

Inspiring a Plural Society

A German Perspective

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Contrary to the outsiders' view, that the faith life in Germany is debilitating, the author says that the criterion of faith and the Christian commitment to the mission of Jesus are not to be measured judging the numbers at a liturgical function, but what a church is becoming. The German author draws the trajectory of the growth of the German church into a force of inspiration for the people to live out the ideal of the Gospel. From the earlier identification of faith life with the nation, through the split into denominations the church life has become a source of inspiration, of course one among many in the pluralist context, for the people, the Government and the society to aspire for and practice higher values of service, co-existence and aesthetics in the socio-political life.

- Editor

In conversation with Asian priests who have done pastoral work in Germany I sometimes hear, with a mixture of disappointment and reproach, words like: “You are a Christian country with beautiful churches but often only one Sunday mass—and most parishioners stay at home. What do you do to bring your people back to liturgy?”

Pastoral theology has a great tradition in Germany. I, however, am not an expert in it. I teach dogmatic theology—but the answer needn't be “dogmatic,” all-fixed: before giving a rash answer, let us pause. Is that Christ's way of asking? “How to set up a pedagogy that brings people back to mass?”—such questions might come from a presumption, or at least out of some hidden assumption like: the Church is doing well when churches are full; so what we have to find is, methods that attract people.

A religious community which develops strategies to increase the number of its active members is rationalising itself according to commercial standards. Christ is sending us to serve (Mark 10:42–5); and that is not to say, to serve the vanity of a clergy hoping to celebrate in a packed assembly. If we are sent to be fishers of human beings, we know we will have to speak in dignity and liberty to human beings, rather than making them victims of appealing campaigns. Christ is a challenge. Not everybody will take the risk of the Kingdom. “Success is none of God’s names” (Martin Buber, *The Frankfurt Notebooks* n° 6, 1951, p. 195).

So, should we simply wait and see who comes, rather than move? No! We need to throw open the doors and get out. Pope Francis is reminding us of our true mission: to open up, to dare moving, to go to the peripheries (*Evangeliu Gaudium* n° 24, n° 30, n° 46). What is the theological background of this calling us out? It is ecclesiology in its most literal sense: the *ek-klēsia* is the assembly of those “called out”, the wandering people of God. The Church is the evangelising body of Christ; it is the missionary movement of the Spirit. The Church is God’s mystery and communion as “mission” (John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis* n° 12). We are hoping and praying for new baptisms and for convinced and convincing Christians in our societies. We have to evaluate self-critically where our own shortcomings are. Why do people who used to come not come any more? Christ’s apostolic body must ask this question. Only, where we start making our apostolic choices according to market standards, we are no longer apostolic. Catholic criteria for Church success cannot be reduced to statistics; but a realistic view is not afraid of numbers. So, we’ll have a look at some statistics, too.

The percentage of German Catholics who attend mass every Sunday is around 13. What does that mean? First, you can say: 13%, that is a lot! After all, Germany is highly industrialised, rationalised, individualised and secularised; and Germans are demanding. Many would desire an aesthetically, linguistically and spiritually top standard celebration. Then, however, one has to ask also: why is Germany so secularised in the first place, and why does secularisation in Germany have an effect on Catholics’ Church attendance? Part of the answer is that in itself s a fruit of Christianity and its European history. I will develop this in three theses. They are a systematic reflection of what one might call the background of liturgical

pedagogy. The first thesis is historical, the second is ecclesiological, the third is liturgical.

First thesis: The Church in Germany has moved into a new paradigm—inspiration

In history's changing contexts, the Church takes shape in profoundly differing ways. In the last 1000 years of what is today Germany, one can identify three successive types of Church life. (I have first developed this triple scheme of ideal types for my Paderborn talk, September 11, 2013, in the framework of the diocesan exhibition "*Credo. Wie Europa christlich wurde.*")

In a typological sketch, what was Christianity for people in their era? Which role did the Kingdom of God play in human lives in those times? In other cultural contexts, one might rediscover the same paradigms; often, however, in significantly different chronologies.

