

The Maximilian Kolbe Foundation – a contribution of the Church to reconciliation in Europe

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The Maximilian Kolbe Foundation (MKF) was founded in 2007 by the general assembly of the Maximilian Kolbe Werk with political and financial support of the German and the Polish Bishops' Conferences. The foundation was preceded by a reflection and coordination process lasting several years. It was mainly based on two trains of thought which converged in the foundation mentioned above.

Since the mid-1990s and against the background of the painful experiences of the wars in former Yugoslavia and in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, the German Commission for Justice and Peace¹ intensively reflected on possibilities, limits, requirements and experiences made in the context of reconciliation processes. During this process it became obvious that the historical injuries can still be felt in the current social relationships in completely different contexts. Contrary to the euphoria accompanying the end of the East-West confrontation, which tempted Francis Fukuyama to express his significant remark about the end of history, the Commission worked out the practical implications of history on the present time. In this context the Commission did not particularly emphasize the famous "lessons of history" but the (social)psychological and political dimensions of historical circumstances.² One of the results of this process was the understanding that talking about reconciliation beyond the real contexts certainly degenerates to a counterproductive because superficial propaganda, but nevertheless in all contexts dealt with, the same basic problems can be found, so that a cross-context exchange can provide valuable contributions to overcome the mental contortions typical of violence experiences in the respective circumstances. In order to develop a (Church) reconciliation practice it is important to create confidence and relationship structures, especially to the victims of violence experiences so that what has happened can be mentioned in a way that supports the painful but necessary healing processes. This includes a self-critical reflection on the respective roles of the Church in the processes and structures of injustice and violence.³ In the end it is a question of the Church's identity. To avoid the challenges the Church and society have to face due to injustice and violence would considerably damage the credibility of the Church's preaching. The Christian reconciliation message would become a mere grandiloquent speech. Not without reason the German Commission for Justice and Peace recommended the development of an institution, in which the manifold reconciliation experiences of the Church could be consolidated and made useful in dealing with the current challenges.

The second line of development contributing to the establishment of the Foundation was the discussion within the Maximilian Kolbe Werk (MKW), which since 1973 has provided assistance to

¹ The German Commission for *Justice and Peace (Justitia et Pax)* is a joint institution of the German Bishops' Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics for promoting development, peace and human rights.

² Cf. *Erinnerung, Wahrheit, Gerechtigkeit. Empfehlungen zum Umgang mit belasteter Vergangenheit. Eine Handreichung der Deutschen Kommission Justitia et Pax*. Schriftenreihe Gerechtigkeit und Frieden, 102. Bonn 2004.

³ Cf. Jörg Lüer, *Kirche im Konflikt. Teil des Problems oder Teil der Lösung?* In: „Ost-West-Perspektiven“, 3 (2005), p. 102-200.

the survivors of German concentration camps and ghettos – especially in Poland – on its future after the death of the survivors of national socialist tyranny. The humanitarian aid in the service of reconciliation, which had been directed towards Poland in the first time, was extended to the countries of the former Soviet Union after the German reunification.

Given the advancing age of its clientele the MKW was confronted with the issue of its future existence with a growing urgency. This discussion emphasized once again that the activities of the MKW were especially characterized by the experiences made in the context of German-Polish reconciliation. Finally it was agreed to follow the way with the survivors until the end and at the same time to create an establishment which should deal with current reconciliation processes in Europe. So the MKW's heritage should become useful for other contexts, too.

While the work of the MKW especially centred on the practical assumption of responsibility for the consequences of National Socialism and thus in a deputy relationship between perpetrator and victim, right from the beginning of the establishment of the MKF importance was attached to a work based on partnership which should give expression to relations on equal terms which have developed when analysing history. This is the message: Jointly we face the challenges which are a result of the formative presence of history.

The subject matter of the relationships developed during the reconciliation process became obvious, when the German bishops had to decide on the expenditure of the remaining funds in the context of the Church's compensation for those who were subjected to forced labour.⁴ Following consultations with the Polish Bishops' Conference the German bishops decided to provide the means to the foundation of the MKF thus giving the significant impetus to the establishment of the Foundation. The willingness to show that reconciliation work was not finished with the termination of the compensation for forced labourers and with the demise of the generation of experience, but that it needed further attention and activities, was essential. The Polish bishops followed these deliberations and also provided means for the MKF.

At the end of this multi-layered process the general meeting of the MKW founded the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation in 2007. This was the beginning of a German Foundation with a strong German-Polish influence and a growing European orientation which becomes obvious in the project work and in the composition of the bodies.⁵ The foundation may be described as a specific centre of competence for questions and steps of action on dealing with a past burdened by violence and on reconciliation in Europe. It is a forum and an actor/protagonist at the same time.

The establishment of the Foundation is the attempt to gather and keep the experiences made in the Church's reconciliation work and to further emphasize aspects of the a.m. reconciliation work.

