

Bishop Dr. Gebhard Fürst

Structural and Spiritual Renewal  
of the Church  
in the Spirit of Jesus Christ



Letter from the Bishop  
to the parishes of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart  
for the Lenten Season 2022

Bishop Dr. Gebhard Fürst

Structural and Spiritual Renewal of the Church  
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– 1st Sunday in Lent: 6th March –

Dear Parish, dear Sisters and Brothers!

As we go into the Lenten season, it is with heartfelt solidarity that I turn to you. From the heart, but also in deep concern.

We are going through difficult times. Wherever we look, disturbing events depress us and frighten many. Turbulent times are leading us into turbulent conflicts. Irreconcilable scenes are tearing our coexistence apart and leading to division.

In the third year of the coronavirus pandemic, we continue to suffer the burdens of disease and death, loneliness and existential fears, all because of the mutating virus.

Even more we feel the shattering crisis of our Church. Again and again new scandals are coming to light in connection with the abuse of children and young people by priests, deacons, religious orders and church employees. In all this, I am particularly dismayed by the cold, dismissive treatment of those affected by abuse, the disregard for their suffering and the refusal of the highest ecclesial office-holders to give help.

In the context of the concealment of offences in favour of the supposed protection of the perpetrators, further problems inherent in the system are becoming apparent:

- the abuse of power that has come to light,
- the refusal to shape the renewal of the Church,
- the inability to accept people in their individual life situations and treat them with respect,
- and the inability to consider the future in the way we deal with major problems.

All of this is putting an extraordinary strain on the togetherness of our Church. The very existence of our Church is endangered.

Dear sisters and brothers, as bishop I am facing up to this responsibility. Together with you, I want to work for the sustainable renewal of the Church. A renewal of the Church in its structures, but also a spiritual renewal in our hearts.

Through many conversations, through the letters and e-mails that many of you write to me, I know of your anger, sadness and disappointment, and also of your turmoil, especially when you yourselves are in a position of responsibility. Many believers are currently turning their backs on the Church as a result of the abuse of power or are leaving the Church, in part because they can no longer understand and support many things. Cover-ups, exclusion and unkindness, indeed any kind of abuse, have no place in a Church that is committed to the message of Jesus Christ and His gospel.

To make the holiness and wholeness of people, the success of their lives and the experience of the loving closeness of our Lord Jesus Christ among us real, tangible and perceptible – that is the mission of all in the Church. Of the people of God just as much as of those of us who serve in the people of God.

If we, as followers of Jesus Christ, can no longer live this message of His in a credible way – for the salvation of all our fellow human beings – then we have gambled away the essence of what it means to be a Christian.

Let me reiterate: A renewal of the Church in its structures, but also a spiritual renewal in our hearts of Jesus Christ and His gospel, is the imperative of these bitter hours we are experiencing.

We have to make sure that the Spirit of Jesus Christ guides all our efforts in a good way. A renewal of structures can succeed above all if we are also willing to renew our hearts. For this may HIS Spirit guide us.

To close, allow me to to look at a meaningful picture with you. I have chosen it for the bitter hours in this stormy time. You have it in front of you.

Sometimes an image helps us to interpret the situation we are in better than words alone. So I would like to invite you to consider the picture together with me:

Dear sisters and brothers, you see a depiction of the story of the “storm on the lake” from the New Testament. This scene, which has been handed down in the gospels<sup>1</sup>, speaks to me very personally.

The gospel writers do not relate the storm at sea merely as a historical event. They describe pictorially how the young Christianity at that time was struggling to survive in stormy times. Jesus’ disciples are sitting in the boat with Jesus. The boat and the people are caught in a violent whirlwind. They are afraid of sinking.

Jesus can be seen twice. On the left of the picture He is sleeping in the middle of the stormy sea. A disciple – it is probably Peter – is expressing with his gestures what we also ask today: “Jesus, Master, do you not care if we perish in this threatening storm?” – “Where are you, Jesus, with your power to save us?” – At the prow of the little boat on a stormy sea, Jesus can be seen a second time. Here He is not asleep. With an outstretched arm, He commands the storm and the waves to stop. With His whole body He points forward. John, the disciple who loves Jesus especially, stands behind the risen Jesus Christ and looks boldly forward with Him.

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1 Mk 4,35–41; Mt 8,18.23–27; Lk 8,22–25



From the Echternach Gospels, Storm on Lake Galilee,  
Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg

Dear sisters and brothers, this image has a great significance for me. I recognise in this image the threatened Church in violent crisis on its journey through the stormy times into the future.

Sometimes it seems that God is indifferent to our situation, as if we were abandoned by the sleeping Jesus. But Peter wakes Him up. Yes, we Christians are to let Jesus Christ become effective and strong in our church. That He may lead us with His spirit in these stormy times. That the helping and saving power that comes from Jesus Christ may be decisive in the renewal of the Church.

Like John in the boat, let us stand behind Jesus, love him and go boldly forward with Him. Where He stands in the middle of the Church, where His spirit works in us and through us, He shows us the way that leads out of the storm. He gives us a future and hope. With His Spirit and through Him, the renewal of the Church can succeed.

Dear sisters and brothers, I promise you that as bishop I, together with those charged with leading the diocese, will do everything that is necessary for renewal: in the further investigation of the criminal acts, in the structural reappraisal, in the recognition of the suffering of those affected and in the prevention of abuse.

Many of you know that we in the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart – I as bishop and those charged with leading the diocese – have been systematically dealing with the sexual abuse of children and young people for two decades through an independent “Sexual Abuse Commission”. No cases that have come to our attention have been or are being covered up or deliberately concealed. All cases of sexual abuse have been and are being investigated by a committee working independently of the bishop. The acts of which we are aware have been

punished and the perpetrators sentenced in accordance with the applicable state criminal law and ecclesiastical law.

I understand that many of you are waiting impatiently for positive results from the Synodal Path. The intensive deliberations of the Synodal Path must not be without consequence:

- The participation of lay people in the Church must be strengthened.
- Women should be able to participate in the Church much more than before, in leadership positions and in the office of deaconess.
- We must find forms and signs so that all people feel that they are accepted by God and the Church of Jesus Christ – in their body and soul identity, in their sexual orientation and in their love for each other.

As bishop, I want to face up to these challenges and look to Jesus Christ to show us the way. If HIS healing and saving message is to work in this world, Jesus Christ needs all our commitment and love.

Let us pray for one another at this difficult time!

Rottenburg, 2nd February 2022,  
Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

Yours

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Bishop Dr. Gebhard Fürst

## **Renew our mind and spirit**

Faithful God, you are the Lord of all Creation,  
in you we are secure.

Take all fear from us  
and strengthen our trust in your saving power.

Send us the comforter, the Holy Spirit,  
who fills us with your love,  
that we may be called to change  
from a wavering to a strong and courageous church,  
from a rambling to a listening church,  
from an obstinate to a renewed church.

This we ask you through Jesus Christ our Lord  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
God from everlasting to everlasting. Amen.

I believe that he can break down my prejudices.  
I believe that he can change my habits.  
I believe that he can overcome my indifference.  
I believe that he can give me compassion to love.  
I believe that he can give me warning against evil.  
I believe that he can give me courage to do what is good.  
I believe that he can conquer my sadness.  
I believe that he can give me love for God's word.  
I believe that he can take away my feelings of inferiority.  
I believe that he can give me strength in my life.  
I believe that he can give me a brother and a sister by my side.  
I believe that he can penetrate my very being.

*Karl Rahner*



From the Echternach Gospels, Storm on Lake Galilee,  
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