual exchange” – the Diocese of Limburg as an example of a pastoral paradigm within the universal Church

Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst

The Catholic Church is a universal Church.³⁰⁷ Its awareness of a common bond is founded upon the unity of each local church with the Bishop of Rome and its manifold expression in the community of many local churches. This provides each local church with an attractive inner breadth.

The diocese of Limburg fosters intensive partner exchanges with a number of different sister churches. Its partnership with the diocese of Kumbo in Cameroon will serve to illustrate the ways in which local churches can derive inspiration from the universal Church.

The missionary dedication and activities of the Society of the Catholic Apostolate (SAC), the Pallottines, have led to a special connection between the diocese and city of Limburg and the Catholic Church in Cameroon. The first Pallottines came to Cameroon as Catholic missionaries in 1890 and dedicated the country to Mary, the Mother of God. Heinrich Vieter SAC, the first Bishop of Cameroon, was subsequently consecrated bishop in the Cathedral of Limburg on 22 January 1905. The mission house for the Pallottines in Germany was built in the diocesan city at the same time. In the light of this historical connection it made sense to establish a close partnership that would focus attention on the vigour of other sister churches and pave the way for mutual learning.

Missionary work is undertaken not just in Cameroon, however. The same is true of Germany, a country in which transmission of the

³⁰⁷ Manuscript of a lecture, slightly edited for publication, delivered at the Université Catholique de l'Afrique Central (UCAC), Yaoundé (Cameroon), on 3 November 2009.

faith from one generation to the next and to non-believing fellow citizens is not (or no longer) a matter of course. With that in mind I should like to present a few thoughts on pastoral theology to encourage common reflection and learning within the one universal Church.

Comparative pastoral theology

More than thirty years have passed since Adolf Exeler, a pastoral theologian from Münster, first projected the idea of a comparative methodology as a means of re-appraising conventional missiology. His initiative was inspired by the prospect of being able to “recognise the ecology of a theology related to a specific time and place.”³⁰⁸ Exeler bases his argument on a vertical comparison that makes it possible to ascertain the succession of different theologies in the course of Church history. He argues that “the comparison with other Church situations has helped to question truths incorrectly deemed to be self-evident, enabled well-trodden paths to be abandoned and new connections and opportunities to be perceived.”³⁰⁹ In a nutshell he says: “The realisation that there are alternatives breaks down the barriers of provincial narrowness and can open up new prospects in dead-end situations.”³¹⁰

But while Exeler strongly recommends learning from other comparative disciplines in hermeneutical respects, he still gives priority to practical exploration. In this context, “learning from the universal Church” means both a subtly differentiated perception of one’s own starting point and that of others in dialogue with the Gospel and the witness of the Church. “Learning from the universal Church” does not function as an uncritical transfer of pastoral programmes, but only as a process of evangelising all those involved in the comparison. Within the hermeneutics of a comparative pastoral theology “learning from the universal Church” means a four-step process³¹¹ involving

³⁰⁸ Exeler, A., “Wege einer vergleichenden Pastoral”, in: *Theologie der Gegenwart* 23 (1980), 12-20, 13.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹¹ Cf. Matthieu, M., “Interkonfessionell, interkulturell, interreligiös. Denkanstöße zur Wissenschaftstheorie einer vergleichenden Religionspädagogik”, in: Baumgartner, K., et al. (eds.), *Glauben lernen, leben lernen*, Sankt Ottilien 1985, 227-242, 236f.

the "description, interpretation, juxtaposition and comparison" of missionary initiatives. In the context of mutual exchange this approach provides a learning experience in which personal abilities are seen as both a gift and a task in dialogue with others that can lead to the emergence of something new.

The following questions make this four-step process tangible. With what eyes do I observe reality? With what faith and life experience do I perceive the world (description)? Why does reality appear as it is? What contexts influence my own interpretation (meaning)? What disturbs me about the interpretations of others? How does my observation touch on my own personal experience (juxtaposition)? What new thoughts present themselves to me? What conclusions do I draw from them? What kind of (shared) growth becomes possible (comparison)?

