

## **Finding Courage in Difficult Times**

### ***Bishop Georg Bätzing's Note to the Faithful for Lent 2022***

*Abridged English-Language Translation*

As in previous years, I've prepared a Pastoral Letter for the Easter penitential season, with the German version on the table at the back of the church for you to take home and the English synopsis available on the parish website. It's a review of current trends of change in society and the church. In addition, I urge you to watch podcasts we'll be posting throughout Lent, of people whose experience with drastic life changes I hope you'll find inspirational.

However, I am moved today to offer you something else -- words of encouragement as the church confronts a wide range of pressures. These stem from publication of abuse investigations, most recently in Munich; the disturbing reactions of some in the church's leadership, up to Pope Emeritus Benedikt; the #OutInChurch initiative of queer staff demanding dignified recognition of their sexual orientation and their most personal decisions on partnerships; and – not least –

the third gathering of the Synodal Way in Frankfurt, where large majorities approved initial decisions on how to pursue church transformation.

### **A Dramatic Crisis Confronts the Church**

The crisis facing our church is extreme. I've rarely before received so many letters and emails from people expressing such shock, outrage, disappointment and confusion. Many young people are among them – particularly those who had felt deeply tied to the church and their faith for decades and committed themselves personally to their parish's Masses and charitable witness. They're volunteers or employees – but they doubt things can last. They see in their own families and neighborhoods massive questioning about how long they can support this "club." Many of them are considering declaring their departure from the church. And some who have taken that step have written to me about their personal struggles that led to this decision. For many, it's a highly emotional move to separate from the church as an institution, even though they consider themselves Christian and see their faith in God as a basis of their lives.

A young woman who's a church registrar in our diocese wrote me of how troubled people seem to her and of their need to talk. She permitted me to quote some of her letter: "These people haven't lost their faith in Christian values; they've lost their faith in an institution that had provided them with those values from childhood but that they sense has transformed into something deeply deceitful and dispiriting." She goes on to say the church needs a recognizable renewal, taking steps to meet people where they are. I'm so thankful that this woman doesn't want to give up on the church and the faith. She expressed with few words what I'm aware many of you are thinking and discussing.

### **Hearing the Voice of Christ Among Those Suffering**

The crisis stems from the incidences of sexual violence and power abuse, with many people in responsible positions thinking more of protecting the institution than aiding those who suffered. In addition, the people in the #OutInChurch initiative have shown us that the church turned its back on those in pastoral roles who needed support, comfort or encouragement as they formed partnerships, struggled with

breakups and sought to share the joy of finding a new spouse. Instead, the institutional church judged and excluded people. For such pain inflicted on church believers, I can only humbly ask for forgiveness. Two weeks ago, the General Vicar and I assured church staff that that such rejection will no longer be part of employment policies.

These decades-long failures are now coming to light as, particularly, the victims of sexual abuse end their silence and reveal their suffering. We who hold posts of power in the church must take these issues seriously. The recent Synodal Way conference adopted a basic text that says essentially: those who suffered these wrongs speak to us with the voice of Christ. They need justice. Our church will only be in Christ when it changes course and renews itself.

### **A Thorough Cleanup and Concrete Change**

Dear faithful parishioners, this constant run of revelations and investigation results has prompted you to ask “Will it never stop?” I understand this impatience. We German bishops made a commitment in autumn 2018 to bring the dark past of the

church into the light with publication of the MHG Study, an unsparing, independently compiled report on sex abuse in our church. after all, it's not just the past, it's our present. The Limburg Diocese undertook a related project, *Betroffene hören - Missbrauch verhindern* (Listening to Victims, Preventing Abuse). The victims live among us, and we owe them justice. Violations must be documented and, where possible, criminally prosecuted. The church can't set itself outside the state's judicial structures.

Our project can't be just investigative. It needs to involve an overhaul from the ground up, revamping church structures so much that any future abuse -- whether in the workplace, psychological or sexual spheres -- can be prevented. We already took some policy steps with church workers years ago to ensure children and young adults can be safe within the church.

Outside experts' recommendations from the *Betroffene hören -- Missbrauch verhindern* project are also bringing concrete results across the diocese, including a newly conceived education program for priests; structures to assure equality for female employees, including an appeal setup; and assignment of two

contact people to offer lifelong spiritual support mechanisms for LGBT staff. A particularly important development is the joint establishment of an abuse-victims advisory council with the dioceses of Mainz and Fulda, plus our own independent commission for continual review of whether our measures take account of victims' viewpoints. I am extraordinarily thankful for those who support our efforts. They will be crucial to pointing out and eliminating our blind spots.

### **Believers as a Source of Turnaround and Renewal**

During a recent conversation on the current situation, an employee said: "The church's permafrost is melting." He meant that questions, convictions and ways of dealing that the church established over the centuries – and that were frozen in place and presumably permanent – are finally beginning to move and absorb energy. It's truly a precarious situation for the church and for us all, as the way out is unclear. Even so, I'm strongly convinced, and trust, that we will meet the challenge of this crisis and become more honest, believing, humane and willing to serve. By doing so, we'll be answering the call of Jesus Christ.

I see no alternative to this “forward exit”. It will be liberating to take up this urgent renewal.

Readers of our church newspaper were asked a few weeks ago what they see as valuable in the church. Some answers included: “My faith helped me in my hardest times”; “our parish is diverse and works to sustain that”; “God needs our individuality – you and me – and I want to give the church a face”.

I find such personal witnessing a magnificent source of strength that upholds both me and the church and provides hope for a better future. Make this the basis of your personal faith experience and share it with others. This is what we live for, and what the church displays in the best sense.

I close with this request to you all: pray for me, as I pray for you, that we recognize God’s will for us and the church to stay on the path of Christ. So, may we receive the protection and blessing of our gracious God, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Your Bishop

Georg

Limburg, the First Sunday of Lent 2022