

Promoting Seafarers Dignity
International Christian Maritime Association, Hamburg 2011

Working with challenging contexts:
Christians in encounter with diverse religions, traditions and ideologies

Dear friends,

I feel very honoured by the invitation to share this morning some reflections about the call for us as Christians in the diverse contexts we meet. I am coming from only about 1000 meters from here. The HafenCity is a region, which was since the 18th century the central harbour of Hamburg, where economic growth, colonialism, social diversity, exploitation and generosity met.

The change from the free port of Hamburg to the innertown-development project HafenCity mirrors the deep global transformation processes of maritime life. Since the second part of last century the development of the container shipping meant, that the infrastructure of this harbour became insufficient. New huge areas at the other side of the Elbe were developed. And now, parallel to the increasing number of houses built for living, working and trade in the HafenCity, the issue of shipping again becomes relevant: by the immense number of cruise ships – in 2011 more than hundred.

There are decreasing numbers of people working on container ships, securing the global exchange of goods and struggling with the time and economic pressure in this area. And there are huge numbers of people working on cruise ships, part of the increasing service sector, which includes different ranges of work, of class differences and sometimes of exploitation.

Coming as Christian community to Hamburg, to offer a space of prayer and spiritual life in the HafenCity, to implement the issues of justice, peace and integrity of creation and to do this as visible presence of all confessions and churches in Hamburg together, means for my friends and me a big challenge. And it includes to be confronted not only with the questions of city-development, inclusion, integration, responsible life-style e.t.c. But also with the fact of every some days a big cruise ship – and the questions around that: the importance for Hamburg as tourist attraction, the economic chances, but also the ecological consequences for Hamburg, for the seas worldwide – and the situation of those thousands of people, mostly from Asia, working and staying on these ships. What about their dignity? You might know, that the Hamburg seafarers' mission last year started to offer a place for them in the HafenCity Cruise Center.

Before I was asked to come to Hamburg, I was responsible for the Europe department of the EKD which included the German speaking congregations all around Europe, sometimes linked with the seafarers' missions – and it included the chaplaincy for cruise ships, the training and sending of the pastors. That meant lots of insights in the situation and needs of the people in the different areas, those of the tourists with wellness and release – or of the crew with hard work and sometimes pressure.

I remember very well the discussions in the church bodies if it would be still needed and reasonable to support the seafarers' mission although the people who profit, nowadays come from other countries, religions, cultures than the German. You might know these discussions very well!

And although the seafarers' mission was found and is developed and granted by courageous believers who took up the need of the seafarers when the churches did not even see them – as problems in other parts of the society as well – the care for the dignity of human beings remains a challenge for the whole church.

The worldwide ecumenical movement, which started with the world mission conference in Edinburgh in 1910, is the early answer of the churches to different worldwide challenges: the diversity of the churches, the social situation of the people worldwide, the call to spread out the gospel. It refers to the prayer of Jesus in John 17 '... that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me (John 17:21).'

The call to follow Jesus on his way of love and reconciliation includes to do it together. If not it is a failure in credibility to the world and destroys the strength of the love Jesus entrusted to us.

And to follow Jesus on his way means to turn to the world – to the human beings, to the whole creation. The churches worldwide in the ecumenical movement always have struggled to become strong in both commitments.

Living in the European context I would like to refer to an important document, the 'Charta Oecumenica – guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe'.¹ Europe - that means the whole of Europe, not only the European Union! This document was signed in 2001 by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), which means that mostly all churches and confessions in Europe - Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic, Anglican, Independent churches - for the first time after the schism/break into confessions agreed on a common theological statement.

After affirming the common ground of the church, the believe in the triune good – the churches state in a first chapter:

'Because we here confess "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" our paramount ecumenical task is to show forth this unity, which is always a gift of God. Fundamental differences in faith are still barriers to visible unity. There are different views of the church and its oneness, of the sacraments and ministries. We must not be satisfied with this situation. Jesus Christ revealed to us on the cross his love and the mystery of reconciliation; as his followers, we intend to do our utmost to overcome the problems and obstacles that still divide the churches.' (I.1)

Being part of the ecumenical movement since more than 20 years my most important learning effect was and is how different we are – and how we are one in our fears and hopes.

The more I got to know people from other confessions, the more I travelled in the North, East, West and South, the more I opened myself for their experiences and their stories, the more I understood something about the culture which shaped their everyday live and their faith. And to share one's story means to give attention to his or her individual experiences and feelings – as Jesus did to the samaritanian women, to the customs officer, to people whom he met on his way.