Such a sequence of missionary steps (along the path to faith) emerging within this inspirational learning environment as a Church-focused *tertium comparationis* in a pastoral comparison can be seen in Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*. The second chapter of that document speaks of five motives within the context of the "evangelisation of culture," which can motivate people to perform missionary pastoral care everywhere in the universal Church: "witness of life", "witness of the word", "genuine adherence", "entry into the community of the faithful" and "participation in the apostolate".³¹²

As a community of learning, prayer and solidarity,³¹³ the universal Church absorbs and reflects the elements constituting the path taken by individuals towards the faith and interprets them as a comprehensive process of evangelisation. This "companionship" touches the whole person.

³¹² *Apostolisches Schreiben "Evangelii nuntiandi" Seiner Heiligkeit Papst Pauls VI. an den Episkopat, den Klerus und alle Gläubigen der Katholischen Kirche über die Evangelisierung in der Welt von heute*, Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls, no. 2, Bonn 1975, 15-16, no. 20.

³¹³ Cf. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Allen Völkern sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche*, Die deutschen Bischöfe, no. 76, Bonn 2004, 55-60.

Parameters of missionary pastoral care

Learning “missionary pastoral care” from the universal Church in practical and theological terms requires the development of specific comparison parameters on the basis of this sequence of steps. With an eye on the four basic functions of community life, I shall now present examples of such a learning perspective that are encountered within “the universal Church as a learning community.” They are intended to stimulate further examination and discussion.

Diakonia

According to the missionary comparison parameters in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, the path to faith begins with “wordless witness”. The immediate experience of “solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good, (...) presence and sharing”, and thus also tangible personal efforts to help others in distress, creates immediate plausibility for the healing effect of the Gospel.³¹⁴

Those who look after children with HIV/AIDS in the “Breakthrough Association” of our African sister church in Kumbo, for instance, who also take care of infected and sick adults and share the challenges of life with them, bear witness to the solidarity of God, who devotes himself to His people. Their efforts, supported and inspired by an attitude of love, are focused on individual human beings. This “wordless witness” is articulated in their dedication to the poorest of the poor.³¹⁵ This experience presents a common challenge. For all the cultural differences there may be, we in Germany also need to ask ourselves how best to bear witness to the active brotherly love born from a spirit of Christian responsibility and how we can stand up for the basic rights of people who have been marginalised. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40) The “witness of life” provides a direct experience of what Benedict XVI referred to in his encyclical *Deus caritas est*: “Those who work for the Church’s charitable organisations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but they

³¹⁴ Cf. Paul VI, *o cit.*, 16-17, no. 21.

³¹⁵ Another concrete example would be the community-based rehabilitation project for people with disabilities in the diocese of Ndola (Zambia).

dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity."³¹⁶

Martyria

Learning to believe is a fundamental challenge within the different life contexts of the universal Church; it entails recognising and confessing what is distinctively Christian in the social context.

Through contact and exchange with our sister churches in the universal Church, the Church in Germany has become acquainted with different forms of what is called "small Christian communities". This approach, which entails not only reading the Word of God but also experiencing in it God's call to us to "witness the word", touches everyone who is prepared to embrace it. Listening to God's Word focuses on the personal witness in the life of the individual; it moves Christians. Religious sensibility in Africa is distinctly community-based and is regarded, above all, as a community with God, the creator of humankind, with ancestors, fellow human beings and nature, as Professor Abeng of the Université Catholique de l'Afrique Central (UCAC) put it in a lecture. Bible sharing, which brings together the sharing of faith and life, has its roots in the human community, i.e. in the social habitat of human beings. Religious sensibility in Germany may be more individualistic than in other cultural areas, but this path can nonetheless help to deepen faith and contribute to a new proclamation of the Gospel.

