Hans-Joachim Höhn

Network of the Holy Spirit
Together on the way to the church of tomorrow

Theses

(1) Theology has a strange relationship to the future: The more distant it is, the more readily theologians express themselves about what is coming. The closer the future comes to the present, the more reticent are their statements. This remarkable divergence is also encountered when it comes to the future of the church. Looking at its distant future, people are optimistic. Behind this optimism is the biblical saying that "the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18). There is great confidence that the church will not face what the world will face in the distant future: ruin. However, what is ruled out for the distant future may well happen for the church in the near future. The projection of church departures and demographic changes suggest, at least in this country, a life-threatening decline in membership and social significance.

(2) In order to achieve in the distant future what is hoped for - the continued existence of the church - one must prevent from occurring in the near future what one fears: the end of the church. While one knows the distant future is in God's hands, one has the near future in one's own hands. The church of tomorrow is something that can be touched. It is an object of pastoral planning. However, it is not usually what is to happen in the future that is planned, but where something is to happen. Church planning is primarily spatial planning. This is easier than planning the future. After all, spaces are already there, in large numbers and enormous expanses - the future is not yet.

(3) Ecclesiastical "spatial planning procedures" and "land consolidation" proceed from a problematic premise. They assume that there is no lack of religious space, that there will be enough space in the future to establish pastoral "land use plans". That is why XXL parishes are being established and ever larger pastoral and mission spaces are being created. There is enough space...

(4) On paper, pastoral metropolitan areas may still give a "continental" impression. They evoke the association of a coherent land mass. But the water level has long since risen in the climate change of secularization. In many cases, "Land below!" is the motto. What remains is an archipelago of church islands. This raises completely new questions for the future: How can we maintain connections when the distances become greater? How do you establish contacts when suitable opportunities become rarer? How do you maintain long-distance relationships? How do you secure passages and crossings to other shores? How does one avoid compartmentalism and isolation?

(5) Pastoral large-scale visions do not help here. They miss the point of reality. But neither is it necessary to become fainthearted, to surrender to scenarios of doom without resistance, or to turn social coercion into religious sham virtues and to dwarf ourselves to the format of spiritual circles of chairs.

(6) In the following, we will try out another way of linking sociological realism with theological idealism. This requires what is otherwise frowned upon: We have to measure the church of tomorrow with double standards. Better said: We have to measure twice - on the one hand by the needs and signs of the times, on the other hand by the demands of the gospel:

It is the task of theology and the church "to search for the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel, so that it can respond in a manner appropriate to the respective generation to the enduring questions of people about the meaning of present and future life and about the relationship of the two to one another. It is therefore necessary to grasp and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, aspirations, and its often dramatic character." (Vatican II/Gaudium et spes nr. 4).

(7) Against this background, the "KirchenVolksKonferenz" is concerned with the search for new social and action forms of Christianity that do justice to social circumstances and at the same time make the Gospel culturally, socially, politically and spiritually accessible. This poses a double task: Sociologically founded as well as theologically reflected, concepts of action are to be found which do justice to the Gospel in a contemporary way and face the needs of the time in a Gospel-appropriate way.

(8) At the "KirchenVolksKonferenz" it will be discussed what can realistically be decided and what ideally remains possible if a "continental", i.e. large-scale "people's church" no longer exists. It is replaced by a polycentric archipelago, i.e. a region consisting of diverse religious island groups and the secular waters between the islands. This change opens the possibility for the self-empowerment of religious actors "on the ground" to realize and give local color to what the Gospel is about, according to their gift and competence.

(9) The church of tomorrow will be smaller, but it does not have to become a place of small-minded narrowness. Against the danger of religious selfishness, of remaining in the echo chambers of like-minded and like-voiced people, an extroversion is needed which can be realized in the mode of networking of different actors and actions. In the mission statement "Church as a network of the Holy Spirit" outlined below, an attempt is made to combine sociological realism with theological idealism.

(10) Net (work) metaphors lend themselves to social-analytical, but also to organizational-theoretical considerations. They are particularly interesting for questions of church development, if this aims at a pluralistic and polycentric, i.e. post-hierarchical and dynamic social form. Here the advantages of a network structure become clear very quickly:

- • Networks combine the advantages of division of labor and dynamic self-direction; their efficiency is based on an elastic distribution of competencies and roles.

