

"A conversation that brings us all together" (LS 14)

The importance of dialogue for Europe

Dr. Petra Steinmair-Pösl, Vienna - Zoom Meeting TfE (Graz) – May8, 2021

1. Occasion: EU Founding Day 9.5.2021

71 years of Europe. What can we see when we pause today - while the European states and with them the whole world have been battling through the consequences of the Corona crisis for a year - and look back at the founding of the European Union?

First of all, looking back may bring a bit of relativization: Even if the current challenges seem huge to us, the horror and trauma for our generation of parents and grandparents were probably far greater at the time. Between 1939 and 1945, between 60 and 80 million people were killed as a result of direct acts of war and the consequences of the war. In contrast, the current number of around 3 million corona deaths worldwide still seems relatively low. But it would not only be macabre to set war and virus victims against each other, it would also deprive us of the chance to recognize that today we are again - or rather: still - faced with similar basic questions as then, namely: How can we succeed in solidarity and live together peacefully - with all the existing differences and despite all historical trauma?

"The peace of the world cannot be maintained without creative efforts that correspond to the magnitude of the threat",

So it says at the beginning of the Schumann Declaration of May 9, 1950. These words also apply today and pose the question of what creative efforts our generation has to make in our situation.

I would like to invite you to pursue this question with me by taking the three steps of seeing - judging - acting based on the principles of the Belgian Cardinal Joseph Cardijn.

2. Seeing: The situation in Europe: What is Europe suffering from?

Europe is facing major challenges today. The pandemic with its many consequences is troubling us: How will the repeated lockdowns affect our economic system? And what about our children and grandchildren, for whom social distancing is a special challenge? But what does it do to us when we can only meet each other via the screen or hidden behind a mask - not to mention touch? How do the multiple fears about the future affect politics - and our willingness to show solidarity - within Europe and beyond?

We know from long-term psychological studies that confrontation with our deep-seated fears, especially the fear of death, tends to lead people to be less unified and more hostile towards those people who are in some way different from themselves. The psychologist Sheldon Solomon confirmed this as a result of his studies: "When we are reminded of our mortality, it makes us less forgiving regarding violations of morals and more hostile towards people who are different from us." (Solomon et al. 2016, 107 -8th)

This is exactly what we can currently see in Europe - but not just since Corona. As early as 2016, Zygmunt Baumann, one of the most important sociologists of our time, pointed out a similar observation in connection with questions of migration. In his book *The Fear of the Other*, he describes how the presence of migrants triggers one's own fears:

These nomads - who did not become so of their own accord, but because of a heartless fate - remind us in an irritating, annoying and terrifying way of the (incurable?) vulnerability of our own position and of the endemic fragility of our hard-earned prosperity. It is a human - all too human - habit to hold the messenger responsible for the undesirable content of the message he is delivering. (Bauman 2016, 21)

In other words, we tend to scapegoat others. This not only affected the Nazi regime, which of course practiced this on a large scale regarding European Jews, but we are also faced with this danger today, in view of the challenges associated with various fears: I already addressed the corona crisis and migration issues. Added to this are ecological and climate issues, which have only taken a backseat for the moment, but which will still occupy us massively in the years and decades to come, as well as a crisis of meaning that many have also mentioned.

In view of these multiple challenges and crises, today there is also a strong impulse to flee into various forms of the "us versus them" or the "friend-foe" mentality. Growing nationalism and identity politics, "the lure of the authoritarian" (Applebaum and Neubauer 2021), the raising of borders and "protective mechanisms" and European disintegration tendencies (Brexit) are just a few examples of this way of dealing with our fears. Another reaction to the confrontation of our fears is to flee into entertainment, excessive consumer behavior, as well as leisure and adventure stress. (Solomon et al. 2016, 301)

But on closer inspection, all of these are revealed as pseudo-solutions that only maneuver us deeper into the crisis. Zygmunt Baumann sums it up:

