

A. Realisations of the Good News

I. Basics of the Church

1. *In the Beginning: Word and Deed*

1.1 The Experience of Meaning

I would like to begin with some socio-linguistic deliberations or “grassroots” concerning the relationship between word and meaning. When a young child learns to say “mama”, then this happens in the context of a certain particular encounter where the mother behaves in a certain way with the child and gives this process a name, “mama”. Therefore, from the beginning, the meaning of a word is defined in the context of certain experiences by actions with which it is used and learnt. Even when in advanced stages of learning vocabulary and of linguistic structures, the power of abstract thinking increases to connect the same words with different concrete individuals (other children also have mamas and they all look different); the child does not lose the deep-rooted “case history” of his or her unique own mother and the linked learning process for this term (with all its ambivalent power). How mothers with other children are and look is learnt in encounters with these themselves.

The enormous achievement in learning a language lies in the combination of the abstract and the concrete; the term “mama” can be used for all mothers, even when they are all different and even contradictory. For the mothers of other children there is no separate word in the linguistic system because the term “mother” means all women with a child or children. The term “mother” on its own does not go into details concerning which mother is meant, a liberating or a suppressing one. To which particular mother this term relates is not defined by the word, but, for example, by an additional pointing phrase such as my mother or John’s mother, etc. The speaker refers to a particular person and evokes the corresponding concrete experience.

These simple considerations already make clear that there are two definitions of a word: the lexical meaning within a language system (mother is a

woman who has a child or children) and the referential definition that refers to a particular mother “outside” of the language system. The meaning is only unequivocal, unambiguous in practice, when the speaker combines the word with a concrete person or real facts. The latter case can happen in two ways: in the connection of the word with a story about the concrete person or in connection of the word with reality itself, for example, with reference to a personal or actual process that is happening in direct experience. The latter happens relatively rarely unless one happens to have a photograph or film in one’s pocket. In linguistic communication we mostly have to rely on naming the actual subject in speech itself, namely through description or narration. This involves a high power of differentiation, namely between the one and the other realisation of the same word. This happens for the benefit of communication and creates understanding and a connection to reality.

The relationship described above between word and reality is applicable to all areas and levels. Such great words as justice and freedom, which are used by everyone, are only defined by the reality connected with these words. The freedom of which dictators speak is different from the freedom that is used in a situation of democracy. Although such words have a quality of automatic agreement (everyone is in favour of them), they do not express much if their universality is not reduced by the fact that the speaker can convincingly enough describe and relate that which she or he actually supports.

A term not only attains its meaning by the fact that its quality is abstracted and defined in our thoughts, but also by the fact that one can refer to a reality or an action and can say, “Look how I do it and how the others do it or what the conditions are and how the relationships are structurally controlled; that’s what I mean when I talk of freedom or peace!” Only then do the differences and contradictions of the discussion partner become apparent. And only then does one no longer argue about “fictitious” phenomena (“ideologies”) but about the formation of real existing relationships. To understand a term, one must reduce it to its material or communicative components. Only when I can say that and how a word is linked with a particular action does the word achieve a dimension of meaning that describes the praxis.

To avoid possible misunderstandings, I wish to make clear at this point that the use of the term “action” here does not exclusively mean active behaviour but refers to human intentional actions as a whole,¹ also, for example, to being silent and waiting. The latter is integrated into the term “action” because I understand it as an action of and between human beings where not only speaking and giving have a place, but also silence and receiving, not only activity but also suffering.

We have now reached a brief anthropological background to understand the following more clearly: especially how the Bible deals with the word “God”.

¹ Cf. J. Habermas, *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt a. M. 3/1973) pp. 138–164.

1.2 Biblical Stories of God

If we consider the experiences with God in the Old Testament, then in the very first revelation of the name YHWH we see something unusual and at the same time characteristic. This name “I am who I am or who I will be” (cf. Ex 3:14) contains no general or abstract quality that could be used to name God (by, for example, superlatives such as “all-bountiful”, “omnipotent” or “omniscient”). The name says “only” that God is and will be there. It describes in this form a personal existence that cannot be obviously determined on a level detached from the concrete and real experience. In this respect, the name is “empty” or rather it is open for a meaning that still has to be experienced. This is concurrent with the Old Testament commandment that one should not make for oneself a graven image of God (cf. Ex 20:4; Dtr 5:8).

