

Bishop's Pastoral Letter – Easter Penitential Season 2021

By Dr. Georg Bätzing, Bishop of Limburg

More Than You See – Steps Toward Unity

For a new burst of ecumenism in the 21st Century

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Diocese of Limburg!

2021 is the year of the Third Ecumenical Kirchentag, or Church Days, conference. We want to be good hosts, with the Limburg Diocese teaming up with the Protestant Church of Hesse and Nassau, the Protestant Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck, the Dioceses of Mainz and Fulda and the Working Group of Christian Churches. I know that many parishes and believers have been preparing eagerly for this event in May, and with great commitment. To you all, I offer a hearty thanks and encouragement: Even in an altered form in light of the coronavirus pandemic, the Ecumenical Kirchentag can provide an impetus for our interfaith path. This is why I've entitled this year's Lenten Pastoral Letter: "More Than You See – Steps Toward Unity." I want us all to experience a new burst of ecumenism to achieve that unity.

The Scandal of Division and a Healthy Impatience

Interfaith togetherness is an intimate matter of the heart for many people in the Diocese of Limburg. They live it out daily in their marriages and family life, in their friendships and neighborhoods, in their children's nurseries and schools and in many other places. Of course, ecumenicalism is an integral part of our offerings of spiritual care. There are numerous interreligious examples -- in Bible-study groups, Taizé prayer sessions, the World Day of Prayer for Women and many charitable and social projects whose works cross the boundaries between faiths and parishes.

Still, we experience the burden of separation from other faiths, and many people would agree with Pope Francis, who has said: "The divisions between Christians are a scandal." The word "scandal," an offense, was used as long as 50 years ago in the Second Vatican Council's declaration on ecumenism. The Church hadn't always provided a natural place to work with other faiths. Since the Second Vatican Council, much has been done: major conferences on justice, peace and the conservation of creation; the Charta Oecumenica, along with jointly developed declarations on baptism, eucharist and communion at the Church administration level. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, published in 1999, laid aside a 500-year-old dispute. This document, developed together, was essential for the success of the Reformation Jubilee Observance of 2017. With the Coptic Church – members of which we have

here in our diocese – there is now a common understanding on the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ. Such developments would have been unthinkable previously.

The goal of a visible unity in beliefs, sacraments and priestly orders has not yet been achieved, however. Pope Francis said, “I too share the healthy impatience of those who sometimes think that we can and should do more.” But even our impatient Pope urges us not to forget to be thankful. And so it helps us to continue to view with gratitude the common way that -- with God’s help -- has already brought us so far in ecumenism.

May They All Be as One

The desire for unity has its fundamental expression in the Word of Jesus: “May they all be as one.” At the Last Supper, Jesus closed his final address to his disciples with a prayer to the Father: “I pray not only for these but also for those who through their teaching will come to believe in me. May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.” (John 17:20-21). Jesus already sees unity as under threat and prays to the Father. Unity in faith is not automatic, but it has been part of the church’s missionary mandate from the very beginning.

“Whom are we there for, as the Church?” This has been the question we’ve confronted throughout the Church’s progression. It’s nested in the term “Sending forth.” Thus the

Church's development also means bringing interfaith unity into effect, that the Church can shape and fulfill its mandate in the world. Unity leads us to faith in Jesus and his mission from the Father. Jesus pledged the Holy Spirit to us for this. "One body and one Spirit, just as one hope is the goal of your calling by God." (Ephesians 4:4). The Holy Spirit generates in us a variety of gifts as well as unity. So we may again pray for togetherness with Jesus, the way we do in the Week of Christian Unity and on other occasions.

With a Unified Voice

Taking this biblical basis, the Second Vatican Council lamented our historical divisions and stated: "There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart." (*Unitatis redintegratio* 7). During the Reformation Jubilee Year, the ecumenical repentance and reconciliation service on March 11, 2017, in Hildesheim was exemplary in this respect. It required a "Healing of Memory."

Today, we experience increasingly that Christian stances on global political and social issues are taken more seriously when the churches express them together. The coronavirus crisis gives us a very current example: restrictions on personal contacts, the problem of triage in hospitals, the just distribution of vaccines worldwide. Scientific progress sparks ethical questions requiring answers, and demands from us declarations protecting human worth -- for example in the question of assisted suicide. Similarly, I think about the joint responsibility and actions for refugees and the needy. How many Christians

have been working here for years, naturally together, to help others and to learn from them? And we can also undertake dialog with other religions.