Liturgia

The complexity involved in learning from the universal Church is particularly tangible in the liturgy: in common prayer and in the celebration of the Eucharist. Humankind's new search for roots and continuity brings with it a new awareness of rituals that support and connect us. The realisation that faith requires form and an easily recognisable ritual is evident. Liturgy and mystagogy are of central importance for the experience and recognition of faith in the Christian Church. The World Youth Days with their great liturgical celebrations

³¹⁶ Benedikt XVI, *Gott ist die Liebe. Die Enzyklika "Deus caritas est"*, Freiburg, Basel, Vienna 2006, 71, no. 31^a.

show how the universal Church can respond to this need. At the same time, the challenge of inculturation on all continents appears to be a task that turns the universal Church learning comparison into a real test.

In spiritual exchange and in the shared celebration of faith and life we can experience not only the closeness of the different local churches and individual human beings, but also sense and celebrate the closeness we share in our belief in the One God. Learning from the universal Church as an exploratory investigation of how unity in diversity can be successfully linked with diversity in unity thus remains a conciliar task which requires that we reflect upon the comparison parameters that are constitutive for the liturgy.

Koinonia

According to *Evangelii nuntiandi*, *communio* and community formation are steps that follow from “genuine adherence” and “entrance into the sacramental community of the Church”. Just how closely gifts and tasks are interwoven is currently becoming clear to us here in Germany as we observe the pastoral processes of community formation in large areas. Although the missionary dimension is expressly included in all structural considerations, there can be no overlooking to the extent to which community formation is frequently perceived in terms of territorial provision rather than as the experience of sacramental gatherings in the form of a *communio*. “Learning by comparison” with our sister churches is only possible to a limited extent. At the same time, however, this *communio* becomes clear in the practise of “companionship”, which some congregations actively develop with partners from the universal Church and in dialogue with each other.

Intercultural and inter-church learning community

“Rivers never cross” is a saying that has been handed down to us from Cameroon. Just as rivers come together and, merging their inseparable waters of life, flow towards their mouth and into the sea, so the mission-based dissemination of the Catholic faith evolved in Cameroon. The first missionaries travelled from Limburg to Cameroon. “For the love of Christ overwhelms us” (2 Corinthians 5:14) can be read on the

relief of the altar plinth of the Pallottine church in Nlongkak. It shows a crowd leaving St. Mary's Church in Limburg and heading for the church erected in Mvolye in 1906. This movement continues up to the present day and we are called upon to give common expression to this evangelising mission in the worldwide Catholic Church as a learning community.

The German bishops found a clear formulation for this in 2004: "The mission of the universal Church needs a head, heart and hands that must work together in the same way as in the human body. Hence the universal Church as a religious community is also a community of learning, a community of prayer and a community of solidarity. Since the universal Church finds its fulfilment in numerous local churches that are rooted in their respective cultures, it is becoming an intercultural and inter-church community of learning."³¹⁷

This attitude lies at the roots of the prayer for partnership that is regularly said in the dioceses of Limburg and Kumbo. It is an expression of the fraternal union of our common faith:

God, our Father,
 Father of all peoples in this world.
 Many miles are between us,
 The people of the diocese of Limburg
 And the people of the diocese of Kumbo.
 Far away from each other we live and love,
 Work and pray.

We are different in colour, language,
 Food, clothing and many other things.
 By our faith in you, Father,
 And in Jesus Christ,
 Your son and our brother,
 We are brothers and sisters
 In the Holy Spirit.

Many things separate us,
 But many more unite us

³¹⁷ Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Allen Völkern Sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche*, Die deutschen Bischöfe, no. 76, Bonn 2004, 55.

And bring us together as one large family.
We are together on our journey,
To understand each other always better,
To recognise each other as brothers and sisters,
Who are close to and
Available for each other.

Grant us, Father,
That our longing will be fulfilled.
Bless our work
For the partnership between Limburg and Kumbo.
Make us true witnesses of your love
Which overcomes any separation.

We make this prayer through Christ our Lord and Brother
And in the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



Edited by

Klaus Krämer and Klaus Vellguth