In the Bible the name of God only achieves meaning because it is told and discovered in connection with very specific encounters and experiences. The name “YHWH”, for example, becomes meaningful in connection with the remembrance of the Exodus story or with other experiences of God’s people: God is known through these stories and experiences and moreover as someone who stands on the side of the people and does not withdraw his trust and frees them from sin and oppression. The name YHWH in Israel is thus not determined by a summary of abstract qualities and titles full of authority (although these also exist, they are always in the context of or as a result of concrete experiences, in particular in the use of the psalms in prayer). God achieves moreover meaningful contours by the fact that God can be related with reference to real experiences in dynamic verbs, that is, in the dimensions of encounters and actions. (The verbal-structure of the Hebrew language is indeed the fitting linguistic medium for that purpose.) Otherwise, there is no longer a connection with the biblical God.

This process is always concerned with unique, very different stories which cannot be copied and which are very different, which, however, always “illustrate” the same in their differentiated situations and people: this very same is the liberating devotion of God in the history of humankind. The experience with God illuminates the fragments of human life like the light in a prism with contrasting colours, which are due to the possibilities and impossibilities, the richness and limitation of real people. Of course, there is nothing to be said against theologians who with logic argumentatively and speculatively consider how one may reflect on God and what one may further say about God. This “systematic theology”, however, should not lose its contact with its basis of stories and experiences, in which the decisive and unique interpersonal encounters take place between God and humankind, which are thereby made possible for future experiences. Only an illustration of the term God through such memories redeems and releases us from having to produce God ourselves

in our thoughts or to subordinate God to our argumentative or even magical access.

It is clear here that the biblical personality of God maintains the secret of God for, although one can name God in such unique stories of encounters, God does not become generally definable. The Old Testament, which is always accused of being too anthropomorphic and of referring too much to God in human terms, here displays itself as a critical stronghold against a theology that wants to ensnare God in thoughts and seize him by means of systematic connections. Inasmuch as this theology wants to possess something of God, it is more anthropomorphic than to tell of God in the context of concrete interpersonal stories because these stories remain open in their uniqueness of the you and I/we relationship for new stories in the present and the future in which God enters into new and unique encounters with new people. In this way God's promise made in the memory of the old stories will be realised once again in a different way than it can be calculated and foreseen by us humans.

Already in the written word, differing, in part contradictory human stories of experiences of the same God come together, so that neither unity nor a freedom from contradiction is characteristic for the presence of God in such stories, of which there are many, even contradictory ones because they all only come from individual people, however general they claim their thoughts to be. The answer to the justified question as to the "unity" of a definition of God in the creed cannot be given in a theological system of thought which requires the agreement of all believers, mostly in the form of structural subordination. The unity exists rather in the fact that the different stories are rooted in the same God and supplement each other as unique stories in their untouched individuality as well as in their ability and need for mutual interchange.

Moreover, the stories of YHWH contain a characteristic double structure, which is discussed in theology in the relationship between the indicative of God's mercy and the imperative of human behaviour, between given talents and using these talents. God is experienced as a liberating and helping companion in one's own distress. God provokes a particular interpersonal relationship and allows and enables us to act in a just, helping and liberating way with other people. Both dimensions related to the presence of God in the history of the people are given in special stories; Israel remembers the Exodus story from the viewpoint of the liberation of God; Israel remembers individual stories of the prophets which never arbitrarily referred to the will of YHWH but made perfectly clear that the belief in YHWH and his word are only compatible with a definite spiritual, social and political praxis. That these texts which thematise human behaviour are quite different in character and exist in tension with each other is apparent because of the differences between the people and situations and because of the different radicalness or compromise necessary or possible in a special context. Here also we see the mutual ability and need for

interchange so that throughout the history of many stories one may experience what it means to organise one's life and act according to the will of God.

