



Bishop Dr. Michael Gerber, Fulda

Pastoral message to the Diocese of Fulda

*to be read in all the Churches of the Diocese of Fulda
on the First Sunday of Lent 2023*



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Brothers and sisters!

Over the last twelve months, much of the news has signalled a common theme: polarisation is increasing. And it is noticeable in our Church as well.

I firmly believe that proclamation essentially happens through *the way we live* and, above all, the way we live *together*. Given the Church's current situation, one could see in this a mission for us all: to seek a constructive and creative way of dealing with these tensions by following the Gospel. And when people understand that this is what we are doing, it could point the way for society to live both in and with conflicts. And it could be an opportunity for people to renew their awareness of the Gospel – an awareness we, the Church, must work hard to develop as well.

Any new culture for dealing with conflict that does justice to the Gospel must first take seriously the tensions and polarisations and their underlying causes. Because that way, we can come to understand that dealing with conflicts of this kind needn't lead to rupture, radicalisation or the rejection of people who think differently. If we are honest with ourselves, we too must admit that rupture, radicalisation, and rejection can all be seen in various forms within our Church as well. And often, our responses to tensions and polarisations hardly appear guided by the Gospel at all. But as the Lenten season begins with a call to conversion, with the willingness to change direction and seek the path of the Gospel again, the question is: what might that actually consist of?

Against this background, I have found the working document for the current continental stage of the synod of the universal Church profoundly moving. The latest stage started in October 2021, when Pope Francis first asked for the dioceses' thoughts on a whole series of questions. Their responses – including ours, which was the result of intense consideration – were collected by the Bishops' Conferences and forwarded to Rome, where they provided the starting point from which the working document emerged. This consists in large part of original quotes from the contributions by the different parts of the universal Church.

The document is available to read on the internet, and I strongly recommend you read it. The title is a quotation from Isaiah 54, which reads:

"Enlarge the space of your tent, spread out your tent cloths unsparingly, lengthen your ropes and make firm your pegs." (Isaiah 54:2)

In the book of Isaiah, the image of the enlarged tent is an expression of hope: after the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and exile, the people of God will return to the land. Demolished cities will be repopulated. Interpreting the image of the working document of the synod sets its own points of emphasis. At one point it reads:

"The vision of a Church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus is at the heart of the synodal process (...)." (No. 31)

On my visit to Rome last October, I met with Cardinal Grech, whom the Holy Father had instructed to advance the process of the synod. Our conversation centred primarily on the question: what does finding a way, with the Church, for it to realise the vision of the enlarged tent, actually mean? Many of the tensions in our Church stem from the highly controversial debate around the question of who is part of the Church and on what terms. On this point, Cardinal Grech drew my attention to the fact that a tent, by its very nature, lives from tension. There is frequent mention in the working document of ropes – a quintessential element of every tent. These must be pulled extremely taut to withstand the pressure of the tarpaulins but also of the wind. Cardinal Grech and I then went on to speak about the degree to which this kind of tension must be regarded as quintessential within our Church as well.

But when it comes to realising our Church's mission as an enlarged tent of God, what kind of tensions will be constructive? And which will be detrimental?

A few weeks after my meeting with Cardinal Grech, I spent an evening with the leaders of the scout and guide packs in our own diocese. One of the topics that came up in our conversation was our experiences of tensions within the Church and society, and they explained to me how their scouts and guides erect a yurt. Their words really caught my imagination – because they led me to the fundamental realisation of what the image of the church as an enlarged tent might actually mean.

Scouts and guides are no fair-weather campers: they pitch their tents even in the most inclement weather, rising to the challenges of each situation. Enduring rain and wind, they set up their tent to provide shelter for many people. It's an image I find very inspiring.

Erecting a yurt ideally takes twelve people. Twelve is a number we often come across in the Bible: the Twelve Tribes of Israel, for example. When Jesus appoints his twelve apostles, he deliberately takes up the motif of the Twelve Tribes and sends out a clear message that all of God's people, in all their fullness and diversity, are called to communion with the Lord. No one can set up a yurt on their own.

Pitching a tent, each person starts with their own tarpaulin, pole and tensioning ropes. Over time, the tarpaulins combine to form a round tent. Then, everyone pulls in their own direction. It seems paradoxical at first, that it's not *despite* but *because* everyone is pulling in a different direction that the tent can be erected.