The only way out of current discomfort as well as future suffering is to reject the deceptive temptation to isolate yourself. Instead of refusing to face the realities of our time, the challenges associated with the dictum "One planet, one humanity", [...] we must look for ways to come into close and ever closer contact with others, which will hopefully lead to a merging of the horizons instead of a deliberately induced and self-aggravating split. (Bauman 2016, 23)

3. Judging: what does Europe need?

But how can it - especially in the face of widespread fears, projections and the formation of social bubbles - actually succeed in such an ever closer contact, even in a “merging of the horizons”? In my opinion, the key word here is dialogue. This is not just my personal insight. In this context, the statements of Pope Francis have become particularly important to me, who has attached central importance to dialogue - especially with a view to Europe - throughout his entire pontificate. At this point I would like to give you a few quotes as “samples”: In 2014, in his speech to the Council of Europe, he stated:

History today demands the ability to move out of the structures that “include” one's own identity to encounter, with the aim of strengthening this identity in the fraternal juxtaposition of transversality and making it more fruitful. A Europe that dialogues only within the closed affiliation groups stops halfway [...] My wish is that Europe, with the rediscovery of its historical heritage and the depth of its roots, as well as with the acceptance of its living multipolarity and the phenomenon of the dialogizing transversality finds spiritual youth again, which made it fruitful and important. (Francis 2014, 6-8)

On the occasion of the awarding of the Charlemagne Prize in 2016, he emphasized the importance of dialogue for Europe, as he sees “the greatness of the European soul” as rooted in the “encounter between civilizations and peoples”, “which goes much further than the current borders of the European Union and is called to become a model for new syntheses and dialogue ”(Franziskus 2016b, 4):

The face of Europe does not differ in that it opposes others, but in that it bears the characteristics of different cultures and the beauty that comes from overcoming the lack of relationships. (Francis 2016b, 4)

Against this background, Francis is convinced:

If there is one word we have to repeat to the point of exhaustion, it is dialogue. [...] The culture of dialogue implies a real learning process as well as an asceticism which helps us to recognize the other as an equal interlocutor and which allows us to regard the foreigner, the migrant, the member of another culture as a subject that we are listens to recognized and valued counterparts. [...] Peace will be lasting to the extent that we equip our children with the tools of dialogue [...]. This culture of dialogue, which should be included in all school curricula as an overarching axis of the subjects, will help to impress on the younger generation a different kind of conflict resolution than the one we are accustomed to now. (Francis 2016b, 4–5)

In addition, the dialogue on different levels and between different dialogue partners - from (marriage) partners to social subsystems such as science, economy, religious communities - also plays a central role in other texts by Pope Francis. Yes, many of his texts are already the result of such dialogues.

Perhaps some of you are now shaking your head in disappointment because you consider the invitation or invitation to dialogue to be a theoretical, superficial or abstract phrase. All too often, all too banal and all too meaningless, dialogue was and is spoken of today - and mostly in normative form. Perhaps when you hear the keyword dialogue you will see pictures of the meetings of some high-ranking representatives of religions, states, companies or interest groups who come together for a formal and cultivated dialogue event in which you meet each other politely, but omit sensitive and controversial topics as far as possible - and after which in fact little or nothing changes.

That's not what I mean when I speak of the need for dialogue! I am concerned with something that affects us all and in which we all participate. And Pope Francis also emphasizes "that no one can limit himself to being a spectator or a mere observer." Rather, "everyone [...] has an active part" and is required "to participate in their design and construction". Because, Francis is convinced: "The current situation does not allow mere onlookers to the struggles of others. On the contrary, it is a clear appeal to personal and social responsibility. "(Franziskus 2016b, 5) And so I would like to use the remaining time to work out more precisely what I am talking about when I speak of dialogue - and why this is neither everyday-banal nor theoretical and abstract, but at the same time highly demanding, but also very practical and concrete - and how a dialogic attitude today, here and now, can change your life and that of the people you deal with on a daily basis.

