

"All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ" (RB 53.1)

First part

About tradition, traditions and Zeitgeist (the spirit of the times)

Important distinctions for a vibrant Church

Dear Sisters,

Thank you for the invitation to give two presentations at your symposium!

In part 1, I dare to present a reflection of Church and of religious life which may seem very unusual. Pope Francis encourages us religious again and again to live our vocation today and to dare taking new paths. For decades, we have complained about Rome. Today, we have no legitimate reason to grumble (cf. RB 41.5). Are we aware of this? Today, we have every reason to walk our way with eyes and ears open (cf. Prol 9). Why do we find it so difficult to live this new moment?

In our communities there are people who fear change, and others who fear that nothing will ever change. Often, these conflicts focus on tradition, traditions and Zeitgeist (the spirit of the times). We want to have a closer look at these terms - not in an academic discourse but through concrete examples. I hope that these thoughts will open up some new aspects of hospitality.

Looking at the first term: **tradition**. Tradition is important in the Church. Tradition is important in our monasteries. Tradition is seen as fidelity to Jesus Christ through all the changes in the course of history. Therefore, tradition is always alive. That's why the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: " This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it. " (CCC 78). Such a vibrant tradition is not possible if it is detached from a specific time and a specific culture. That is why we must speak of "Zeitgeist" as well. It is that which is characteristic for a certain time. Those who ignore Zeitgeist, cannot live in a tradition that is alive. Zeitgeist is simply a given reality. We need to be aware of it, if we say something and want to be understood. "The *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the age or spirit of the time) is the dominant set of ideals and beliefs that motivate the actions of the members of a society in a particular period in time. (Wikipedia)." The spirit of the times is important - especially for the preaching of the Gospel. The person who does not know the spirit of the times, talks into a void, misses his audience. It is clear: nothing must be changed in the Church to be recognized by the Zeitgeist, but we need to make changes to live and proclaim the Gospel in the here and now. We meet the spirit of the times in the Scriptures as well. For example, Jesus appreciates the experiences of people and expounds on them in his speeches. He was obviously familiar with the Zeitgeist and this made his teachings so very different from that of the scribes and Pharisees. Since the

Church has always understood to live in the present, she has acknowledged the Zeitgeist, adapted much and not simply rejected it.

A look at **traditions** of the church is surprising in some respects. It shows us what we have come to love and are familiar with. It illustrates the biggest obstacles the Church experienced on its journey through history. It reveals the scope for much-needed reforms. It positions the significance of Zeitgeist in a completely different light. Actually, it is Zeitgeist which helps us to understand traditions. Traditions shaped by Zeitgeist are not worthless or variable at will. The Church also needs rules of living together - like every other community - and a common culture that provides a home. Traditions should not be altered according to preference or whim. On the other hand, they can and need to be changed communally if they get in the way of tradition. If individuals assume this change, it can cause great damage; if done communally, it contributes to the building up of community. Decisions made by individuals have been the cause in some cases for missed opportunities for community decisions that have been long in coming.

Much in our lives and in our monasteries has originated and been impacted by Zeitgeist, especially the Zeitgeist of former centuries. Still today, the Zeitgeist of the Roman Empire shows its influence. And because these things are old or even very old, we call them traditions. Often we confuse traditions with the tradition. Dominican theologian and late Cardinal Yves Congar published a book with the title: "La tradition et les traditions" (Tradition and traditions). This distinction was incorporated into the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "The tradition here in question comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus' teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit. The first generation of Christians did not yet have a written New Testament, and the New Testament itself demonstrates the process of tradition. Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical, or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church's magisterium"(CCC, no. 83).

In this distinction, we find many new challenges and ways to live our vocation credibly today. However, this distinction is hardly ever made. Bishops, even archbishops, are tempted to confuse traditions with the tradition. The following is an excerpt of an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (a German newspaper) from February 28, 2014. The interviewer is journalist Peter Seewald who has been friends with Pope Benedict for many years. The interviewee is Archbishop Georg Gänswein, Pope Benedict's private secretary and current prefect of the Pontifical household:

"Your Eminence, your new boss does not live in the Papal apartment. He wears ordinary street shoes. He drives a cheap car. Many find that exciting, others are reminded of 'Summerhill'. Is there a rebel on St. Peter's chair now?" – "No. Those who are in constant contact with Pope Francis learn to distinguish between an external image and his real personality. His Jesuit formation alone speaks against revolutionary and 'anti'. As for the shoes, this is also a matter of aesthetics. But it was futile trying to convince him that wearing them may not only be for reasons of appearance, but also more in sync with tradition, and to follow the line of his predecessors." Shortly thereafter, the journalist asks: "However, much of what one was used to

with Benedict now seems to be missing with Francis: precise language, the richness of tradition, the nobility in the formality." This is archbishop Gänswein's response: "That both personalities are quite different, is obvious. Pope Francis is a man of gestures. He is someone who advocates in a way not expected from a Pope. With Pope Benedict one would listen and be taken by his words. With Pope Francis, you first want to see how he is approaching something, how he will tackle it. He is a man who understands to address the whole person, not just the intellect, or just one of the senses. If this enthusiasm will last needs to be seen. We are still waiting for a strategy." These questions and answers hardly need to be analyzed at this point. Many will be surprised about such statements, especially those who gratefully accepted the plan since the first day of Francis' office and who try to implement the program presented in 'Gaudium Evangelii'. Isn't it tragic that theologian Pope Benedict's unintended message of the red shoes was misunderstood and heard more than his excellent sermons? Conversely, Pope Francis' shoes are immediately seen as a witness of the Gospel, even by people outside the Church. The Pope's shoes are not the tradition of the Church, but one of the many traditions. They are an expression of an old Zeitgeist, which is even contrary to the Gospel. After the Constantinian shift, church leaders turned more and more into rulers - the opposite of what Jesus asks: "but with you it should not be this way" (MK 10,43). Until 1566, the Pope wore red dresses – just like the emperor. Pope Pius V. a Dominican, continued to wear his white habit. From then on, the Pope has been wearing white. So it is obvious - this is not the tradition, but one of the many traditions. The red shoes that were worn up until Pope Benedict XVI. were left-overs. Pope Pius V. faced the difficult task to implement the reforms of the Council of Trent. This included also the cutting down of competences of the cardinals. So that they would accept this, the Pope allowed them to wear red dresses - just as the emperor. And that's how it is still today.

