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**Challenging Compassion:
Xenophobia in the Church and Society**

Lecture at the Study Assembly of the European Forum of National Laity Committees
23. – 26.6.2016 in Maynooth/Ireland

I.

In the last few months, hundreds of thousands of refugees have sought safety in Europe. They are fleeing from civil wars and political persecution, from droughts or from the complete lack of prospects that drive many – particularly young people – from their home countries. They flee in extremely dangerous ways – overland and, even more, over water. Often this turns into a deadly calamity. We all know the shocking pictures of men, women and children who have drowned in the Mediterranean near Lampedusa or Lesbos after being left to their hopeless fate by unscrupulous bands of smugglers.

In many European countries, they encounter a population that welcomes them. Also in Germany. No one knows exactly how many of those who have fled can actually remain; how many of them must go back because, according to the relevant laws in the host countries, no asylum or permanent residency can be granted to them. No one knows how many of them will go back to their homelands even though they have a firm prospect of remaining here – simply because the longing for their family or their familiar culture drives them or because they want to look for and develop new prospects in their homeland. And yet they are – at least in Germany – welcomed by a majority because no one wants to leave them alone in their great need. Many Christians, many Catholics are among them. Perhaps they have in mind the well-known words of Jesus Christ: “For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger, you took me into your home; when naked you clothed me” (Matt. 25, 35ff). Perhaps Pope Francis, with his personal engagement, encourages practicing compassion in this way.

However, other people in Germany are sceptical: Will we actually be able to manage the number of refugees? Is their need really so big that they must come to us? They take a wait-and-see position. Still others harshly reject those who have fled. They are afraid of their foreign culture. They are afraid that they must compete for jobs, for housing or for state benefits and that they will be left empty-handed. For some of them, this rejection even turns into violence against refugees and their accommodations. To be sure, the majority shy away from open violence. But they have been demonstrating on the street for weeks. Or they radiate an atmosphere in their families, at work or in their circle of friends which stirs up a xenophobic climate.

In Germany, too, this xenophobic mood has long since been present in the midst of our society. Even a considerable number who generally vote for the classic mainstream parties are openly xenophobic: some 18% of Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social-democratic Party Germany (SPD) voters can be classified as xenophobic. Even the voters of the Parliamentary left wing is up to 17% xenophobic. Still stronger is the rejection of certain religions and ethnic groups: 35% of the voters are Islamophobic and 55% are even antiziganistic (anti-Romani).¹ And what particularly bothers me

¹ Decker/Kiess/Brähler (2014), 41.44

as a Catholic: just about 22% of practicing Catholics are xenophobic; even the 18% of Protestants who are xenophobic is greater than the 16% of secular Germans who are. What has happened?

II.

First of all, we must consider the following: Not everyone who sees the “welcome culture” as practiced in Germany critical and prefers other political strategies, is xenophobic. And not everyone who is wary of another religion or feels most comfortable in his own culture is xenophobic – especially not if he is pointing out apparent shortcomings. Xenophobia is more: Xenophobia consists of “derogatory attitudes and prejudices against such groups (...) which are defined as “other”, “foreign” or “abnormal” and are assigned a subordinate social status.”² A “subordinate social status” means: They are people of *less value*. Scientific studies speak of “group-focused enmity” in Germany. Thereby it is clear: Xenophobia applies not only to foreigners. It can also be applied to other groups of people whose ethnic, religious, cultural, sexual or physical/mental “otherness” seriously disturbs one’s own vision of a normal, good, correct life – to the extent that these groups of people are experienced as threatening or viewed as inferior.

Xenophobic views are often dressed up as subtle prejudices: “The foreigners only come here to take advantage of our social state.” (xenophobia) Or “As in nature, the stronger ones should prevail in a society.” (racism/social Darwinism). Or “Even today, the influence of the Jews is too big.” Or “Thanks to the many Muslims here, I sometimes feel like a stranger in my own country.” Or “Sinti and Roma have a tendency towards criminality”. Or “Women are, by nature, the weaker sex and need the protective hand of a strong man”. Or “Homosexuals act against nature and so they seek out young people in particular”.

The normative core of all forms of hostility to the “other” or xenophobia is the ideology of the unequal value of different people. Xenophobes deny the human rights principle of fundamental equality or the same human dignity of all. It is striking that xenophobia frequently occurs together with authoritarian concepts of a state (“We need a strong leader or president who shows who is in charge!”), with chauvinistic notions (“We Germans are simply the most successful Europeans!”) and, above all, with the rejection of cultural diversity: The so-called “identity movement” which – making its way from France – has been able to gain a foothold in many European countries, claims that it respects the diversity of religions and cultures – but neatly separated into the different countries where they actually belong.

