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“SEEK THE PEACE OF THE CITY” (JER 29,7): CHURCH PRACTICE AFTER THE SERIOUS CASE OF PUBLIC WELFARE-ORIENTED PROBATION IN THE PANDEMIC

During the corona pandemic, pastoral practice and church proclamation show structural problems as well as new beginnings. The question is whether effects for a dynamic church development will emerge from them in order to find a stronger orientation of pastoral action towards the common good.

Which social players enjoy priority and which areas of society are considered „nice to have” and thus dispensable, at least in times of crisis? This question permeates public debates throughout the multiple waves of the Corona pandemic: prioritising the allocation of vaccination appointments, prioritising the opening of shops and facilities, and prioritising the allocation of aid money and Corona Relief funds. Behind these decisions is the question of who is considered systematically important in modern societies and from whom contributions to the common good are to be expected.

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While DIY stores, car dealerships and international sports competitions were considered indispensable pillars of social stability, the bitter realisation arose for educational institutions, cultural workers and gastronomy: they are dispensable in times of crisis. The churches found themselves somewhere between these poles. While there had still been a „hard lockdown” during the first wave, that meant the end of analogue church services and Easter liturgies, there were re-openings again more quickly than in day-care centers and schools.

Many church representatives were offended by this fragile constellation. For here, at the latest, the changed role of the churches in modern societies became visible. They may see themselves as „relevant for life” in their pastoral and diaconal work, in their liturgical practices and their spiritual traditions. However, towards the general public they have to prove this relevance first and foremost and cannot claim it by mere assertion. This created a social pressure to question established pastoral patterns² and to prove one’s own added value for society, which had not been seen/done that vigorously since the (Age of) Enlightenment. Even then it was possible to learn that monasteries and congregations could gain a right to exist due to their contributions to the social education system. Thus, social expectations made their mark right into the core of the church’s self-conception, into liturgical performances and church proclamation. But in the pandemic as a major crisis of the 21st century, the explicit social expectations of the churches were missing or limited to the requested loyalty to the hygiene measures. However, where expectations are not formulated, they can still exist and must be actively enquired about and sought for.

² G. Spallek, *Pastoral auf Distanz*, [in:] J. Werz (ed.), *Gottesrede in Epidemien. Theologie und Kirche in der Krise*, Münster 2021, p. 373-387.

1. WHAT IS NOT VISIBLE DOES NOT EXIST – AND IS QUICKLY CONSIDERED IRRELEVANT

The wide searching³ for pastoral fields of activity in church beyond the familiar logics of congregational and casual pastoral care was therefore accompanied by a bitter controversy about a lack of pastoral commitment on the part of the churches. The criticism was articulated in a particularly high-profile way by Christiane Lieberknecht, a former pastor and Minister President in Eastern Germany. With her statement, a broad argument arose with references to the quiet and discreet, but definitely committed work of pastors, chaplains and many volunteering church members of the large churches. A final assessment of whether the actors in the pandemic were particularly committed and creative or frighteningly ponderous and overtaxed is not important at all. Empirical surveys show that among church employees the whole range of behaviour in this spectrum can be found anyway. More important, therefore, is the insight, indispensable for late-modern societies, that the concession of relevance presupposes one's own visibility. What is not visible, in fact, does not exist in public perception. This insight seems almost trivial when taking into account an „iconic turn“⁴ and its realisations in the field of imaging media, but at the same time it contains potential for outrage in the scope of the church. For here, an awareness of the mechanisms of visibility raises the suspicion of vanity and superficiality. This becomes clear when, for example, in many places, hospital chaplaincy still refrain from introducing themselves personally as contacts on the internet with pictures and videos and from offering digital contact and opportunities to talk. The assumption that direct conversation

³ W. Beck, „Darüber muss ich noch nachdenken“. *Die pastoralen Erfahrungen in der Gemeindepastoral während der Corona-Pandemie*, ETS-Studies 12 (2021) 1, p. 151-160.

⁴ V. Pirker, *Zur Macht der Bilder. Theologische Anthropologie im Kontext digitaler Bildkulturen*, [in:] W. Beck, I. Nord, J. Valentin (ed.), *Digitalität und Theologie. Ein Kompendium*, Freiburg i.B. 2021, p. 155-179.

is important fails to recognise the situation of patients and relatives. Also, it relies on the assumption that everyone is familiar with the importance of their own field of work anyway – the common fallacy of a communicative bubble.