1.3 Jesus's Practical References to God

The embodiment of God that began in the Old Testament achieves its deepest foundation and realisation in Jesus of Nazareth. God becomes human through Jesus and takes the responsibility for his own practical "historical" and unique definition. The presence of God in history is then determined from that point onwards by the remembrance of the story of Jesus Christ. God does not "come from on high" in the form of ruling knowledge for humankind and does not appear before humankind in a showy overbearing display, dispensing redemption as a decree: "Because I am love, you are all redeemed!" She rather risks herself to show that she is love; he himself risks a story in which he appears and in which he realises himself in the words and deeds of a particular human being. God shows this love in the detail of a single man. To explain himself, God points at his only beloved son, as is told and illustrated in the story of the baptism of Jesus: "And when Jesus... was praying, the heaven was opened ... and a voice came from heaven, 'thou art my beloved son; with thee I am well pleased'" (Lk 3:21ff.). God shows us the real human being Jesus: look at him, then you will know who has a relationship to God; then you will know what the Kingdom of God means. Who God is as well as what humankind could and should be is given its meaning by the actions of this man and his relationship to God and humankind.

Let us now also consider the story of the transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor. Here God also points to Jesus and refers to his words and actions: "That is my son, my chosen, listen to him!" (Lk 9:28–36, here 35). Those involved must once again descend to the ground level of humankind and the transfiguration has no value of its own but shows itself to be the "enthronement" of the human life of Jesus of Nazareth and his way to the cross, which he risked for the sake of love and as a result of the necessarily connected criticism of the inhumanity of those in power. To deal with God has to be a very earthly thing. Only as such it is heavenly enough.

Accordingly, Jesus himself does not speak of God outside of concrete healing and participating actions, outside redeeming and saving encounters. In doing so, he stands in the tradition of the prophets of Israel who claimed that humankind behaves in the way God has behaved with them, in that humankind works for justice for all and for mercifulness towards everyone and does not hide injustice and mercilessness by pious words. He speaks of and demonstrates the Kingdom of God when he carries out his mission of mercy and salvation in liberating encounters with the poor, the stigmatised and the weak or

when he forgives in God's name those who have sinned. He also speaks of the Kingdom of God when in his stories and parables he shows solidarity with the poor and suffering. "When I heal with my finger on my hand, drive out terrible alienation and speak and act against the marginalisation of the suffering and the excluded then the Kingdom of God has reached you!" In his realised as well as related stories, the term "God" is endowed with an unmistakable practical unambiguity. These stories do not exclude the suffering and/or different people but incorporate them and relate the effect of God amongst the people in it. The effect of God is such that it always concentrates on the basic contradiction between those who create suffering and those who fight against suffering and risk themselves in this contradiction.

Jesus thus demonstrates (Lk 11:4-5) the "truth" of his Gospel and his sending in answer to John the Baptist in that he allows his healing deeds to be related with reference to Isaiah: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear ... the poor have good news preached to them." The coming Lord will thus ask us if we have given the hungry food or if we have welcomed strangers and have visited the sick in his name (cf. Mt 25:31-46). Strangely enough, the Lord will obviously not question what we have believed. The religious outsider in the Samaritan story is the justified one because he helped the suffering man and the priest who was hurrying to the temple to serve God did not understand anything (cf. Lk 10:25-37). And Peter's verbal acceptance of Christ and his flight from following the suffering Messiah also belong here: Peter is blessed for his profession of faith as the "rock" of the Church and is called Satan for his flight from the real imitation of the surrendering and powerless Messiah for the sake of others.

These are the details by which the Kingdom of God becomes reality in the history of humankind. The criteria are explicitly of a practical nature! The conflicts with those who, although they also talk of YHWH, show counter-effective behaviour and conduct (namely, they cheat people of their rights and freedom) are predetermined. The deadly conflict explodes because of the irreconcilable contradictory deeds of the adversaries that they associate with the definition of God.

Let us now bridge nearly two thousand years and proceed to the Second Vatican Council. Here we will find a theological method that reinstalls what we realised in the Biblical Revelation.