To reflect the personal, the political, the cultural context means to see a person woven in a textile of traditions, conditions and actions. It is a difference and you are different if you are a Lutheran grown up in Hamburg-Blankenese or in Hamburg Wilhelmsburg. It is a difference if you are a roman catholic grown up in Poland or in Finland. And than you find out that being a Lutheran in Bremen you might understand better your catholic neighbour than the Lutheran in St. Petersburg –

¹ Hg. Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), Conference of European Churches (KEK), Charta Oecumenica – Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe, St.Gallen, Genf 2001

not only because you have the same language!

The different contexts and traditions, in which we are born and grown up, as well as our personal experiences as man and woman, as people born in different social groups, they shape the way we feel and believe. As a theologian I learned, that most of the theological differences between churches and confessions are rooted in the differences of cultures, traditions and interests. That makes me hesitant if I hear about differences, which out of theological reasons can't be overcome. That makes me open to turn to the differences and create a space of trust, to discuss them openly and precisely. That motivates me to explore the other and his or her dreams behind the story. And to find out that we are one in our longing for love and reconciliation in Christ.

So the headline of the second chapter of the Charta Oecumenica is: On the way towards the visible fellowship of the churches in Europe. And it starts with the programmatic sentence: 'The most important task of the churches in Europe is the common proclamation of the Gospel, in both word and deed, for the salvation of all...It is equally important for the whole people of God together to communicate the Gospel in the public domain, which also means responsible commitments to social and political issues.' (II.2)

We communicate the gospel – and communication is a process which only can succeed, if there is an atmosphere of mutual acceptance, openness, trust and understanding. We communicate the gospel – and respect, that there are different expressions of faith. This might mean to offer space for different expressions in liturgy, for the importance of the bible, for candles, for icons, for the eternal light, space for praying standing, moving or on knees,.

'We commit ourselves to act together at all levels of church life wherever conditions permit and there are no reasons of faith or overriding expediency mitigating against this;' (II.4) This is a fundamental change in the paradigm of our church life. We have no longer to justify if we work together but we have to justify if we don't work together, if we insist in the difference as reason for different acting, if we neglect the call of Jesus to be one in God.

So we come to the 'common proclamation of the Gospel, in both word and deed, for the salvation of all.' - which is explored in a third chapter: Our common responsibility in Europe.

The churches were and still are part of producing ideologies which hurt the human dignity, which destroy the integrity of creation. Christians continue to be part of an exploitative capitalism, of devaluing women, of abusing children, of producing weapons, of blessing wars, of destroying nature, of oppressing people, of continuing an ideology of power and violence. We still are part of the worldwide idolatry of concurrence and property.

'Our faith helps us to learn from the past, and to make our Christian faith and love for our neighbours a source of hope for morality and ethics, for education and culture, and for political and economic life, in Europe and throughout the world.' the Charta Oecumenica states.

'The churches support an integration of the European continent. Without common values, unity cannot endure. We are convinced that the spiritual heritage of Christianity constitutes an empowering source of inspiration and enrichment for Europe. On the basis of our Christian faith, we work towards a humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail.

We likewise insist on the reverence for life, the value of marriage and the family, the preferential option for the poor, the readiness to forgive, and in all things compassion.'

And it continues:

'As churches and as international communities we have to counteract the danger of Europe developing into an integrated West and a disintegrated East, and also take account of the North-South divide within Europe. At the same time we must avoid Eurocentricity and heighten Europe's sense of responsibility for the whole of humanity, particularly for the poor all over the world.' (III.7)

Regarding the European churches this happens for example by the common monitoring of the European institutions. During the last decades the churches together discussed and intervened in the European treaties process, the constitution, the work of the different commissions of the European Union and the work of the Council of Europe and the UN. In the center there is always the human dignity - and the integrity of creation.

Human dignity for all and everywhere: For the Romas in Hungary and France, for the victims of the financial break down in Great Britain, for the victims of trafficking in women in the western countries, for the immigrants in Italy – as well as challenging the European world economy treaties and how they deal with taxes, or the influence of an European energy policy and the worldwide sustainability problems. You can imagine: I could continue for hours to name the themes we have to tackle as Christians.

We have our instruments for that: on the European level the offices of CEC and COMECE at Brussels, at international level the WCC- and the Vatican-offices at New York, Geneva e.t.c. What is it that we as Christians can bring in, apart from our faith rooted search for solutions? Our call and hopefully our daily life is to be part of the people, to share their everyday-experience, to live the Christ-given love and reconciliation – and to know by own experience where the attacks against human dignity take place and how to resist. This is why we are needed as partners of those who are responsible for the political decision making processes, which have an impact on the everyday life of the people.