Where pastoral workers in hospital pastoral care limit their digital presentation to a passport photo and telephone number, but do not introduce themselves and their work further, they remain largely invisible to relatives and patients. Visibility, however, makes it possible to get to know each other first and to build up a relationship before the conversation. Something similar can be seen in other categorical and pastoral fields of action in the community.

What is experienced as life-serving for society as a whole must prove to be relevant in these respective fields of action. Public discourses are therefore an increasing authority for the central actions of the churches. This is most clearly illustrated by a statement of the “Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken” (ZdK), the organisation of lay people in the Catholic Church in Germany. In the midst of the pandemic, the position paper “Aufbruch statt Rückzug”⁵ (Moving forward instead of retreating) was drawn up and adopted in order to constructively address the rebalancing relationship between the Catholic Church and the social public sphere, which illustrates the redefinition of religious authority.

While the institutional structure is destabilised and in particular the authority of ordained ministers within the church and in society as a whole is eroding, an enormous pressure for change is building up in the public sphere and its discourse on justice. The justified expectation arises that the existing deficits in justice within the scope of the church and the lack of awareness of constitutional principles among those in positions of responsibility can be dealt with in the long term. The effects of the pandemic therefore include a further dynamisation of the ecclesiastical structure of authority and office. That

⁵ Der Text ist unter <https://www.zdk.de/veroeffentlichungen/reden-und-beitraege/detail/Aufbruch-statt-Rueckzug-Die-roemisch-katholische-Kirche-in-der-Oeffentlichkeit-heute-448j/> zu finden und wird 2022 als Sammelband publiziert.

their effects are far-reaching became evident in the lack of interest in church-theological contributions to the discourse of public during the pandemic.

Churches are no longer expected to make contributions to social issues beyond the confines of their own denomination, in the sense of a broadened solidarity with all people.

The only (!) ecumenical statement of the highest bishops in Germany during the pandemic was not positioned in a prominent broadcasting slot on German television (for example as „ARD-Brennpunkt”), but at midnight. It was a situation of a self-restraint church preaching that hardly places itself under the claim of making stabilising contributions within the framework of overall social crisis management.

2. PREACHING AND PROCLAMATION AS A CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Insofar as crisis discourses are also always places of collective search for identity and “adaption of identity” (Identitätskorrekturen)⁶, it is precisely here that the pastoral contribution to the shaping of public sphere is requested. For the sociologist Armin Nassehi, the crisis and the way it is dealt with is the epitome of late modernity, constantly reconstituting itself through crises:

Society’s permanent crisis mode is its great strength, because it enables it to achieve considerable efficiency, which, however, leads to an equally unavoidable

⁶ H. Kämper, *Krise und Sprache. Theoretische Anmerkungen*, [in:] T. Mergel (ed.), *Krisen verstehen. Historische und kulturwissenschaftliche Annäherungen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2012, p. 241-255, 252.

overstrain. (...) – however, this excessive demand is both problem and solution at the same time.⁷

Crises are to be understood as massive shocks in which a catastrophe can no longer be dealt with using the existing patterns of interpretation. In a crisis, there is a comprehensive uncertainty, with which reorientations become necessary as a search for explanations and interpretations. Therefore, crises are at the pivot of learning processes.⁸

Here are just a few elements of successful crisis communication:

- a. Dramatic events are not denied, but openly addressed. This also includes addressing one's own responsibility.
- b. Those in positions of responsibility face up to their task, become visible in the media and do not point to the responsibility of other actors. They also show and address their own uncertainty and refer to previous and future learning processes in the search for appropriate decisions.
- c. Transparent communication of one's own learning processes in dealing with the events is essential for generating acceptance for process-oriented decision-making.
- d. The responsible actors refrain from apportioning blame, strengthen a society-wide solidarity (comprehensive „we-feeling“) and overcome small group solidarities in favour of orientating oneself towards a common good.

Successful crisis communication is carried out in the awareness of different phases of crisis management⁹ in the run-up to and in

⁷ A. Nassehi, *Der Ausnahmezustand als Normalfall. Modernität in der Krise*, [in:] A. Nassehi, P. Felixberger (ed.), *Kursbuch 170: Krisen lieben*, Hamburg 2012, p. 34-49, 38.

⁸ K. Meyer-Drawe, *Vom anderen lernen (1996). Phänomenologische Betrachtungen in der Pädagogik*, [in:] M. Brinkmann (ed.), *Phänomenologische Erziehungswissenschaft von ihren Anfängen bis heute*, Wiesbaden 2019, p. 363-378, 364.

