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“CrossingOver”: A Project Supporting the Dialogue on the Catholic Church and Parish Life in the United States and Germany

The project “CrossingOver” has been set up in 2004 under the direction of Wilhelm Damberg – chair of medieval and modern church history at the faculty of Catholic theology, Ruhr University of Bochum – in cooperation with the diocese of Essen and was made possible by generous funding from Dr. Karl Albrecht. As CrossingOver is a project of ongoing development, it is too early to present results now. Instead, the following pages want to give a brief introduction into the short history of CrossingOver and the goals of the project.

A first answer to the question of what this project is trying to achieve is already given in its subtitle. It reads: “A project supporting the dialogue on the Catholic Church and Parish life in the USA and Germany”. Naturally, this subtitle can only provide a first answer and is not helpful in answering the crucial question why it should make sense to start such a dialogue in the first place. Some German friends asked why Germans could possibly be interested in the American Catholic way of life and what German Catholics could actually learn from the American Church. The motive for such questions is that most Germans do not know much or – to be more precise – do not know anything about Catholics in the U.S. Spontaneously, they associate religious life in the U.S. with reborn Christians, fundamentalism and Evangelical Protestant churches. The average German is certainly biased when it comes to his or her perception of religious life in America, prejudices which have to be tackled at first to make a transatlantic dialogue between Catholics possible at all from the German side.

Despite these biases, I would like to offer two approaches or reasons for the project, one stressing the importance of a cross-cultural dialogue in general, and the other emphasizing the importance of a dialogue between Catholics in the U.S. and Germany. First of all, I am strongly convinced that German Catholics can learn significantly from the American Catholicism, especially – and this might be surprising at first glance – with regard to their own Catholic culture. Being confronted with a different culture almost certainly leads to a “shock of recognition” of some kind: many things you consider “normal” are not normal any longer since people follow a different way of thinking and a different pattern of behavior. All of a sudden, you start thinking about your own culture, but from a different maybe more critical point of view. Let me give an example. When I first came to the U.S. as a foreign exchange student at the age of 17, I was astonished about my host parents’ religious beliefs as members of an Evangelical church. So far, I had only been used to the comparatively liberal Catholic and Protestant church life in Germany. Being confronted with their seemingly “strange ideas”, probably for the first time in my life I started thinking about my own Catholic identity. Therefore, I would claim that a dialogue between two different cultures does

not only help to understand the different, respectively the other culture, it also helps to find a new and maybe more critical point of view of your own culture.

Aside from this rather general cross-cultural experience, I am coming to my second point, such a comparative dialogue is very fruitful for understanding the development of the Catholic culture in Germany and the U.S.. Religious life in Germany has undergone dramatic changes in the past decades, which are often regarded as a continuing process of general decay. This process, often labeled as “secularization” has generally been interpreted by German historians and sociologists as the result of the process of modernization in society. But this interpretation seems to be a very German one as religious life in at least one country in question here is very vibrant although this country is extraordinary modernized. Quite often, it has been considered the decisive factor or even the trendsetter for ongoing modernization. I am talking about the U.S., a country where more than three-fourths of its inhabitants consider themselves religious, in Germany less than half of its population does so.¹

Therefore, the question arises: Is the American development an anomaly or is the German example an exception to the rule? We can only find answers when we start to compare. Keeping these two approaches in mind, I think that a transatlantic dialogue focusing on the nature of the Catholic Church and parish life in the U.S. and Germany makes sense and will hopefully result in a process of mutual learning.

The CrossingOver project aims to support this dialogue in two ways: by research and by enabling German priests and pastoral associates to do a pastoral internship in the U.S.. The research program has been officially initiated almost exactly two years ago on Pentecost 2004 with a conference in Berlin arranged by the CrossingOver team on “American German Catholicism, Nation and Modernization after 1950”. The main objective of the conference was to initiate a comparative perception of American and German Catholicism regarding developments within the last 50 years in nine different areas ranging from politics, the role of women, the charities to the liturgy.² Therefore, it was also important to present an interdisciplinary approach. Both the American and the German participants came from different academic backgrounds like sociology, political science, church history or pastoral studies. Promising fields of comparative research are also developed and supported by *CrossingOver*. Our research program in Church history and related disciplines currently includes studies on U.S. and German parishes and on American Catholics’ civic engagement.

