

Being Catholic

Pastoral Letter
for Lent 2020,
Bishop Peter Kohlgraf

Translation: Eva Baillie/Mark Baillie, February 2020

Umschlagmotiv:

Detail aus dem Altar-Glasgemälde „Verwandlung“
in der Jakobuskrypta (geweiht 2006) von „Hl. Dreifaltigkeit“ in Offenbach;
weitere Bilder beziehen sich auf die Sakramente der Kirche
(S. 4, 7, 8, 9, 11 Details aus: Buße, Taufe, Eucharistie, Priesterweihe, Ehe).
Glasmalerei und Fertigung von Robert Münch (geb. 1949), Groß-Umstadt.
Wir danken sehr für die Abdruckgenehmigung.

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Herzlichen Dank für alle Hilfe bei den Übersetzungen!

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the diocese of Mainz,

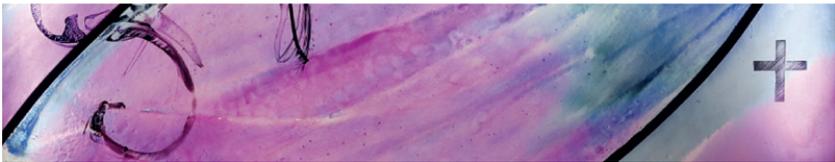
What belief do you have? In one of his shows, comedian Konrad Beikircher has a Rhineland character's answer: "Normal". He refers obviously to his Catholic denomination that is the "normal faith" for the local Rhinelander. Please note – we are dealing with a comedy programme.

The Christians of the first centuries might have had a similar understanding: they confessed their Catholic faith, which meant affiliation with all men and women and a community of the faithful around the world. They could not have imagined anything else. For centuries, this sentiment continued, through the ups and downs of history.

The situation is changing noticeably today. Even the friendly Rhinelanders would not confess his „normal“ faith and his affiliation with the Catholic Church that easily. Pride comes before a fall – this is not only my current perception of the situation of the Catholic Church, but also that of many people who are struggling with their journey of faith.

In reflecting on the inviting aspects of my church in this letter, I do not intend on diminishing its negative sides: sin and much darkness have left their marks on present-day church life, and these aspects cannot be erased, no matter how good our intentions are. My thoughts are also not to be interpreted as degrading towards other churches or denominations. But Christianity only exists in its various denominational expressions. My history and my everyday life are influenced and determined by the Catholic tradition that I cannot eliminate from my life.

In their quest for symbols of Catholicism during the long tradition of the church, theologians have often employed the image of the wide and open arms of the crucified who tries to embrace humanity. They would point to his open heart from which the sacraments of the church emerge. Being Catholic has always meant to endure tension, to be open to the questions of the world with an open mind and heart, and to know of Christ's love for us. Being Catholic has also always meant to want this experience for all men and not to withdraw selfishly into the inner world of faith.



I want to briefly elaborate how I got the idea for this year's pastoral letter: in the Catholic Church in Germany, we are at the beginning of a synodal process that will look into topics that have long been smouldering. The process has been initiated after the discovery of the sexual abuse of children, and other people entrusted into our care, by clerics. During the forthcoming synodal process, we will use different settings to discuss topics such as power, sexual morals, the priestly way of life, and the role of women in services and offices of the church.

In different contexts, I am taken aback by aggressive voices asking those who argue for change to leave the Catholic Church and convert to Protestantism where their requests are met - even though the Protestant sisters and brothers are seen to be "not any better off".

What defines us as Catholics? Is the defining aspect of our identity as Catholics that we do not ordain women, which we consider practising sexuality outside marriage as sin, that our priests cannot marry and that we as bishops do not allow any real control of our office? Of course, many people associate these topics with the Catholic Church. However, will any of this help me, when I am on my deathbed, waiting for the deciding encounter of my life? Is God as small as we often seem to make him out to be with our regulations, limitation and norms?

I ask these questions in all seriousness: my identity as Catholic cannot be primarily about restrictions, prohibition, and the attachment to official authorities. In return, this does not imply the unreflected fulfilment of all expectations; however, the affirmative quest for a Catholic identity is very rarely the content of our debates. We draw boundaries. And how often are those who struggle with the traditions confronted with the accusation of not being sufficiently Catholic! I am worried by these aggressive tones and the harsh judgement of others. These aggressive public displays will not encourage anybody to reflect on the beauty of the Gospel. As a Bishop, I ask you for verbal disarmament and a return to what really matters.

What does it mean then, to "be Catholic"? The Catechism of the Catholic Church helps me to understand as it lists four criteria: the one confession of faith, the experience of the sacraments, the apostolic succession and the tradition and unity of the worldwide church. (CCC 830-856)

Communal faith

The creed we say during mass and which unites us with other Christian churches summarizes our faith. Christian faith is not arbitrary, but, rather, it has context. The words of the confessions and dogmas are the results of long negotiations. They did not emerge from a desk, but, instead, are the result of intensive quests for and deep experiences of faith.

