



Regarding God's "systemic relevance"

Pastoral letter
of Bishop Peter Kohlgraf of Mainz,
Lenten season 2021

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Herzlichen Dank für alle Hilfe bei den Übersetzungen!

Sisters and Brothers in the diocese of Mainz,

During the Corona pandemic we have grown accustomed to using words that were previously seldom thought of, for example "systemic relevance ". We consider institutions and professions as systemically relevant that are essential to the upkeep of a functioning society. For some people, this discussion was a difficult experience, because their jobs or their role in society was not classified as systemically relevant.



What relevance does religion have in these times? This question is a matter of some controversy. In the church leadership, we have referred to pastoral care, to spiritual strengthening through prayer and services and many other social activities organised by staff and volunteers in our church communities. As churches, we were and are closer to the people than some might want us to think. As Christians, we do not have to be ashamed in this context and we certainly need not hide. Church has never been "away".

The "systemic relevance" of church services and other church activities has been an important topic right from the beginning of the pandemic. Out of concern for the general wellbeing of everyone, public services could not take place for a period of time. Instead, services at home and various digital concepts

were used by many as an alternative. Joining the celebration of mass from our living rooms was encouraged with the intention of providing people with strength and optimism. That the receiving of the sacraments can be of existential meaning for some was not in the focus of the discussion.



Clearly, of course, this cannot be played off against potential physical harm to life. It is part of the success of democratic processes to conduct the same discussions anew. The spiritual offers of the church encourage people and motivate them to engage in social interaction, therefore, the message of the church has systematic relevance. Indeed, as bishop I may say; I am happy about the many relevant actions of fellow Christians and thank them all from the bottom of my heart! Your actions and your care have helped many people and showed them that we do not live by bread alone!

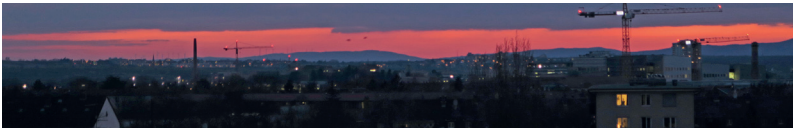
God is not fit for the preservation of the system

What role does God "play" in these times?

In what follows, I do not wish to outline the entire Biblical Christian doctrine of God, but rather give a personal insight into my own thoughts over the last few months. Many find support in their faith during these times; however, others struggle with the question of God. There are simple answers that leave me ill at ease. Some are certain; the old interpreta-

tion of God exerting punishment through the pandemic is no longer relevant today. God does not punish, they say. Do we really know this? In an impressive homily during the pandemic in March 2020, Pope Francis said: We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick.¹

Needless to say that this does not imply the image of a God thinking up random acts of punishment. Nevertheless, who can eliminate the theory that this pandemic might be the "harvest" of many years of our abusing the earth? This might be a consequence, even a punishment for human action. We need not trivialise God. We must carry the consequences of our actions. One might call this God's punishment.

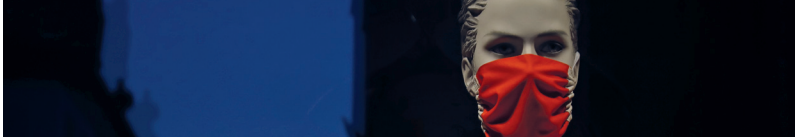


The question remains that even the scriptures do not answer conclusively; how can God permit suffering and illness? Both affect the innocent and this observation remains until today one of the main arguments against the existence of a good God. Sickness and suffering are not to be interpreted as an act of punishment against the sins or guilt of an individual. I myself do not find a simple answer to this. Romano Guardini (died 1968), theologian and religious philosopher, reportedly wanted to ask God a question on his deathbed; "Why, God, all this suffering?"²

1 Homily by Pope Francis, 27th March 2020, prayer service in the pandemic, St Peter's basilica: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/urbi-et-orbi-pope-coronavirus-prayer-blessing.html>

2 Reinhard Körner, *Lose Blätter zugeweht*, Leipzig 2020, 111.

It would be a fallacy to think that the frequent public display of piety could prevent human suffering. Some practices of religious devoutness seem like magical concepts in disguise.



During the pandemic, believers and non-believers are in the same boat, looking for solutions and answers. Is the belief in God systemically relevant? Is God relevant? I want to say directly; God should not be relevant for the preservation of human systems. It contradicts God's greatness to instrumentalise him. Wherever people see their own opinion confirmed by God's will, something is not right. God does not allow for his instrumentalisation in the actions of church, politics or society. He is not a God of war; neither is he a God of the church or a God who is convenient for simple solutions in church or society. He is also no God of health. Medieval theology talked about the analogy principle; everything we might say about God contains more dissimilarities than similarities. In all that we say about God or derive from him, we should never forget this.

