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Konzerthaus

Meeting with Catholics active in the Church and society

Official translation

Dear Brother Bishops and Priests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am glad to be here today with all of you who work in so many ways for the Church and for society. This gives me a welcome opportunity personally to thank you most sincerely for your commitment and your witness as “powerful heralds of the faith in things to be hoped for” (*Lumen Gentium*, 35 – *validi praecones fidei sperandarum rerum*). In your fields of activity you readily stand up for your faith and for the Church, something that is not always easy at the present time.

For some decades now we have been experiencing a decline in religious practice and we have been seeing substantial numbers of the baptized drifting away from church life. This prompts the question: should the Church not change? Must she not adapt her offices and structures to the present day, in order to reach the searching and doubting people of today?

Blessed Mother Teresa was once asked what in her opinion was the first thing that would have to change in the Church. Her answer was: you and I.

Two things are clear from this brief story. On the one hand Mother Teresa wants to tell her interviewer: the Church is not just other people, not just the hierarchy, the Pope and the bishops: we are all the Church, we the baptized. And on the other hand her starting-point is this: yes, there are grounds for change. There is a need for change. Every Christian and the community of the faithful are constantly called to change.

What should this change look like in practice? Are we talking about the kind of renewal that a householder might carry out when reordering or repainting his home? Or are we talking about a corrective, designed to bring us back on course and help us to make our way more swiftly and more directly? Certainly these and other elements play a part. As far as the Church is concerned, though, the basic motive for change is the apostolic mission of the disciples and the Church herself.

The Church, in other words, must constantly rededicate herself to her mission. The three Synoptic Gospels highlight various aspects of the missionary task. The mission is built upon personal experience: “You are witnesses” (*Lk* 24:48); it finds expression in relationships: “Make disciples of all nations” (*Mt* 28:19); and it spreads a universal message: “Preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (*Mk* 16:15). Through the demands and constraints of the world, however, the witness is constantly obscured, the relationships are alienated and the message is relativized. If the Church, in Pope Paul VI’s words, is now struggling “to model itself on Christ’s ideal”, this “can only result in its acting and thinking quite differently from the world around it, which it is nevertheless striving to influence” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 58). In order to accomplish her mission, she will constantly set herself apart from her surroundings, she needs in a certain sense to become unworldly or “desecularized”.

The Church’s mission has its origins in the mystery of the triune God, in the mystery of his creative love. Love is not just somehow within God, he himself *is* love by nature. And divine love does not want to exist in isolation, it wants to pour itself out. It has come down to men in a particular way through the incarnation and self-offering of God’s Son. He stepped outside the framework of his divinity, he took flesh and became man; and indeed his purpose was not merely to confirm the world in its worldliness and to be its companion, leaving it completely unchanged. The Christ event includes the inconceivable fact of what the Church Fathers call a *commercium*, an exchange between God and man, in which the two parties – albeit in quite different ways – both give and take, bestow and receive. The Christian faith recognizes that God has given man a freedom in which he can truly be a partner to God, and can enter into exchange with him. At the same time it is clear to man that this exchange is only possible thanks to God’s magnanimity in accepting the beggar’s poverty as wealth, so as to make the divine gift acceptable, given that man has nothing of comparable worth to offer in return.

The Church likewise owes her whole being to this unequal exchange. She has nothing of her own to offer to him who founded her. She finds her meaning exclusively in being a tool of salvation, in filling the world with God’s word and

in transforming the world by bringing it into loving unity with God. The Church is fully immersed in the Redeemer's outreach to men. She herself is always on the move, she constantly has to place herself at the service of the mission that she has received from the Lord. The Church must always open up afresh to the cares of the world and give herself over to them, in order to make present and continue the holy exchange that began with the Incarnation.

In the concrete history of the Church, however, a contrary tendency is also manifested, namely that the Church becomes settled in this world, she becomes self-sufficient and adapts herself to the standards of the world. She gives greater weight to organization and institutionalization than to her vocation to openness.

