

Confidence under pressure

Keynote by Dr Thomas Arnold, Dresden

Thank you very much, dear xy for the introduction.

This country needs confidence, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Because we are in times of great uncertainty. For our continent. For our Church. And for our faith. Each of the three is undergoing profound change. Let us not delude ourselves: Our world, our Church, our faith - none of these will look the same in ten years as they do today. Let us therefore begin by remembering that we are not the first to act and we are not the first to face such challenges. Those who count themselves among the people of God know that they are rooted in a history of salvation with God. None of us is the first. And none of us will be the last. But each of us is faced with the challenge of making the now as good as it can be. Therefore, now is not t h e time to complain. But now is the time to reflect, ladies and gentlemen: How do we succeed in being as He is? Because people still ask us.

Because people ask. Hope in areligiosity

Yet the diagnosis of the times is almost universally fatal: the number of people leaving the church is reaching record highs year after year, participation in church life is sinking to a shameful minimum. And those who cry out that this is a Western European problem of a society saturated with material are right. But they ignore the fact that other parts of the world are striving for exactly the same thing and that it is not yet clear whether the same developments will not only set in with a considerable time lag. Catholicism in Poland is a local example of what I mean.

For those who have not yet been able to hear it, I would like to enlighten you now: I come from a region that the Bonifatiuswerk would classify as a classic diaspora. But not because Protestantism has a majority of the population, but because the dominant number of people do not belong to a church. It is not a conscious decision *against* a church, but it is the second to third generation that no longer takes a stand on the question of God. Eberhard Tiefensee, the clever philosopher from Erfurt, calls them religiously indifferent. They are not those who are still baptised but are actually disinterested in the work of the church. Nor are they those atheists who consciously decide against God. And it is also not the agnostics who abstain from taking a stand. I am talking about everyday life with people for whom God is irrelevant as an element that gives meaning. This does not mean that religion and religious questions do not occur in everyday life. But they are 'read over' or dismissed as information from the realm of the retarded.

If I am asked to make a diagnosis of the times today at the beginning of this conference, then let me say: Central Germany is a place of learning for the way we live Christianity in this country in the coming decades. The initial conditions and the way we deal with them will remain different. But the phenomenon will spread nationwide. That's how far my ability to look into a crystal ball goes. In large parts of the old Federal Republic, people are still alienated from Christianity. In the next generation they will be unaffected. Towns and countryside are affected, it will have grown over generations. Never before in the 2000-year history of our Christianity have we been faced with the challenge of bringing Christ into contact with people where faith in God no longer exists. Our tried and tested strategies will no longer work.

But at the beginning of the conference, let us also guard against a danger of our being Christians among the committed: Let us not legitimise our actions because we think that the human being without religion has a kind of more deficient humanity. As much as I appreciate Karl Rahner, it seems to me that with his assumption that every human being is religious, even if he does not call himself so, he is more overreaching than right. What the majority of people in the east of the republic live by today

and is spreading in the West, is a "very solid life option among many others en "1 (Eberhard Tiefensee). Three characteristics of such an own existential ^{culture2}:

- 1) Even without God, there is no extraordinary decay of values. Godlessness' does not mean 'immorality'. Of course, people without a belief in God also have values. "They feed on a variety of traditions and have a pragmatic side, which of course has undoubtedly absorbed Christian content, but for most it is indifferent where these values have come from [...]. Values are accepted or rejected as reasonable or practicable; as a rule, this has little to do with religion. "3 As much as they would like to be: Churches are neither the only nor the central value agencies of a democratic society. When the relevance of the churches threatens to decline, the temptation is great to functionalise them for the community. That would be a truncated functionalisation of the Christian faith!
By the way, anyone who thinks that the polarisation in the population of East Germany currently visible in the media and the success of the right-wing extremists is an expression of God-absence must look more closely at the common German pre- and post-reunification history than at God-absence.
- 2) Areligious people can also celebrate, especially at the high and low points of their lives. The youth consecration could be used, but it has other characteristics and actually has identity-forming functions within Germany. But school admissions, free marriage ceremonies and the address at the funeral are the secular sacraments of the 21st century. Yet one should not be mistaken: Because the church ritual is of poor quality or not available, because, for example, the local priest is currently on holiday or homosexuals are not allowed to receive a blessing, the exchange to the non-religious ritual is quickly made. Conversely, however, it is subject to justification. Or formulated differently: Anyone who has once made use of secular rites will hardly return to church rituals.
- 3) Probably the greatest provocation for us missionaries who want to inspire confidence with the Christian message: Even existential borderline situations do not lead to religious conversion. The areligious society no longer asks the question *why*, but *how*. But this changes the perspective on the analysis of the situation: when a person dies, people today turn to doctors and psychologists to find out the *how*. When society or nations are in crisis, political scientists are asked *how*. "How did it come to this?" Is the attempt of our time to use empirical science to find causal mechanisms that not only explain but prevent such events in the future. Such a question, however, no longer offers a starting point for religious or metaphysical considerations.
At the same time, it can be stated: Whoever succeeds in doing this can, at best, cope better with practical problems. When the why question arises, it would only be a crisis phenomenon that I have to escape from myself or with the help of my social environment in order to silence the question.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, I believe we are moving towards a social situation where one must say: Confidence without God is a reality.

