

*"WE HAVE HEARD: GOD IS WITH YOU" (Zech. 8:23)*

Living change in the church -- honestly and confidently

PASTORAL LETTER FOR LENT 2024

Dear brothers and sisters in faith!

In the first few months of the year, there's a lot of tension in many accounting departments, as companies weigh up profits and losses to see whether the year was successful. Many individuals also take stock, in the hope that, as they review successes, setbacks, growth and stagnation, the scales will tip in a positive direction. However, if we try to "close the year" in the larger context of this world, things look bleak. The measure of whether we could counteract what causes people to flee their homes, to become internally displaced or seek asylum, or to slow the economic and ecological consequences of climate crisis: negative. The balance of hope that people might at last see that terror and war change nothing for the better: negative.

We in the church have also lost a lot. Far too many have turned their backs on us again, for a range of reasons. Behind the shockingly high number departures are individuals who've taken stock and made a decision. And I am sorry about each one of them.

DEPARTURES CANNOT BE DENIED

What we've long sensed intuitively and statistically was confirmed a few months ago by a new church-membership survey<sup>1</sup> of more than 5,000 people, including religious and non-religious persons, church-going and the unchurched, with data broken out for the Catholic Church for the first time. The figures confirm a picture of continuing and rapid decline for both of Germany's major faiths, whose social significance is dwindling. Only 48% of our country's population now belongs to either of the two major churches -- and even fewer believe that there is a God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ. Criticism of the church as an institution is confirmed. And the thesis that people are just taking their religiosity away from churches and into the private sphere is refuted. Lived faith outside of the churches is virtually non-existent; religious convictions have virtually no significance for the way people lead their lives.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wie hältst du's mit der Kirche? Zur Bedeutung der Kirche in der Gesellschaft. Erste Ergebnisse der 6. Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung, hrsg von der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), Leipzig 2023: <https://kmu.ekd.de/>

Our country is becoming more secular and the majority of the population is hardly approachable in religious terms.

Findings on the remaining faithful also paint a picture of a dramatic crisis: Only 4% of Catholics and 6% of Protestants say they're closely attached to their church. Trust, especially in the Catholic Church, has fallen enormously. And almost half of Catholics are thinking about leaving the church, with only a third ruling it out in principle.

It would be fatal to deny or trivialize such developments. Let's be honest: We have long ceased being able to pass on our faith and attachment to the church from generation to generation.

### REALITY SMILES ON US

Similar to the personal grieving process, in church circles there are phases of denial and placing blame. For some, it has long been the "evil" world and its obsession with growth, wellness and gender. Such overly simplistic narratives are increasingly finding supporters, but they are of little help as an explanation. It is not German Catholics who are increasingly distancing themselves from the universal church. It is Rome, with its persistent unwillingness to reform and lack of honesty about the structural causes of abuse, which is prompting more and more people to distance themselves.

There may be a grain of truth in both arguments, but placing blame hampers the search for ways out and new perspectives.

Even so, I have personally long held a conviction based on many encounters: Reality is actually smiling on us. After all, we believe that God showed himself in the space and time of our world when Jesus became man. That's why, for me, the reality of the world today remains a place to discover traces of the divine. We must not close our eyes to what is happening around and within us. Even if the first glance is sobering and disillusioning, it's necessary for discovering something that on a second look breaks previous patterns and helps to initiate something new.

### CHANGING HABITS

So let's take a second look at the church-membership study. It reveals a number of astonishing things:

- Although so many of them are quitting, Catholics find it emotionally difficult to do so. Rather than indifference, leaving the church is often

associated with anger, rage and suffering. This could be a starting point for a conversation with those people.

- Those who remain expect the church to work against poverty and for justice, in line with the vast majority of the unchurched subjects in the survey. The commitment to refugees, climate protection and combating poverty are obviously still key to the church's external credibility.
- While I often hear critical voices saying that a supposedly "silent majority" is skeptical about reform, the survey proves the opposite. An overwhelming 96% of Catholics say: "My church must change fundamentally if it wants to have a future." The most important issues include a positive approach to homosexuality, more genuine participation by the laity, the free choice of marriage or celibacy for priests and greater ecumenical cooperation. This means, however, that attempts to maintain certain norms despite low acceptance among the faithful will probably lead to even more defensiveness, conflict and church exits. Reforms certainly won't solve all of the Catholic Church's problems, but strife will be exacerbated if reforms fail to take place.
- Half of all members of the Catholic Church are involved in voluntary work -- significantly more than the average population. We need to spread the word on why community and others' well-being are so important to us.
- The approval rate for Confirmation and First Holy Communion remains high. A third of our population has attended a church daycare center. Our child and youth programs continue to be used. Conversely, it's also clear that those who don't come into contact with the church in their youth are unlikely to do so later on.
- Finally, the churches still have a wide reach. Church locations, parishes, Caritas facilities, educational work and counseling services have an impact on society. A third of all respondents stated that they've had contact with church staff and agencies.

## GOD OPENS UP THE FUTURE

We are not at the end as an institution, but a very specific social form of church that has developed over the past 150 years is coming to a conclusion. The springs of faith are still bubbling up today, because God stands by His promises. This is why I find the words of the Prophet Zechariah encouraging: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: It shall yet come to pass [...] men of the nations of every language shall take a man of Judah by his garment, and shall hold him fast, saying, 'we will go with you; for we have heard: God is with you.'" (Zech. 8:20-

23). The basic experience of people of faith is that God walks by our side as the Rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This motivates people to proceed outward themselves because, as the theologian Fulbert Steffensky puts it, "It is as if people who come into contact with the Mystery cannot stand it in their old place.... they go and seek their happiness and salvation elsewhere. Restlessness in the traditional place, dissatisfaction with the old places, leaving the old houses to seek a new one -- it is a basic movement of faith. What do our settled churches do with this?"<sup>2</sup>

## SETTING OUT

There is a great temptation to focus solely on internal church activities when the world obviously no longer wants to know much about us. But retreating has never been the way forward. On the contrary, I am convinced that we needn't ask, "What will become of us?" We should live selflessly in faith -- personally and in communal forms -- and offer faith in all its dimensions as much as we can. Do it selflessly and talk about why we do it, why it's important to us and what drives us at our core.

Perhaps we've taken it too much for granted in recent decades, that people know what the church is and what faith is all about. Instead, we should start meeting people in all our church activities and in our personal lives in such a way that they begin to ask questions. I am deliberately holding back on offering solutions on how this should happen, because they won't succeed when imposed from the top down. It's more effective if you try it yourselves, where you live your faith: in the churches and the wider parishes, in centers and institutions offering church services. It would be a good starting point for the newly elected parish councils to come to a sober and honest agreement about their realities and, based on the results of the church membership survey, to formulate their priorities.

For some time now, I've noticed an advertising poster from the Working Group of Catholic Social Education Centers that asks in large letters: Are you the change that our society needs? I think to myself: Yes, I want to live the change that our church needs. And I would like to do it together with many others.

Your Bishop

Dr. Georg Bätzing, Bishop of the Diocese of Limburg

The First Sunday of Lent 2024

---

<sup>2</sup> Fulbert Steffensky, Schutt und Asche. Streifzüge durch Bibel und Gesangbuch, Stuttgart 2023, 178