Pastoral Letter for the Lenten season 2025

Dear brothers and sisters,

My heartfelt wishes for a blessed Lenten season!

“The heavenly God in our world below”

“Deus semper maior” – Some of you might still be familiar with this phrase as the motto of my predecessor, Georg Cardinal Sterzinsky. In three short Latin words, a basic insight is formulated here that has concerned all believers since the beginning: God is always greater than what we imagine of him, and greater than what we believe we understand of him. We quickly reach the limits of our ability to think when we try to visualize the classic characteristics of God, his omnipotence, his omniscience and his all-encompassing goodness: the nature of God is beyond our comprehension.

The problem of theodicy, i.e. the question of suffering in the world, arises precisely from this human limitation: How can an all-powerful and all-knowing God allow evil when he is at the same time good and merciful? There is no satisfactory, all-explanatory answer to this question for us, at least not on earth, because as creatures we stand within creation, and with our reason we can only grasp what is within the order of this creation. But God is greater, he stands both inside and outside the created order. But what is outside remains closed to our knowledge. At best we can only imagine it as a distant reflection.

God's greatness eludes us.

In our St. Hedwig's Cathedral in the center of Berlin, which was festively reopened last November, I like to stand under the high white dome, where the light from above gently shines down on the people. I can't see the sky behind the vault from where I stand, I can only glimpse it through the small opening of the *opaion* (the opening in the top of the dome) far above me. I am even less able to grasp or even reach this sky. This stone boundary of the dome illustrates what it means to be involved in creation: the light has the same nature, inside and outside, but I can still only see the area in which I am. The view of the outside is not open to us: it belongs solely to the greatness of God.

We Christians are certainly not the only ones who have developed this insight: many religions of the world – and especially our Abrahamic brothers and sisters in Judaism and Islam – share with us the knowledge of the greatness, the majesty and the aloofness of the Creator. When Moses turns away his face from the burning bush (Ex 3:6), when in the Ten Commandments God's name is to be removed from human grasp (Dt 5:11), then this is

based on the ancient knowledge of the greatness and incomprehensibility of God, which surpasses all human understanding.

The sober redesign of the St. Hedwig's Cathedral with its sparse visual appearance has sometimes been criticized. But I believe that it is good for us as humans not to want to confine God's unlimitedness too easily within the narrow framework of our images, thought patterns and worlds of ideas. Often, it is instead necessary to humbly face his unapproachable nature.

But God in His greatness emptied Himself and became small.

As Christians, we not only believe in a God who is bigger than we can imagine, but also in a God who has made himself much smaller than we often want to imagine. In his incarnation, God voluntarily renounced his unapproachable greatness: in Jesus Christ "he emptied himself and became like a slave and equal to men. His life was that of a man", as the hymn in St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians bluntly states (Phil 2:7).

The obvious sign of this in our cathedral is the altar that has moved into the center: There – on the ground of the world – we people gather around Christ, become witnesses to his faithfulness, his sacrifice and his resurrection, just like people did 2000 years ago when they stood near the Cross or met the risen Christ face to face.

The first ecumenical council of Nicaea, whose 1700th anniversary we celebrate this year, is fundamentally based on a dispute over the understanding of this Pauline statement about God. For our brothers and sisters in faith in the year 325, it was anything but self-evident to speak of Jesus Christ as the incarnate God who became human: the many followers of an Egyptian priest named Arius at the time even considered the idea that God had actually become man or had suffered on the cross to be unthinkable. For them, Jesus was a kind of demigod or just a person who was particularly distinguished by God. The Arians could not think small of God: they insisted on his unapproachable greatness.

But God made himself small, as the Nicene Creed testifies, which we as Christians have confessed together for 1,700 years.

Arius was wrong: with Jesus, God did not simply choose a person whom he called to be an example for others or a scapegoat whom he ultimately sacrificed on the cross. Through Jesus God doesn't just *let* someone speak, forgive, heal or die. God personally comes to us as JESUS THE CHRIST, as true God and true man at the same time. In Christ, God personally speaks, forgives, heals, and dies.

The Christian God is a God of relationship with and love for his creatures.

So the Council of Nicaea was right to reject the Arian doctrine for what it was: a seemingly pious one, but nevertheless, an error. In the first all-Christian confession of faith, however, the Council Fathers tried to put the divine nature of Christ into words that are still difficult to understand even for us today:

God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
consubstantial with the father.

(From the Nicene Creed (June 19, 325): Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ, φῶς ἐκ φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί [= DH 125].)

This God doesn't just bow down from on high. No! He lives among us, even today. He is baptized with earthly water (Matt 3:13-17), with the wedding party in Cana he shares our earthly joys (John 2:1-12), together with Mary and Martha he weeps and shares our earthly sorrow (John 11:33-36), together with the disciples he prays to the heavenly Father and shares earthly fears and hopes (Matt 6:9-13), and in his birth and death he shares with us the universal fate of man.

So God makes himself small *for us*! He wants to be with us and walk our path through life with us, day after day, with all its ups and downs.

And yet Jesus Christ made it very clear in his earthly life that God is greater: namely, where he overcomes human weakness. Unparalleled and incomparable especially in the Resurrection. But also when he gives us an example to grow beyond ourselves: where people marginalize others, he touches the lepers and heals them (Luke 5:12-16). Where others cannot forgive, as with the adulteress, he breaks through the poisonous conventions of humanity (John 8:1-11). Christ is great above all wherever God's love and commitment to us are shown.

So with God we are to show ourselves greater and lesser.

Being greater here means, among other things, that we begin, as pilgrims of hope, to be credible witnesses of our faith in God, who strengthens us and gives our lives greatness and dignity, direction, fulfillment and salvation, as Pope Francis reminds us in this Holy Year. Greater by courageously contributing our strengths in the service of the lepers of our day, the marginalized and persecuted, and for all those who are denied value and dignity in this world. We should strive to be greater than the supposedly great people in the world, who are only so because they oppress others and trample them into the dust. We should strive to be greater precisely by refraining from making others small! And last but not least, we should strive to be greater than those who claim that our small world and our limited perspectives are comprehensive and that there is nothing more.

We know about the greater things, we believe in the ever greater God, in whose good hands we rest, and we also want to be great, always new, in our faith, our hope and our love.

But we should also strive to be smaller by humbly admitting that we don't know a solution in many situations; by remaining humble in success; by recognizing that we can do nothing on our own; by honestly recognizing that we are not called to rule, but to serve.

Above all, we should refrain from measuring the unfathomable greatness of God by our earthly smallness. Rather, we should strive to meet the heavenly Father where he himself met us and continues to meet us again and again: in Jesus Christ and his sacraments, here, on earth!

Filled with this spirit of greatness in humility and with the Christian hope for strength that becomes powerful in the weak (2 Cor 12:10), I wish you and all those with whom you are connected in your family and in your private surroundings, at work, in church and society, God's rich blessing for this preparation time leading us to the celebration of Easter.

+ Heiner Koch

Archbishop of Berlin

Translation: Diakon Dirk Verheijen