

Pastoral letter
to the parishes of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart
on the coronavirus pandemic

25th Sunday of Ordinary Time: 20 September 2020

Bishop Dr. Gebhard Fürst

Faith in God
in the Time of Coronavirus

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

A week after the end of the holidays and the start of school, I would like to speak to you today.

The coronavirus crisis continues to hold us in its grip, painfully impacting our day-to-day life. Since March this year we have been affected worldwide by the coronavirus pandemic. Much is being demanded of us in these days: having to go without seeing loved ones, reorganisation of our everyday activities, curtailments of the freedom to live our lives, severe restrictions on going to church and celebrating mass.

Looking back, I would first of all like to express my sincere thanks to you, my dear sisters and brothers. The vast majority of people have behaved very responsibly over these last few weeks. That is the case in our diocese as well. In spite of all the mental and physical strains, we have so far come through the severe crisis relatively well compared with other countries. But these times are not behind us.

Our coexistence in days so severely impacted by coronavirus shows us all how important helpful togetherness is. The social distancing that is required on hygiene grounds has so far *not* led to us *distancing from each other as people*. On the contrary: attentiveness to the situations and needs of our fellow humans, concern for each other's fate and a mutual willingness to help have increased in many places. Hygienically essential distancing has often brought about a greater closeness to and concern for one another. The painful experiences of isolation suffered by the severely ill and the dying have shaken us all deeply. Thank God that relatives, carers, medical staff and friends, but also people in church positions such as priests, deacons, pastoral assistants and parish workers – so many, many Christian volunteers – have looked after people in need. The resourcefulness in mutual support that I have seen, heard and experienced here has given me comfort and hope in our situation despite all the suffering. Through dedicated people on the ground, the church was close to people.

Dear sisters and brothers, given all that the time of coronavirus is throwing at us, *many people of faith are asking themselves with a heavy heart: Why did all this have to happen?* Has God forgotten His creation, has God forgotten His creatures, we humans?

Dear sisters and brothers in faith, it is not easy to answer these questions that so burden us. But it is helpful to turn to Holy Scripture. In the Bible it is almost always the experience of people with their God that is reported. Ever-present in these life stories are not only good times and happiness, but also bad times and sadness. War and strife, despair and powerlessness – yes, it speaks of the painful experience of people who feel that God is remote. But the biblical stories also testify that despite everything, the people have not given up their relationship with God.

It is not least the experiences of Jesus with his closeness to and remoteness from God that shake us. In his Passion and on the cross, Jesus of Nazareth, the holy and righteous one, endures for a while the full force of the eclipse of God. His sufferings were surely not punishments. His cry in the agony of crucifixion does not go into a void. **HE asks GOD:** “Why have **YOU** forsaken **ME**?” Even in his deepest distress Jesus does not give up his relationship with God. And we know what came out of that: overcoming death, resurrection, new life ...

Dear sisters and brothers, let us look to Jesus of Nazareth, to the people in the Bible who in their distress do not lose God.

Despite all our lack of understanding of why what we are going through at present had to happen and is happening, let us stay connected to God.

Let us not give up our relationship with God! Let us address our painful, perhaps also reproachful experiences to God. ***Let us pray!***

A reading of the psalms, the songs of prayer in the Old Testament, is especially able to help us experience how people of deep faith thank God, praise Him, make requests of Him, but also accuse Him for His perceived remoteness from them. ***The psalms are an education in how to pray in unfathomable distress.*** Like the people in the Bible, we do not give up our living relationship with God but keep it alive when we do not forget God, when we instead call out to God, in other words when we pray.

There is, though, a second dimension to not losing God. We do not give up our living relationship with God when we allow others to sense our nearness and encounter it in such a way that they do not feel left alone. Where my neighbours experience God's healing nearness through me and my loving actions, there God becomes present. Thus we become witnesses of God in what we do, in practising love for our neighbours.

Where do we get the strength to love our neighbours and to help them selflessly? The power to love comes to us from our living relationship with God in prayer. But it comes to us particularly from the ***celebration of the Eucharist!***

Dear sisters and brothers, our church is going through unprecedentedly difficult times. Our church gatherings and encounters are suffering enormously as a result, particularly the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. So far we can only celebrate with a limited number of believ-

ers and under conditions that we find difficult to deal with. I am delighted that you, dear sisters and brothers, have come here today to celebrate our Sunday mass. In doing so you are demonstrating your faith. Demonstrating the faith of our church. The celebration of the Eucharist is not just any gathering. It is a different kind of mass to the other masses, however important they are. I need mention here only the Liturgy of the Word with the sacrament of communion. In the Eucharist, the Holy Mass, we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a holy gathering, initiated by God: a liturgical celebration in holy signs. In it God's love for us becomes present and effective as signs. It is, especially, the sacramental celebration of the sacrificial love of Jesus of Nazareth for us. In celebrating with us you, all of us, as believers are received into the living, acting Christ here and now.

That, dear sisters and brothers, is why I am delighted and thankful that we as God's people are celebrating the memory of Jesus. From His spirit we receive the power to act in accordance with and in the spirit of Jesus to the *afflicted of all kinds in these dark times*.

Why am I so keen to speak to you in my letter today in particular?

Dear sisters and brothers, I am driven by the concern that the deep mystery of the Eucharist could be trivialised or even lost in our church in the present pandemic. Anyone undervaluing the Eucharist loses that life-giving contact with it. Let us be careful, therefore, that in these difficult times especially we do not spill the eucharistic font of our

faith and of our church, indeed of all that we do personally and as a church.

If we lost the Eucharist, we as a church would lose the *most important font of our energy to love*.¹ It is in the celebration of the Eucharist, after all, that the spirit of Jesus Christ comes to live among us. The existent Christ encourages us in His spirit to *love your neighbour as yourself* and to *love them today just as Jesus loved people*.

God bless you all!

Rottenburg, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, 14 September
2020

Yours,

Bishop Gebhard Fürst

¹ In the solemnly promulgated Constitution on the Holy Liturgy, the Second Vatican Council teaches: The liturgy, the Eucharist, is **the font, the summit**, the centre and also the goal of **all the activities of the church** (cf. Sacrosanctum concilium Art. 10, Lumen Gentium Art. 11)

PC/CoV19BB: Wörter: 1.096; Z.o.L 6.351; z.m.L 7.439