You as seafarers' mission people from over the world, you know the everyday life of those who are affected by the developments in the harbours and on the seas, you know the stories of those who hope to ensure the daily life of their families by working for a minimal salary and with long absences from home. And bringing these stories together from all over the world, you bring together the different sides, actors, responsibilities – be it ship owners, shipping companies, employers, crews, trade unions. Together with them or sometimes in difference to their point of view you are able to identify the urgent political steps and to bring them to the ILO, as you did maintaining for years the political struggle for a Maritim Labour Convention until it was formulated and put into action.

And now the monitoring has to start and go on...!!

This is one example for a strong expression of our 'common proclamation of the Gospel, in both word and deed, for the salvation of all.'

Yes – 'for the salvation of all': human dignity can't be reserved for the people of some continents, integrity for creation can't be reserved for some parts of the world.

'Our common endeavours are devoted to evaluating, and helping to resolve, political and social issues in the spirit of the Gospel. Because we value the person and dignity of every individual as made in the image of God, we defend the absolutely equal value of all human beings' (III.8) the European churches commit themselves. That means to recognize the different cultural contexts in which people grew up and live – to hear their stories of suffering and hopes, to acknowledge their struggle for justice and peace, to get to know about their visions for life and future.

You will share the experience with me, that the results are the same as within the churches: that most of the differences between religions and ideologies are rooted in different cultures, traditions and interests. That makes me hesitant if I hear about differences, which can't be overcome. That makes me open to turn to the differences and create a space of trust, to discuss them openly and precisely.

And that means to challenge us together in our understanding of the dignity of every human person, be it women or men, adult or child, from different sexual orientation, different colour, different religion. Only then we take the gospel as well as our partners seriously.

Let me come back to where we are today, at Hamburg: while we are discussing the issue of seafarers' dignity there are some 15 people not far away imprisoned, who are accused to have attacked a big ship from Hamburg and put into danger the whole crew. The problem of piracy is one of the issues on your agenda here. Three days before the newspaper reported the story which one of the 15 offered to the court. The story of someone from Somalia, whose family was murdered when he was a young boy, who had no future in the traditional fishing, who was forced into piracy and the concrete act of attacking the ship.

On the other hand we are confronted with the discussion about guaranteeing the security of the ships by accompanying them by mariners or private forces. An urgent and complex problem, part of the whole range of problems around human dignity, global justice, integrity of creation, sustainability – you know all the different and difficult aspects much better than me.

I only want to turn to one: there are economic and strategic, political and cultural reasons which might urge to solve the problem of piracy by strengthening the military power and to defend them by weapons, be they in the hands of the marines or private agencies and their interests – which by the way may become an added problem!

Some weeks before the international ecumenical 'Decade to Overcome Violence' ended at Kingston/Jamaica with an assembly and a resolution. The text names the whole range of violence – by unjust structures, global destruction, the ideology of the power of violence. It names the challenge to engage in deleting the sources of violence by developing the competences for active conflict-prevention, peace-building and reconciliation. And the assembly names the crucial question, if we as Christians can still accept military forces as last resort to protect vulnerable people – the UN-concept which is called the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P). There is still no agreement about that in the worldwide Christianity.

Parallel to Jamaica the - since more than 50 years working - European network of Peace Churches and Christian communities, named 'Church and Peace', met in France and sent an intervention which says:

Church and Peace understands the need to stand alongside people whose lives are threatened and who call for security and protection.

Church and Peace appreciates that the United Nations' Organisation and some regional organisations are seeking to accomplish these tasks by taking measures which pre-empt the causes of conflicts as well as assisting in the reconstruction and reconciliation process after violent conflicts have ceased.

Based on our understanding of Christian discipleship and peace making, we oppose that section of the Concept which allows the use of military force to ensure the protection of threatened peoples.

Even if military force is held only in reserve for use as a measure of last resort, this influences the

planning of civil action during the earlier phases of conflict by consuming a disproportionately high share of the resources available for aiding civilians. Also its availability strengthens the traditional attitude that military force is the inevitable answer...We invite all churches to resist together with us the temptation of justifying the use of deadly weapons even as a last resort.'²

Yes, I am sure, that the challenge of piracy is in a way the same as in other situations which create the call for military forces. The analysis of the causes of piracy– and parallel to that the causes of migration – urge for fundamental changes in global and regional policies and economic measures like fishing policies, exploitation of resources, arm trade.

That calls for strong longlasting strategies and measures. And there is the call for a short term strategy: to avoid the confrontation, to take other ways – as is asked by some representatives of seafarers' trade union. We have to say something about that – as Christians! As 'common proclamation of the Gospel, in both word and deed, for the salvation of all.'

The Charta Oecumenica ends with the prayer:

"May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Rom 15.13)

Joy, peace, hope by the power of the Holy spirit to all of you for your challenging and important commitment!

Thanks for your attention!

Hamburg, den 22.8.2011

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