

The prophetic mission of *Together for Europe*

Gerhard Pross – Meeting of the Friends of *Together for Europe*
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Dear friends,

I'm convinced that, in the midst of today's challenges, God has entrusted us with a prophetic message and a mission.

1. The times we are living in

During the 2016 *TfE* Congress in Munich, the sociologist Michael Hochschild spoke about the “end of society”. Through his analysis he showed that our society is in a dissolution phase. The institutions are losing their power of providing cohesion. He placed his hope in the Movements because they “were born from the future”. We perceive that:

a. Society is breaking up in ever smaller realities, in diverse bubbles that almost never communicate with each other. These last years have been marked with an incredible polarization. The images from last year illustrate this in a frightful way:

IMAGES (I) The assault on the Capitol (Washington)

- Alternative demonstrations

b. The Church seems to be crumbling

- IMAGES (II) – Easter 2019: Notre Dame Cathedral in flames – the Church is dying out (the newspaper *Bild*); Andrea Riccardi put forward an unusually drastic formulation: “Notre Dame in flames, while Christianity is dying out”.
- The 2020 corona virus crisis – the Church has no importance in the system – the churches remained closed, even on Easter Day.

c. The world risks moving away from its axis -

- IMAGES (III) the ecological crisis. Climate change threatens to dry us up or to sweep us away. For us in Germany, the flooding in the Ahr valleys was a clear warning sign: we cannot go on like this.
- The Covid pandemic has shown us with frightful clarity how little we are in control of our world. We have become more aware of the threats and our vulnerability.

In this brief contribution I will focus upon society, even though I consider the issue of the future form of the Church to be crucial, because I'm convinced that even on this reality God has entrusted us with a prophetic message, and we can already recognize the outlines of the future form of the Church. Nevertheless, I want to put this issue, as well as the ecological crisis, on the back burner, so that I can concentrate upon the social situation.

2. Possible causes of polarization in our society

The English sociologist David Goodhart expressed this well in his book “The Road to Somewhere”. He never thought possible that Brexit or Donald Trump’s election to happen; he explains how his sociological research led him to find out how these indeed happened.

- Many persons feel that they have been robbed of their values and their world by the dominant media fashion.
- A cultural war is raging.
- Those who have other values are trying to take back their world.
- Case in point – England: let’s take back our Country, which the EU has taken away from us.

An article in the weekly ‘*Die Zeit*’ specified the following:

“The narcissistic cynic Trump provided a platform for the losers in the cultural war... They resented being controlled by the language used by the ‘élite’ and the fetish approach to issues like gender, skin colour and sexuality”.

We can discern an increase in polarization and fragmentation of our society:

- ("LEFT"): The fashion and the politically correct adopted by the main media create a monopoly of opinion – especially regarding the fundamental social-civil issues of our living together: abortion, homosexuality and integration/migration. This shows that in our society tolerance rapidly changes to intolerance. The value of human life is not based on opinion: it is ‘sacred’ and worthy of protection; yet, it has become the object of ever new highly questionable processes of negotiation. “Which life is really worth living? Is self-determination the highest value?” For example, the discussion regarding euthanasia in many (Western) European Countries highlights these questions.
- ("RIGHT"): The social media offer the possibility to create one’s reality to those who have other values and to those who have been left behind and devalued.
- Thus the following are easily brought about:
 Either paranoiac images of the enemy (foreigners and minorities)
 Or fear of losing one’s future and identity (national)
 Or conspiracy theories: “We know better, we have other scientific sources!”
- They are well nurtured in the Google biotope of opinion, where one can find others who share the same opinions.
- We live in echo chambers of same-interest groups and therefore we have confirmation of our opinions.
- The digital debates provide more poison of polarization.

Thus: there is a split along our societies. There is the danger that Western and Eastern Europe move away from each other. There are many persons in the former Eastern bloc who, following the fall of communism 30 years ago, have been given freedom; however, they were also subjected to an economic system and values that denied them their identity and often their dignity too. They

feel left out, devalued, alienated and marginalized. Such impressions can be found among those living in East Germany (territories in the former Democratic Republic), in the young democracies on Central-Eastern Europe, and in the Midwest of the USA (those who aided the electoral victory of Donald Trump). They feel manipulated by other groups and interests – perceived as “alien to their Country, which has been taken over by foreigners”. And this extraneousness leads, in turn, toward an instinctive defence against the foreigners, the migrants.

Besides influencing our society this polarization and fragmentation has, for some time now, also reached the Churches and the Christian communities, and things are getting worse.

Naturally, this is not a complete picture. And yet, these short sketches provide a background that challenges us Christians to come up with our own message.

3. Moving toward what’s new

Years back, God brought about a movement that moves in another direction. I can discern a multiple impulse that God is donating in our time.

a. Hope

In a crisis, humanity needs hope.

The futurologist Matthias Horx stated: “The corona virus reveals the lack of a credible future”, and he continues: “This virus has transformed in a drastic manner our crisis of saturation into one of longing”. From “saturation” to “longing”. As Christians we know of a “living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” and we have a message that is unique in its kind. Jesus sustains us; he ensures us a future and the certainty of being sustained in the midst of the upheavals of our times. And, with the prophet Isaiah I can say: “Behold, I am about to do something new; even now it is coming. Don’t you see it?” (*Is* 43, 19).

b. Relationships and network links

In this present ‘systemic crisis’ of the Church, what is sustaining us? Is it perhaps the spiritual Movements, the initiatives, the Communities, or the ‘new social forms’ of the Churches? During the already mentioned 2016 Munich Congress, the sociologist Michael Hochschild said: “You were born from the future, or rather you are witnesses of the future”. We consider these words to be very promising. When structures come apart, relationships become ever more important.

