



# A Sharing Church

Pastoral Letter for Lent 2019  
of the Bishop of Mainz, Peter Kohlgraf

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the diocese of Mainz,

I wish you all a blessed time of preparation for the feast of Easter. May the coming weeks help us to focus on the important things in our life and our faith.

We also need this focus in our everyday church life. These weeks mark the beginning of a new pastoral path in our church of Mainz, one that will have to take into consideration both the realities of our society and the question of what individuals require from their church in this day and age. The process that we are about to embark upon demands a spiritual question: how do we manage to talk about the message of the gospel, especially with those who are not part of our “inner circle”? In order to do that we have to contemplate our desire to be the Church of Jesus Christ today, and how we view our mission. Any resulting structural changes only make sense if they are the result of such spiritual contemplation. In my last letter for Lent, I introduced the quality of sharing as a spiritual guideline for our process, following the example of our patron St Martin. The implementation of this approach was introduced at the diocesan conference in September 2018.

In Acts, Luke describes the ideal image of the apostolic church of Jerusalem in the first century:

*“And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Acts 2,44–47*



This might sound very idealistic, possibly unrealistic and, indeed, a few chapters later, Luke does mention the difficulties that are faced. However, it is still worthwhile to measure our actions by the ideals of the first Christian community. In Jerusalem, we hear about a parish that shares life, faith, resources and, consequently, responsibility. Regarding our future path in the church of Mainz, I would like to elaborate on these four aspects of sharing.

## Sharing Life

We know about the importance of the church presence locally. The church and its members need to be approachable and I share the concern of some people that the church might withdraw territorially. The people in villages and neighbourhoods that are living their faith in their parishes, associations and charity organisations, and as volunteers in different aspects of church life, will determine whether the gospel endures and becomes reality. The declining numbers of priests, deacons and pastoral workers, remind us that the vocation to live according to our faith and to give witness of it, goes out to all those who are baptised. As Christians we are part of this world in many ways; we live in community with many people. If we live those relationships with open ears and minds, we will become experts on *“the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age.”* (Gaudium et Spes 1, preface)

Sharing life is to live relationships according to the message of the gospel – filled with respect, empathy, appreciation, and love to all people. The theme of this world and our contemporaries in it is, thus, an important theme of our church. If we can manage to remain aware of this, we will avoid both the danger of being too focused on



inner-church discussions that seem irrelevant to many people and the use of language that is formalistic and empty. Anybody sharing life tries to understand what is important for other people and becomes more reluctant to morally judge them, without becoming indifferent. Our church is only taken seriously in its ideals and ethical convictions if it shows that it knows the concerns of people and does not just repeat abstract norms. Anybody sharing life in the future is engaging with our many church services, parishes, schools, nurseries, associations, charity organisations, parishes of foreign languages, religious orders and much more. Because all of these bodies contribute unique experiences and expertise that are invaluable in serving everyone fairly and equitably. Sharing life means to break open the singularity and narrowness of church services in order to better recognise the common call for the fellowship of Jesus for all people of our time. Just like the apostolic church of Jerusalem, it needs a culture of agreement in which all people in the church in all their diversity, feel connected to a common service. The insistence on one's own truth, gain, and interest alone, impedes the proclamation of the gospel.

## Sharing Faith

The apostolic church of Jerusalem would have been unthinkable without the common prayer and belief in the risen Christ who is alive in the word and the sacrament of the community and the church. This faith has to be our most important common foundation. From there, many important topics emerge. The question of how we pass on our faith has to be a pressing one, one placed above all others. Families are the place for the first experiences with faith, and in our



parishes, we reach many individuals through the preparation for the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation and Marriage. In some places, people have reacted to the changing religious situation of our time and I am convinced that it is not possible today to conduct Eucharistic preparation for children without involving the parents if we are to create something that endures. Many are aware of the inadequacies of, for example, selective marriage preparation or grief counselling. Outside of our parishes, religious education in our schools and nurseries are important fields for the imparting of faith. The apostolic church of Jerusalem seemed to have been successful in living, celebrating and sharing their faith in a way that was communicable. There is no panacea for any of the above mentioned areas and methodic or structural changes alone won't help anyone. In the end, faith is passed on by people who are themselves filled with the spirit. This is not just about teaching people. We have of course a confession of faith that is content-based; these statements, however, need to be filled with our own life and spiritual experience. This is a life-long task of searching, and walking with others the paths of faith, to hear their questions and to find the right language to talk "about the faith that fills us" (1 Petr 3:15), to accept their and our own doubts as well as to learn from them. The former bishop of Aachen, Klaus Hemmerle, put it like this: *"Let me study you - your thinking and speaking, your questioning and your existing, so that I may learn through that the message anew that I am supposed to deliver to you."*<sup>1</sup> If there are as many ways to God as there are people<sup>2</sup>,

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1 Cited from: Katholische Arbeitsstelle für missionarische Pastoral, „Lass mich dich lernen...“. Mission als Grundwort kirchlicher Erneuerung = Kamp kompakt 4, Erfurt 2017, 4.

