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Koinonia: A Theological Pattern for Youth Ministry in a Church as a Community. A Roman-catholic Perspective

Patrik C. Höring

ABSTRACT: The current situation in church and modern society makes it necessary to leave comprehensive theories of pastoral care. Facing youth that can only be described as an aggregate, and regarding a pluralization of practice, methods and approaches, a contemporary theory of youth ministry will not be a complete design but rather a flexible theory, which is open for different situations and diverse ways of action. This article outlines a theological concept of youth work corresponding to the self-conception of the church by revealing its characteristic trait as a koinonia (community, communion and relationship) as a suitable pattern for such a flexible theory of youth ministry needed today.

INTRODUCTION

Germany has a rich tradition of Catholic youth ministry, which dates back to the 19th century. Since then, priests and lay Christians established a broad system of groups and societies, institutions and programmes for leading young people to mature faith and personality in church as well as in society. Current theories of Catholic youth ministry in Germany base on the II Vatican Council (1962-65) and the German National Synod (1972-75), one of the follow-up events of the council, which took place in the late 1960s and the early 1970s either in the Netherlands, in Switzerland or Austria. The resolution of the Würzburg Synod in 1975 concerning "Goals and Tasks of Youth Ministry" is characterized by a new approach, a diaconical approach, understanding youth ministry as a service of the church both for young people and for the society ("social diaconia"). This basic intention is expressed by the term and concept called "personal offer".

This concept was new because previously youth ministry remained an instrument for holding young people in the Church, an instrument of recruitment or instruction, mainly for the Church's benefit. From now on Church wanted to be only an assistant for the personal development of young people. This conduct corresponded to the educational concepts of this period, which supported emancipation as the most suitable way of becoming an independent and responsible subject.

Hence this concept became fundamental for nearly all modes of Catholic youth ministry in Germany, for the youth clubs as well as for the youth associations, for social work as well as catechesis. But – and this is the core question – is this attempt still "state of the art"? The following questions may illustrate possible gaps:

- What about the other duties of the Church, the worship (liturgy) or the task of announcing the good news (martyria)? Is this all included in the diaconical concept? (This question was severely discussed especially with the bishops already on the Würzburg Synod itself.)
- How can the mistake of separating diaconical work, social work, from the other duties of the Church be avoided? (Especially rich dioceses like in Germany established an own branch of Catholic social work which has often a lack of spirituality and less to do with the life of the parishes.)
- What is the central task, the 'core-business' of the Church, when people are in a situation to decide? Is it the care for social needs or the catechesis, or the liturgy? (This becomes reality in many dioceses when finances or the number of employees decrease.)
- Is a diaconical approach really helpful in the encounter with young people? Is it helpful developing them towards a subject? (Serving others can be easily misunderstood. Sometimes diaconia is not open for a relationship at eye level. It contains the virus of

paternalism. And finally, what about people who doesn't want to be served and who need any help, but rather a space to give room their constructive ideas, their "sparks" and their dynamic, sometimes prophetic power?)

It is obvious, therefore, that the diaconical approach can imply misunderstandings such as that the server knows best. He is the giver and the other one is the receiver – a one-way-communication. Youth ministry doesn't work that way, however. Youth ministry needs a dialogical behaviour and a dialogical conviction. A key word is participation.¹ It means encounter at eye level, a relationship, which might be called symmetrical. Diaconia is not superfluous, but it should be accompanied by another theological orientation.

The main task, therefore, is to show that a participatory approach, a pastoral care at eye level, which reflects the shifting of modern pastoral concepts from a concept of advice to a concept of encounter, is originally corresponding to the gospel and to the deepest certainties of the Catholic Church.

And – secondly – the task is to develop a fundamental orientation for the three ecclesiastical duties, diaconia, martyria and leiturgia, to avoid a one-sided diaconal or martyriale orientation, which would mean preferring a youth ministry which is either service or teaching. With the help of the fourth fundamental ecclesiastical aspect, the koinonia, it should be possible to overcome the dichotomy, the view of the fundamental ecclesiastical aspects as additives in favour of a perichoretic view.

These considerations prompt us to investigate the concept of koinonia closer. The keyword "koinonia" (Latin: communion) is complex; it could be roughly translated as "relationship with others by being in relation to one common matter or item". It will be revealed not only as a keyword for the self-description of the (Catholic) Church but also as the core subject of the message and the practice of Jesus Christ Himself. Finally, this concept will be shown as compatible with the current state of knowledge in human sciences (education, psychology, social philosophy). Therefore the idea of koinonia seems appropriate to give an orientation for the Church's mission with, under, and through young people.

