

Experience of a Lutheran Bishop

"You Will Be a Blessing"

Dorothea Greiner

The author invites us to broaden our perspective through the experience and practice of the Evangelical Church. In the years after World War II, and especially beginning in the 1960's, a process was undertaken in some Regional Lutheran Churches that gradually paved the way for the ordination of women. For the Lutheran Church in Bavaria (Germany), it is exactly 50 years since the Regional Synod allowed woman's ordination as pastors. The author herself was a pastor, and then a regional evangelical bishop until recently retiring.

During the two weeks before my ordination, I heard a constant refrain in my heart. It was not a song, as sometimes happens, but those words from the Book of Genesis, where God promises Abraham: "I will bless you, and you will be a blessing." (Genesis 2:12)

At my ordination, and in accord with custom, I was on my knees while Bishop Johannes Merz and assistants laid hands on me. One after the other, they spoke a biblical word over me. And I was deeply touched when one of the assistants said, "God says, I will bless you and you will be a blessing." Spontaneously, my body moved from kneeling upright to resting on my heels, because I perceived these words as a promise about my life.

Family, parish, studies...

God has kept his promise. In retrospect, my childhood was already a blessing for me. I grew up in a family that followed the Pietistic tradition in Lutheranism. We went to church every Sunday morning and returned in the evening for the so-called "hour", where my father was one of the lay preachers. In the Christian Youth Association (YMCA) I learned to pray for myself, to read, and to meditate on the Bible. I knew that my life belonged to Jesus Christ, and I silently told him so on my knees in my room, at the age of 16.

Then, a year later, on a bright summer Sunday morning, as I was about to return home from morning service after also musically accompanying the parish community on the pump organ—a dreadful instrument - my pastor called me across the street: "Dorle, you could become a pastor. Study theology."

My studies began four years after our Church introduced the ordination of women. There, I met my husband Gottfried, also a theology student. He has always supported my path, and I was able to complete my formation, even with the birth of two children.

A young pastor

After ordination, my husband and I together took over the care of the Pfuhl/Burlafingen parish (in the deanery of Neu-Ulm, Germany). Soon, however, we were called to the Seminary of Preachers in Bayreuth to devote ourselves to the formation of vicars (future pastors). Then, two years later, I took a sabbatical and wrote my doctoral thesis in systematic theology on the topic of 'blessing'. In 1996, we moved together to the parish of Holzkirchen in Upper Bavaria. At that time, the parish was building a new church. It was to be named, the *Church of the Blessing*, without me having given the slightest indication of any kind...

The call to regional service

I was in great need of God's blessing when, after two years in my first pastorate in Holzkirchen, the then regional bishop of Bavaria phoned to ask if I would be available for an interview with the committee on church appointments. At the age of 39, I was the first woman called to serve on the regional church council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. My responsibilities included initial and ongoing formation, and after three years I was also given the responsibility for personnel for theological and theological-pedagogical roles in our Church.

They were intense years, because we were not used to economizing. During the Church's process of economic consolidation, I needed to generate substantial savings in personnel expenses. And I also needed to learn then to take care of my soul. Since that time, in fact, I started taking time for an annual retreat, such as for a week in silent retreat at the Christusbruderschaft in Selbitz (Germany).¹

This deepening of my spiritual journey was necessitated by the weighty responsibilities entrusted to me, and it has become a source of lasting joy and strength. It changed the way I provide guidance and put Christian spirituality at the center of human resource development. In fact, this directional shift has been welcomed positively by almost everyone in our Church, and is a part of the blessing that God has granted.

After ten years of responsibility for personnel, I was grateful that the way was paved for me to become the regional bishop of Bayreuth. I happily moved to Upper Franconia in Spring 2009, not least because my husband is from this region. Over these past 15 years now, this ministry has been a source of deep joy and fulfillment: ordinations, the accompaniment of people and communities, and decision making at the Regional Church Council. All of these have never become a boring routine.

Two experiences remain powerfully with me.

Assisting refugees

First, in 2015, large numbers of refugees arrived to our country, including Christians of varied languages and nationalities. For this reason, and together with a large team in Bayreuth, I initiated a monthly "International Celebration", which was welcomed with growing participation by these Christians of differing backgrounds. But also Muslims

participated, including some who were about to become Christians. After intensive courses of faith and baptismal preparation, more than 170 people were baptized. However, officials in the government offices and courts often did not know how to account for conversions of Muslims to Christianity, and thus there was a great risk that these new converts would be deported to countries where they could be killed by their families or imprisoned by the government. Thanks to positive relations with the Bavarian government, many were able to be saved from deportation processes that had already begun. I am convinced that God entrusted me with this task in Bayreuth, also to help these young Christians.

A Passion for unity

A second experience regards my own journey, in that from early on I was increasingly led towards ecumenism. Catholics were “heretics” in my family of origin because they prayed not only to God but also to the saints, and their piety – so the prejudice went – was oriented towards external rites rather than an interior bond with Christ.

But Prof. Joachim Track², with whom I did my doctorate, had an impact on me already during my earliest studies. He was “at home” in ecumenical dialogue, and I learned to recognize the dimension of truth in other confessions and see it as a richness. Then, the fraternal attitude and Christ-centered devotion that I found in several Catholic ministers in Holzkirchen and in Bayreuth swept away any last prejudices.

Inertia and, especially the authoritative claims of various denominations, still prevent mutual recognition and ecclesial communion. But heart-felt compassion, with Christ in the midst, will prevail in the Churches, because Christ prayed to the Father for the unity of *all* (!) those who believe in him (cf. *John* 17:20-21).

This is also the reason why, since being invited to meetings of Bishop-Friends of the Movement, I felt intimately connected to members of the Focolare Movement. Here we meet pastors and committed lay people who live rooted in their own denominations first, and at the same time carry in their hearts this yearning of Jesus for unity. They have as an integral part of their own spiritual practice what Chiara Lubich called “knowing how to lose”. It is a knowing how to lose, a giving up their own power, as people set free by Christ on the cross to self-giving and humility. I would like to continue this journey with the focolarini, together with my husband. The promise of being blessed, and of being a blessing, is fulfilled in the life of faith and in an ecumenism of the heart.

¹ The Christusbruderschaft of Selbitz is a community of sisters and brothers, founded in 1948 by Pastor Walter Hümmer and his wife Hannah within the Lutheran Church of Bavaria. It includes celibate and married persons in the style of the Third Order.

² Joachim Track (1940-2023) was a professor of systematic theology. As a member of the Council and Executive Committee of the Lutheran World Federation he was deeply involved in ecumenical discussions, including dialogue with the Catholic Church that led to the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999.
[See <https://lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-joint-declaration-doctrine-justification>]