- • Networks establish connections and relationships in all directions (horizontal, vertical, transversal) and thus serve a rapid mobilization and provision of important resources.

- • Networks gain stability through flexibility; they can switch from standby mode to operational mode within a short time.

- • Networks enable forms of action whose clout depends less on the number (quantity) of activists than on the quality of their social imagination, media creativity and strategic alliance ability.

(11) The "KirchenVolksKonferenz" provides an example for this concept of organization and action: networking of church reform groups, which in turn operate as networks. Moreover, networking is also realized here as an indicator and criterion of "catholicity" and manifested in unison with what constitutes "synodality".

(12) What seems sociologically plausible, however, does not yet have to be theologically accepted and received. Acceptance is made more difficult by a dogmatic and canonical definition of being "catholic" and "synodal", which sees the identity of the church anchored in a structure represented worldwide by the pope and bishops, who in turn see themselves as guarantors of continuity with the apostolic origin of the church. Compared to this "catholicity", are the many Christian initiatives in and outside the "official church", which have committed themselves to church reform, only particular forms of expression of being Christian? Do they only represent group-specific concerns and interests? Instead of looking at the whole, i.e. paying attention to the concerns of the universal church, they are in danger of becoming self-centred and bubble-forming in the eyes of their critics.

(13) Such questions and concerns, which often camouflage conservative, traditionalist and anti-democratic resentments traditionalist undercut the fact that the Church sees itself not only to an apostolic-sacramental foundation, but also to a signature of dynamic change but also has a signature of dynamic change imbued with the Spirit of God.

The decisive statements on this can be found in the Constitution on the Church of Vatican II.

> "When the work the Father had given the Son to do on earth was completed (cf. Jn 17:4), the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost to sanctify the Church continually, so that believers might have access to the Father in one Spirit through Christ (cf. Eph 2:18). He is the Spirit of life, ... ; through him the Father gives life to those who have died in sin, in order to finally raise their mortal bodies in Christ (cf. Rom 8:10-11). The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of believers as in a temple (cf. 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19), ... He introduces the Church to all truth (cf. Jn 16:13), unites her in communion and service, prepares and guides her through the various hierarchical and charismatic gifts, and adorns her with his fruits (cf. Eph 4:11-12; 1 Cor 12:4; Gal 5:22). Through the power of the

Gospel he always rejuvenates and renews the Church ... Thus the whole Church appears as the people united by the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (LG nr. 4).

(13.1) The frequently mentioned guarantors and guarantor powers of Catholic identity are not mentioned in LG nr. 4. The Pope, bishops and other ministers are only mentioned to the extent that they are "spiritually gifted". If it is the Spirit of God who continually renews and rejuvenates the Church, he relies on a specific form of promotion of the gifted, which is not bound to a position in the hierarchy: unity, identity and vitality of the Church cannot be thought of without those actors and communities in whom the gifts of God become "fruitful".

(13.2) These gifts and fruits are community-enhancing and need the extroversion of the gifted. Community-promoting extroversion is a networking indicator. In LG nr. 4 we thus encounter a model of the Church which presents it as a "network of the Holy Spirit". In this network, both the catholicity and the synodality of the Church are realised. It is debatable in which framework such networks (may) operate or whether they themselves represent the framework in which the Church of tomorrow will operate.

(14) The text published by the International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" (2018), affirms that all believers have a spiritual gift that enables them to participate fully in the life of the Church. It also recognises synodality as an expression of catholicity:

> 6. Synodality in this ecclesiological context points to the specific modus vivendi et operandi of the Church as the People of God, which manifests and concretises its existence as community and communion by coming together in assembly and by all its members actively participating in its mission of evangelisation. 55.

> 55. Synodality expresses existence as the subject of the whole Church and of all in the Church. The faithful are σύνοδοι, companions called to be active as sharers in the One Priesthood of Christ and as recipients of the various charisms which the Holy Spirit pours out with a view to the common good.

> 58. Synodality is a living expression of the catholicity of the Church as Communio.

(15) However, this document leaves no doubt that the exercise of synodality is strictly limited by the hierarchical constitution of the Church:

> 64. This ecclesiological vision invites us to promote the development of synodal communion between "all", "some" and "one". At different levels and in different forms, at the level of particular Churches, their regional groupings and that of the universal Church, synodality implies the exercise of the sensus fidei of the universitas fidelium (all), the governing office of the college of bishops, each with its presbyterate (some), and the office of the unity of the bishop and the pope (one). Thus, in the synodal dynamic, the communitarian aspect involving the whole People of God, the collegial dimension concerning the episcopate and the primary office of the Bishop of Rome are united. 69.