2. *Christian Belief within Redeeming and Liberating Experience*

2.1 The Benefitting Church

I would like to start with a particular text that may serve as a preamble. The text is from Pope John XXIII who spoke these words a few days before his death. I understand these words as his legacy in the context of our subject: “In the presence of my colleagues, I am spontaneously moved to renew the act of belief. This is a proper thing for us priests, as we have to deal with the highest of matters for the good of the whole world, and therefore we must allow ourselves to be led by the will of God. We are orientated more than ever today, certainly more than in the last centuries, to serve humankind as such and not only the Catholics and are orientated in the first instance and above all to defend the rights of humankind and not only those of the Catholic church. The present situation, the challenge of the last fifty years and a deeper understanding of belief have confronted us with a new reality, as I said in my speech opening the Council. It is not the Gospel which has changed; no, we are the ones who are just beginning to understand it better. When one has had a long life and has seen oneself confronted with the new tasks of a social engagement at the start of this century and when one has spent twenty years in the Orient and eight in France as I have done and as a result is able to compare different cultures, then one knows that the moment has come where we must recognize the signs of the times, where we must seize the possibilities offered and look to the future.”²

I would like to underline the following sections of this text as I repeat them in the following summary: The act of belief, its renewal and dealing with the highest of matters have as their aim the well-being of the whole world. Therefore, we are orientated today to serve humankind as such and not only the Catholics and are orientated in the first instance and above all to defend the rights of humankind and not only those of the Catholic church. In my opinion, these comments express in a highly concentrated form the basic intention of Vatican Council II.

Thus, the issue is not only to “win” people for the Church, but also to question what the Church does with those people that it has already “won” for itself. Does it want to bring them into a ghetto-like church that only carries out the salvation of its own institution or does the Church want to enable the people to humanise their environments because they are supported by a church that realises itself for a more humane world and thereby for the Kingdom of

² Cf. Orientierung no. 52, 10 (1988) p. 109.

God (with all the fragmented quality and partiality of these attempts by Christians and the Church to create as much reality as possible for the Kingdom of God)? The knowledge of the Good News is therefore not to be spread in a privileged know-all manner or as a ruling knowledge, but as a knowledge in our faith that should be for the benefit not only of ourselves, but also of as many people and cultures as possible. Thus, it is not primarily a question of acquiring competence and authority for the most effective application of strategies; it is rather a question of for what purpose both are to be employed.

One can, for example, read and teach the biblical text in a competent way, from the perspective of knowledge and method, but still basically misunderstand the critical background of evangelising, if one does not read the text principally and practically from the perspective of mercifulness and at least longed-for justice. When one does not approach biblical texts from the perspective of such practical hermeneutics for the benefit of humankind and particularly the suffering, then one will all too easily functionalise them for that which one wants to achieve (in particular for herself or for the benefit of a strong church). It is my concern therefore that we reach the basis of our identity and ask why we, as Christians and as the Church, are there and are called to be such in the world.

In the theology of Vatican Council II, a theological basis is given that can no longer be circumvented to disarm dispensing with much that in the long term has a destructive effect on us and others and to look what is possible for us and what is necessary according to the Gospel. Then, however, we must tackle that and act. However, nothing should be understood in terms of “doing still more” and progressive excessive demands, which rightly provoke defensive reactions. It is more probable that we should not do some of the activities that are at present taking place and should devote this energy to those places that are more necessary according to the Gospel and those affected. It is possible to do less but to do that then with more courage to stand up for one’s belief and courage to take up our position and to show solidarity with those who need mercifulness and justice.

Vatican Council II places the authentic unity of belief and life, dogma and pastoral (the whole of actions and non-actions in certain contexts), teaching and praxis in the centre of its statements. It is here that we see in effect the dogmatic progress of this Council³. In the present strategy of forgetting and removing the importance of the Second Council, it is repeatedly said that the council did not announce any new dogma on the semantic level, that is, in the area of words, and for this reason it is not so binding. Such a conclusion is misleading. Of course, it is simply not correct, because the dogmatic progress of the Second Vatican Council, which is decisive for all church dogmata, lies in

³ Cf. E. Klinger, *Der Glaube des Konzils. Ein dogmatischer Fortschritt*. In: id./K. Wittstadt (ed.), *Glaube im Prozeß* (Freiburg 1984) pp. 615–626.

the fact that the dimension of experience and praxis of the Church's teaching and thus of all its dogmata is questioned. (Of course, the Council's texts should be read in its deeper intention and not just on the surface where, in its formulation for the sake of compromise and achieving working majorities, it can be used and quoted for completely differing positions). We have many dogmata for which the corresponding confessional agreement is demanded. At the same time, there is an enormous deficit regarding their existential meaning concerning the people's daily life, that is, their relevance to human existence. Which experience and design of human life do the Church's teachings challenge, offer and develop? Behind this is the unspoken idea that the treasures of our belief have been too little discovered to date for the communicative and liberating praxis of humankind and for the formation of social structures.