Together at the Table of the Lord

The most burdensome question for many regarding interfaith life is this: Can I partake of Communion at the services of other religious confessions? This topic has been discussed ecumenically for years; many questions have been clarified, while differences remain for which clarification today becomes more urgent. The Ecumenical Working Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians presented an advisory opinion, “Together at the Table of the Lord,” in September 2019, and this panel wants to support individual believers in a matter of conscience. This is currently being extensively debated with much controversy. And this strong debate is good, essential and valuable. I hope very much that the advisory will lead to a solidly based and at the same time careful and responsible opening for our practices until now.

Together at the Table of the Lord? That’s been an urgent question for decades, above all for numerous interfaith married couples – a question that brings division and tensions in its wake. In 2018, the German Bishops Conference published a document entitled “Going With Christ – On the Path to Unity.” It recommended a talk with a spiritual adviser to be able to come to a responsible, conscientious decision regarding

receiving Communion. Interfaith couples and families give witness to how ecumenism is experienced together in daily life.

Unity in Difference

What is the goal of ecumenism? The Catholic Church, as well as the World Council of Churches says: The goal is the visible unity of all people of faith. Unity does NOT mean uniformity. Thus, unity is also reconciled to differences.

Even the Catholic Church itself isn't uniform. We experience it in many contexts: through religious orders and spiritual communities that provide a visible display of variety in their practices; through our ties to the world church, whether through our partner dioceses abroad, priests in our diocese from other countries and our foreign-language parishes.

Another example of our experience of diversity is the Eastern Churches that are Catholic but not Roman Catholic. They have their own rites and spiritual traditions, even church law that recognizes married priests. Their liturgical celebrations, through their texts, symbols, music and vestments, are indelibly eastern rite. Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankar Christians, Maronites from Lebanon, Catholic Eritreans, Greek-Catholic Christians from Ukraine belong to the same diocese. They enable us to come to know the diversity of a "catholic" Church.

Ecumenism itself is diverse, not just Protestant-Catholic. We have growing Orthodox communities; we share with them the same understanding of the Sacraments and veneration of the

saints, above all Mary, the Mother of God. There is also the range of smaller, independent Christian denominations -- called "Freikirchen", or "free churches" in German -- with their basis in the Reformation that find a home in the territory of our diocese. The contact with these other confessions can be fascinating and inspiring. Most such contacts are through personal ties. The experience of other churches also signifies that even a community that's fulfilled by its own readings and communion can find there's much to learn and discover among others, which can lead to a better understanding of oneself. Through our own rootedness, we gain an appreciation of others. The gift of ecumenism provides us with the gratitude needed to appreciate what the Holy Spirit has provided others and to recognize differences respectfully.

With Confidence and Joy

I am moved by the question: Do we still have burning hearts when it comes to bringing unity to our faith? Do we feel the pain of division, or do we find ourselves accepting the split as fact? The desire for unity in faith and togetherness at the Table of the Lord must not be lost to us as long as we exist as Church.

I'd like now to make a three-point proposal for our ecumenical talks and meetings that have been wrestling with the question of unity both together and on a personal level.

- First: truly want to understand others, with their wishes and the things that are important to them

- Second: Accept diversity and welcome it as an enrichment
- Third, and following from that, realize that what unites us is much greater than what divides us. That's the way, to me personally, of becoming Church with confidence and joy.

I want the 21st Century to set us on a course to a renewed blossoming of ecumenism and a new, attentive attitude to bringing about the Church's progress. Why not approach topics of the future and its challenges ecumenically, or at least through better cooperation? This will call for some effort. But unity can't be thought of as the goal. Unity grows through concrete ways, in common projects and in honest cooperation.

Let us put ourselves on the way to an ecumenical Church, united with all who believe in Jesus Christ, taking responsibility for other people and for our world and environment. With that, I bless you all in the name of the triune God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Limburg, on the 1st Sunday of Lent 2021

Your Bishop

Dr. Georg Bätzing