1. Nation. For medieval Germans, the basic paradigm of Christianity was *nation*. According to the national paradigm, you belong to the Church by birth, you are a *Christianus natus* (also, *nativus*, or indeed, *naturalis*). It is through your *gens* (people) that you are in Christ, by participating in your ruler's rebirth (*regeneratio*): by his baptism. For the "nation" type of Christendom, doctrine is of secondary importance. There is space for deviations without even marking them out as departing from the mainstream. There are niches for many life styles. Syncretism is not felt to be a threat to the unity of society. Difference in belief can be integrated, as long as it does not go against the ruler.
2. Confession. With the Reformation, the confessional paradigm takes over. Correct or false understanding of the faith becomes decisive; and divisive. Germany undergoes an era of "confessionalisation" (Wolfgang Reinhard, Heinz Schilling). Doctrine, definition, distinction have become markers of identity, of true Christianity and of faithfulness to God's Kingdom. The effect is a rationalisation, purification and conscious Christianisation of people's lives. Mutual exclusions, however, just as xenophobic suspicion, and social patterns of "othering" ensue. Till today, many Germans, and not only those who

call themselves Christians, seem to live in this paradigm. Still, the role of the Church for German society has moved on.

3. Inspiration. Now, the Church is becoming, within the German society, an inspiration. The two mainline Churches of Germany—Roman Catholic and *Evangelisch* (established Lutheran and Reformed Protestants)—are taken seriously as partners in dialogues on many levels. Long before the help of the sacraments comes into mind, one can already encounter professional Church outreach. Social, medical and educational institutions take responsibility in a society that lives according to the principle of “diversity of providers” (*Trägervielfalt*). Highly appreciated is, for example, professional pregnancy conflict counselling, dept counselling, family counselling. Church kindergartens, schools and professional training centres are widely respected. Church voices are taken seriously as well-informed contributions to societal processes of moral opinion making that prepare political and legal decisions. Catholic and mainline Protestant aid organisations are certified and popular fund-raising agencies for people in need; but more than that! They have also adopted the role of advocacy. They are critical voices reminding decision makers in Germany of their responsibility for the forgotten: the poor, the refugees, the marginalised. Church institutions like academies offer spaces of quality encounter and thus function as interface for intellectuals, politicians, economists, artists and the general public. Church programmes in the public broadcasting systems have their allocated times: information, reflection, even proclamation can be produced in a reflected, sober and empathetic way.

Where is this influence from? After World War II, the founders of the Federal Republic of Germany saw that a nation needs a point of reference, reverence and responsibility beyond human legislation. This is why the preface to the 1949 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany expresses the people’s “responsibility to God and to human beings”. They had learned their lesson from German Nazi terror that had dehumanised, humiliated, uprooted and killed millions.

40 years later, in 1989, peaceful demonstrations caused the bloodless revolution and led to the fall of the Berlin wall. In those months, it was especially protestant churches that opened their gates. They became

gathering places, a “substitute public” and symbols of a possible change: spaces of listening and sometimes even of prayer, for people who had been subject to decades of atheist propaganda. Especially Lutheran pastors thus created points of departure for the masses carrying candles and calling for a united Germany. They were singing Church hymns but also the socialist “Internationale.” Inner-Christian confessional differences were not discussed. Immediately after the Berlin Wall had fallen, East German Catholics were invited to help reconstruct a democratic, responsible society out of what had, only weeks before, been a system of totalitarian control and inhumane ideology; but the surprising, non-violent re-unification did not bring back Christianity into the East. Church life is free again, but decades of atheist propaganda had done its job: many people in the East are—not aggressively atheist but without much religious interest or even spiritual thirst.

