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## Witness

### Introduction

The late Roman-Catholic Cardinal Karl Lehmann once said (2005): “The future Christian will be a witness, or soon he will be no more.”<sup>1</sup> His words suggest that the importance of witnessing is growing fast and significantly, maybe even exponentially. The presence of other faiths and “no-faith”, as well as the considerable decay of religious literacy in general, and Christian literacy in particular, have changed the religious eco-systems, not only in Europe. If there once, in a number of countries, was the assumption that more or less everybody, except a few minority groups, was Christian one way or the other, active Christians nowadays, in many places, find themselves being those who deviate from the norm. Hence, witnessing becomes a more visible, important and challenging part of being a Christian. This means that churches, congregations and pastors/priests must pay more attention to how they equip men, women and children to be good witnesses.

However, let us make clear one thing right from the start: the nature of “witness” is ambiguous. On the one hand, in order to be a good witness to the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, you need skills, knowledge and practice. Not only do you have to know at least the basics of Christian life and faith, you also need to know the context you are witnessing in, and it certainly is an advantage if you have honed your pedagogical skills. On the other hand, to become a witness is not really your choice. You become a witness because you were there, when “it” happened. Most people who are called to court have not chosen to be witnesses, they became witnesses, because they happened to be there and they got drawn into the consequences of an event. The same with us: we are witnesses of the faith, because we were drawn into the Christ event.

Sure, none of us was there, when baby Jesus lay in the manger, we were not there when he blessed the children and challenged the priests and Pharisees. We were not there, when he ate his last supper with his friends, when he was crucified and when he rose again. And yet, Jesus has been born in our hearts; his blessing has been called down upon us, for many of us when we were little children; his words about radical love continue to challenge us. In our baptism, we died with him in order to rise and walk in newness of life together with him (Rom 6:3f). In the Eucharist, we partake of everything he promised his disciples. So yes, we are disciples and witnesses, without it being our own doing. And still, there are tons of things we can do to be good and efficient witnesses! Witnessing is about the tension between our own doing and God doing it all. A tension that the apostle Paul describes so well in Philippians 2:12-13: “... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Hone your skills as best as you can – and know it is God who works in you, through you and even in spite of you. And even the latter is good news!

In recent years, I have had the opportunity to travel in countries where Christians are a minority, even a minority under oppression. Whether in India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Egypt or Iraq, everywhere I was struck by the emphasis on Christian witness. Although a tiny minority, the readiness to witness through life and work stood out: schools, medical

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<sup>1</sup> “Der künftige Christ wird ein Zeuge sein, oder er wird bald nicht mehr sein.” According to Lehmanns Denkanstöße *Ökumenische Arbeit ist immer eine Gratwanderung*, Frankfurter Allgemeine 180311.

services, interfaith relationships. Local church leaders claimed: We are a healing presence in this society, and we show it; this society needs our presence, even though we are discriminated against. And they really put emphasis on the healing, rather than on more theoretical truth claims. Witness is about healing, even in situations where we are forced to resist, to question, to argue; even when the message of the gospel leads us into controversy.

One might say, the more Christians deviate from the standard citizen in a community, the more their witness is both natural and required, because Christians stand out as “the other” and because witness to the love of God and neighbor is crucial for Christian survival, especially in a hostile environment. In such an environment, special care and energy should be given to the common witness, by the local communities as well as by supporting communities from other parts of the global church. In dangerous and exposed situations spiritual leaders should be very attentive to the situation of individuals who are young in life and/or faith, so as not to put too heavy a burden on them as witnesses. Martyria is part of Christian faith. A Christian should be prepared to accept martyrdom when necessary, but not seek it.

Thus, the demand for witness comes very much “from below”. It is required by the current living and working conditions for churches in many parts of the world. On top of that, we have Jesus’ commission given to his disciples “from above”, at his ascension: “... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem ... and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). These famous words are preceded by the promise: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”. Wherever we look, upwards or downwards, inwards into our own Christian tradition or outwards into the world: the call to witness is there, and it is urgent. Now, how shall we go about preparing to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in Europe in the years to come? What does it mean to witness to salvation, unity, global mission and truth in contexts that are, sometimes severely, affected by the four dangerous P’s of our time: polarisation, populism, protectionism (often manifested as nationalism) and post-truth? Underlying all these four P’s I sense a common lack: the lack of a credible hope. Hence 1 Peter 3:15-16 should be a guiding principle to witnessing in our time: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” Let us turn to two exemplary witnesses of Christian faith for some guiding perspectives on witness.

