

To Bring God into the Light

Klaus Hemmerle

The challenge of the creative process within the Church is not only a question of reinvigorating Christian communities and generating new believers, it is, first and foremost, the challenge of rendering God present and experienced. The late theologian and Bishop of Aachen, Germany, Klaus Hemmerle (1929 – 1994) reflected on this after a 1984 ecumenical trip to Istanbul¹.

In 1984 I went with an ecumenical group of bishops to the Basilica of Saint Sophia in Istanbul. [...] It was an ancient Christian structure from the time when Christianity was united and Asia Minor was the center of the Christian world. But we were also in the place where the rupture between East and West was consummated and unity broken. In the concave wedges of the large dome we saw enormous writings taken from the Koran, reflecting the supremacy of another religion over a fractured Christianity. There were also signs in front of us that said: "Praying forbidden". It was a museum. People wandered here and there with cameras and binoculars looking at the artistic beauty which had been preserved. There was a terrible absence of religion in what was once a sacred place.

We were overwhelmed by the chronology: unity, fractured unity, different religions, no religion at all². . . Our eyes wandered, disoriented, in search of help. Then suddenly . . . there! Above the dome was a barely noticeable, sparkling ancient mosaic: Mary was offering her Son. There I understood clearly. Yes, this is the Church. It is simply 'being' and starting from oneself to generate God, that God who is seemingly absent (*den abwesenden Gott*).

The word *Theotokos* – Mother of God, she who begets God – suddenly acquired a completely new meaning for me. I understood that we cannot organize faith in the world. If no one wants to hear about God anymore, we cannot fight forcefully and say: "Woe to you!". We can simply be there and, starting with ourselves, bring that God who is seemingly absent to light. We cannot fabricate this God, but only bring God into the light. God cannot be proven or affirmed through debates, but we can be the vessel filled with God, the heaven from which, though inconspicuous, God shines forth.

¹ This translated excerpt can be found in Italian in his book, *Partire dall'unità. La Trinità come stile di vita e forma di pensiero* (Starting from Unity. The Trinity as mentality and lifestyle), Città Nuova, Roma 1998, pp. 124-125.

² Saint Sophia was indeed a simple monument at that time. It was again opened to Islamic worship in 2020.