The German West does not only have a well-functioning institutionalised Church presence but also civil Christianity. The sense that “we are a Christian country” is, however, not always a truly Christian profession. Calls for a profiled Christian culture are growing—sometimes with problematic overtones, when it comes to defend an alleged Christian identity over against immigrants. On the other hand, some opinion makers, politicians, sports heroes and other public figures are known to be Christian, and convincingly so.

The 2010 abuse scandals first seemed to destroy the trust in Catholic institutions, figures and values. In those months, more Catholics than in the years before and after, cancelled their official Church membership. Still, an awareness was growing that abuse of minors is not a consequence of celibacy or a typical Church problem. The Church has become humbler in its self presentation; but the Church has also become an example in prevention measures and in listening to the victims of all sorts of power abuse.

In urgent questions, the Church’s expertise, experience and encouragement is being consulted. An important example is the establishment of institutes for Islamic theology at German state universities.

The Church is present, atmospherically and institutionally, audibly and visibly, culturally and professionally; but in no field is the Catholic voice

the only voice. Political parties, media, movements, individuals and other religious or para-religious proposals and fashionable ideas can be equally influential. The Church *is* an inspiration, but it is not the only one; and since the Reformation, people have become more and more used to the fact that there is not only one Church around. The two major Churches have coexisted in Germany in almost equal strength with well-educated pastoral staff, a respected academic standing in universities and other institutions of reflection and formation. Their mutual interaction, as rival and partner, has had mostly positive effects. Thus, in today's Germany Christianity has become a "soft power" (Joseph S. Nye), cooperating with the State and society without aspiring for clerical politics or a state religion.

Christianity is by far not the only voice in German opinion making. Christian views and Church representatives are being challenged; there is animosity, polemics, lack of knowledge and lack of interest. Catholicism has no guaranteed influence; but it is a quality interlocutor. In this sense, Christianity in Germany has arrived at its third stage. Is, however, a Church that accepts the role of inspiring a society not resorting to a deplorable residue of what was, in brighter days, the full ecclesial existence? No. The reasons need to be explored now.

Second thesis: New Evangelisation is the rediscovery of the Church as divine service

In a country like Germany, New Evangelisation is not a call to regain lost territory. That would be falling back into the paradigm of 'nation' rather than constructively appreciating the present situation—Church as inspiration. So, what is New Evangelisation in such a context?

1. New Evangelisation is a way of looking at history. Pope John Paul II first spoke of an imminent New Evangelisation of his home country when the political situation seemed to contradict him completely (at Mogia, Poland, June 9, 1979). In his sense, any talk of New Evangelisation is—not a strategic answer to a frustrating analysis but—an optimistic discovery of God's action in the world: the opportunities he provides.
2. Evangelising enthusiasm easily creates a dualist sociology. If a "small

flock” of the true Christians demarcates itself over against the tepid compromisers, that is not Catholic ecclesiology! The Church is, for us, not the “amongst-ourselves” club. The Church is, rather, communion as a process. The Church is the sign and instrument of our unification with all humanity and with God (*Lumen Gentium* n° 1). New Evangelisation can be understood as the truly Catholic version of Evangelism: the Church’s universal sacramentality, the communion in which, in different ways, all creatures take part.

3. So what is a Church like that has exposed itself to New Evangelisation? What happens when Christians allow the Gospel to newly convert them? What does Catholicism look like when it is evangelised by the celebration of its mystery (*Evangelii Gaudium* n° 24)? It is a Church that does not count membership cards but that is cheerfully serving. “I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds.” This is Pope Francis’ view (September 30, 2013, *America Magazine*) of the Church living from the experience of new evangelisation. An outgoing Church is an inspiration to the society in which it lives. In such a Church of service, for this “inspiring” Church, what is the role of liturgy?