The term will be explored in three steps: (1) Koinonia (within the meaning of community) as the purpose of the church's action, (2) koinonia (within the meaning of relationship) as the core and centre of the preaching of Jesus Christ and (3) koinonia (within the meaning of encounter) as the basis and starting point of modern pastoral care.²

1. CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY: KOINONIA AS THE AIM AND PURPOSE OF CHURCH PRACTICE

1.1 BIBLICAL APPROACH

First of all the meaning of the Greek word in the New Testament (koinos) or the Hebrew equivalent in the Old Testament (habar) indicates a context of participation. In the Old Testament this motif refers to the self description and the structure of Israel. Community means sharing the common tradition, means being responsible for each other, means being an image of the partnership between God and the people (which is of course not a symmetrical one!), as it is drawn in the theology of creation (cf. Gen 1:26ff; Ps 8:6f). The individual is part of the community but still subject at the same time. He becomes more and more subject the more he realizes his responsibility for the community. Individuality and community are interdependent.

¹ Cf. Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

² For details cf. Patrik C. Höring, *Jugendlichen begegnen: Jugendpastorales Handeln in einer Kirche als Gemeinschaft* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000), 189-310.

Koinonia in the New Testament is used primarily in the Pauline writings. There it can be understood as "being connected with someone by sharing something, or participating at something together".³ But what is being shared? What is the heart of the community? What is it that all part and what constitutes the community?

While it is in Israel the faith in God as the Creator and the common Exodus experience, it is in the Christian communities the koinonia (participation/communion) with the Son (1 Cor 1:9), the Gospel (Phil 1:5), in His sufferings (Phil 3:10), and in the fellowship of the Spirit (2 Cor 13:13; Phil 2:1). This builds up the Christian community, which always renews its community through participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 10:16f). This christocentric koinonia is pictured in the horizontal koinonia of the community of the faithful which is characterized through mutual taking and giving. This relationship influences the image of the community of Luke (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37). These two lines – vertical and horizontal Koinonia/relationship – are connected theocentrically in 1 John 1:3 and 1:6f, where another central concept of the New Testament is brought into play: the love.

1.2 ECCLESIOLOGICAL APPROACH: COMMUNICATION AND PARTICIPATION AS AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL NECESSITY

The concept of love is what gives Church its life as a jointly structured community.⁴ Model of the participatory structure of a Christian community is the belief in one God, who is "the love" (1 John 4:16b), expressed in the belief of the one God as a community of three persons. On this belief the church's self-image is founded. "Thus, the Church has been seen as a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." (LG 4; cf. GS 24.3, UR 2). The Church, trying to be a credible image of the koinonia between God and men (cf. LG 1), therefore calls herself a koinonia (communion); a "communion sanctorum".

This famous term is used since the 4/5 Century, although it was added later to the articles of the Creed. The effect of the Pauline understanding of koinonia is evident. The term expresses the unity of the horizontal and vertical relationship, the unity of love of God and of neighbour. This koinonia/communion is first of all constituted by the participation in the sacramental life of the Christians and by imitating the actions of Jesus – means to achieve a unity with Jesus Christ himself. This is, originally, the sense of "communio sanctorum" (taking part of the sacred). By this similar participation a community (a "communion of saints") is constituted.

The understanding of the Church as koinonia (or communion) was renewed by the II Vatican Council: "The 'Communio'-ecclesiology is the central and fundamental idea of the conciliar documents."⁵ This self-understanding of the church emerges a fundamental equality of church members, based on the Baptism (and the Confirmation) where all Christians are gifted with the power of the Holy Spirit so that everyone may wear the same honorary title "faithful" (cf. LG 40.32.10).

But how can this image be realized in a modern world? The modern concepts of participation and communication can be part of a Church as koinonia. Surprisingly, the Church is able to realize aspects of the philosophical concept of "communicative action" (Jürgen Habermas). It can be defined as follows:

"Communicative action is present when the parties engage in coordinating their plans and

³ Cf. Josef Hainz, *Koinonia: „Kirche“ als Gemeinschaft bei Paulus* [BU 16] (Regensburg: Pustet, 1982), 89.

⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI.: Encyclical letter „*Deus Caritas Est*“ (Rome, 2005).