### **The “What” of witness — Witness driven by divine dissatisfaction: Martin Luther King**

In the year of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his assassination, I would like to turn our attention to the legacy of Dr Martin King jr, the great leader of the American Civil Rights Movement. As is well known, the witness of this Baptist pastor gained enormous political momentum. Yet, those who have studied his work say that the Black Church and its spirituality are the primary sources to understand his life and thought. The black community looked to the black church not only for spiritual nourishment in hymns and prayers, but also for leadership and social and political support. Witness that is holistic and public! King points to “divine dissatisfaction” as a driving force for witness. In a passionate speech he puts it like this: “Let us go out with a ‘divine dissatisfaction.’ ... Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort and the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice.”<sup>2</sup> Don’t we hear an echo of the prophet Amos 5:24 here? “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” King called for broad education and empowerment of the oppressed, counting on the Church as a symbol of hope and an agent of reconciliation. We may miss some distinctly Christian vocabulary in this witness, such as Jesus, grace, sacraments ... Yet, theology is what it is, for instance, when King reflects on the relationship between love, power and justice. As he puts it: “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power

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<sup>2</sup> Noel Leo Erskine. 1994. *King Among the Theologians*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press. 6.

correcting everything that stands against love.”<sup>3</sup> This is indeed a possible reading of 1 Corinthians 13:13 (“and the greatest of these is love”). A church that takes the gospel of love seriously must endorse the pursuit of justice, the struggle for human dignity and human rights for all people as well as the quest for freedom.<sup>4</sup>

“Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.” So Martin Luther King said in his most famous speech. And as the preacher he was, he made a heavenly vision present, turning it into an urgent appeal to transform injustice into justice: “I have a *dream* today!” he said. “I have a dream that one day ... the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; ‘and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.’<sup>5</sup> This is our hope, and ... [w]ith this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”<sup>6</sup>

This dream had power because it was not just a dream, but a vision. It makes us see – at least for a moment – the world as it *can* be, if it dares to reflect the values of peace, justice and compassion. And not only reflect, but embody them in a peaceful, just and compassionate society.

This is more than mere words of great men and women arguing for an open and democratic society, as they (politicians as well as church leaders) usually do when an act of terror has struck their country. This is more than honest appeals to not let fear take possession of us. The gospel of Jesus Christ has given us a *vision*: we can see what will be when goodness reigns. When the soil of injustice, violence and war, from which hatred grows, is no more.

The vision is the powerful presence of that future among us. It lays bare our shortcomings, sin and injustice, and at the very same time, as an act of grace, it instils in us hope and courage. It makes us see that it indeed is possible “to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope”. It is a heavenly vision – at odds with the imperfection of the world. And not only at odds, but in deadly clash! The very bearer of it, Jesus, was crucified. And yet, the spell of death was broken. The journey of justice, peace and reconciliation started anew.

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you”, said the Risen One when he met his friends again. And they saw. They saw victory over death. They also saw the wounds, the traces of the nails that human fear had driven through his hands and feet. Doubting Thomas was invited to touch those wounds — remember, even sceptics can turn into powerful witnesses. Nevertheless, it is the mission of a wounded God that we witness and bear witness to. Witness also means: to resist and to feel the pain of our own wounds and the wounds of others, for the sake of healing.

Witness can be pricy. Martin Luther King paid the ultimate price: his witness was truly martyrdom, he became a martyr because he expressed divine dissatisfaction in fighting against injustice and racism, for the sake of healing.

A question for further reflection: What might “divine dissatisfaction” mean today, in a Europe that loses heart in many ways?

### **The “How” of witness — Witness driven by divine surprise: Ms Cleopas**

Some years ago I came across this Ethiopian style icon in the ecumenical Monasterio di Bose in Northern Italy. I once showed it to a pastor. He immediately recognized the style, but not the story. I said: “It’s Emmaus.” He replied: “But that was two disciples!”

For years and years, the Emmaus story from Luke 24 has mostly been told as if the disciples were two men. When in fact nothing in the text suggests that they were. One is named, Cleopas, the other isn’t. The story suggests that they live in the same house. So

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted according to Erskine 151.

<sup>4</sup> Erskine 156f.

<sup>5</sup> Is 40:5.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his speech “I have a Dream” on August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Monument in Washington DC.

they may very well be Cleopas and his wife – and sadly enough, this is supported by the fact that her name is not mentioned. Women as witnesses have often had less worth, less visibility and no names. Women have been made invisible in history. Also in Church history. With few exceptions. Although European church history according to Acts 16: 11-15 started with a woman: one of the few whom we know by name, Lydia, entrepreneur and migrant from what today is Turkey. She made the very apostle Paul rethink his mission and witness. And in the end, she made him receive the bread from her hands. Because “she prevailed on us,” as Acts has it.

So, here is Miss Cleopas. And we may be surprised by her place at that particular table. Good for us, for the willingness to let ourselves be surprised is a real gem when it comes to the virtues that advance Christian witness!

