

Inauguration of Dr Michael Gerber as 18th Bishop of Fulda

Fulda Cathedral on 31 March 2019

Sermon of Bishop Dr Michael Gerber

Dear Confreres in the service of the Bishop, the priests and the deacons, dear Sisters and Brothers!

We have gathered for this celebration this afternoon from the whole of the Diocese of Fulda and far beyond, and from many different networks. We belong together, so do the people who are standing outside the Cathedral and who join us at home via their TVs.

We are celebrating the Eucharist at this place where Sturmius and his companions erected a cross. They started an important new chapter in the history of Christianity in our country. When someone comes into a diocese for the first time as Bishop, it is necessary for him to be guided by an attitude of respect as he asks: What is the history God has written with the people here? What paths has God followed with this people who live in the region between Bad Karlshafen and Hanau, between Geisa and Amöneburg?

At this point I would like to thank all who have set their stamp on the history of this diocese in the last years and months: Above all Bishop Heinz Josef Algermissen, who has led this diocese for many years, and together with him Prof. Gerhard Stanke as Vicar General. Auxiliary Bishop Karlheinz Diez, who has been diocesan administrator until today, has invested a great deal in the last weeks in order to introduce me to the diocese. However, I would also like to thank you, the priests, the full time and voluntary workers, the people of consecrated life, and the ordinary worshippers who support the various offices in the diocese with your prayer, commitment and testimony.

At this moment we are gathered here at the grave of St Boniface. Boniface, who is also called "the Apostle to the Germans", and with him the apostolic women and men of a Church marked by Easter, ask us: Church, what is your commission? Church, what is your mission now in 2019? If we were to ask them for the answer, I am convinced they would say: Fundamentally what matters also today in 2019 is the process that has been going on since the first Pentecost in Jerusalem. What matters is to open up a space, to enable relationships through which people can enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and his Gospel. What matters is that, as a result of this relationship with Christ, people are able to tackle the challenges of their lives, so that they do not break under them, but instead grow. What matters is that out of this relationship to Christ people are able to form human relationships that are truly human, and in this way set their stamp on our culture and this planet.

Precisely at a time when contrasts are again more strongly emphasised, when those seem to gain the upper hand who preach isolation, and who erect walls; precisely in this time we are challenged to again accept responsibility for our planet. We have to see this responsibility in such a way that it opens up our horizons to take in their worldwide

dimensions and hence also their global context. "You have set my feet in a spacious place" (Ps 31, 8 NIV). Let us not be afraid of the wide open spaces into which the Lord wants to place us.

What will help us so that these do not just remain words in a Sunday sermon? Where can we get the strength to live as Christians today and influence our culture? Let us look again at Boniface. He was a man who was profoundly touched by the Gospel – right up to the last minutes of his life. The *Codex Ragnydrudis*, which has been placed before the altar today, testifies to this. Which words from the Sacred Scriptures have touched me, touched my heart? Which events in my life have helped me to grow? Where do we find an echo of these moments when we were touched?

"To grow together" – this is the motto for the process of developing the Church in the Fulda Diocese. When we gather in our committees and circles, groups or privately, our attitude, our attentiveness, is meant to create an area where, besides the many things that always have to be clarified and discussed, we can tell one another about such points of growth, such key experiences. From time to time we will grow precisely through those experiences that caused us pain. Where and with whom does this find a response?

Where and how does the path and fate of other people find a response in me? St Elizabeth, the second patron of the Fulda Diocese, offers us a living example of caring for those in need in her times. She, therefore, represents a process that is part of the essence of the Church. Jesus assembles the People of God and proclaims the Good News precisely through his loving concern for the poor. Where and how do we come into real contact with the lives of other people?

In these years we are asking ourselves about the future form of the pastorate. I believe that witnesses such as Boniface, or Elizabeth, would recommend to us today: Create a pastorate that has its hands on the pulse, and is in contact with the deepest movements of the hearts of the people you encounter. Don't be uncritical, but involve mind and heart. Don't jump to conclusions, but draw what you discover into a conversation with the Word of God and the path of the Church. Try in this way to understand together in the movements of hearts, in the deeper experiences of the soul, and in the occasionally surprising and unforeseen moments of their history, where God's traces are to be found.