When I look at the New Testament, I see four gospels, many letters of the apostles and various other texts. There are many ways of approaching Jesus Christ. In the beginning, there is no dogma, but, rather, a variety of encounters with the risen one. Whenever we pray the creed, the "credo", the "I believe", it is not an abstract text summarizing facts. For me, it becomes increasingly a personal confession of faith: "I believe you, father, I believe you, son, I believe you, holy spirit. In your community/unity originates the church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead and eternal life"¹

The personal baptismal promise is put into words. There is one connecting element in the plurality of faith experiences: "Jesus Christ became flesh". He became man. This is the inner core of the Catholic faith, as we read it in the first letter of John (1 John 4,2). The grand musical versions of the creed always put one message in the centre – "et incarnatus est – He became flesh." Because God becomes human through Jesus, the Catholic faith is sensual, life affirming, and affirmative of the human body. Being Catholic means to believe in and celebrate God with all senses. Our church year is colourful, we celebrate

1 I refer here to P. Reinhard Körner OCarm.



the fullness of life (John 10,10). The Catholic service is colourful, and touches our senses with words, music, sacraments, the plurality of people, the smell of incense and flowers, lights, colours and much more. Being Catholic means to embrace faith as humans – through flesh and soul. I connect with my Catholic tradition through pilgrimages, a variety of prayer services and mass, a positive image of men and their ability to do good and a generally affirmative approach to life. Even the celebrations of „Fastnacht“ (Carnival) bear a clear connection with the Catholic joy of life. At the end of my life, I hope for a resurrection of the body and eternal community with the threefold God in the company of all Saints.

The experience of the sacraments

The sacraments become alive through symbolic signs and the interpreting words. They are touches of a loving God, signs for his closeness.² If God loves us, he does not only speak of it, but also reveals it through his touch. Those are the sacraments of the church. They accompany the faithful from birth, during adolescence, through illness and dying. They give nourishment and strength to all ways of life. God does not leave us alone in guilt and sin. Through the sacrament of marriage, lovers become themselves sacramental signs by giving themselves to the other and by passing on love and life. Through ordination,

2 Theodor Schneider. Zeichen der Nähe Gottes. Grundriss der Sakramententheologie, 2009⁷



Christ takes weak men into the service for community. Being Catholic means to be touched by the sacraments. Life becomes big and infinitely wide. Pope Francis says: Sacraments are not reward for the perfect, but remedy for the weak.³

Office and tradition

The scriptures are the sources of our faith. Office and tradition connect us to the origins of our church. Being Catholic also means to show respect to those who have believed before us. The office in the church represents Christ in the middle of the church. Tradition as the acting of God's spirit, however, cannot mean the mere passing on of immovable forms and sentences. There is a central theme throughout the passage of time: the faith in Christ that reveals God's love. Of course, there have been changes in the last 2000 years. Our faith is not a dead stone. In order to give witness to Christ today, we may have to find new ways to keep the relevance and serenity of the message alive. Mere immutability might result in the opposite: faith vanishing into insignificance. The aim of our preaching the gospel is not to reduce our church to a small band of self-proclaimed beatified.

What I can only allude to here is the difficult task for today: finding forms of evangelisation that let God's truth become

3 Evangelii Gaudium 47

alive and convincing here and now. The task of letting God's eternal truth shine today might require changes in our forms of preaching, in our church structures and in the language that we use – because humans and their horizons change. The discernment of what belongs to the essential core of the church and what needs to be changed can only be established through communal paths of faith and through spiritual processes of distinction. This is what we want to attempt in Germany, and the world church will have to face those same questions.

The Pope and the universal church

There cannot be a Catholic identity without a connection to the Pope. This also applies to the church in Germany, which can only remain Catholic in unity with the Pope. This unity is required in all aspects of our faith and not only when the pope confirms us or me personally. Being part of a universal church provides great richness and many envy us for it. Pope Frances has continuously addressed the tensions between the local and the universal church; he has encouraged us to find a greater plurality and less centralisation. The exact interpretation of that must be discussed and tested in various forms. Being Catholic in the universal church is only possible with the plurality of cultures sharing unity in faith.



I hope that we can stay catholic: not exclusive, but inviting; kind, with open arms, a big heart, and a broad mind. Open for new things and faithful to the old message; life-affirming and interested in everything that God's good world offers to us; clear in the affirmation of his love in Jesus Christ; critical against everything that harms men and questions God's honour. This is what being Catholic means to me.

Let us stop denying each other true Catholicism, when some ask questions in the church and look for new ways. Let us stop looking down on those who struggle with new things. This is only possible in a spirit of trust, love and mutual respect. Shortly before the end of World War 1, Edith Stein wrote to her sister Erna: "This is the faith I would like to teach you – that the development which we know very little about and can influence even less, will in the end be a good one."⁴

May God bless us on our journeys; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

+ *Peter Kohlgraf*

Peter Kohlgraf
Bishop of Mainz

4 Letter to Erna Stein



„I hope that we can stay catholic: not exclusive, but inviting; kind, with open arms, a big heart, and a broad mind.“