The conference would end with the keynote. All those who have been involved with or employed by the church until now are likely to give up their voluntary work, hand in their resignation or look for options to make ends meet until retirement without getting agitated.

But perhaps the three characteristics of our time are already three indications of a time with God in our time:

Re 1) If we know that the absence of God does not lead to moral decay, then let us be critical of those politician:s who for majorities are striving for this narrative. Let us not fence off "Christian civilisation" in order to preserve it as much as possible. We know from the GDR: Every wall that pretends to protect but instead constricts will sooner or later

¹ Tiefensee, Eberhard: Confidence without God is Reality, on the internet: https://bibliographie.uni-tuebingen.de/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10900/122098/Tiefensee_014.pdf?sequence=1

² Cf. *ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

fall later. Let us acknowledge that "the modern form of religion will not remain the first and obviously not the last social-cultural incarnation of the Christian faith in history" (Tomas Halik). This protects us from wanting to preserve everything that we have come to love and from glorifying it as particularly worthy of protection. However, it also means that those who left religion and the church generations ago should be regarded as "God's others". People" (Tiefensee) instead of devaluing them. They are important for the whole. It is important to appreciate their differences instead of devaluing them. This is not a question of mercy, but of absolute equality.

Re 2) If we know that people of our time turn away from religion because they have a higher expectation of the 'service' of religion than is offered to them, then the answer cannot be to explain the limitations of the service, but to change the offer of a sacrament in such a way that it remains in its essence, but becomes attractive in its form. The quality and quantity of the offer too seldom match the expectation of demand. Let us qualify people in such a way that they can share something of God's love with people through the sacraments and sacramentals according to their needs and with painstaking detail work. So far I have always spoken of those who have been away from religion for two generations. They are ^{also}⁴ because religion could no longer be experienced as a possibility of confidence. In many regions of Germany, however, we are in a time of transition, in which personal closeness, authentic life and the right offer in response to demand can cushion the dynamics of secularisation.

On 3) The crucial question of our action in the coming decades will be how we accept that people ask about the *how and* yet we keep our questioning about the *why* in play. For this, the church will remain indispensable.

By the way, I only know one person so far who came to faith because he intellectually 'approached' the questions of life through the study of philosophy and only then experienced the faith in its basic processes. All others found their way to Christianity through an initial emotional enchantment, which was then - in the next step - underpinned with the thinking level. That is why it is not to be underestimated in which way we design a setting of faith to open people's consciousness to ask the question of *why*.

Because they ask us. Hope in the Church.

I have taken a lot of time to describe with you the situation that we have to expect across the board in the coming years. We can also describe the world in which we live and which we have to expect in a completely different way: Plural. Global. Digital. Mobile. All correct. And yet too little. Because in the end it will be about the question of how we are on the path with the individual to interpret their life and to be able to have something we call "hope" even in the greatest depth of their life.

In my view, this is the greatest danger for us as Christians. How do we speak of what moves us and makes us act? Can we ourselves answer the question of *why*? Or are we children of our time and only prefer to explain the *how*? Are we stuttering, doubtful or platitudinously self-confident. Because we can hide well behind empty phrases?

I want to tell you a little experience of my own: [Maria - Paulina].

Perhaps in some moments silence is best. And the willingness to experience a window of hope in the faith of non-believers.

⁴ In addition, of course, in parts of the Federal Republic there is the forced secularisation by two anti-religious regimes.