⁹ J. Drews, *Risikokommunikation und Krisenkommunikation. Kommunikation von Behörden und die Erwartungen von Journalisten*, Wiesbaden 2018, p. 48.

the aftermath of the events by those authorities who have proven themselves to be disinterested and reliable long before the crisis.

The talk of crisis nevertheless also contains a potential danger. For it can make drastic measures seem credible. Talking of the crisis can be used, for example, to make redundancies in business enterprises without resistance. Talking of the crisis strengthens autocrats and weakens participatory structures.¹⁰ Therefore, it must be integrated into democratic processes and critically monitored accompanied.

The author and Peace Prize winner Carolin Emcke observes such manipulative forms of crisis-driven rhetoric in the Corona crisis, where a retreat to nation-state thinking was justified with the help of the crisis.¹¹ Successful and responsible crisis communication reflects this problematic potential of talking of the crisis.

Against this background, a definition of successful crisis communication will be presented here:

Successful crisis communication overcomes small group solidarity and strengthens a broader solidarity of all people. It contributes to public stability in such a way that people become active agents, assume responsibility, become capable of acting in decentralised and cooperative search processes in different social systems and develop new interpretations of life experiences.

The fact that church contributions to public communication have so far only been perceived to a limited extent as a contribution to dealing with the Corona crisis can probably be explained on the one hand by a considerable loss of authority on the part of the institution and its ministers. On the other hand, structural problems can also be

¹⁰ G. Dueck, Ich hasse Krisen. Denn Krisen geben Macht, die keiner braucht, [in:] A. Nassehi, P. Felixberger (ed.), *Kursbuch 170: Krisen lieben*, Hamburg 2012, p. 84-100, 85.

¹¹ C. Emcke, <https://www.srf.ch/kultur/gesellschaft-religion/mutig-in-die-zukunft-carolin-emcke-die-klimakrise-braucht-pandemie-denken> (2021-11-14).

identified within the practice of proclamation. These include a restriction to small group solidarities in sermons, which is done by emphasising the specifically Christian or denominational contribution. Likewise, the negation of one's own insecurities in a claimed confessional stabilisation can be observed. Only where church proclamation also addresses its own shocks, is indicative of open learning processes and places itself at the side of all contemporaries, it can make contributions to a social crisis communication. Approaches to this have been presented by Hans-Joachim Höhn¹² and Günter Thomas.¹³

This, however, would mean not only seeing church action and social work in the area of Caritas and social welfare as a social service, but also conceiving liturgy and preaching from an orientation towards the common good.

This would give social publics an authority over identity of church. A proclamation that avoids the risk¹⁴ of having its own traditions questioned by the concerns of contemporary society and transferring this reference into open spaces of discourse is in danger of dismantling the Gospel of Jesus as the basis of its own actions. Examples of such unsuccessful, fearful practices of proclamation were numerous during the pandemic precisely because of their digital dissemination. These deficits in content occur in the reduction to internal plausibility of church itself, in the institutionally established ignorance of theological-scientific findings or in the disinterest in contemporary social issues.

¹² H.J. Höhn, <https://www.feinschwarz.net/corona-theologie/> (2020-11-12).

¹³ Cf. G. Thomas, *Theologie im Schatten der Corona-Krise*, [in:] M. Heidingsfelder, M. Lehmann (ed.), *Weltgesellschaft im Ausnahmezustand?*, Weilerswist 2021, p. 296-321.

¹⁴ W. Beck, *Ohne Geländer. Pastoraltheologische Fundierungen einer risikoreudigen Ekklesiogenese*, Ostfildern 2022, p. 333.

3. PASTORAL WORK ORIENTED TOWARDS THE COMMON GOOD

One of the bitter experiences of the churches during the pandemic was the realisation in many places that there was little demand for their own offers of help beyond the intensely church-affiliated milieus.

In addition to the delayed response of the churches to the pandemic situation in many places, it became apparent during the first lockdown in spring 2020 that they were hardly expected on outside the churches. Where there had not been years of working on relationships across the congregations that could now be built on, the church agents were hardly trusted to be able to make offers for all people in the district and in the locality. The internal orientation of congregational practice, usually established over decades, shows its fatal effect here and must be transferred into open learning processes (such as a „deepened ecumenism”¹⁵) in many places. This is even more true for denominational constructions of identity, as can be observed in milieu Catholicism and in traditionalist approaches of the present. They find an important corrective in an understanding of pastoral work that is structured for the common good. In it, full-time and voluntary representatives of church congregations get involved in local and district-related debates without having to cultivate their own institutional profile.

