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PRESS RELEASE  
GERMAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE



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**Statement**  
**by Bishop Dr Georg Bätzing,**  
**President of the German Bishops' Conference,**  
**at the St. Michael annual reception**  
**on 4 September 2023 in Berlin**

Today I would like to welcome you all to the St Michael annual reception, which this year takes place directly after the summer break. We do not commemorate St Michael as the patron saint of the reception until the end of this month. But since - as you may know - the World Synod begins in Rome at the beginning of October, I am grateful that we are already gathering here today. It is a pleasure to have you here! And I am glad that you have found the way to us. We appreciate your presence very much (...).

Before sharing a few thoughts with you, it is a great pleasure to welcome today's guest speaker, Archbishop Noël Treanor, Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union in Brussels. Ladies and gentlemen, Noël Treanor is – and you will learn this today – a committed European. He was born in the far north of the Republic of Ireland, was ordained a priest in 1976 und studied especially in Rome. From 1992 he served as General Secretary of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, before Pope Benedict XVI appointed him Bishop of Down and Connor in Northern Ireland in 2008. After 14 years, in 2022, Pope Francis appointed him as Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union in Brussels. Dear Noël Treanor, thank you very much for joining us today and welcome to Berlin.

Once again: It is a pleasure to have you here! I am grateful for this. This gratitude is meant very seriously, because in view of the state of the Church, one may ask oneself whether one should go to a reception held by Catholics.

In fact, we have to ask ourselves realistically and honestly, in particular: Are the churches in Germany in inexorable decline, less and less able to address people in terms of the message of Jesus and to strengthen cohesion in our society with their values? Much seems to speak in favour of this. But this does not say everything about the situation of the churches, especially the Catholic Church in our country. For the decline of a certain social structure of the Church, the

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erosion of the popular Church, does not have to lead to the gloomy finale of Christian life in Germany. Therefore, allow me to make a few remarks that outline the fact that we are not only a Church in decline, but also and even more: A Church in transition. In short, you, dear guests, may and must continue to count on us.

The two large churches have lost a huge number of members in the past year. The trend of de-churching, which has been creeping along for many decades, has gained massive momentum. In an increasingly plural society, religion is more and more seen as a part of personal expression, equal to other attitudes and convictions that are allowed to find their place in an open society. And it is not only people's attachment to the Church that is dwindling. Faith in God is threatening to evaporate. Many who do not formally leave the Church have distanced themselves inwardly and are in many cases hardly approachable. The Church's ability to win people for the Gospel and to give orientation is diminishing with each generation.

Many people feel the need to come forward when they leave the Church – some write to me and give their reasons: The sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and the decades of dealing – or better said: not dealing – with it are mentioned frequently. We are still looked at critically by those affected, the media and the general public. Far too many people in the Church have been guilty – as perpetrators but also as people who look the other way, who gloss over or cover up various deeds. We are aware of the responsibility we have as an institution and therefore we are taking concrete steps towards change – many of you will be aware of this, so I will only mention the establishment of Independent Commissions for Child Sexual Abuse Issues in the dioceses based on the *Joint Declaration* between UBSKM and the German Bishops' Conference, which are taking on the immense challenge of independently investigating structures and processes and deriving recommendations for action from this in order to prevent abuse as much as possible. But many do not believe in the willingness of the Church to implement profound change. Many doubt that the Church is really willing to come to terms with the cases of abuse. This shows that the key problem is credibility.

Leaving the Church, however, is also an expression of an individual decision, because many people do no longer feel automatically bound to the Church from the cradle to the grave as was the case in earlier years. Religion and denomination are regarded in the context of a variety of offers to give life a meaning to which one relates in different phase of life. The so-called "Nachwuchskirche" ("generational Church") (Michael N. Ebertz), in which faith and church membership were institutionally secured for future generations has come to an end. And I think that in other areas of public life – in politics, associations, voluntary work – the question of commitment arises in a similar way.

And it is precisely the initial situation of freedom and conscious and individual choice which is possible in our country that is important and positive. It requires that we as a Church seek new ways to accompany people even more helpfully in their life situation and with their questions and to promote community in a good spirit. In this hour of crisis, the need to proclaim the

message of Jesus Christ *in a new way* is clearly evident. I am convinced that it can even today inspire and support people. At this point I would like to emphasise how grateful I am for the people who, in their full-time and voluntary work and in their everyday lives, give the Good News a face and go creative ways so that people find strength in their faith and for their lives.

The old logic of structural belonging does not work any longer. It was often characterised by opposing clergy and laity and by strict collective norms, the fulfilment of which was demanded by threatening with sanctions. Obligation, obedience, fidelity to the law – literally: “compliance” – shaped church identity and community in earlier years.<sup>1</sup> And they encouraged abuse of power. Today we have to explain the quality and the purpose of our work which is no longer a matter of course. So as an institution we need new forms of compliance with more transparency, opportunities for participation and comprehensible self-commitment. This was also the focus of the Synodal Path. Such forms do not only promote cohesion, but above all coexistence. This is what is important here: Only together can we overcome the current crises, only together can we stop the processes of social erosion. In this respect we as a Church are in the same boat with politics. Even if we are no longer recognised for this form of integration, we will never tire of providing precisely this service to our society.

The Church does not exist just for herself. Her task is not self-preservation, certainly not self-preservation as an institution. To proclaim the joyful and life-enhancing message of the Gospel, to make it tangible in concrete life situations and in the community is the elementary purpose of the Church. And for this reason, we do not want to withdraw – even in times of crises and upheaval. We bear responsibility for our society.

As a Church, we want to be measured also in the future by the fact that we stand up for the protection of life – especially at the beginning and at the end. We will be measured by our defence of the dignity and rights of those who are on the margins of society: the socially disadvantaged, the sick, people with disabilities, refugees. And finally, we are measured by the fact that in the conflicts of our time we stand up for justice, peace, human rights and the integrity of creation and increasingly develop them into guiding principles of our society and also of international coexistence.

Now we do not need just words but concrete action. That is why it is so important that the churches and their numerous organisations continue to be significant pillars of the social network that characterises our country. Hundreds of thousands are engaged in full-time and voluntary service to people and to a society that threatens to become inhospitable under the coldness of merely impersonal relationships.

A Church, that does not serve, that keeps her distance from society, is inconceivable. In this context, it is *not* primarily important how many members we have – we are of course pleased

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ebertz, M., *Konfessionsfrei – eine Religionspolitische Herausforderung*, in: IKaZ 52 (2023), 279.

about better figures than those recently published –, how our concerns are actually taken up in political discourse or with whom we are on good or bad terms. What is important is that we as a Church based on our faith are working for the people and for the good of society.

I would like to take this opportunity to expressly thank the government, parliament and all staff members for the fact that the churches continue to find open doors in the political debate in order to present their concerns. I believe that the churches – despite all internal difficulties they are struggling with – can continue to contribute with their exhortations, reminders and practical ideas of charity to holding this society together and limiting the influence of anti-human ideologies. To all of you who honour us with your presence at today`s reception, I say once again: thank you very much. We want to be partners in the common striving for a peaceful and just society – in Germany, Europe and the world.

I am pleased that the Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union, Archbishop Noël Treanor, a committed and convincing European, with his keynote speech will open a perspective which we may talk about this evening. Dear Apostolic Nuncio, thank you for being here.