4. Action: dialogue

First of all, it is important to be very clear: Not all talking to or against one another is dialogue! The political and educational scientist Thomas Stuke (2020) suggests the following matrix to differentiate between different forms of communication, which differentiates between different forms of communicative action and also assigns them a legitimate target dimension.

		Process orientation	
Pers on orie ntati on	Dialogue	Discussion	
	for hearing, perception and To express, to deepen the mutual understanding of all interlocutors on a question Goal: Coexistence	for collection and categorization of perspectives, to increase the argumentative wealth on a complex question Goal: co-orientation	
	Debate	Decision	
	to attack / defend militarily, to work out the strengths and weaknesses of different positions Goal: co-orientation	for decision between distinct options, to reduce complexity and become capable of acting Goal: Cooperation	
		Result Orientation	

The necessity of such a systematisation arises from the experience that the ability to engage in dialogue in a time and culture that is strongly influenced by the forms of communication in social media, by “fake news” and power-based interventions cannot automatically be assumed or that other forms of Communication are culturally more pronounced. An example that I know all too well from the academic context - but which many of you should also be familiar with: How often are we - while the other person is still speaking and we are (apparently) listening to them - already inwardly recognizing what has been said as " I already know "to tick off, perhaps to bring counter arguments into position and to consider your own reply ...

Dialogue therefore requires active practice and conscious decision-making.

In view of the active practice, five basic attitudes seem to me to be particularly important and helpful, which I have formulated as follows based on Pope Francis ‘remarks in Amoris Laetitia (Franziskus 2016a) (Steinmair-Pösel 2020, 147-48):

1. Take your time and take an inner silence:

“Taking your time, precious time, which consists of listening patiently and attentively until the other has said everything [...]. This includes taking an inner silence in order to listen without 'disturbing signals' in the heart or in the mind: to shed all haste, to put aside one's own needs and urgencies and to give space. "(AL 137)

2. Giving real importance to others and treating them with respect:

"It is based on the conviction that everyone has something to contribute because they have a different life experience, because they look at something from a different perspective, because

they have developed different worries and because they have different talents and intuitions." (AL 138)

3. *Have spiritual breadth and be ready to change and add to your own point of view:*

"It is possible that my thoughts and those of the other could lead to a new synthesis that enriches both of us. The unity to be striven for is not uniformity, but rather a 'unity in diversity' or a 'reconciled difference' "(AL 139).

4. *Treat others with affection rather than competitors:*

because then "we succeed in understanding better what the other person wants to express and make us understand. [...] It is very important to base your own security on deep decisions, convictions or values and not on winning a discussion or on being found to be right. "(AL 140).

5. *Have your own, reflective point of view and continue your education:*

"In order for the dialogue to be worthwhile, one has to have something to say, and that requires an inner wealth that draws its nourishment from reading, personal reflection, prayer and openness to society" (AL 141).

The willingness to become empty and still inside, as mentioned in the first basic attitude, is both essential and highly demanding. In order to be able to adopt such a - we theologians say "kenotic" attitude (cf. Kronreif 2018) - and to be able to consciously decide again and again for the dialogue, it is necessary to (regularly) pause, to external and internal stillness. This not only enables us to interrupt everyday forms of communication and open up a space in which a real dialogue with a human counterpart is possible. Rather, it is also helpful to perceive that "voice of floating silence" that Martin Buber, the great philosopher of dialogue, characterized the voice of God.

5. Conclusion

Let us return to our starting point - the challenges that Europe is facing 71 years after the founding of the EU: If we practice the aforementioned basic dialogical attitudes, if we repeatedly consciously enter into a dialogue with people who are different from us, Of course, this does not automatically solve all the challenges and problems mentioned above. But here and now we are making a very concrete contribution to building that personal and cultural constitution that makes it possible in the first place to find creative new solutions together, taking into account the legitimate concerns and needs of everyone, establishing mutual trust and initiating cooperative action . We create the basis for "a conversation that [actually] brings us all together" (LS 14).