With Community Organising, the theologian and sociologist Leo Penta from Berlin has developed a model in which as many people as possible work democratically on local issues. In doing so, the church actors would have to take the risk of renouncing any special positions and to participate in discourses without any hegemonic habitus.

During the Corona pandemic and the initially very pragmatic aid and support projects, responsibility for social cooperation became the decisive marker for personal and institutional authority. Orienting

¹⁵ Cf. T. Halík, *Die Pandemie als ökumenische Erfahrung*, [in:] W. Kasper, G. Augustin (ed.), *Christsein und Corona-Krise. Das Leben bezeugen in einer sterblichen Welt*, Ostfildern 2020, p. 113-134, 117.

towards the common good must therefore also be placed anew in the focus of church development at local and diocesan level in pastoral conceptions after the pandemic. A pastoral ministry oriented towards the common good does away with delimiting logics as far as possible and realigns even established and traditional activities with the needs of the social environment. It will develop into an „open source enterprise”¹⁶ and will do this in terms of contents on the one hand with an orientation towards the „option for the poor”, i.e. an advocacy for the needy and marginalised. And on the other hand, it will combine this with the concern to strengthen social and neighbourly dialogue on site. The „Thérapie Sociale” by the Frenchman Charles Rojzman is also a helpful instrument for this. It aims to maintain dialogue between different interest groups and political camps in order to reduce divisions and prevent the end of public dialogue.

4. TOGETHER OR NOT AT ALL: STRENGTHENING A PARTICIPATORY PASTORAL UNDERSTANDING

In the pastoral fields of action in the local community the formation of pastoral action described is expressed in a clear expectation of participative action. This can also be illustrated by an example: in the summer of 2021, it had become clear to most pastors that they had to use digital media to find communicative means, including church services, as an important element in cultivating relationships. Since the classic liturgical forms seemed only partially suitable for this, new formats with integrated participation offerings were designed in some places. On the one hand, a great plurality of liturgical forms emerged, which is illustrated for example by the CONTOC study (www.contoc.org). These are digital liturgies that are less focused on individual (official) actors, contain dialogical elements and offer opportunities for suggesting topics or conversations between the services. Since there are no fixed patterns for these forms yet, many of those responsible have orientated themselves in a longer process

¹⁶ G. Spallek, op. cit., p. 378.

on the feedback from parishioners and interested participants. This resulted in a joint search process for sustainable forms that can be suitable for the place of digital media and the communicative expectations forced there – only made possible by the fundamental official and institutional loss of control.¹⁷ The offer of the Catholic parish in Höntrop (Diocese of Essen; www.hoentrop-kirche.de) can be considered a convincing example both for the process of creation and for the result because it was created on the basis of the awareness of baptismal theology. On this basis, not only a liturgical and parish pastoral practice, but also its theological foundations in a „theology of participation”¹⁸ become recognisable.

In diocesan surveys, many people expressed the hope that the initiatives that have emerged will continue beyond the pandemic. It should be clear to those responsible that this will only succeed with a simultaneous reduction of classic, pastoral fields of work in the parish. The negotiation processes between these classic fields and the innovative search processes have long shaped the debates in the pastoral professional groups, but so far have mostly had to be fought for by the individuals in their time management and in the negotiation of task settings. A participatory form could not have been established yet on a broad scale for the shaping of church priority setting. It would be the chance of a learning process.¹⁹ For in experiences of crisis, where „standardised expectations meet non-standardised realities”²⁰, mere recourse to existing answers and patterns of behaviour becomes impossible.²¹ It is in this incompatibility that the risky and open processes of negotiation take place.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ M. Nausner, *Eine Theologie der Teilhabe*, Leipzig 2020, p. 122.

¹⁹ Cf. E. Kröger, *Wie lernt Kirche Partizipation? Drei Grundperspektiven*, [in:] E. Kröger (ed.), *Wie lernt Kirche Partizipation? Theologische Reflexion und praktische Erfahrung*, Würzburg 2016, p. 423-432.

²⁰ H. Bude, *Die Gesellschaft der Angst*, Hamburg 2014, p. 22.

²¹ Cf. R. Bucher, *Partizipative Kirche – Stationen eines weiten Weges*, [in:] E. Kröger (ed.), *Wie lernt Kirche Partizipation?...*, op. cit., p. 59-69, 68.

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