> 69. A synod, an assembly, a council cannot make decisions without the legitimate pastors. The synodal process must take place within the body of a hierarchically structured community. In a

diocese, for example, a distinction must be made between the process of making a decision (decision-making) through common discernment, consultation and collaboration and the pastoral making of a decision (decision-taking) which is the responsibility of episcopal authority, the guarantor of apostolicity and catholicity. The elaboration is a synodal task, the decision is a responsibility of the office.

(16) In this concept, the number of participants decreases with each stage in the process of consultation, deliberation and decision-making, while the powers of the remaining persons increase. The standards of a corporately organised social order still apply here: believers are allowed to speak when they are asked. Bishops are supposed to listen carefully before they deliberate and decide among their peers. "Lay people" will never get into a (co-)decision-making situation because they are not ordained. Ergo: In the Church, the people of God remain in the minority!

(17) However, there is a passage in the document of the International Theological Commission which calls into question the decision-making cartel of ordained ministers:

> 74. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise the principle of equality between the hierarchical and charismatic gifts in the Church, which is based on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. It implies the participation of consecrated communities, movements and new ecclesial communities in the synodal life of the Church. All these realities, often born of an impulse of the gifts given by the Spirit to renew the life and mission of the Church, can contribute significant experiences of synodal membership and dynamics of communal discernment inherent in them, as well as suggestions for new ways of evangelisation.

(18) The idea of the "coessentiality" of hierarchy and charism can give communities that form a "network of the Holy Spirit" their own quality, relevance and legitimacy. In them, a synodality comes to bear which is constitutive for the church and stands for its "essence".

(19) However, criteria must also be taken into account in order to "separate the "spirits"". For the Holy Spirit is not at work everywhere where a lot of fuss is made about one's own position. Sometimes it is just hot air. Where this is the case, the theological appeal to the Spirit of God becomes an extremely windy affair. If this is to be prevented, the way the Second Vatican Council speaks of the work of the Spirit of God can provide guidance. If one ties these statements back to the biblical testimony, then one can only speak of the working of this Spirit if there are corresponding indicators. These include:

- *Sovereignty and unpredictability:* When the Spirit blows where it wants, it can blow in the face of the church establishment, but also of church reform groups. The Spirit of God is no guarantee of a tailwind.

- *Vitality:* The Spirit is there where something is going on (Ps 104) - he makes alive (2 Cor 3:6; Jn 6:63). He is the birth of new ideas and projects, but not the support of the worriers and gravediggers.

- *Attractiveness:* The Spirit has charm - he attracts and seeks partners whom he "jumps over" and takes for himself (Gal 5:25; 1 Cor 12:1-11; Rom 12). He has a preference for sociable individualists.

- *Freedom and liberty:* The Spirit disempowers the fear that authorities use as a means of maintaining power (2 Cor 3:17: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty").

- *Otherness and eccentricity*: The measure of the Spirit is not the centre, but the limit or the other, from which impositions and encouragements emanate (1 Cor 14:1-5). The Spirit of God occasionally leads a "system-critical marginal existence".

(20) If it is true that a church is not "catholic" if it does not understand itself as "synodal", then the above-mentioned signs of recognition and "gifts" of the Spirit of God are probably the most important (theological) dowry for the exercise of this synodality. Whether and to what extent they bear fruit in the implementation of reform concerns will be measured (sociologically), among other things, by the extent to which the church reform groups use the advantages and opportunities of a network and observe its functional conditions. This includes, among other things:

- Anchoring in the lifeworld: Networks articulate problem situations that become manifest in the lifeworld, but whose causes are structurally conditioned.

- Proximity and distance: Networks allow their members to determine the intensity of their commitment themselves and make themselves independent of membership and participation conditions defined by church law.

- Campaign competence: Networks participate in the competition for public attention and also use media-effective staging of their concerns.

- Breaking discourse monopolies: Networks identify power cartels and their members get in the way of the innovation-resistant representatives of the existing church system, both peacefully and provocatively, and campaign for a "democratic synodality" in the Catholic Church.

Translated by Colm Holmes, Chair of We are Church International