These transatlantic contacts will also hopefully attract attention among a larger Catholic public, at least in Germany. Therefore, we are also working together with the *Ruhr*

1 While the overall picture is always the same, the exact data depends on the poll. Schulz, Rüdiger, *Religiosität und religiöse Praxis von Katholiken in Deutschland*, in: Damberg, Wilhelm/Liedhegener, Antonius (eds.), *Katholiken in den USA und Deutschland. Kirche, Gesellschaft und Politik*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2006, 302, for example states that 77 percent of all Americans in contrast to 43 percent of all Germans described themselves as religious in 2001.

2 The papers presented at the conference are now published, cf. Damberg, Wilhelm/Liedhegener, Antonius (eds.), *Katholiken in den USA und Deutschland. Kirche, Gesellschaft und Politik*, Münster: Aschendorff, 2006.

Wort – the magazine of the diocese of Essen. The Ruhr *Wort* has been regularly publishing articles by the CrossingOver team for about one year, covering a great variety of topics on the Catholic Church in the U.S. as college life, the importance of schools or the development of the parishes.³

The second way of enhancing the cross-cultural dialogue is our pastoral exchange program for priests and pastoral associates, which is organized in cooperation with the Diocese of Essen, the Archdiocese of Chicago and the Inspire project (a partnership initiative of Loyola University Chicago and the Archdiocese of Chicago).⁴ With the help of Reverend Robert Heidenreich from the Archdiocese of Chicago and Daniel Gast, director of the Inspire project, we were able to identify some outstanding parishes and to set up a reflection process for our group. The internships began in September and October 2006 with ten German pastoral associates and priests from the dioceses of Aachen, Essen and Münster, who visited one of the participating parishes in the diocese of Chicago and stayed there for four to six weeks. By doing so, they got to know American Church life with its many different facets such as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), the concept of stewardship, which is virtually unknown in Germany, the liturgy, or programs for young adults. Before, during, and after their stay in Chicago, there were altogether six meetings of preparation for the participants and reflection on their new experience. Two more groups will follow in 2007 and 2008 respectively.

The central purpose of this program is to enable the participants to act innovatively in their field of activity after they have returned home using their American experiences. We are aware that no simple “transfer of practices” can be made because in both countries the Catholic Church has developed quite different traditions and structures according to their respective national and cultural contexts. But with regard to the serious problems, that are obviously part of the transformation process that the Catholic Church in Germany faces, fresh ideas and approaches are strongly needed.

Another central aim is that the participants will communicate their individual experience to a larger public in Germany. Therefore they will write an essay in which they reflect on their American experience, which will be published.

We are also optimistic that this part of *CrossingOver* as well as the research program will stimulate a dialogue. One of the most encouraging experiences we made during our trips to Chicago was that almost all pastors we visited were not only open minded and willing to host a German guest, but also interested in the situation of the church in Germany and eager to learn a lot from the German perspective.

In sum, research and the pastoral exchange program are the two main aspects of the *CrossingOver* project. It was stated at the beginning, that our project is developing. Although I am not able to predict future results, the steps taken so far give reason to be optimistic that it will yield considerable learning effects, and that this will be a mutual

3 All articles can be found on our homepage <<http://www.rub.de/mnkg>>.

4 The Inspire project aims to assist pastoral leadership teams in the Archdiocese of Chicago as they build capacity for collaborative pastoral leadership. For more details see <<http://www.inspireproject.org>>.

learning. Hopefully, our project will also make a small contribution to the improvement of the strained relations between the U.S. and Germany as *CrossingOver* sees itself as a project that reaches out and brings together different cultures.

Bibliography

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