2.2 The Practical Meaning of the Teaching

This basic intention begins already with extreme consistency in the Dogmatic Constitution on Liturgy. In it, the teaching of the sacrament concerning the Holy Mass and what it has to do with the teaching of the Church in the context of apologetic and/or catechetical inculcations is not only renewed and impressed upon us, but the universal question is how the Holy Mass must be altered and conducted so that the believers may experience what the Church means by it in its teaching. The question of experience has changed the liturgical praxis to date. In this way, the text is aware of the "signs of the time", which themselves have a theological quality. For this reason, there is the extension of the service in word, the stress of the simplicity of symbols and above all the introduction of the vernacular.

This basic intention of the question of how that which has been collected and "secured" in the teaching of the Church for a long time finally develops its practical meaning for the people is inherent in all the texts of the Vatican Council, above all in the Dogmatic Constitutions "*Lumen gentium*" and "*Gaudium et spes*". The question that dominates the latter text is: If what the Church claims of itself in its teaching is true, namely that it is here for the salvation of the world and can be termed at least in an analogous sense as "sacramentum mundi", how must the Church realise itself and be amenable to the world? Furthermore, how must it deal with the world so that it can be really experienced as that what it claims to be, namely, as salvation and liberation for the world in terms of the biblical message of God. In fact, quite a few systematic theologians have worked out that the Pastoral Constitution has to be regarded as the key text in order to understand Vatican Council II as a whole, for in this text the Church assesses itself from the outside perspective of itself. The meaning of the Church is the response it elicits.

In the Constitution on the Church, the same question is posed “towards the inside”: How must the Church develop itself so that its own members experience their existence in the Church as a redeeming enrichment of their lives? For this reason, you find the basic importance of placing the people of God before the hierarchy and the basic importance of the charismata of all (cf. *Lumen Gentium* No. 12).

Even the very heart of the matter, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Revelation, links the Revelation of God strictly to the experience of the biblical authors. Without their vocations in their characteristic qualities as well as in their one-sidedness and in their own particular historical situation, the revelation would not have been possible.⁴ Revelation and the content of the teaching can never attain historical meaning and reality through humankind without the influence of humankind upon them. Reality can only be obtained in the unbreakable connection with human experience and lives as well as with their diversity amongst each other, which can even go so far as being contradictory. The biblical revelation shows, in correspondence to it, not only a *variety* of vivid events, but often also different stories that are *contrary* to each other. For example: You can hardly compare the fashion of belief (or better “non-belief”?) of Qoheleth (*Ecclesiastes*) with such a highly developed faith as you find in *Deutero-Isaiah*. The same happens between the first letters of St. Paul and the so-called Pastoral letters concerning the church structures. The lack of contradiction is none of the God’s names in either the revelation (which was once real life) or real life.

This is the exciting, revolutionary aspect of Vatican Council II: namely, that in its texts, which are called the “Dogmatic Constitutions”, the question of praxis is approached. Thus, at the latest since the Council, pastoral theology can no longer be interpreted, for strict theological reasons, as an applied science of dogmatics or of fundamental theology. Praxis belongs moreover to the dogmatic teaching of the Church itself. The question as to the praxis of the Church and Christians is not an application of dogma but is an integral part of it. This is precisely the dogmatic progress of Vatican Council II; God’s gift of redemption and human deeds of liberation belong together.

And here is also where the nail is hit squarely on the head, bringing up a painful subject for our church and for being a Christian! This is what educational theory calls “paradoxical communication”, which is manifested, for example, in the combination of noble words with in part extremely despicable deeds. For many people, the credibility of the self-realisation of the Church is determined by the question: What is the praxis of the Church like in the Church itself and in its environment compared with its message of the redeeming and loving God? Where the meaningful connection of this talk of God is at odds with the praxis claimed by it, the Church reveals itself to be hardly attrac-

⁴ Cf. Dogmatic Constitution on the Divine Revelation No. 11.