2 See Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger, Salz der Erde. Christentum und katholische Kirche; Ein Gespräch mit Peter Seewald, Stuttgart 1996, 8.

our efforts to find formats of sharing the faith need to become more creative, diverse, and courageous. We have long come to understand that this is not possible by just passing it on automatically from generation to generation. Sharing faith means to appreciate anew our “mission” that can only be realised in encounter and relation. Pope Francis continues to question what our churches have to offer, and asks especially of the traditionally and apparently strong parishes, what missionary impulse they are sending. We should not evade this question in our pastoral process.

### Sharing Resources

The most important resources of our church are the sacraments, the word of God, the confessions and experiences of faith in the tradition and the many people and their communities. I am repeating myself by putting this at the beginning of this paragraph, in order to not forget this foundation in what follows. All other resources like money, property, and employees only serve the realisation of the church’s calling and that of its entrusted people. Material goods are important as they are instruments of the church’s efforts, but they are by no means the central context. Experience shows that these are the areas where conflict is most likely to happen in the further course of the pastoral process. I ask you all to not forget that the questions of money and personnel can only be answered reasonably if they are discussed and even argued upon on the basis of a spiritual attitude. Acts does describe the perfect community of property first: everybody gets what they need. This works because nobody is clinging onto their hereditary property. But as early as chapter five, Acts (5,1–11) talks about the couple Hananias and Saphira who sell their house and secretly



keep part of the proceeds. The consequences are horrific: when confronted by the Apostle Peter with their guilt, they both drop dead. I am reading into this story, Luke's experience that any form of greed and refusal to share resources means the death of community and the end of the church's mission. This is the radical view of the New Testament. And there will be situations where we might have to remember similarly clear words of Jesus himself. The sharing of resources will remain a constant challenge. If we are called to share resources, it also means to critically question any form of protection of vested rights and to be ready to change old habits.

### Sharing Responsibility

Sharing responsibility means to recognise anew the dignity of Baptism. Christ is alive in every baptised person in this world and we all have a part to play in the priestly, kingly and prophetic ministry of Christ. As such, every baptised person has the right and the duty to accept responsibility in and for the church – but, in the succession of Christ, as a service for rather than domination over others. This applies to clerics, and every other faithful person in the church. Some vested occupational profiles, such as pastor, priest, deacon, and pastoral assistants will certainly change throughout the course of the pastoral process. Sharing responsibility means that the pastoral care workers employed in our services will set out first on their way to show how to realise the kingdom of God together. In that effort they are more than just colleagues – they stand in Jesus' mission in different roles and job descriptions. Members of these services are also teachers of religious education, nursery staff, members of Caritas organisations, and a parish secretaries and administrators, not



to forget all the members of religious orders who contribute essential services in our diocese, and many others. I am convinced that we can achieve a lot of good if everybody feels committed to this common service in all their diversity and inspire themselves through utilising their talents and undertaking different tasks.

Some of the new structures will see not only priests in positions of leadership. Other dioceses are already gathering experience in this field. I also hope for respectful and diverse cooperation in the common task between employees and volunteers in the church. I know that many volunteers are already at their limits, and therefore it is not enough to just look for new structures that give volunteers positions of leadership. This is, however, not the appropriate place for the discussion of details. I would like to invite you first and foremost to build our structural constructs onto a spiritual foundation. Will we manage to live diversity in unity, because we know and live daily that Christ is our centre and that we are in his service? Sharing responsibility is a good way to avoid any selfish exercise of power in the church.

Sharing life, faith, resources, and responsibility – this is the invitation to the pastoral way in our church of Mainz and I would like you to accept this as an invitation and as a personal impulse for the forthcoming weeks. I invite different groups and parishes to reflect those ideas in your own life and develop them further for the future.

For our joint path, God may give us his blessings. The Lord bless you all, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

+ *Peter Kohlgraf*

Bishop Peter Kohlgraf

Mainz, First Sunday of Lent 2019







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