

LUDWIG RING-EIFFEL

Excellencies, dear colleagues,

I would like to begin with a claim that may sound surprising: In the catholic media I do not see a necessary contradiction between “Freedom of expression” and “Truth of the Church”. And I do not think that there is a contradiction between the Ecclesial Communion, or, as it were, the Unity of the Church, and media coverage of Cóntroversies within the church.

This rather optimistic statement may surprise even more since it is made by a journalist who works in the context of the catholic church in Germany.

A church known for its inner tensions between more liberal bishops, theologians and catholic lay activists on the one hand and a more conservative wing of bishops, theologians and lay activists on the other – and a good number of moderates in between.

And I must admit: In a church like this, *the truth of the church and freedom of speech* ARE indeed seen as contradictions, as are *cóntroversies and unity*. Why is that?

The explanation is easy: Whenever a local church is divided into different currents of opinion like the one in Germany, the struggle of the political lines will almost automatically be reflected in the church’s media.

An internally divided church behaves almost like a political party: The leaders of each one of its wings will try to implement THEIR followers on the important jobs in the church, and especially in the church media, because they expect them to become opinion leaders.

And the more opinion leaders of YOUR political color you have in these jobs, the more you can influence the public opinion within the church.

And since there is also money involved - and I may say, there is quite a bit of money involved in the catholic church in Germany – the internal race for the key jobs will be fuelled additionally by the race for funding and subsidies.

This all leads to catholic media in Germany, which are, with some important exceptions, more or less heavily subsidised, media which are seen as involved in the internal fighting about church politics - and all this with a sharply declining number of readers, viewers and users and very few opinion leaders who are heard and seen outside of the church.

Given this framework, each and every decision in church media will be seen as a “political” move. If a bishop decides to withdraw subsidies from a church

newspaper, it will be argued, that he did so because the paper was not in his line of thinking. If somebody is named director or editor of a new church website, the observers will ask: "Where does he stand? On the left, on the right, in the middle? Is he a man of Cardinal X or is he in the line of Archbishop Z?" 2000 years after Saint Paul we seem to be back in the times of internal struggles that he described at the beginning of the first letter to the Corinthians:

(¹⁰I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.)

¹¹*My brothers, some have informed me that there are quarrels among you.*

¹²*What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"^[a]; still another, "I follow Christ."*

¹³*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into^[b] the name of Paul?*

Seen from outside, church media in Germany are somewhat similar to the small christian congregation of the Corinthians. Like them they are weakened by a weak believe in Christ, poisoned by a lack of mutual trust between currents and factions and almost paralysed by an internal struggle for money and influence. This is why, although they receive a lot of money, many catholic media in Germany are - again with some notable exceptions - not very efficient in spreading the truth.

What is to be learned from this for the media of other local churches?

1. Avoid falling into the trap of internal divisions. Seek unity in believe before you start writing about church conflicts!
2. Do not expect to be saved by financial subsidies. If you cannot find readers, listeners and viewers for the contents that you produce, money will not save your publications in the long run. (it will only postpone their moment of death).
3. If you are catholic, try to be good journalists! The virtues of journalism like truthfulness, a quick and broad and sound research, honesty, reliability, the skill of playing with words or images, the ability to make a story both interesting and true, all this will work better if you do NOT have an eye on money and power.

Is this an utopian claim? I think it is a realistic one - although or maybe: exactly BECAUSE I come from the difficult background of catholic journalism in Germany. My favorite examples for this do not come from the realm of catholic media, but the parallels are stunning:

They are the British weekly "The Economist" and the American "Wallstreet Journal". Both are astonishingly successful papers in the midst of declining sales figures for other newspapers in the western world.

What is their secret of success?

One is their excellent journalism. The second is: The informations they spread are useful to their readers: Some of these readers base their most important financial decisions on these informations.

The third is: The journalists in these papers share a firm set of believes: They believe in market economy, they belileve in individual freedom and they believe in the overwhlming power of intelligent entrepreneurship.

As you know, that is not exactly the set of dogmas catholic journalists believe in. But the interesting thing is: Even with a firm belief in their background, the writers of the Economist and of the Journal are able to inform about and to discuss openly even events and views, that question these beliefs in the most fundamental way.

So, there is something to be learnt from these colleagues in Lodon and New York: Believing in the teaching of the Church does not mean to be silent about her inner conflicts, and reporting about these debates does not mean to take sides.

But if we question the foundations of our believe or even worse, if we do not know these foundations anymore, there will be no firm ground on which we stand, and from which we watch, research, select, categorize and report.

But if we stand firm on this ground, we will be free to be excellent Journalists and to produce news and storys that people will want to buy, and maybe some of them will even base the most important decicions for their lives on them. The motto of such a new generation of catholic journalists could well be the famous phrase from the dgospel of Saint John: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Thank you for your attention!