Whoever wants to be active in the care of souls and the pastorate in this way, whether as priest, deacon, or as full-time or voluntary workers, must be in touch with the movements of their own soul. The Gospel for this Sunday gives us an impressive indication. We see the son who wants his Father to pay out his inheritance, and who tries to make his own way in the world. It is a path directed by curiosity and an interest in new experiences. He seems to want to avoid the reality of the dynamic movement within himself, and to suppress it with all sorts of activity. Only when he can name his hunger, the hunger of his body and the hunger of his soul, is he able to discover a new perspective.

In these years, and once again in these months, we have been shaken by what has happened when pastors were not in contact with the essential dynamics of their own souls, when they have blanked out essential dimensions of their existence, or even disassociated them. We are then shaken how this has set its stamp on their actions, so

that the souls of others, in particular of minors, but also of other people under their care, were wounded in such a way that they have suffered lifelong damage and impairments.

We are not dealing here with some sort of wrongdoing in the course of the Church's long history. The problems of our days have to do with the core of the mission and commission of the Church itself: It is the task of the Church to help people in such a way that their lives gain in extent and depth. We are shocked to see that in many instances exactly the opposite has happened.

We have to face this. We have to regulate things in a new way, and as those with responsibility in the Church, we feel that this is a new challenge to which we will not so easily do justice. Many initiatives have been taken, and much has been said in the last weeks on this subject. How can we collaborate in a credible way as Christians today, how can we be credible disciples today? That is one of the huge areas needing improvement in the Church of our days.

The vocation to be followers of Jesus leads us into the community of his disciples. They share their experiences, their everyday cares and needs. Also Boniface was incorporated into a network of companions – Willibald, Willibrod, Eadburg and Lioba. As a priest and bishop I am most grateful to be integrated into such forms of pilgrim fellowship: With the priests of my community of priests, with families which are friends, with people who live their lives as men and women of consecrated life. Without these relationships I would not be able to follow my path in this way.

Credible collaboration: in the past years as Auxiliary Bishop I had the privilege to accompany some tried and tested religious communities in their necessary processes of transformation, and was at the same time a witness to the start of new networks.

It is by far not every obligatory community that is able to find a form of Christianity that suits them. Even Jesus does not seem to have required an obligatory form of all who wanted to follow him. "To grow together" – the motto for the development of the Church in the Fulda Diocese – challenges us to discover the various forms of "togetherness" so that growth is possible.

Together with many of you I was able to go on pilgrimage along the Boniface Route in the past two days. Many whom I met along the way have signed their names on a scroll. It is here before the altar lying under the historic Codex. It contains a message. The history that God has written with the witnesses of the Gospels, the history God wrote with Boniface, the history this Codex relates, continues. God wants to write history with us, with our at times spidery handwriting. When the Codex has long been returned to the climate-controlled treasury, we know that his Gospel has no place in a treasury; instead it is spelled out in the stories of our everyday lives.

Nevertheless we will repeatedly come up against our limitations; the years before us will also be marked by experiences and decisions that are painful. The future will also be marked by taking leave of what we have come to love. Many a disappointment will be unavoidable. However, as at the time of the Acts of the Apostles, may also these experiences point us more deeply to the bedrock that Jesus Christ himself laid.

Because, also for us as the Church of Fulda, those words apply that Brother Roger, the Founder of Taizé, once spoke to his Brothers when it soon became evident after the euphoria of the Council many hopes would not be carried out as they expected. He wrote:

“So who are we? A small and sometimes strongly shaken community, which however always gets up again, because it is borne by a pre-eminent presence. Who are we? Our present situation can be summarised in a single sentence: We are a collection of personal weaknesses, but at the same time a community that is visited by someone other than ourselves.” (Fr Roger, Die Gewalt der Friedfertigen, 1972, p. 54)

Amen

Unauthorised translation from the German by Mary Cole, Manchester UK/Schoenstatt.org