⁵ Cf. Concluding Document of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops 1985, II.C.1.

aims, and in effectuating them only on the basis of an consent about their situation and the likely consequences of their action, reached without pressure and coercion.”⁶

In six dimensions main aspects of communicative action can be paralleled with six main beliefs of catholic faith.⁷

<i>Characteristics of communicative action</i>	<i>Characteristics of Church and catholic faith</i>
Communication is possible only in an atmosphere of freedom.	Faith takes place only in freedom - faith liberates into a new life.
The goal is an agreement (unity, consensus).	The truth can be approached only through consensus (consensus fidelium).
All parties are equal subjects.	In the process of truth all believers are involved as subjects because of the “supernatural discernment in matters of faith” (sensus fidei).
The renunciation of power and authority claims is a prerequisite.	If dialogue must not threaten the essence of the Church’s needs, it should not be prevented. Authority must serve the community, must serve the dialogue.
Although the full realization in everyday life is often missed, the ideal is still the condition of communication.	The faith in the dawning of the kingdom of God includes the knowledge into the pending of its full implementation (“not yet”).
The "communication unity" as the understanding of the subjects is achieved in a "social space", which is a prerequisite and consequence.	Faith as "communicative unity" among the faithful can take place only in a "social space" of a common tradition which precedes the present and at the same time is a result of a dialogical process.

On the background of analogies to the concept of Habermas’ “communicative action” church may be called a "communicative unity of believers" (Medard Kehl). Church is, on the one hand, a product and, on the other, a precondition of communicative action within the horizon of faith. Thus, the focus of the image of the Church shifts from being an institution of socialization and education, from being a counterpart to the believers to a Church as a community of faithful, as “communio sanctorum” in its personal meaning that arises from the common participation in Christ, the “communio sanctorum” in its sacramental sense.

1.3 PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES

Consequently, young people are not 2nd-class-members of the Church; they are full members by virtue of their baptism – although they feel sometimes as 2nd-class-members when adults dominate the shape and programmes of the parishes. This is the fundamental reason why young people won’t discover Church as a thing of their own; as a space they can help to give a new shape. Participation is necessary. But participation is not a concession; it is rather a right and duty of every faithful to build up the body of Christ (cf. AA 3). Therefore the majorities in numerous councils and institutions should be checked!

⁶ Hans-Joachim Höhn, *Kirche und kommunikatives Handeln. Studien zur Theologie und Praxis der Kirche in der Auseinandersetzung mit den Sozialtheorien Niklas Luhmanns und Jürgen Habermas’* [FTS 32] (Frankfurt am Main: Knecht, 1985), 36.

⁷ Cf. Höring, *Jugendlichen begegnen*, 235-246; Medard Kehl, *Die Kirche: Eine katholische Ekklesiologie*, 3. Auflage (Würzburg: Echter, 1994); Karl Lehmann, *Vom Dialog als Form der Kommunikation und Wahrheitsfindung heute*, hrsg. v. Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz [Der Vorsitzende der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 17] (Bonn, 1994).

Church should be more and more what it is from its origins: a community of communication between different subjects (adults and young people, men and women, ministers and laity). Church can be a communicative space where freedom and dialogue, participation and communication, and the common reach for another presence and a new future, the transcendence of the status quo (possibly using a "prophetic power" of young people) are characteristics of a common belief.

2. ACTING IN RELATIONSHIP: KOINONIA AS THE CENTRE AND CORE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD-PRACTICE OF JESUS CHRIST

2.1 BIBLICAL APPROACH

The core of the shared hope of Christians is the good news of Jesus Christ announcing the dawning of the kingdom of God, the "basileia thou theou". This message is suitable to develop indicators for the Christian way of life because the practice of Jesus was nothing more than the practice of the message he preached.⁸

In contrast to the apocalyptic preaching of John the Baptist, Jesus emphasizes not a departure from the past guilt but the turning towards the God-given salvation which dawns with His appearance. God sets a new beginning; he repays the debt-history of Israel.⁹ This "eschatological act of election" is resistant to human influence. Therefore, humans can only let it happen at themselves. This is the meaning of a "sola gratia" (only the grace). Man must primarily turn to God and can then start over. Thus, God renews His relationship with His covenant people, offering them salvation and peace, the "Shalom" or - in the words of the author of the First Letter of John - "koinonia tou theou" (1 John 1:3).

The practice of Jesus needs no further explanation as it is a practice of this "koinonia tou theou". His devotion to the people on the edge and outside of the community is not only a practice of philanthropy. It is a practice of the basileia, a practice of God's kingdom. The salvation from God, the renewed koinonia with God shall become visible and tangible. Jesus wants to renew the horizontal koinonia by his actions because God has renewed the vertical. So Jesus gives authoritatively to the individual the opportunity to begin anew. In the ethics of Jesus the indicative precedes the imperative. The decision for a new start leads to a new way of acting. "Ethic of Jesus would be then enabling a new form of being. Their last axiom would not mean: 'Obey and you will live' ... but reversed: 'You have the new life (salvation and promise of salvation), so act accordingly.'"¹⁰ This radicalism in the vertical relationship can only be followed in a similarly radicalism in the horizontal relations, e.g. in radical compassion. From here the behaviour of Jesus must be understood.