The Church

Of course, ladies and gentlemen, we cannot avoid the question of how to move in the future in a Church that lurches from self-inflicted crisis to self-inflicted crisis and at the moment seems like a giant that is imploding.

I want to be honest: As a person who comes from a region with "experience of rupture", who therefore knows - at least from stories - what a system feels like that is hollowed out in terms of content, is breathed through a functionary level and in which the majority of people know that the corset no longer fits life, I want to warn: There are too many analogies of the Church of our time to the GDR shortly before 1989. Whether Francis is the new Gorbachev and the Synodal Way is the Leipzig Ring, I will not presume to say. But people's feeling that those in positions of responsibility, in whom they have placed so much trust up to now, have lied to them is so painful and profound that something crucial has been lost, namely trust. When it then becomes visible, like a gaping wound, that the rule no longer fits reality, but it is held via denunciation and duplicity, then more and more people say: Go with God. But go.

Without me.

We have long since passed the point where people only leave the church because of money. We have long since reached the point where the majority of my generation no longer wants to muster the strength to strive for change in the church.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we want to boldly cry out "nevertheless" at this conference, then this includes naming the nakedness of the emperor without being resigned. A church that wants to enable the people of the next decade to find their way to the why and offer response options to it must act honestly:

- Now is the time to put everything on the table and not act in small faith.
- Now is the time to make a case for putting the morality in the poison cabinet and making the rule fit life again.
- Now is the time to remove the basis of ambiguity.

You are already working hard on it. Otherwise you wouldn't be here today. And it's good that there are

"Nevertheless" means because "nevertheless" would mean that one spends a lot of energy against "the system" but continues to move within it. For me, "nevertheless" means something else: whoever wants *nevertheless* is not satisfied with what exists, but is committed to change. But he (or she) does not resign, but has strength. Because he or she is convinced of the basic message and knows that they can do things differently. We can be different! And we want to be different!

We have to shape the status quo of the Church. First I had written: "accept". No, that is the wrong word. "Accept" would be wrong because an ecclesia semper reformanda is never a may take "accept". But we will need an attitude that brings the other's position into the argument. But does not demonise the other as a person. Let me give you an example of what I mean: I am clearly closer to the theological views of Bishop Kohlgraf than to those of Bishop Vorderholzer. But I am firmly convinced: you must be heard just as much. Their position must be accepted. And we need to think about how we can unite instead of furthering the dynamics of division and injury.

With speed, with creativity. And with a lot of patience and composure.
- because he who carries is carried.

One thing I have learned during my time with the Synodal Way is that it is good to think about new rules and structures. But they do not save the faith. They even run the risk of stabilising some things that many of you know as the people's church, but which will no longer be. We will have to set two accents: We will have to become a church that is more ecumenical and that is more spiritual.

The Church has managed, certainly for good reasons, to create an "architecture of the cathedral of Catholic culture"⁵ with dogmatics. But it needs an "intellect of the heart",

⁵ Halik, Tomas: *The Afternoon of Christianity*, 227.

who adds the closeness to life to the building plan. When we train the next generation of Christians - I mean full-time and voluntary workers, lay people and priests - they should be people who have not only studied the architectural plans intensively, yes, even hold on to them in order to be able to cling to them in the storms of life. But we should educate and train a next generation with the "intellect of the heart", who know about architecture and are therefore able to knock another window into the walls. That is the aggiornamento of the 21st century!

A renewed Church in society. Because people ask.

Let us share our experiences during these days. They will be as numerous as the people who are here. They are stories with God. And each one of them should be heard. This can give us strength, perhaps also set us apart. But above all, it can encourage us to continue the story with God together.

Final

I want to warn you, ladies and gentlemen, as I have done several times since the Synodal Way: It is over! What you know as religion and church from your childhood days is not coming back. Neither in the East nor in the West. Suffering from relevance is only one expression of this. It goes deeper. Religion is no longer there as a matter of course. It has to convince. Don't get me wrong: I am absolutely convinced that we need to adjust some screws in the engine room of the church so that the piston seizure does not turn into irreversible engine damage. But even if we succeed, the engine will power another age. After the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the Middle Ages also ended and the Renaissance began.

Dear people, dear fellow Christians, let these days turn a "for now" into a powerful "for now". become "nevertheless".