I do believe in God's presence. He reveals himself; he talks to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus is not spared the way of the cross; he walks our path with us and does not merely instruct us. He carries our cross. He calls us into his succession. Being Christian is not superior knowledge, but acting, living, walking. It is handing over my life to him. This is where the meaning of a Christian's life is revealed - and not through theoretical

answers and not through plans to incorporate God in our will or actions. For me as a Christian, the only helpful answer in these times that is neither simple nor ostentatious is the contemplation of the crucified and risen one. I am carried and redeemed; the world is in his hands.

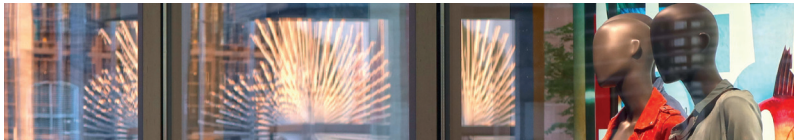


To seek God in this time

God cannot be equated with our formulas. Belief means a constant conversation with God. He talks to us and we can answer. In doing so, he does not reveal any text, but his affection and his love. In the end, he talks to us through his son. God is not just part of our plans. I need to seek him in himself, and not as a solver of problems or as a part of my plans. Thus, I also have to endure his darkness and his hiddenness. This is difficult and because of this, we often think we need clear solutions and answers. Sometimes those lead us away from God, even though they sound good and pious. I want to say it with P. Reinhard Körner; already in the early centuries of the church's history, Christians "did not talk with God, but about God. They turned Jesus and his gospel into a doctrine. (...) They stopped praying, and instead started to carry out their prayers".³

3 Ibid, 76-78.

Let us talk in this time with God, with Jesus! Let us talk with him and let us bear it that he might not answer promptly or according to our expectations! Let us not confuse the talking about him with devoutness! Let us pay attention not to equate our sentences about God with his reality!



Finally, it is possible that God does not want to be systematically relevant. It is possible that he questions our system massively, in church and society. Maybe the pandemic is a loud call to turn around our routines and a call to seek God. In the biblical scriptures, God questions every time when people want to rope God into their plans. He remains the wholly Other. During these times, we also must endure the darkness and the questions. At the same time, I fully trust that God is with us, although sometimes hidden and unassuming. This I do with a strong conviction of faith. The world and humanity are not alone.

Church in Jesus' following

We assign the church today a high competence in teaching values. Those values keep society together and have a positive impact. I ask myself; is church really first and foremost an agency for creating and teaching values? Some voices say that we do not need the church for values. Church is not actually the only source for social values. However, values that serve

society are important, yet we do not find the word "values" mentioned one single time in Jesus' words or in the New Testament. The message is about fellowship, friendship, love to God and our neighbour, not about promoting values.

Church must appeal to this friendship. Only if its teachings encourage fellowship, does it stay true to Jesus' mission. Whether this is systemically relevant, depends on the system. We have learned in those past months that the defining factors are mutual consideration, community, and yes, love. These are the "values" of the gospel, without them being called that. This does not, however, refer to abstract norms, but to a way of life derived from a friendship with Christ. This is where we as Christians, as his church, should make our essential contributions. The love of God and our faith in him may motivate us to do so.



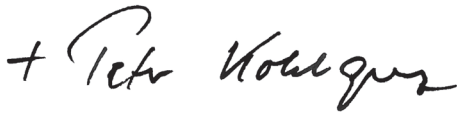
People in the church contribute so much to our society, its preservation and its unifying values. We thank them sincerely. God himself, however, is not just part of the preservation of our system. He is the one who is always greater.

In these coming Lenten weeks, we are asked to seek him, bear the darkness and not look for prompt answers.

In addition, in our church debates, God does not serve himself as an easy answer. We will have to talk to him personally

first, not about him; we will have to seek him and ask for his will, and not just try to fit him into our system. Faith gives us strength, but it is also exhausting and challenging. God is challenging.

In these weeks, the triune God may bless us - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Peter Kohlgraf". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P'.

+ Peter Kohlgraf
Bishop of Mainz

Mainz, First Lenten Sunday 2021

"God himself is not just part of the preservation of our system. He is the one who is always greater. In these coming Lenten weeks, we are asked to seek him, bear the darkness and not look for prompt answers."

