

Bishop Bätzing Lenten Pastoral Letter 2026

English translation

Repent, Think Anew: The Kingdom of God Is at Hand!

Pastoral Letter for Lent 2026

By Dr. Georg Bätzing, Bishop of Limburg

Dear brothers and sisters in faith!

We live in challenging times; there is no doubt about that. Habits, structures, and lifetime assumptions that were familiar and gave us security are reaching their limits or have already lost their formative influence. And this doesn't affect just a small part of our lives--almost all areas are affected by major upheavals. Social cohesion, which is based so much on solidarity with one another, is crumbling; the political climate and confidence in the ability of parliamentary democracy to shape the future are both in crisis; the climate emergency and the growing influence of artificial intelligence demand urgent attention and decisive action; and in church life, too, we have long seen more breakdowns than new beginnings, and the causes lie not only in the untrustworthy image that we portray as a church (and I expressly include myself here), but also in the fact that belief in God itself has long been called into question.

In view of all these phenomena, some speak of an epochal change, something extraordinary that is unparalleled in recent history. It is hardly surprising that many people—including many believers among us—are confused, unsettled, and burdened with fears about the future. So, what can we do? How can we turn things around, at least in those areas where we can make a difference, when the old ways are clearly no longer working and probably can't be easily repaired or restored?

When Something Comes to an End

Ends and beginnings: For Jesus, the end of John the Baptist's prophetic ministry was obviously the impetus for him to step forward himself and proclaim the Gospel. "From that time on," according to the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 4:17,

also Mark 1:14-15), “Jesus began to preach and say: Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” At the beginning of Lent, this impulse resounds every year and invites us to regard these holy forty days as a gift of time to grow inwardly in faith and to make visible the fact that, through Jesus, we are redeemed and liberated. For me, Jesus combines two perspectives in his first public appearance that can provide direction in the crises of our time: Fear is a poor adviser when it comes to changing our attitudes and, even more so, our way of life. Threatening gestures and doomsday scenarios tend to cause people to freeze; in any case, they rarely prompt action. Jesus promotes a grand and appealing vision: the Kingdom of Heaven is near. It is coming. Soon afterward, people will understand that it has already dawned with Jesus, for his preaching and his presence lift people out of their paralysis. He touches the sick, and they are healed. He gathers the poor and the disadvantaged around him and gives them confidence in God's name. Jesus lives what he says—and he himself is the enticing sign of hope of which he speaks. Translated into our situation, this means, for me, that I do not want to be constantly influenced by the prophets of doom of our time. I do not want to deny reality, but I do consciously look for good news that makes people sit up and take notice and gives them courage, because good seeds are being sown by those who take risks. I do not want to merely seek hope – and then all too often sadly miss it – I want to spread hope myself, together with many other hopeful people. I want to hold fast to Jesus, quite concretely, by talking to him in prayer and taking his love of God and humanity as my standard. The kingdom of heaven is at hand; that is the core of the good news that we are to proclaim in the footsteps of Jesus.

The Art of Changing One's Thinking

A second perspective that can be helpful in the face of epochal changes lies in the call to repentance. The Greek word *metanoieite* used in the Gospels' phrasing Jesus' sermon is open to various and nuanced interpretations. “Repent and be converted” is how it's usually translated in German; in English it comes out as “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” But the word can also mean “change your mind” or “think anew.” I find that particularly interesting: when habits and ways of thinking reach their limits, when the familiar breaks away and comes to an end, then change your thinking, think anew. Admittedly, changing our thinking is at

least as difficult as changing well-established personal behaviours. I'd like to ask: When was the last time you changed your mind about an important matter? How did it come about? On what issue have you changed your perspective? And who or what made you reconsider? In recent months, I've gained insights for which I must give credit to others. They relate to looking from a different angle at the often lamentable situation of faith and the Church. I'd like to briefly tell you about three of them.