And Emmaus is a story of divine surprise. They are surprised that the “stranger” who joins them on their sad and desperate walk home to Emmaus doesn’t know about Jesus and his death on the cross. They are surprised when he explains Scripture for them. They feel affection and ask him in, because evening falls and they lay the table for the three of them. And then comes the breaking of the bread – and the surprise that puts them all in motion: the risen Jesus disappears, they become aware of their own burning hearts and run all the way back to Jerusalem, although it is dark, and their muscles are tired.

Thus, Miss Cleopas became one of the first Easter witnesses. It may very well have been she who provided the bread that Jesus broke so that they recognized him, believed, and ran back to Jerusalem to witness in sharing the good news with the others, and with those still in the limbo of fear and loss, doubt and insecurity. With those still without hope and sense of meaning.

I think it is a good idea to open our eyes, together with this Ethiopian icon painter, for Miss Cleopas and her witness and to watch out for the Miss Cleopasses rendered invisible in the history of our churches. They are there. In great numbers. In most places, they constitute the majority in the pews. The majority in our choirs. The majority in our confirmation classes. The majority among our young leaders. Let us call them by their names. Let us affirm their gifts as witnesses of the gospel and have them participate fully in the ministry of the church. Because there indeed were two disciples at that dinner table in Emmaus that Easter day.

And let us also see this:

[Diagram] This diagram is an example from my church, showing the gender proportion of male and female when it comes to youth and adults in the church. Simply put: The farther we get into church involvement the more girls and women we have. There may be those among you who recognize the pattern from your own contexts.

Where are the Mr Cleopasses, the boys and the men? Let us not blame the Ms Cleopasses for their absence, though. Rather, let us ask ourselves why we are not so good at facilitating for boys and men to hear and follow the call to be witnesses. And let us not to forget those either who cannot fit into the male-female binary.

A question for further reflection: How and where might divine surprise lead us today?

### **The Witness of the Church: holistic and public**

The common witness of the church is both holistic and public. God’s holistic mission includes proclaiming the Gospel, diakonia, serving the neighbor and becoming neighbors to each other, advocating for human dignity, justice, peace and reconciliation, as well as for the integrity of creation.

The common witness of the church is public, because God who chose incarnation to save the world that God so loved (John 3:16) calls the church to engage in the public space. For those of you who are interested in a deeper understanding of how Lutheran churches think about their public witness, I recommend the document “The Church in the Public Space”, adopted by the Lutheran World Federation in 2016. Here and now, I will only

share the “ABCDE of the Church’s Engagement in the Public Space”<sup>7</sup>:

- Assessing public issues in participatory ways
- Building relationships of trust
- Challenging injustice
- Discovering signs of hope
- Empowering people in need

I am well aware that within the oikoumene we pursue different courses when it comes to witness. The emphasis and balance may vary or even differ between public and personal, social and private, involvement and distance, and even prayer and work (*ora et labora*). But all these dimensions need to be present in witness, even if we put our emphases in different places.

Also, the time may have come, that we all, whether we are Orthodox, Protestants or Catholics, evangelicals or ecumenicals, search for a bolder and more effective common witness and service in God’s beloved world.

### **Looking forward: truth and love in witness**

Witness is needed whenever truth is contested. We confess Jesus Christ as the truth. There is a truth, but not everyone knows it. And to be honest, we do not know it fully either. Because the truth looks different from different perspectives. After all, the Bible itself makes this clear to us. We have differing accounts of the same truth: four gospels. A fact that constantly reminds us of what I like to call “the apophatic surplus”. There is so much we know, so much we can preach – and my tradition has a proud legacy of preaching, sometimes too much and too long. Human voices can make the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the gospel, heard. However: the more we learn, the more we know how little it is that we can grasp – the more we know that, in spite of revelation, there is a dimension of the divine, that is beyond human expression. Hence the apophatic surplus. And hence, our witness should always be humble.

Nevertheless, it should also bear the marks of *parrhesia*, of speaking candidly, “for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard,” as Peter and John say according to Acts 4:20. Or as Paul puts it: “For the love of Christ urges us on” (2 Cor 5:14). It’s love! How can we hold on to love in the struggle for truth and against post-truth? We do not possess the full truth. If we pretend to have it, we will violate love. It remains a challenge to find the right path of witness. Too little *parrhesia* and confidence in our knowledge of the truth, and we will betray Christ and salvation through Christ. Too much confidence in our knowledge of the truth, and we will betray the love of Christ. And we know, betraying love is the worst we can do.

May God bless our witnessing with humility and *parrhesia*, with good courage to speak and excellent listening skills! For the sake of healing.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/exhibit\\_9.3\\_the\\_church\\_in\\_the\\_public\\_space\\_-\\_a\\_study\\_document\\_of\\_the\\_lwf\\_0.pdf](https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/exhibit_9.3_the_church_in_the_public_space_-_a_study_document_of_the_lwf_0.pdf) , page 35f.