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MISSION IN COVID AND POST-COVID TIMES IN GERMANY

The following paper was presented at the Online-conference „Mission in Covid and Post-Covid times” which was organized by the International Association of Catholic Missiologists in May 2021. The presented aspects are divided into four parts: In a first step, I will take a general look at the course of the pandemic in Germany. In a second step, I will show what role the church played during the months of the pandemic. In a third step, I address pastoral observations on the mission of the church in Germany in times of the pandemic. And in a fourth step, I show what challenges the mission or pastoral care of the church in Germany faces after the pandemic.

THE PANDEMIC COURSE IN GERMANY

The pandemic reached Germany in late January 2020, when an initial infection was reported by the Bavarian Health Office. A 33-year-old employee of an automotive supplier working near Munich had contracted the disease during a training session with a Chinese colleague who had traveled from the company’s site in Shanghai. In connection with this, 13 other employees and relatives became infected. Even though all those infected were discharged from the clinic as cured by the end of February 2020, the virus had thus reached Germany.

After the Robert Koch Institute, as the biomedical lead research institute of the German government, initially did not name an acute danger, the institute changed the risk assessment for the health of the population on March 17, 2020, and now assessed this as „high” overall, and even „very high” locally. As a result, lockdown-measures on exit restrictions were developed. Gradually, gatherings and events were banned, and churches, synagogues, mosques, cultural and educational institutions were closed. At the end of March 2020, a „comprehensive ban on contact” was issued. When meeting in public spaces, a minimum distance of 1.5 m was to be maintained, and restaurants were closed. Personal care service businesses (e.g. hairdressers) also remained closed. The core point of the contact ban is that staying in public space is „only allowed alone or with another person or in the circle of members of one’s own household.” The possibilities of pastoral accompaniment, social-diaconal assistance and church educational work were also massively restricted. As a result of these measures, Germany had only a low mortality rate by international standards in the spring of 2020. After a relatively relaxed summer, a second pandemic wave followed from September 2020 to early February 2021, which was countered with various lockdown measures. A third wave followed shortly thereafter, beginning in March 2021. This one, after jurisdiction changed and the federal government (rather than the states) was now responsible, was broken by a nationwide lockdown. This was helped by contact restrictions, extensive testing programs and, of course, vaccination of broad parts of the population. Today, nearly 50 percent of the population has been vaccinated at least once.

Now, in mid-June, Germany is looking at a total of 3.7 million infections in the course of the pandemic, of which 3 million people have already recovered. 89,000 people have died as a result of Covid 19 infection since the pandemic began. Although these are depressing figures, an optimistic mood is currently spreading in Germany. Contact restrictions can be lifted more and more, the number of infections is declining, the vaccination rate is rising, and more and more normality is returning to public life.

ROLE THE CHURCH IN THE MONTHS OF THE PANDEMIC

What was the role of the churches during the months of the pandemic? I will discuss this in the second part of my presentation. The rather sobering conclusion is: Orientation during the months of the pandemic in Germany hardly came from the churches or their representatives. The pandemic has revealed a dramatic loss of social relevance of the Catholic Church in Germany, which the Jesuit Christoph Theobald has sketched with the terms „diaspora situation of the church,” „exculturation of faith” and „credibility crisis. In the first months of the pandemic, physicians, politicians, journalists and ethicists were interviewed in order to provide social orientation in view of the massive threat that suddenly burst upon us and the associated challenges and uncertainties. Representatives of theology and the church, on the other hand, hardly appeared in the media. They – who in the past were repeatedly accused of being self-referential – were apparently not trusted to be able to provide appropriate and helpful social impulses or even guidance in the face of the pandemic.

Theologically, the observation that the churches were not in demand as a socially relevant authority at the beginning of the pandemic indicates a problem. For it corresponds to the self-image of the pastoral ministry of the church to be present and in demand in times of crisis, mourning and fear. The Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council emphasizes in its almost prosaically formulated opening sentence:

The joy and hope, grief and anguish of people today, especially of the poor and afflicted of all kinds, are also the joy and hope, grief and anguish of Christ's disciples. And there is nothing truly human that does not find its echo in their hearts. (GS 1)

Although the Council Fathers formulated here such a decisive commitment to Christian solidarity with people in situations of distress,

which Pope Francis took up in his programmatic *Exhortatio Evangelii gaudium*, in the seriousness of the pandemic, at least in Germany, this did not trigger any perceptible resonance in society.

Detlev Pollak, a sociologist of religion from Münster, Germany, has examined the behavior of the church in times of the pandemic and, in an interview with the protestant news vagency (Evangelischer Pressedienst) published a few weeks ago, first noted that the churches had responded appropriately to the pandemic in recent months with the digitalization push in pastoral ministry. At the same time, however, the pandemic has also revealed „a theological need for argumentation” on the part of the churches: The question of what, in the face of the pandemic, was the unique specificity in the action of the church in contrast to other institutions, could not be answered. It is not enough to define one’s own role by referring to pastoral care and concern for the poor and weak in society. Attempts to present Christianity as – to use the words of Christoph Theobald – an „integral humanism” are no longer helpful today. This role, Pollack said, is also fulfilled by medicine, welfare organizations and science, for example. In view of the massive loss of relevance, the church faces the challenge of identifying and clearly communicating its own specifics. In order to counter the loss of relevance in society, the church must therefore, on the one hand, make the thematically correct choices and commit itself to the poor and the weak, as emphasized by Detlev Pollack as well as in the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council or by Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* and countless other documents and addresses of his pontificate, which has now lasted eight years. In order to counteract the loss of relevance, however, it must also become clear what the specifics of the commitment, the specific perspective or motivation of the church are.

PASTORAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN GERMANY

But what impact did the outbreak of the pandemic have on the mission or pastoral care of the Church in Germany? First of all,

an astonishing observation in the face of a life-threatening global catastrophe: pastors personally experienced the first phase of the pandemic, with its unexpected restrictions on contact, first of all as a time of relief and relaxation with not only negative connotations. Pastor Markus Krell wrote about his experiences:

As a pastor, I experienced the time of the pandemic in part as relaxing, because the abundance of appointments was eliminated. Many personal conversations could be held, many a theological book that had been ready for a long time could be read, employees could be talked to longer than usual, and many a thing could be prepared for the future – despite or because of Corona close to and with people.

The time of the pandemic is also connected with the experience that the classical form of the congregation, at the center of which is the Sunday service, is dissolving more and more quickly and that new forms of liturgy in particular must be developed. Pastoral theologian Richard Hartmann pointed out that new forms of ritual language and sign-like culture must be found to enable people to expand the experiential spaces of faith in the church liturgy. „Corona makes it clear that people are most willing to engage with the church and its celebrations when they feel that they themselves are meant. Joy and hope, sorrow and fear (GS 1) need more than rite. They need touch and in it new spaces of experience to believe.”

In addition, the time of the pandemic was marked by Christians becoming more involved in diaconal work and networking anew in civil society. Many committed Christians felt that the church in Germany needed to overcome its self-centeredness, in which it is often trapped, and open up to people's emergency situations. „What people can really do without in this situation is a church that is pre-occupied with itself and the question of its own relevance,” wrote pastor Burkhard Hose from Würzburg a few weeks after the outbreak

of the pandemic, calling for a change of perspective that focuses on the plight of people. Bishops Herwig Gössel and Reinhard Hauke concurred in their reflections on diaconal pastoral care for people with Covid-19, stating:

The Christian mission of accompanying people in need must be implemented with heart and mind under the challenging conditions of a pandemic. [...] This requires the willingness to cooperate with state authorities and with the responsible institutions, the conscientious consideration of the desire to be present on the one hand and the risks on the other, and last but not least the creativity of pastors who offer new formats of accompaniment adapted to the current situation. We are grateful for all initiatives that respond to the high demand for pastoral care in times of crisis.

It could also be observed that processes of church development became independent and took on a dynamic of its own. Last June, pastoral theologian Christiane Bundschuh-Schramm described her observations at the beginning of the pandemic:

Staying at home, practicing social distance, reducing analog communication, not attending (larger) events, switching to digital communication – the Catholic Church is being turned upside down. Digital is still a beginner, analog is its capital, events with larger audiences its real favorite. Just as it is becoming apparent in society who and what people really need and what is dispensable, so it is in the church. The church lives and survives on the religious and Christian commitment of its members.

Bundschuh-Schramm pointed out that in times of the pandemic, Christians became more involved in diaconal work and engaged beyond the boundaries of the church with those people who were

active in civil society in various areas. In the process, she observed a dynamic that triggered change within the church itself: „When the church is turned upside down, the current theories of church development kick in. What programs in glossy brochures failed to do over the years happens in the homes of Christians and in the places where they show solidarity, cooperate in networks and support others. With the help of the Internet and on the basis of baptismal competence and charisms, Christians are shaping their religious life themselves in all areas: ethics, theology, spirituality and rituals. The church as an institution must focus on how it can better support this ‘autonomous’ Christianity in the future.’”

It was also unmistakable that after the churches had long found it difficult to embrace digitization, especially in pastoral ministry, the restrictions of the Covid 19 pandemic triggered a real push for digitization in pastoral ministry. Faced with restrictions on church life that affected funerals, choirs and all other forms of church gatherings in groups and circles in addition to church services, communication was digitized in a variety of formats. Contact networks emerged, online services were streamed, church groups met via video conferencing, and a wide variety of offerings in the areas of church education, pastoral care, and diaconia were realized online. In some cases, combined concepts of analog and digital elements were created. These forms of communication were set up by different actors and targeted different contexts and target groups in terms of their reach.

