

Meet one another with loving care and attention!

Lenten Letter 2019 of Our Archbishop Dr. Heiner Koch

Ever more frequently, differences of opinion clash with ever more harshness. I observe this phenomenon in our civil society and just as much in our Church. Views are put forward with extreme rigor and with an amazing self-assurance that holds its own vision for absolute truth. Disagreeing ideas and convictions are at once disqualified as being provocatively irresponsible. Such an attitude fails to perceive that every point of view has its limitations. Nothing is perfect; very little may pass as self-evident; and against nearly all positions one can raise justifiable objections and criticism.

Hence, I plead for a readiness to endure ambivalences and contrary ideas whatever decision may be at stake. Someone who allows only his or her personal conviction and turns a deaf ear to arguments coming from elsewhere, in fact maintains only one thing: „I have no need to learn anything. I know everything, and I can do without the experiences, insights and views of other people. “

With this idea in mind one causes harm to oneself and blocks one's own flourishing and development. All of us are in need of help and require the supplement of others. We need the richness of variety; we always need the process of learning from one another, because in mutual exchange we grow. Only in this way can we properly meet the many challenges with which we as Church are confronted in these days. Only together shall we find good answers and appropriate ways, from the variety of our different convictions and experiences. In one of the prayers of the missal we say: „To nobody you gave everything nor did you give nothing to anyone. “

We must recognize that for our life an attitude of mutual esteem is indispensable. This is more than mere respect and tolerance. When I esteem another person, I do not merely give due respect to the person's experiences and convictions, but I truly regard this person as someone valuable. Notwithstanding all differences, the other person enriches my own being. I attend to the other person because this person is a precious gift, a unique value, and that is why I esteem the person. I am considerate, trying with utmost care to enter this new world of thought and feeling, keen on understanding another human being.

Saint Edith Stein, the Carmelite nun who was executed in Auschwitz, has taught me to hold dear this attitude of personal esteem. She describes it with the German word „Einführung“, a very sensitive feeling one's way into the inside of another person. In no other manner can one be able to perceive the depth of a human being. In this way, however, I permit the other personality to enter my life. So, I can share in the person's joy and inner life. This attitude expresses my respect for the other, my esteem of the whole personality, even my reverence. How many quarrels and disputes would be carried out differently and yield better worthwhile results, if we talked and dealt with one another in that attitude which I tried to describe. It is a matter of sincerely attending to others whoever they are, especially when we have problems with them and do not share their opinions and convictions. Especially in these cases of dissension our entire society and, in particular, our Church face a great challenge. We must learn to live in community. For we are a *Communio*, a gathering, a union with God, and in him a union with one another.

The attitude of due respect for every person corresponds to God's own attitude towards each one of us: He attends to us lovingly and attentively, he never ceases to regard us with a benevolent eye.

Only by living with one another and for one another shall we find Christ, and with him and through him find God, and draw nearer to him. God will always be a mystery that we can never comprehend. We will never fully understand his ways and procedures. This will be granted to us only at the very end, when „**we will see him as he is**. “(1 Jn 3:2) Until then we shall advance in the discovery of God only by means of our different visions and experiences. For this variety helps us to perceive him and keep him steadily in view.

Therefore, we may say that this attitude of personal esteem becomes an effective and convincing way of proclaiming our faith: „**See, how they love one another**. “With this phrase the ancient author Tertullian (2nd century) describes the cohesion of the early Christian community. A proclamation without many words, but coming from the heart, will be understood by many. Therefore, let us meet one another in this attitude of sincere appreciation, especially in contacts with those near and dear to us, in the family, with friends, neighbors and colleagues, and in our parishes.

For God's and his tender creatures' sake, I ask you to keep a loving attentive eye on our children. Pay attention to possible improprieties; notice any signs of abuse, hurt and trespasses. Be vigilant regarding such cases, and do not hesitate to voice your observations! Let me add that this is equally relevant for dealing with past incidents. In the Church and everywhere all of us together are responsible for the well-being and development of our children. Prevention concerns all of us; it demands this attitude of loving attention and respect. God became a child, and whenever a child is harmed, God is insulted.

Moreover, also our pastoral process of renewing our ecclesial presence („Wo glauben Raum Gewinnt“) depends on this basis of a respectful encounter. We are on this road together, we must heed one another with care and be regardful for one another. Every community, every institution, every congregation and parish, every place of ecclesial activity receives attention and care. Each individual, just as every community and group, is important and precious. Only in this way can we succeed in bringing, by a colorful variety of ways and means, the gospel to the people that God has entrusted to our care.

Let us be considerate and attentive in our contacts with colleagues and co-workers, with classmates and fellow students, with the cashier in the supermarket and the newspaper boy, the one whoever delivers the mail and parcels, the ticket controller and people in similar functions. Too often it happens that we fail to perceive them as human persons.

The same caring attention ought also to be practiced in dealing with our time. Everyone is granted only a limited period of time here on earth. Let us be mindful of this gift and careful in its use. Some fill their time with lots of useless things. Others divide it in nothing but profitable activities. The question is: Are we conscious of time being a gift, and do we give enough of our time to one another? Hence, please, attend carefully to your time. For time is not money, but our life.

In the near future we shall be called to the ballot box, for the European Parliament and the Landtag in Brandenburg. Elections too call for vigilant attention. We must carefully appreciate the riches and chances that Europe as well as our federal state have to offer. Consider attentively what contributes to the well-being of **all** of us, not forgetting the poor and those at the margin of society. Cultivate an open eye for situations that possess the potential to split our society by marginalizing and rejecting certain groups.

Finally, please, take care of yourselves as well. I am aware of the many and often bitter challenges that strain your strength, be they demands coming from the family, your profession, the friends, burdens of illness, suffering and misery, from set-backs inflicted on you or hurtful disregard from your surroundings. I instantly beg you, please, be kind to yourselves too, as far as possible, and allow yourselves something pleasant and wholesome that is good for your body, for your mind, and not least also for your spiritual life! Your life with God deserves special care and attention. As in every loving relationship so in our relation with God, lack of sensitivity and attentive presence does no good. Never stop in your life to care for God. He always takes good care of you!

Personally, for my part, I wish to thank you from my heart for keeping a watchful eye on me. I can draw much strength from knowing that I may be your bishop. I sincerely thank you for the many occasions to meet with you, for your support, and also for your prayers.

I hope that these reflections can motivate you during the time of Lent to further develop this attitude of respectful and caring attention to the people you encounter, to yourselves too, as well as to God. I invite you to use this Lenten season as a period of training in this matter. Take time to be aware of its importance.

Pay attention to your inner health, to the persons at your side, and to God.

In this sense I wish you all the blessings of Lent.

Berlin, First Sunday of Lent 2019

Your Heiner Koch

Archbishop