1. The theologian Paul Zulehner, who was born 1939, has once again pointed out the consequences of the epochal change in faith and the Church in a secular environment, which we are still far from fully understanding. If it's true that it's no longer fate that determines whether someone is a believer or not, if today it's much more a matter of each individual's decision whether he or she belongs to the Church and practises the faith, then we must consequently stop measuring today's developments by yesterday's standards. However, we still often take the whole population as a benchmark when we say that such and such a percentage of people in our country are "still Christians" today. For me, thinking in new ways means that it goes without saying that not everyone in our country believes in God, professes Jesus as Saviour and feels part of the Church. Was it any different in Jesus' time? Don't the biblical accounts tell us how God's grace is effective in the conversion of individuals? For me, everyone who believes today is a miracle of God's grace. Look around you, God is working his miracles among us, in very concrete ways.

Secularisation Encounters Its Limits

2. For several years now, I've observed events that run counter to society's ever-increasing secularisation. Every week, one priest or another from our diocese tells me of individuals who are interested in the faith, asking to rejoin the Church or convert to Catholicism. In conversations with these people, a variety of motivations and approaches becomes apparent, and such conversations often give pastoral workers real encouragement. During a recent encounter with young people, I was astonished that they did not confirm my assumption that faith and the Church are something that fails to

interest them or that don't seem particularly credible. Among their peers and in the social networks they follow, spirituality and personal faith are discussed openly. They find this exciting, saying it helps them to tackle the many challenges they face. This reminds me of something that Jean-Marc Cardinal Aveline, the archbishop of Marseille, once said. For years, thousands of people in France have been preparing for baptism at the Easter Vigil, seeking guidance and finding it in the faith of the Church. Those responsible still don't really know how this trend reversal came about or what's behind it. Cardinal Aveline admits honestly: "We kept the front door of the church open, but many came in through the window." How good it is that the Spirit of God blows where He wills (cf John 3:8). Perhaps He will also help us to learn to think and see anew where faith is growing.

Churches – Small, Mobile, and Approachable

3. Churches and chapels shape the appearance of our villages and towns. They are often historic, and their imposing structures remind us of the importance of faith and the personal commitment of many generations before us. However, it's also part of an honest assessment that we now have to think carefully and make decisions about the preservation or relinquishment of some church buildings because we no longer fill them with life, while their maintenance is beyond the means of the parishes. These are painful insights and processes that have been observable in our diocese for years. Recently, however, I was moved by a contrasting example: In Frankfurt's Niederrad district, in the middle of the newly developed Lyoner Quartier, a tiny church was opened ecumenically, a mobile mini-church measuring 7 x 2.5 meters. The smallest of all the houses in this new district is a response to how the church wants to be present among the 7,000 people in this modern neighborhood development with a high turnover of residents and many single-person households. In the past, a church and a parish center would have been built in a new district. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to follow the deliberation process. Those responsible asked themselves: How can we offer something to the people here? What would be appropriate? So they experimented: meetings in a

rented shop, or opportunities for conversation and short presentations in the entrance area of a supermarket, among other activities. Mobile, personally present, openly inviting without ulterior motives, a Christmas party for young people at the little illuminated church at midnight. This shows rethinking and gaining experience in how we really want to be a church among people and stay in contact with them.

What Has Yet to Be Realized for the Kingdom of God

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Dear brothers and sisters in faith, with this call, the Lord encourages us to understand God's great future with us humans and with his Creation as an incentive. In our personal lives and our shared responsibility for the Church and society, let us consider and address all that has yet to be realized in the vision of the Gospel: greater trust in God, more justice, genuine peace and reconciliation, mutual appreciation among us humans, while care has yet to grow enough for the little ones, the weak, and the poor. It can really help to practice taking new perspectives together, awakening the senses, and thinking new thoughts. Six weeks lie ahead of us until Easter, holy days of repentance and penance, which today's prayer refers to as a gift of time. Yes, Lord, “through their celebration, grant us the grace to grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ and to make visible the power of his act of salvation through a life of faith.”

For you and all those connected with you, I ask God's rich blessings in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Limburg, the 1st Sunday of Lent 2026

Your Bishop

Georg