

Statement by Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki on the instruction “The pastoral conversion of the parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church”

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Called forth into a new era

In many of our dioceses in Germany today, we are trying to respond to the changed circumstances of our time at the level of our parishes and communities. For this reason, a few years ago here in the Archdiocese of Cologne, we set out on a "Pastoral Path for the Future". With his new guidelines, Pope Francis shows us the way, taking on the current challenges as an opportunity for a new missionary orientation. Let us dare to once again be what we are, as a Church: Ecclesia, the called one! Body of Christ, people of God, royal priesthood!

The instruction provides valuable suggestions on how the age-old institution of the parish can be transferred to our modern world. There is a clear call for conversion here, a conversion to an open, missionary and "rejuvenated" form of ecclesial communion. But this does not happen only by dint of structural change and purely human effort; rather, it begins with the conversion of the individual and thus takes its starting point in Christ. The new instruction therefore is anything but new as regards its orientation; in fact it is completely in line with the letter of 29 June 2019, which Pope Francis addressed to [the pilgrim people of God](#) in Germany with a view to the "Synodal Way". In it, the Holy Father warns against seeking out ecclesial renewal only in the reform of structures and calls on us to place evangelization and thus Christ at the very center. It is precisely here that the essential task of the parish, according to Pope Francis, becomes evident, namely that in "*all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers*". [1]

The Church's Mission

Notwithstanding the full scope of the document's content, which is worth studying as a whole, its reception here in the Church in Germany is focused on the question of leadership responsibility within a parish. In this context it is necessary that we reflect on the mission of the Church, on her very *raison d'être*. As the Second Vatican Council has aptly expressed it, "*the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely-knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race*". [2] The whole community of the Church participates in and is co-responsible for this mission of salvation. Therefore, the new document requires us bishops to promote "*practices and models by which all the baptized, by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit and their infused charisms, become active participants of evangelization, in the style and modality of an organic community*". [3]

Since all members of the Church receive a share in God's salvation and holiness, they are also connected with one another in the ecclesial community: "*sharing a common dignity as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection*" [4]. This ecclesial community is neither shapeless nor without structure, rather it is structured and can be experienced by people at various levels of concreteness: at the level of the Universal Church, the level of the particular Church or diocese, and at the level of the parish. "*The ecclesial community, while always having a universal dimension, finds its most immediate and visible expression in the parish.*" [5] The parish therefore plays a special role in providing access to the Church's complete reality of salvation.

Different roles, however equal dignity

This structure of the Church also corresponds to the specific responsibility which is not only borne by the Pope, us bishops and priests, but by the entire People of God through their respective apostolate. The lay faithful provide a specific and irreplaceable contribution, since through them the Church becomes present in the world "*as a sign and source of hope and love*" [6]. The collaboration of all the faithful is an organic reality, the Body of Christ, whose members are the faithful, but whose head is Christ himself. In this body, both the head and the members, with equal dignity, have their place and function in their own specific way. The presence of Christ, the head, in a parish is the responsibility borne by the priest, but not because being a priest means

automatically being more competent or holy, better than "the rest". Priests do not possess their capacity to lead a parish by themselves, but because through priestly ordination they have become "conformed to Christ the Priest" and are empowered to "*act in the person of Christ the Head*". [7]

The ministerial priesthood of ordination thus serves to gather and grow the People of God, who on their way through changing times encounter Christ in the celebration of the sacraments entrusted to the priest, and thus time and again constitute the local church of Christ Jesus. Through his special ministry of leadership, the priest should support, encourage and accompany the baptized as Christians: their attachment to Jesus Christ and their solidarity with the people of our time. As Archbishop of Cologne, it has been my concern to emphasize this, especially since embarking on the "Pastoral Path for the Future".

Joint responsibility for the Church

Just as the head and other parts work together in the unity of the body, so the lay faithful, in addition to their apostolate, "can also be called in various ways to a more direct form of cooperation in the apostolate of the Hierarchy. This was the way certain men and women assisted Paul the Apostle in the Gospel, laboring much in the Lord. (Cf. Phil. 4:3; Rom. 16:3ff.) Further, they have the capacity to assume from the Hierarchy certain ecclesiastical functions, which are to be performed for a spiritual purpose." [8] The new instruction from Rome does not deviate from this: the final responsibility for the direction of the parish lies with the parish priest, who is an ordained priest; at the same time, the laity are called to participate in the direction of the parish. This is not a question of esteem, but of the fact that we, priests and laity, share the responsibility for the Church of Christ.

A narrowing of the Church and her mission solely to the ordained priesthood is therefore not conducive to the goal and does not do justice to the dignity and role of all the baptized. The document sharpens our awareness of a certain tendency to think of the Church solely with a view to the parish priest. It puts an end to the temptation to fix the missionary charisma of a congregation solely on the role and function of the parish priest. For the evangelizing power of a church is far from being solely dependent on the

figure of the pastor! One could almost say that it is the other way around! The question I have to ask myself as a priest is, how can I help you to become holy? To develop and live your very personal vocation as a child of God? We as priests must ask ourselves, how can we help the faithful to evangelize themselves and others?

Conclusion

As the Body of Christ, the Church remains unchanged in its essence throughout the ages. As a visible part of the Church, however, we are called upon time and again to respond to the changes of our time. We must ask ourselves time and again how we can bring Christ to the people. As Church, we have to give God to the world - or we have nothing to give to it. If we as Church want to keep our right to exist, which we have so often invoked lately, it is because we recall our very own reason for being, "*that of bringing the Gospel to the People through the proclamation of the faith and the celebration of the Sacraments.*" [9]. The parish, as a local Church and a concrete community of believers, carries out this mission through the participation of each of its members.

In Germany, our discussions and proposals for reform tend to revolve around the role of the parish priest, as though we, priests and bishops, could carry out the mission of the Church alone, which is never the case. Let us dare, together, to transform our parishes and congregations more and more into pulsating centers of the encounter with Christ! Let the Holy Father call us to a way of being Church in which all the baptized, without exception, see themselves as active "*protagonists of evangelization*" [10] and lend a face to Christ for their fellow men and women: their own face.

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[1] Evangelii gaudium, n. 28.

[2] Lumen Gentium, n. 1. Cf. also Lumen Gentium, 48: "Christ, having been lifted up from the earth has drawn all to Himself (Cf. Jn. 12:32) Rising from the dead (Cf. Rom. 6:9) He sent His life-giving Spirit upon His disciples and through Him has established His Body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation."

[3] Instruction "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church", Ch. 6, n. 38.

[4] Lumen Gentium, n. 32

[5] Christifideles Laici, n. 26 (The Parish)

[6] Christifideles Laici, n. 7

[7] Presbyterorum Ordinis, n. 2

[8] Lumen Gentium, n. 33

[9] Instruction Ch. 2, n. 7

[10] Instruction Ch. 6, n. 39

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