Third thesis: The Church is celebrating the future of humanity

The Church is called to provide service. Church service cannot be divided into cultic on the one side and social on the other. True Christian liturgy, precisely as divine service, is God’s transformation of humanity into joyful, generous people who serve their Lord in serving others. This is most obvious in the Eucharist. Christ is inviting us to celebrate, already in this world, the future of humanity. We are called to his table fellowship in the Kingdom of God. We may, already now, experience the final fulfillment of human life: communion with God. The banquet of eternity anticipated in our present history fills us joy. It gives us a feeling of what being human is all about: sharing in the joy of the risen Christ, living out of God’s life-giving community. This orientation encourages us. It gives us energy, patience, but also orientation. Therefore, Christians can find ever new ways of testifying to God’s service to us. Therefore, they find ever new ways of living God’s love. It is not out of strategic calculation but in the

eucharistic joy that Christians express what they have discovered as humanity in fulfilment; the liturgical celebration becomes social action, and becomes societal institution. Out of their celebration's orienting energy, Christians are creative in backing up and criticising, in relativising, reformulating or revitalising values of their respective cultures. Out of their celebrating experience, they verbalise ever new orienting priorities ("values")—and motivate each other to realise them. The celebrating people of God encourages processes of ethical discernment—and gives them an orientation. That is how the Church-at-feast is an inspiration in a pluralist, democratic country like Germany today.—This may be explicated in the light of three examples.

1. Televised Mass

Since 1986, every Sunday, a public TV channel (*ZDF*) broadcasts Christian liturgy. Catholic mass and Protestant service alternate. The range of possible congregations to be seen is not limited to Germany. Every time, another German language church is being visited: it may be an expat parish in Istanbul, a seminary in Frankfurt, a hospital in Hannover, an Austrian abbey or a village Church in a diaspora area of what was East Germany. In any case, music plays an important role. So, for each hymn, the TV station also broadcasts the numbers of the two denominations' official hymn books. Many viewers, unable to physically go to mass, sing along in their living-rooms. The congregation that will be seen on each Sunday is never particularly selected; what is shown is regular Church life. The beauty of the vestments, the dignity of the gestures, the simplicity of the words, and the normality of the people attending mass transmit a strong message. Obviously, the practice has its problems: are we celebrating God's mystery, when people can follow it from their sofas? It is, however, the Church that is, this way, opening up to people; and authenticity as it becomes visible in such a simple celebration by become a purifying contrast to the glamour of most other TV programmes.

2. Altar Servants

Is liturgical pedagogy what we tell the young about the liturgy? Mostly not. The greatest project of liturgical pedagogy in Germany is the huge amount of boys and girls who volunteer for altar service. Every parish organises their formation and their scheduling—and the young do an

excellent job. When I was on a supply in the Limburg diocese some months ago, a regular Sunday mass would be served by eight well-formed altar servants aged 11 to 19. It is not our talking about liturgy that makes them feel God's mystery but our showing them how to move and stand and kneel, how to incense the people of God and how communicate near the altar. There is great sense for the sanctity of the place, for the dignity of service.

3. Church Buildings

From 340 on, there is ecclesial architecture in Germany. The buildings are well looked after and kept in a shape that is at the same time historically accurate and theologically sound. Mostly, public and ecclesial funding carry—often heavy—repair costs together. At the beginning of the 20th century, theological and cultural developments allowed for new building styles: a new church would no longer be what was the idea in the 19th century: a re-edition of medieval forms. A church built today has to speak today's architectural language. This breakthrough made for many fascinating buildings in the last 100 years. So, we find impressive spaces, great pieces of art from all epochs in Germany since the Church's early centuries. Most Catholic churches are open also during the weekdays. In the pedestrian zones of the cities, people simply enter to see the artistic quality, to find a space of silence – but also to light a candle: you need not be a regular mass attendant to do that.

Conclusion

Liturgical pedagogy in Germany is primarily not bringing people to mass. Liturgical pedagogy is, first of all, what liturgy itself offers. In its language of gestures, lights, smells and sounds it is witnessing to the world to come: the hope that human being is more than what we tend to reduce ourselves to. In celebrating the mystery of Christ, the Church is offering God's service to humanity: inspiring them to be men and women who accept life with reflected joy, serve in dignified generosity and act out of a responsible conscience.