From where I stand, however, I can pull in all sorts of different directions. So, I need to be sensitive to the bigger picture to pull in the direction that will actually get the tent up. The metaphor of the tent tells us it's OK – essential, even – to pull in one's own direction, because otherwise the tent will be missing something. But at the same time, I need to remain open to others who support and correct me. Because only then will I pull in a way that helps. This kind of sensitivity can lead us to grow into a mindset that's very important in the Bible: the mindset that this is God's tent and He

will remain the decisive agent. The tent we are pitching is not just any tent. Far more, this is HIS tent, and it's our calling to help build it.

In conflict situations we sometimes experience an inner reflex, a feeling that things could be so much easier if this or that person were not here, that we would be better off without them. When I find myself feeling this way, I am shocked, not only on the human level but also with regard to the Church community. Because who belongs and who doesn't is not for me to decide. Far more, God freely calls on people to enter his church. He calls on them to help work on his tent. Whether or not that suits me is irrelevant.

So, my thought for this Lent is: I am going to practise a mindset that seeks to resist this reflex, particularly when there are tensions. And I shall do so out of my profound conviction that Jesus is among us today to gather all of God's people, especially the ones I struggle with. What can I learn, especially from a difficult relationship, about myself, the Church and God?

Let's come back to the different points of reference of people building the tent. What is my point of reference when it comes to connecting to the Gospel? What message from the Gospel has made its way deep into my heart? For other people, those personal points of reference will be *different* – and that's something I must learn to understand. Some will focus more on the spiritual dimension; others care deeply about the social aspect. Some have discovered the value of tradition; others have existential experience of the abysses of many an ecclesiastical development. There are so many other points of reference, and at first, they sometimes even seem to contradict each other.

Setting up a tent, if everyone works from their own point of reference but with the necessary sense of the whole, the tent will have enough tension. That's as true of the scouts' and guides' tent as it is of the Church's tent, figuratively speaking: without tensioning and re-tensioning, a tent cannot exist. Tension is the only way it can unfold and do its job as a "sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race." (LG 1)

At last the guides' and scouts' tent is up. But having emphasised the need for tension, we now face the critical question of what should be at the centre? Scouts and guides like to place a fire pit in the middle of theirs, because the fire offers warmth and community.

On the road to Easter, in the Gospel of St John, we twice come across a charcoal fire. And twice Peter is confronted with unexpected tensions at the fire.

The first time is in the night of Jesus's arrest. Peter follows him. Later, standing beside the charcoal fire, he is suddenly asked if he is a follower of Jesus. And we all know the answer. For Peter, the solution to the tension in this question is a "no".

Fearing for his life, he denies Jesus at this crucial moment, failing at his own aspiration. The rope that binds him to Jesus seems broken once and for all.

But it doesn't stop at that "no" at the charcoal fire. According to the Gospel of St John, after Easter Peter retired to his native lake with the other disciples, possibly wanting to forget or put out of his mind the part he had played on the night of the decision. But in the morning, plenty of tension awaits. During the night, returning to his usual pursuit, fishing, Peter's nets remain empty. But early the next day, against all reason, he casts out his nets again, this time with the success he had been hoping for. But not until he reaches the shore does he understand more fully what has happened to him on his personal Easter morning: he has met the resurrected Jesus, who, abandoned by Peter and most of the disciples, has been hanging on the cross between heaven and earth. But the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus have changed the course of history once and for all. Peter experiences Jesus as the one who quietly and lovingly, in an unfamiliar place, picks up and pulls together the thread again, re-joining the broken bond.

This Lent, amid all the tensions in our Church and society, let us discover Jesus as the one who weaves together the broken bond in a new, unexpected and unfamiliar way, so that we, the Church, can realise the vision of his enlarged tent. Over the coming weeks, I will be happy to share experiences of this kind with you, via three online discussion evenings, for example. Find out on the internet or from your parish news.

On the road to Easter, through the intercession of St Boniface, St Elisabeth of Thuringia and all the saints, may we be blessed by the good and merciful God the + Father and the + Son and the + Holy Ghost. Amen.

Fulda, 25 January 2023,

On the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul the Apostle



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