III.

How does it happen that people from all classes or religions are xenophobic – or, better: can become xenophobic? First of all, we must consider this: Xenophobic people are a very heterogeneous group. However, social science studies also confirm that: what unites xenophobic people is a *profound insecurity* in their lives, which overwhelms their usual ability to master problems or difficulties in their lives and, thereby, causes massive anxiety (in social sciences we speak of a massive loss of coping competencies to deal with crises and conflicts or of a serious impairment of social and political resilience). The causes which lead to this profound insecurity and the massive anxieties are very different: One person feels a lack of orientation and is overwhelmed by the rapid changes in almost all areas of society or by the increasing complexity of our world. Others see themselves being marginal-

² Zick et al (2011), 14

ized economically, socially or culturally to the edges of society and they fight back against those who, in their view, enjoy more attention and solidarity. Still others find foreign ways of life and religions so scary that they fear the eclipsing of their own cherished way of life and religion and thus react reflexively by going on the defensive.

Incidentally, we were also able to discover that: It doesn't matter whether the economic, social or political situation of xenophobic people is actually bad and precarious. In reality, what is decisive is how the people affected perceive and interpret their life situations *subjectively*. In Germany, for example, we are confronted with the following phenomenon: Even members of the so-called middle class feel themselves massively threatened. They do say spontaneously that their current situation is quite acceptable. They have a job; they have adequate income at their disposal and they are integrated socially in the family or in friendships. But they have immense anxiety about the future: The time after the complete destruction in the Second World War was characterized in Germany by a continuous upwards curve. Now stagnation has occurred. And many experience this stagnation as failure: As soon as the familiar promises of advancement are no longer fulfilled, they fear falling into the group of those who are ultimately "hung out to dry" and excluded.³

Xenophobic views can help some people conquer their frustration over their daunting life situation. Xenophobia orders the world into simple categories: "good" vs "bad", "belonging" vs "not belonging", "friend" vs "enemy"; "safe" vs "threatened". Some people tend anyway to reject rapid changes to their living environment; they shy away from diversity. Or they quickly make strong judgments about true and false and black and white. These people are – as empirical studies have shown – particularly receptive to xenophobic views and patterns of reaction to threats to their lifestyle.⁴

IV.

Perhaps it is, thus, understandable why Christians too, why Catholics as well, are receptive to xenophobic views. For Christians are, first and foremost, always human beings and children of their time. One can and must interpret the famous beginning of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* in this way:

"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of today (...) are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts".⁵ And the abyss of hatred and violence which opens up again and again also is a part of this. Our confession of guilt at the beginning of every worship service and our plea for forgiveness and reconciliation are no empty clichés but rather reflect our hard human reality. We are no better people just because we can hope for ultimate salvation in Christ!

Sometimes certain temptations can actually even promote xenophobic views in the thinking patterns of Catholics. I would like to mention three such temptations:

The first temptation is the *temptation to fundamentalism*. Fundamentalism means a stance in which certain content and traditions of faith are simplified and any critical questioning is rejected from the start as an attack on the faith: "The woman was created from the man's rib and she must, therefore,

³ Bude (2014)

⁴ Stolz (2000), 80ff

⁵ Pope Paul VI, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html accessed 07.06.2016

be subject to him.” Or: “It was the Jews who allowed Our Lord to be nailed to the cross”. Whoever is used to thinking in such an undifferentiated way, has little defence against other xenophobic patterns of devaluation. Fundamentalists refuse any dialogue over the arguments of others. They entrench themselves behind the fortress of (allegedly) simple truths.

This brings us to the second temptation: *the temptation to authoritarian submission*. In the search for simple truths, it is not only fundamentalists who tend to compensate for their uncertainty and lack of orientation by submission to a person of authority. And there, it seems quite right for many that an ecclesiastical teaching body give clear guidelines. It is true that an ecclesiastical teaching body can itself repeatedly emphasize that church teaching does not turn off thinking, but that belief and common sense go hand-in-hand; or that the genuine freedom of a Catholic does not entail external leading but rather being moved from within to think and act (Gaudium et Spes 17, AL 266ff). None of this is of any use if Catholics misunderstand decisive loyalty to the church teaching as blind submission to the currently valid church teaching body.