In the actions of Jesus is visible and tangible that God created humans as subjects. Again and again the miracle stories tell that Jesus helps people to get themselves back on their feet: "Your faith has saved you" (Mark 10:52; cf. Mark 5:34), "Rise, take up thy bed, and yourself" (John 5:8), "Go, show yourself to the priest and bring represent your cleansing" (Mark 1:44). As much as a person first has to put up with the action of God, as much he can get up and walk around - it is his faith that has helped.

In the same way Jesus teaches the people. His preaching can - like the healing - be described as "communicative actions".¹¹ Modern parable theory tells that Jesus uses the rhetorical

⁸ Cf. Helmut Merklein, *Die Gottesherrschaft als Handlungsprinzip. Untersuchung zur Ethik Jesu* [fzb 34] (Würzburg: Echter, 1978); Helmut Merklein, *Jesu Botschaft von der Gottesherrschaft – Eine Skizze* [SBS 111], 3., überarbeitete Auflage (Stuttgart: Verlag Kath. Bibelwerk, 1989).

⁹ Cf. Merklein, *Jesu Botschaft von der Gottesherrschaft*, 78-84.

¹⁰ Merklein, *Die Gottesherrschaft als Handlungsprinzip*, 139.

¹¹ Cf. Edmund Arens, „Metaphorische Erzählungen und kommunikative Handlungen Jesu. Zum Ansatz einer Gleichnistheorie“ *Biblische Zeitschrift Neue Folge* 32, (1988), 52-71.

means of rabbinic parables, where the listener becomes the subject of the action. While the turning point of the parable must be decrypted by the receiver itself, the listener is drawn into the event of the basileia, the kingdom of God, and remains subject. He is not a passive receiver but an active contributor to the message. So any preaching of the Church or in the Church must be understood as a dialogue rather than one-way preaching.

And one thing more can be seen in the practice of Jesus. Specifically, the mutually cooperative relationship that characterizes the actions of Jesus is also the criterion for what is actually happening with the people. An important element in its own right is the touch that alone can already be beneficial (cf. Mark 1:41; 5:25-43.41, 6:56, 7:32-35). This relationship is what makes people healed, and in this relationship it comes clear what the other one needs. This essential partnership characterizes the action of Jesus and His message.

And finally, again, the goal becomes clear: return into the restored community (koinonia) with God and with one another. Many stories report that Jesus heals the sense organs or that He dines with sinners. It shall express that with the advent of the kingdom of God the conditions are fulfilled to build up new relationships in order to renew community.

2.2 PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES: EMBOLDEN FOR A NEW WAY OF LIFE!

Jesus helps all by strengthening them to decide freely for acting in a different new way. What a chance! Which claim? How would the image of the Church change, if (young) people were not told constantly what they should do or not to do, but rather they were treated more as subjects!? Today, at a time when young people want to decide for themselves and must decide for themselves, there is a need for such new handling. Young people need less pious exhortation rather than someone who gives them courage to follow their own sense, and to do what young people secretly know already as the good and the right thing.

The aspects of action of following Jesus as described here correspond to the developments of pastoral care towards pastoral encounter. This is characterized by a fundamental symmetry of relations. A "slope" in pastoral care has been overcome. The client today is always fully subject of the relationship. Because - in the words of Carl Rogers - the client is, "who knows where the shoe pinches."¹² To help him without taking over control is today's task of the pastor.

Koinonia/communion is the basic criterion for action in the process of following Jesus. The search and the offer of koinonia is the basis of all activities and the main characteristic of all the ecclesiastical duties, so that it can be spoken - a little artificial - of "koinonical diaconia", "koinonical martyria" and "koinonical liturgy". Koinonia, understood as a relationship, becomes the internal criterion of other three-fold fundamental ecclesiastical dimensions.

An image from the North American Indians may illustrate what is meant. H.G. Behringer talks about a "unity of man in four ways"¹³ which consists of body, soul, mind and heart. These four aspects of human being can be assigned to the four basic aspects of the Church. The diaconia would correspond to the care for the body, the martyria would concern for the mind. The liturgy would appeal the soul of people. Finally, the koinonia with its numerous aspects as presented here would have its function as a center, as the heart of Church's action.

3. ENCOUNTER IS THE FIRST STEP: KOINONIA AS THE STARTING POINT OF PASTORAL CARE

3.1 BIBLICAL APPROACH

¹² Cf. Carl R. Rogers, *Entwicklung der Persönlichkeit. Psychotherapie aus der Sicht eines Therapeuten* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1973), 27. – Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person. A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

¹³ Cf. Hans G. Behringer, „Auftanken – Kraft schöpfen – neu werden“ *Katechetische Blätter* 125, (2000), 348.