In order to accomplish her true task adequately, the Church must constantly renew the effort to detach herself from the "worldliness" of the world. In this she follows the words of Jesus: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (*Jn 17:16*). One could almost say that history comes to the aid of the Church here through the various periods of secularization, which have contributed significantly to her purification and inner reform.

Secularizing trends – whether by expropriation of Church goods, or elimination of privileges or the like – have always meant a profound liberation of the Church from forms of worldliness, for in the process she has set aside her worldly wealth and has once again completely embraced her worldly poverty. In this the Church has shared the destiny of the tribe of Levi, which according to the Old Testament account was the only tribe in Israel with no ancestral land of its own, taking as its portion only God himself, his word and his signs. At those moments in history, the Church shared with that tribe the demands of a poverty that was open to the world, in order to be released from her material ties: and in this way her missionary activity regained credibility.

History has shown that, when the Church becomes less worldly, her missionary witness shines more brightly. Once liberated from her material and political burdens, the Church can reach out more effectively and in a truly Christian way to the whole world, she can be truly open to the world. She can live more freely her vocation to the ministry of divine worship and service of neighbour. The missionary task, which is linked to Christian worship and should determine its structure, becomes more clearly visible. The Church opens herself to the world not in order to win men for an institution with its own claims to power, but in order to lead them to themselves by leading them to him of whom each person can say with Saint Augustine: he is closer to me than I am to myself (cf. *Confessions*, III, 6, 11). He who is infinitely above me is yet so deeply within me that he is my true interiority. This form of openness to the world on the Church's part also serves to indicate how the individual Christian can be open to the world in effective and appropriate ways.

It is not a question here of finding a new strategy to relaunch the Church. Rather, it is a question of setting aside mere strategy and seeking total transparency, not bracketing or ignoring anything from the truth of our present situation, but living the faith fully here and now in the utterly sober light of day, appropriating it completely, and stripping away from it anything that only seems to belong to faith, but in truth is mere convention or habit.

To put it another way: for people of every era, not just our own, the Christian faith is a scandal. That the eternal God should know us and care about us, that the intangible should at a particular moment have become tangible, that he who is immortal should have suffered and died on the Cross, that we who are mortal should be given the promise of resurrection and eternal life – to believe all this is to posit something truly remarkable.

This scandal, which cannot be eliminated unless one were to eliminate Christianity itself, has unfortunately been overshadowed in recent times by other painful scandals on the part of the preachers of the faith. A dangerous situation arises when these scandals take the place of the primary *skandalon* of the Cross and in so doing they put it beyond reach, concealing the true demands of the Christian Gospel behind the unworthiness of those who proclaim it.

All the more, then, is it time once again for the Church resolutely to set aside her worldliness. That does not mean withdrawing from the world. A Church relieved of the burden of worldliness is in a position, not least through her charitable activities, to mediate the life-giving strength of the Christian faith to those in need, to sufferers and to their carers. "For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 25). At the same time, though, the Church's charitable activity also needs to be constantly exposed to the demands of due detachment from worldliness, if it is not to wither away at the roots in the face of increasing erosion of its ecclesial character. Only a profound relationship with God makes it possible to reach out fully towards others, just as a lack of outreach towards neighbour impoverishes one's relationship with God.

Openness to the concerns of the world means, then, for the Church that is detached from worldliness, bearing witness to the primacy of God's love according to the Gospel through word and deed, here and now, a task which at the same time points beyond the present world because this present life is also bound up with eternal life. As individuals and as the community of the Church, let us live the simplicity of a great love, which is both the simplest and hardest thing on earth, because it demands no more and no less than the gift of oneself.

Dear friends, it remains for me to invoke God's blessing and the strength of the Holy Spirit upon us all, that we may continually recognize anew and bear fresh witness to God's love and mercy in our respective fields of activity. Thank you for your attention.