In order to investigate the impact of the pandemic on the pastoral care of the church and in particular on the processes of digitization in the German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland), the ecumenically designed research project CONTOC was initiated. Representatives of the Center for Church Development at the University of Zurich, the Institute for Protestant Theology at the University of Würzburg, the Swiss Pastoral Sociology Institute (SPI), the Philosophical-Theological University of Sankt Georgen and the Social Science Institute of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) are involved in this research project. The research project CONTOC aims at an empirical, representative survey of the development and

implementation of especially digital church offerings under the conditions of COVID-19-related restrictions on contact and assembly. The idea of the survey, which is primarily quantitative, is to survey the experiences of digital conversion in pastoral practice in a very timely manner. The focus of interest here is less on the technical challenges that may have arisen. Rather, the study aims to gain insights into what can be learned from the new forms of pastoral work for the near future in the church and community context. In particular, the survey focuses on the fields of worship, pastoral care, education, diaconia and communication. In addition, pastoral-theological questions are asked about the experiences, assessments and possible consequences of pastoral practice and the self-understanding of people in church administration. This is combined with questions of perspective for the future need for support in the area of pastoral „digital literacy”.

The research project focuses, on the one hand, on the question of the design of these offerings and the conditions under which they were developed and designed. On the other hand, the project will look at the extent to which these offerings will continue to exist in a situation that has changed again and the return to worship gatherings. The repercussions of these digitalization dynamics on the role and self-image of church actors and on the organization of church practice will also be examined. The results of the research project are expected to yield significant insights for the mission and pastoral care of the church in Germany in the aftermath of the Covid 19 pandemic.

CHALLENGES OF MISSION IN COVID AND POST-COVID TIMES

In my previous remarks, I have focused very much on mission or pastoral ministry in the face of the challenges of the Covid 19 pandemic in Germany. And it turned out: „For the Catholic Church in Germany, Corona is an accelerant for processes that were already visible long before: Loss of relevance, liturgical focus, structural problems, loss of members and staff, communication difficulties,

the treatment of women, the (too often) lost contact with the reality of life...”.

In conclusion, however, especially in view of the fact that we as missiologists are always internationally, global oriented, I would like to add a final rather fundamental thought that addresses nation-state thinking on the one hand and thinking that transcends national borders in the age of globalization.

After the beginning of the pandemic, Germany reacted in nation-state affect. In order to protect its own population, borders were closed, entry restrictions were imposed, air connections were cancelled, and foreign contacts were largely prohibited. To limit the spread of the virus within national borders, the risk of infection through international contacts was to be minimized. That may have made sense. Then, when the first vaccines became available at the end of 2020, heated discussions flared up about whether Germany should have gone it alone nationally to secure more vaccines for its own population. The United Kingdom and the United States served as models for primarily national vaccination campaigns, having „secured” larger quantities of the scarce serum for their own populations at an early stage – at the expense of other countries. However, this probably made less sense – at least in the medium and long term. After all, the global pandemic in particular shows that we will only be able to overcome the global life-threatening challenges – also in our own interest – in a global perspective and in solidarity. What good does it do us in Germany if we have our population vaccinated promptly, but the virus continues to spread and mutate in other parts of the world at the same time as our vaccination campaigns. If mutations resistant to the vaccines form in other regions of the world that do not have the possibility of prompt vaccination, these mutations will also reach the population in Germany in the age of globalization. And possibly trigger new waves of the pandemic in our country as well. Future health in Germany is therefore dependent on successfully containing the pandemic not only here in Europe, but also in Africa, in Asia, in America and Australia. So, for selfish national interests alone, it is necessary to confront the pandemic in a global, international

solidarity. And to find ways together for the economically stronger nations to enable the vaccination of the population in the economically weaker nations.

This would realize solidarity as it was originally understood. Solidarity means more than just assistentialist support for those in need. Etymologically, the term solidarity derives from the Latin terms „solidus” (firm, securely founded) and „solidum” (solid ground, soil). It primarily denotes an attitude of solidarity based on shared values and joint support for ideas, activities and goals. And hardly any experience is likely to have made it as clear as the pandemic experience of the past few months that it is not possible for one part of the world’s population to prevent the spread of the virus or infection by the virus, but that the poor and the rich – even if they are affected to different degrees by the effects of the pandemic – can only face the challenges of the pandemic together.

Here it becomes clear that solidarity means more than just supporting the weak by the strong. Pope Francis referred to this in his exhortatio „*Evangelii gaudium*”. He emphasizes that solidarity is a spontaneous reaction of one who recognizes the social function of property and the universal destination of goods as realities, and he urges that solidarity be „lived as the decision to give back to the poor what is due to them.” But at the same time, a few lines earlier, he writes that the word „solidarity” has become a bit worn out and is sometimes misinterpreted, „it denotes much more than a few occasional acts of generosity. It requires creating a new mentality that thinks in terms of community and the priority of the lives of all over the appropriation of goods by a few.” The concept of solidarity, then, cannot be reduced to a financial commitment, but has to do with an attitude whose foundation is community and the priority of life as a commonly held value.

All too often in Germany, we still look for economic, social and societal solutions that focus exclusively on maximizing our own advantage. If the global pandemic with its cross-border character teaches us that we can only solve the great challenges of the future, such as the ecological challenge of climate change, in a spirit

of global solidarity – then we as a worldwide community of destiny have learned an essential lesson for the future through the pandemic.

Key words: pandemic, COVID, Church, mission