Our history – spanning 22 years – shows this: God calls us to Togetherness. The meetings between East and West, North and South have given many of us new perspectives. Since our 2017 Meeting of the Friends in Vienna we purposely focused upon the meeting between East and West and thus we acquired a new perspective.

c. God’s antidote for polarization and fragmentation is reconciliation

As Christians, in the last 50 years we learned how to overcome old lines of division. Reconciliation set *Together for Europe* rolling. What was extraordinary became possible because we decided to

become ambassadors of reconciliation. The confessional and spiritual walls that separated us crumbled down because we started seeing Jesus in each other; otherwise our spiritual, confessional and cultural breadth would not have been possible.

This, however, does not mean that we have reached our goal fully.

Would we be able to overcome the new separations and divisions in our society?

Sometimes I prefer to utter a *Kyrie Eleison*, because we aren't able to do that even among us! How could we, then, become a unifying factor for society?

It's incredible how somewhat insignificant things can divide us. All at once, our communities are ravaged by political 'wars of religion', for example, on how to tackle the corona virus.

From the very beginning, as *Together for Europe* we emphasized 'Jesus in our midst'. He, Jesus, is our focal point. He must be placed on top of our priorities. If we recognize Jesus in the other person, then all the rest assumes a secondary importance.

As soon as I've finished writing these lines, the Holy Spirit surprised me with a dream that showed me that I still had not solved this issue.

I dreamt of having dinner at the conclusion of a conference. I was sitting with other persons when another guest came in: it was Viktor Orban. He was looking for a seat. We still had one free at our table. Should I rise and warmly invite him to our table? I felt a huge internal resistance and a prejudice against this man. Since September 2015, the month of the great refugees' crisis, I saw the Hungarian prime minister as a man with an inhuman attitude regarding the migrants' issue. Within me I felt this great tension between my conviction – that as Christians we ought to be 'builders of bridges', a unifying factor of this society – and my interior refusal. Should I invite Orban to sit at our table? Am I ready to hold a dialogue with him?

This question woke me up, and I couldn't go back to sleep. I couldn't get rid of that dream. Some Hungarian friends might object: this is a typical dream of a Western European, which shows how the policies and the Christian-humanitarian attitude of our prime minister are little understood in the liberal societies of the West. Naturally, this is quite true; this dream says a lot about my attitude – but I fear that it's not only mine.

The mission of *Together for Europe* is to build bridges. Then, how come we fail to live fully our mission? Why are we prisoners of a specific current and cannot find the way out of our opinion bubble or our echo chamber?

At the same time, it is clear that we ought also to draw boundaries and to defend ourselves against lies and egoism.

The spectre of polarization and fragmentation, which are infesting our culture and our communities, are best treated, first of all, by prayer. Prayer clears the intervening space between us and this enables us to meet without obstacles.

This reconciliation requires areas of encounter and dialogue. These areas can be anywhere, in the most diverse places, because they come about from the spirit of Jesus' New Commandment, a lived-out mutual love.

During the 2019 Ottmaring Meeting, Herbert Lauenroth clearly explained that *Together for Europe* is not situated "on the safe side", that is BEHIND and BEYOND the boundary, but rather "ACROSS all boundaries", that is, directly on the boundary, on the threshold, right in the middle of the split, in the space between the diverse cultures and confessions – sometimes even at odds with each other.

Our gaze rests upon Jesus nailed to the cross, between heaven and earth; it is he who took upon himself all the contradictions of this world, and has reconciled the world. Isn't our place with HIM who penetrated the split?

Aren't we being called once again to go forth from our own places, our secure confessional and cultural spaces and our 'comfort zones', so as to enter into the "open space", the space opened by the encounter with another/with others? In this way, from the polarization and fragmentation of our ecclesial and social structures a new culture of network, of togetherness, may grow – guided by the Spirit.

4. Our prophetic mission – Living something of the future in an emblematic way

- In the midst of the centrifugal forces of our time, the Spirit of God is calling us to togetherness. 'Togetherness' is not a static reality; it demands that we overcome the boundaries which we have so far experienced. It aims at a continuous "conversion" and invites us to make a real "turn – towards God and the others!"
- While polarization is rapidly spreading, we are called to witness the efficaciousness of our 'Pact of mutual love' and thus become "agents" of "reconciliation" in the spirit of the Gospel.
- Faced with isolation and the formation of bubbles of our time we have the mission to build bridges, creating "spaces for listening", places for encounters and dialogue.
- At a time when each one considers his/her world view as the only valid one, we ought to promote the interaction of diverse perspectives, and then make ours the one that is the widest and most complete in line with the Kingdom of God.
- At a time of demarcations, we are called to encounter the foreigner in the spirit of the "be not afraid" that Christ teaches us.
- When structures come apart, God gives us new and slender forms: closely-knit nets, whose "horizontal hierarchies" open between them, once again, the most diverse ecclesial-social realities, and link them up. That is how Christian life becomes again capable of having a future!
- Faced with the ecological crisis, the Gospel guides us and invites us to establish new alliances with those "persons of good will that have at heart the safeguarding of creation and the sacredness of life".

In the midst of the upheavals and the crises of longing of our time, we can live the indestructible hope of the Gospel and be messengers of God, who, even now, "wants to give us hope and a future" (*Ger 29, 11*).

Let us live our charism with a renewed passion, courageously and humbly!

Gerhard Pross