On closer inspection, *koinonia* turns out to be even the starting point of Jesus' behaviour. First, Jesus can be characterized with Acts 10:38 as someone who "went about doing." The restlessness seems to be a feature of His practice. Of Himself He says: "The Son of man, but has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Jesus is en route. We would say today: He is present among people, approachable. And often enough, He will be approached as soon as people recognize Him. With increasing success, when he attracts more and more people, they ask for help. Moreover, Jesus is approaching them, goes with them (cf. Mark 5:24), He is their guest (cf. Luke 19:5) and remains where compassion touches Him (cf. Mark 10:49, 1:41, 5:19, 6:34, 8:2, 9:22, 10:47 f).

In this initial encounter, Jesus takes his opponent seriously as a subject. Obviously, when he does not speculate about the needs of others, but rather asks them: "What shall I do unto thee?" (Mark 10:51), He offers nothing more than an open encounter. Just Mary is praised because, in contrast to her busy sister Martha, she does nothing more than to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to Him (cf. Luke 10:38-42). So she gives Him what makes a guest the subject of encounter: her undivided attention.

Jesus seeks contact and makes an offer to meet Him. It is the beginning of a deeper relationship. Today it is evident that this contact is fundamental for every relationship. So the beginning is the openness and partnership that is emerging more and more as the main characteristic of Christian community.

2.2 PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES: BEING PRESENT AS A HUMAN AMONG HUMANS

What does it mean for Christian life today? It can only mean being present as a Church or as an individual minister or youth worker, being present in the midst of people and near to the people.¹⁴ And this should be not filled up with purposes and objectives, hopes, and conjectures, but more with an authentic interest! An attitude is needed that is frequently called "sharing life together". It is the search for and the provision for an encounter. However, it is also an invitation, an invitation that can be rejected, but still remains. As in the story of the Good Father (cf. Luke 15:11-32), the door is always open, even for those (or maybe especially for those) who left the community. Church should even continue to look out for them (cf. Luke 15:20). What do we think now about young people who leave our parishes after receiving the confirmation, who no longer come to our services, and no longer join in, and take part in the parish life? Only from the encounter as defined above, additional steps may become visible. In youth ministry it is a truism that no teenager would look for help or advice from a church employee whom he does not know or has not seen as trustworthy. Roles and titles are not considered as significant; what is important is the person.

4. PERSPECTIVE: CHURCH AS AN ATTRACTIVE NETWORK

The biblical term *koinonia* reveals a multidimensional meaning of Christian theory and practice. It became clear that it is fundamental for the self-description of the Church, particularly in reference to the Pauline epistles. It was also demonstrated that the term *koinonia* describes the central content of the "basileia thou theou"-preaching of Jesus Christ. And – thirdly – *koinonia* offers a pattern for a specific attitude in pastoral care. These different but corresponding aspects can provide elements for a concept of youth ministry orientated towards a symmetrical relationship between young and old, clergy and laity who face the challenges of the modern world and appreciate its achievements.

¹⁴ It is remarkable that the person who is most unknown by teenagers is the pastor or youth worker. Cf. Joachim Zinnecker et al. (Ed.), *null zoff & voll busy. Die erste Jugendgeneration des neuen Jahrhunderts. Ein Selbstbild* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2002), 58.

Reflections on the term *koinonia* as the Church's fundamental concept may help to develop it towards a habitat that corresponds to the gospel and to the needs of people. A Church as a *koinonia* would perhaps also receive the necessary charisma, so that young people can discover the Church for themselves as a space for their search for belonging and acceptance. Then it would be true again what Romano Guardini, one of the leaders of the youth movement in the 1920th wrote: "The Church awakens in the souls".¹⁵ This would happen to those who act in the name of the Church, and put in practice what was proclaimed by the prophet Zechariah: "In those days ten men ... shall take hold of the robe (of someone), saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard (seen, felt, experienced) that God is with you.'" (cf. Zech 8:23).

Abbreviations

AA = II Vatican Council: Decree on the apostolate of the laity "Apostolicam actuositatem"

LG = II Vatican Council: Dogmatic constitution on the church "Lumen Gentium"

UR = II Vatican Council: Decree on ecumenism "Unitatis Redintegratio"

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¹⁵ Romano Guardini, *Vom Sinn der Kirche. Fünf Vorträge*, 4. Auflage (Mainz: Grünewald, 1955), 19.

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