This brings us to the third temptation: *the temptation of an unreflected claim to absoluteness*. Especially those monotheistic religions, such as the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), can succumb to this temptation. A claim to religious absolutism is, then, unreflected when we as believers do not differentiate between the absoluteness of our God (“The Lord is our one God” Dt6, 4) on the one hand and the insurmountable provisional nature of our human or religious speech about the absolute reality of our God. Our Holy Scriptures too transmit such a variety of insights on the God of Abraham and Jesus Christ that, even today, they must repeatedly be laid out and interpreted anew. Our Christian theology is composed of a two thousand year old exegesis history. Our churchly tradition is constantly evolving. Again and again, Synods and Councils come together in order to delve more deeply into the secret of God and achieve better recognition of His reality. That is a reflected claim to absoluteness: Naturally, it insists on the uniqueness of the Biblical God. But it is known that one’s own knowledge is always temporary and cannot be ultimately made into an absolute. And it even reckons with the possibility that other religions themselves – as the 2nd Vatican Council formulated it in its declaration *Nostra Aetate* – “reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men”⁶ (NA2).

V.

Especially with respect to the last point, the involvement of the church can act against xenophobia in its own ranks. Naturally, as Christians, we can and must, time and time again, point out that any form of xenophobia or group-focused enmity fundamentally contradicts the central substance of our faith. Every human being is the image of God and, therefore, everyone is equal. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all ‘one’ in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3, 28). And the same Christ Jesus teaches us that we cannot arbitrarily limit our solidarity with the persecuted and those in need to those who are closest to us culturally or religiously. The parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that brotherly love is the greatest when it comes to us as active love from furthest away, that is, from those who are not counted among us. Yes, our faith in the Biblical God expects us to do even more. He even encourages us to constantly open up new horizons, new worlds. This is meant when we give ourselves to following Jesus and – as

⁶ http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra_aetate_en.html accessed 07.06.2016

did the People of Israel who left the fleshpots of Egypt or Peter and Andrew who left the familiar world of their fishing family – in order to seek and find the really good life. And that also is a part of our biblical compassion: To lose ourselves in order to give others new possibilities for life.⁷

Regrettably, only seldom do we fulfil all these right and important indicators of the fundamentals of our faith. Experience teaches us: First, actual encounters with people who are “other” and foreign, can resolve deep insecurities and break down xenophobic defensive reactions. We must create opportunities where insecure people regain trust in their own lives because they realize that they can, in fact, achieve something and are not playthings of foreign powers and authorities. And we, as a church, must create opportunities where, through personal contacts between various cultures and ways of life, people can have the experience that variety must not threaten one’s own self, but sometimes actually leads to our own blossoming.

A particular focus of church engagement against xenophobia is, therefore, the strengthening of intercultural competence. A special form of this is the competence for interreligious dialogue. That is an effective instrument against the hostile devaluation of other religions – also that of Islam. Exactly 25 years ago, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue⁸ presented very helpful reflections on the four central levels of an interreligious discussion. At the beginning is the “Dialogue of Life.” This deals with the sharing of joys and hopes, but also with the grief and anxiety that people of different religious or cultural backgrounds have. This way we get to know people, how they live, what they think, what they fear, what they long for. We get to know them as they are – with all their possibilities and impossibilities, which we have long known about ourselves. Then, there is the “Dialogue of Action”, which leads us together to joint action for a humane development of our world and society. That then, naturally, a third level, the “Dialogue of Theological Exchange”, which deepens mutual understanding and sometimes helps us recognize the treasure of our own. All theological understanding would, however, be deficient if the fourth level of the “Dialogue of Religious Experience” were not pursued – where we become sensitive to the spiritual or liturgical richness of religions from which all can draw.

A final thing: We Christians apparently tend to xenophobic defensive postures, particularly then when we are dominated by a feeling of doom and gloom. Let’s not deceive ourselves. Frequently we and our churchly authorities serve up apocalyptic scenarios of doom more strongly than trusting that messianic patience which originates from Easter and Pentecost: Faith – Love – *Hope*; those are the divine virtues. Let us not lapse into gloomy prognoses of decline but, rather, give a chance to a future open to surprises. That does not mean a renunciation of critical diagnosis of our time. It merely means the assurance of the reality of God through the work of the Holy Spirit: “Do not stifle inspiration or despise prophetic utterances, but test them all. Keep hold of what is good and avoid all forms of evil” (1 Th. 5, 19-22).

⁷ The Hebrew root *rechem* stands for womb; *cham* for life-giving warmth, which surrounds new life.

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http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html accessed 08.06.2016

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