

The Church in 2011: A Necessary Departure

It is over a year since cases of sexual abuse of children and youth by priests and religious at the Canisius School in Berlin were made public. Thereupon followed a year that plunged the Catholic Church in Germany into an unequalled crisis. Today, a split image is projected. Much has been undertaken to do justice to the victims, to come to terms with the wrong done, and to search out the causes of abuse, cover-up, and double standards within the Church's own ranks. Many responsible Christians, women and men, in office and unofficially, have come to realize, after their initial disgust, that deep-reaching reforms are necessary. The appeal for an open dialogue on structures of power and communication, the form of official church offices, and the participation of the faithful in taking responsibility for morality and sexuality have aroused expectations, but also fears. This might be the last chance for departure from paralysis and resignation. Will this chance be missed by sitting out or minimizing the crisis? Not everyone is threatened by the unrest of an open dialogue without taboos – especially since the papal visit *[to Germany]* will soon take place. The alternative simply cannot be accepted: the “rest of the dead” because the last hopes have been destroyed.

The deep crisis of our Church demands that we address even those problems which, at first glance, do not have anything directly to do with the abuse scandal and its decades-long cover-up. As theology professors, women and men, we can keep silence no longer. We consider ourselves responsible for contributing to a true new beginning: 2011 must be a Year of Departure for the Church. In the past year, more Christians than ever before have withdrawn from the Catholic Church. They have officially terminated their legal membership, or they have privatized their spiritual life in order to protect it from the institution. The Church must understand these signs and pull itself from ossified structures in order to recover new vitality and credibility.

The renewal of church structures will succeed, not with anxious withdrawal from society, but only with the courage for self-criticism and the acceptance of critical impulses – including those from the outside. This is one of the lessons of the last year: the abuse crisis would not have been dealt with so decisively without the critical accompaniment of the larger public. Only through open communication can the Church win back trust. The Church will become credible when only its image of itself is not removed so far from the image others have of the Church. We turn to all those who have not yet given up hope for a new beginning in the Church and who work for this. We build upon the signals of departure and dialogue which some bishops have given in recent months in speeches, homilies, and interviews.

The Church does not exist for its own sake. The church has the mission to announce the liberating and loving God of Jesus Christ to all people. The Church can do this only when it is itself a place and

a credible witness of the good news of the Gospel. The Church's speaking and acting, its rules and structures – its entire engagement with people within and outside the Church – is under the standard of acknowledging and promoting the freedom of people as God's creation. Absolute respect for every person, regard for freedom of conscience, commitment to justice and rights, solidarity with the poor and oppressed: these are the theological foundational standards which arise from the Church's obligation to the Gospel. Through these, love of God and neighbor become tangible.

Finding our orientation in the biblical Good News implies a differentiated relationship to modern society. When it comes to acknowledgement of each person's freedom, maturity, and responsibility, modern society surpasses the Church in many respects. As the Second Vatican Council emphasized, the Church can learn from this. In other respects, critique of modern society from the spirit of the Gospel is indispensable, as when people are judged only by their productivity, when mutual solidarity disintegrates, or when the dignity of the person is violated.

This holds true in every case: the Good News of the Gospel is the standard for a credible Church, for its action and its presence in society. The concrete demands which the Church must face are by no means new. And yet, we see hardly any trace of reform-oriented reforms. Open dialogue on these questions must take place in the following spheres of action.

1. Structures of Participation: In all areas of church life, participation of the faithful is a touchstone for the credibility of the Good News of the Gospel. According to the old legal principle "What applies to all should be decided by all," more synodal structures are needed at all levels of the Church. The faithful should be involved in the naming of important officials (bishop, pastor). Whatever can be decided locally should be decided there. Decisions must be transparent.

2. Community: Christian communities should be places where people share spiritual and material goods with one another. But community life is eroding presently. Under the pressure of the priesthood shortage, larger and larger administrative entities (Size "Extra Large" Parishes) are constructed in which neighborliness and sense of belonging can hardly be experienced anymore. Historical identity and built-up social networks are given up. Priests are "overheated" and burn out. The faithful stay away when they are not trusted to share responsibility and to participate in democratic structures in the leadership of their communities. Church office must serve the life of communities – not the other way around. The Church also needs married priests and women in church ministry.

3. Legal culture: Acknowledgement of the dignity and freedom of every person is shown when conflicts are borne fairly and with mutual respect. Canon law deserves its name only when the

faithful can truly make use of their rights. It is urgent that the protection of rights and legal culture be improved. A first step is the development of administrative justice in the Church.

4. Freedom of Conscience: Respect for individual conscience means placing trust in people's ability to make decisions and carry responsibility. It is the task of the Church to support this capability. The Church must not revert to paternalism. Serious work needs to be done especially in the realm of personal life decisions and individual manners of life. The Church's esteem for marriage and unmarried forms of life goes without saying. But this does not require that we exclude people who responsibly live out love, faithfulness, and mutual care in same-sex partnerships or in a remarriage after divorce.

5. Reconciliation: Solidarity with "sinners" presupposes that we take seriously the sin within our own ranks. Self-justified moral rigorism ill befits the Church. The Church cannot preach reconciliation with God if it does not create by its own actions the conditions for reconciliation with those before whom the Church is guilty: by violence, by withholding rights, by turning the biblical Good News into a rigorous morality without mercy.

6. Worship: The liturgy lives from the active participation of all the faithful. Experiences and forms of expression of the present day must have their place. Worship services must not become frozen in traditionalism. Cultural diversity enriches liturgical life, but the tendency toward centralized uniformity is in tension with this. Only when the celebration of faith takes account of concrete life situations will the Church's message reach people.

The already-begun dialogue process in the Church can lead to liberation and departure when all participants are ready to take up the pressing questions. We must lead the Church out of its crippling preoccupation with itself through a free and fair exchange of arguments and solutions. The tempest of the last year must not be followed by restful quietness! In the present situation, this could only be the "rest of the dead." Anxiety has never been a good counselor in times of crisis. Female and male Christians are compelled by the Gospel to look to the future with courage, and walk on water like Peter as Jesus said to him, "Why do you have fear? Is your faith so weak?"