Traditionalists view traditions as the tradition. Take as example the Latin language. This is one of the many traditions of the Church, but not the tradition. There were times without Latin in the Church. Latin was the language in the Church because the people did not understand Greek anymore. Most of the baptized spoke Latin in the 4th century. This is the Zeitgeist. This is why Pope Damasus commissioned St. Jerome to translate the Bible into Latin, so that the people could understand the word of God. This translation is known as the "Vulgate", which means "the language of the people". Latin has become the language of the Church because she faced the Zeitgeist of the 4th century. In subsequent centuries, this language was one of the traditions in the Church. Traditionalists consider Latin as the tradition. But the tradition is to use the language that people can understand. God's Word must reach the people.

Many aspects of our daily monastic life are traditions. They can be important. We like them. But their time may be well past for a long while already. Always when traditions get in the way of the tradition, we have to abandon them. Living the tradition — that means fidelity to Jesus Christ — does not hinge on the number of monks or nuns in a community or on their age. But the living of traditions requires a certain number of members.

How do we present ourselves to the public? What do our logos communicate? Very often we simply show traditions and talk about traditions. We are proud of our traditions. But let's not forget - these are the fruits of the Zeitgeist of former times.

Our buildings, for example, are expressions of the Zeitgeist of earlier times. Are these traditions still compatible with the tradition? Our Baroque buildings speak the language of a powerful and important institution. Is this the message that we would like to proclaim today? If our buildings are an obstacle for the people to open their ears to the Gospel, we have to let go even of impressive traditions. Pope Francis' example shows that by leaving an impressive building credibility grows.

Now take a look at the liturgy. What comes to mind for me is the simplest celebration of the Eucharist I ever heard of, but also the most impressive. From 1976 to 1989, the Vietnamese Cardinal Franz Xavier van Thuan (1928-2002) was in solitary confinement because of his faith. He had to endure many unimaginable torments. Only some little sunlight came through a small crack into the room, and also all kinds of insects came through it. Due to stomach problems, van Thuan was allowed a small bottle wine from time to time. This enabled him to celebrate the Eucharist daily. Since he had no chalice available, he poured a few drops of wine in the palm of his hand and put a few bread crumbs next to it - and that's how he celebrated the Eucharist. There were no beautiful vestments, no organ, no altar, not even a chalice. All the traditions were not there. But what is most important was there (and that's the tradition): Jesus Christ. Celebrating Eucharist in all simplicity – perceiving Jesus Christ as the center of the celebration. We could let go of everything else. Only if we recognize the central point of the celebration of the Eucharist, the vestments, the organ and the chalice make sense. Otherwise we do something because it has always been done this way. On this stance, Pope Francis reflected in a sermon: "Christians who insist on 'we have always done it this way', sin... This stubbornness is also idolatry – a stubborn Christian sins." Our faith is exciting not because of its trappings but because of the center: living what we say; living the way we pray; living what we celebrate. Then our lives will not lose quality. On the contrary, we will discover abundant life. We can experience this only when we dare to live our faith.

Here is another issue that certainly is close to your hearts: Women in the Church. The longer I am pondering this issue, the more I am convinced that the exclusion of women from ordained priesthood is one of the traditions, which can and must be changed. I am not taking this stance since today's society demands it but because it has become clearer to me in my own seeking of God. I am encouraged to this stance by people who rant and rave against ordination of women. Here I am confronted mostly with traditions that are not rooted in the Gospel, but still evidence patriarchalism.

That even in this matter movement in the Church is possible, shows the example of St. Teresa of Avila. The then Papal Nuncio in Spain described the Carmelite, who was born on March 28, 1515, as "a restless, vagabonding, disobedient and wicked wench, who invented false teachings under the pretext of piety." A few decades later, she was beatified and then canonized. When Pope Pius XI. was asked to appoint the great Teresa of Avila as Doctor of the Church, he rejected such a move as impossible in 1923. His reason was: "obstat sexus" - "the gender stands against it". Such thinking is not tradition, but the fruit of the Zeitgeist. In 1970, Pope Paul VI. appointed Teresa of Avila as the first woman ever to be a Doctor of the Church. At this point, the following women are among the 36 Doctors of the Church: Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux. Even in the question of gender, the Church has learned to distinguish between tradition and traditions.

Do we talk and discuss the tradition in our chapter meetings? Or are we preoccupied with defending traditions and saving them? Our daily schedule is largely one of the traditions, as well as our work. We would do well to make the distinction between tradition and traditions in our communities. Deepen the tradition. Examine the traditions. Traditions are measured by tradition. If traditions get in the way of tradition, we must have the courage to let go of them. New resolutions are needed, because the Zeitgeist has changed. And so new traditions are created – and they in turn are not created for eternity.

You may note: with this reflection on tradition, traditions and Zeitgeist, something begins to stir inside us. Something static suddenly starts moving. Something petrified comes alive. With such considerations in mind, we want to take a look at Benedictine hospitality in the afternoon. I am convinced: we will be surprised.