

Englisch

„BEDENKE, MENSCH...“

Social Challenges and Christian Humanity

PASTORAL LETTER

for Lent 2023 (Abridged)

By Dr. Georg Bätzing, Bishop of Limburg



What is a human? The readings today, the First Sunday of Lent, bring this question into sharp focus: the biblical story of the Fall of Humankind (Genesis 2), the connection between sin and death in the Letter to the Romans (Romans 5) and the Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). They all raise the question of what makes a human being.

The question of human nature drives theology, philosophy, natural science, art and politics. It guides all of society's debates and decisions – particularly those concerning the beginning and end of life.

Everyone deals at some point with the issue of what makes a human being, whether it's during a crisis, a major decision or just a situation we need to deal with every day. It's particularly important when people's worth is damaged, exploited or marginalized. It's not an abstraction during an emergency; it puts our beliefs and knowledge to the test.

Human Beings: Creatures of Relationship

Human nature is defined by our relationships with God and other people. From the very beginning of our lives, we are dependent on and tied to others. Only in relationships can the things that make my ego unique be determined. “The ‘I’ develops in dialog with the ‘you,’” as the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber put it. We are responsible for our role as beings existing through relationships. We are asked to find answers and challenged to question simple replies.

Responsibility is a vital attribute of our ties to others. That’s implied in the *Gottesebenbildlichkeit*, the knowledge of Good and Evil, in the biblical Creation story of the Tree of Knowledge. The lesson is this: My decisions have consequences for other people. And so, today we find ourselves in structures whose outcomes we never thought we’d be the cause of.

Sin, which St. Paul interpreted as meaning death, is the counterpoint to God's grace, which came into the world through Christ Jesus. Therefore, with our actions we're not solely dependent on ourselves but can hope for His help and justice. God's love, our love for ourselves and our love for our neighbors are all inseparable. This especially propels those who help others with a sense of solidarity, compassion, empathy and engagement, whatever their other motivations.

In the absence of those conditions, we see not only the clear cruelty of history but also of the present: Consider the destructive Russian war on Ukraine in Europe and many other brutal conflicts worldwide, and the people who are killed, tortured, injured, abandoned and traumatized. Even in the Church over decades, children and youths who most needed protection were violated, with deeds of abuse covered up, the perpetrators hidden, the victims ignored.

Humanity and Creation

The egotistical striving for power, success, glory and riches doesn't just divide us from each other; it also severs us from Creation. Humanity's ties to nature had already developed into one-sided exploitation by the 20th century.

A long-recognized result of our unsustainable behavior is global warming. And we sometimes forget: We need nature, but nature doesn't need us. Our efforts at climate and environmental protection seek to limit the "payment due" to Creation, and are ultimately aimed at conserving our own living space – above all, for our descendants.

Sometimes it seems as if we're in the front row of a cinema watching our own disaster movie of global collapse, in which we aren't just ruining the world but our very selves. Here's some examples of what we're seeing:

- War in Europe and implied threats of the use of atomic, biological or chemical weapons
- Global conflicts over land, material resources and power
- People threatened with torture and death when they go into the streets to demand dignity, equality under the law and basic rights, as has been happening in Iran or Afghanistan
- Devastating droughts, uncontrollable forest fires, indescribably widespread famines, floods with hundreds of deaths, thousands losing their homes, and entire cities destroyed by hurricanes
- Worldwide pandemics
- Plant and animal extinctions and an ecosystem under uncontrollable pressure
- 80 million people worldwide fleeing their homes amid the scenes of horror

We've witnessed this here in Germany: the recent terrible flooding of the Ahr and Erft rivers was apparently partly a result of climate change.

We must fully comprehend that many of our answers and passive viewership in the past have wrought great damage. Scrutinizing our actions, confronting the need for change – that's the continuing challenge of our humanity. What is to be done?

Humanity's Chance for a Turnaround

We can start right now to behave responsibly. Passive observers, conspiracy theorists, the ignorant, cynics, the indifferent – there are enough of those. What's needed now are sustainable answers to current challenges. Of course, technical solutions are among those answers. But above all, there's a need for a turnaround that begins with us. Humans have the chance to reverse course and change internally. We have it in our own power to break away from the “tried and true”.

The progress-killing cliché, “We’ve always done it that way”, becomes increasingly and self-evidently absurd once we acknowledge that we’re being led astray by the course that we “always” take. Ultimately, we need to pay the bill for our accumulated deeds of the past few decades that brought prosperity, freedom and scientific knowledge.

As we prepare for Easter with this season of repentance, we want to find a path of turnaround and renewal. Our 40 days of Lent put us face to face with these challenges, the way Jesus spent 40 days in the desert. On this path to the Easter celebration we carry out in miniature what is necessary as a great transformation. I’ve often marveled at how appropriate for our times are the ancient church rules – for instance, through fasting, with abstention from meat on certain days and every Friday. It raises the questions: What’s really needed? What do we depend too much on? Fasting is never an end in itself. It can provide a way to God, and closer ties to fellow man, Creation and our internal selves.

Being There for Each Other

The old question “What is a human?” shifts, in my view, into the question “What sort of human do I want to be?” I use this perspective to consider new possibilities -- and also new limits. Many other people do this too. If I don't shut my eyes, by letting reality renew me I don't limit the advantages just to myself.

Together, we can bring many things to fruition. We've experienced it ourselves – in 2015-16 and again in February of last year: an impressive solidarity with people fleeing from Africa, the Middle East and Ukraine. We can't put enough value on the numerous neighborhood-based aid efforts and the major engagement of so many volunteers, not just those of us in the charitable field but across society. The wide range of “Being there for each other” extends far beyond the local neighborhood. I myself experience this more and more in my visits across the diocese and throughout Germany.

“See, the Man!” (John 19:5)

What kind of person do I want to be? The Passion According to St. John, which will be read on Good Friday, makes concrete the question of what kind of people we want to be. Pontius Pilate shows Jesus to the mob after his scourging with the call, “See, the Man!” Indeed, Jesus has shown us what being human means – often in ways that were far different from the usual images of the upstanding members of society. That’s the challenge for everyone who seeks to follow Jesus: What does He show us about being human?

A few years ago, we used to see young people wearing bracelets with the German equivalent of the American abbreviation WWJD – “What would Jesus do”? Perhaps it’s just a new, Christian form of the old question, “What is human?” We can only really look at this question together with others – through prayer, listening to the Word of God, and taking part in conversations and actions. We’re therefore not doing these alone.

So, in closing, I wish you a good path toward “successfully being human” during this Lent, with many stimulating ideas and a prayer for God’s blessings upon you, in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Your Bishop