So the Foundation follows the tradition of the Maximilian Kolbe Werk and the German-Polish church work for reconciliation and remembrance carried out so far. It regards itself as being on the path which is clearly marked by the correspondence that was exchanged between the German and Polish bishops in 1965, as well as by the admission of guilt which Pope John Paul II gave for the Church in 2000. It aims at developing new approaches and ways beyond the traditional paths of reconciliation

⁴ Conf. Karl-Joseph Hummel, Christoph Kösters (Ed.), *Zwangsarbeit und katholische Kirche 1939-1945. Geschichte und Erinnerung, Entschädigung und Versöhnung. Eine Dokumentation*. Paderborn-München-Wien-Zürich 2008.

⁵ Representatives from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland and Ukraine belong to the MKF bodies. The Board is chaired by both presidents of the contact group of the German and the Polish Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Dr Ludwig Schick (Bamberg) and Archbishop Dr Wiktor Skworc (Katowice). For further information see: www.maximilian-kolbe-stiftung.de.

and remembrance work thus giving a fresh impetus to the further development and updating of the reconciliation and remembrance work.

One of the Foundation's principal tasks is to carry out projects independently or in cooperation with select partners. The MKF's projects shall meet the following criteria:

1. The projects deal chiefly with subject areas of political and social relevance. Projects addressing neuralgic points of respective fields of remembrance are preferred.
2. The projects are recognizably conceived as contributions of the Church to dealing with a past burdened by violence in the horizon of reconciliation. They take account of the spiritual and theological dimension of the peace activities.
3. The projects shall have a European perspective exceeding the respective national context.
4. The projects shall contribute to address the influence of the present time by the history of violence in an appropriate and clear manner. They shall deal with the influence of violence and strengthen the cooperation relationships. They are a concrete contribution to the reconciliation processes necessary in the long term.
5. The projects shall focus on a qualified encounter which enables the participants to discover the perspectives of the others and to address their own perspectives in a reflected way.
6. The projects shall have an exemplary and symbolic value. The experiences and results gained in the projects shall be introduced into the social, ecclesiastical and political discussions and shall stimulate and promote them.

These general considerations translate into a great variety of projects, three of which are briefly presented here. Since 2009 the Foundation has organised a European Workshop in Oświęcim on dealing with the past of Auschwitz burdened by violence. 30 representatives of different European societies are invited to enter a joint learning process on dealing with violence experiences and their consequences in the exemplary examination of the current significance of Auschwitz.

Beyond the concrete case the analysis of the phenomenon of Auschwitz is of particular importance when dealing with violence experiences and their consequences in general. Auschwitz stands for experiences making a lasting impression on the identities of our societies. Europe is still characterized and hurt by the violence experiences of the 20th century. In this context Auschwitz and the areas of experience symbolized by Auschwitz are playing an essential role in this context. This is shown not least in the various forms, contents and functions the memory of Auschwitz has in the different European societies. Auschwitz still has an impact on these differences resulting from varying historical experiences and areas of experience. When dealing with the memory of Auschwitz, reconciliation and the liberation of the constrictions caused by violence have to be taken into account, the differences have to be faced and a deeper understanding of these experiences has to be aimed at.

This is done by the Workshop when the participants are invited to jointly bring to mind the experiences made related to Auschwitz and to reflect on the different perspectives and on the experience and interpretation contexts the participants bring along. It is essential to make these differences visible and understandable thus contributing to overcome the negative consequences of the history of violence.

So the project may be understood as a contribution to a constructive analysis of history. In addition to the joint learning process of the participants the project shall provide a concrete testimony of the Church's efforts to aim at reconciliation when dealing with the history of violence. These efforts shall be marked by solidarity with the survivors, respect for the

sufferings of the victims and by the understanding and the responsibility for the strained aftereffects of this history.

The workshop shall give ideas for the work of the participants in their respective contexts. As a rule the participants come from about 14 different countries from the East and the West. During the duration of the workshop the different approaches to the subject matter which may lead to conflicts are revealed. What was caused by Auschwitz and the Second World War becomes painfully visible in the various memories of what has happened in the past. The programme is designed to make exactly these differences visible and understandable. The conflicts which might emerge e.g. between the Russian, Ukrainian, Polish and German participants are carried out and may become the source of a deeper understanding of the presence of history. As soon as the participants become aware of being influenced by their own specific history they usually develop a more open-minded attitude towards the perspectives of the others. So remembrance work often becomes a kind of demanding conflict management.

In this context the fact that the workshops are carried out under German-Polish direction is usually regarded as a great encouragement by the participants from the countries of the former Yugoslavia. If it is possible to carry out joint projects at a place like Oświęcim after the bloody and strained history between Poland and Germany then it may also be possible to overcome conflicts as, for example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The secret of the effect achieved is the undeniable power of the place itself, and the fact that the Foundation abstains from celebrating the German-Polish reconciliation as a model case and with an appropriate understatement enables the participants to experience a new reality against the background of what has happened. What is more: Especially in this multilateral constellation it is possible to break with the usual German-Polish patterns of discourse and to develop new perspectives for the German-Polish relationships in the European context.

After a constant exchange with our partners from Bosnia and Herzegovina the experiences made with the workshops in Oświęcim have led to an annual international workshop on dealing with the past burdened by violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina which has been organised since 2013 with the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Renovabis. The profound divisions in former Yugoslavia and particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina are an open wound on the body of Europe. The country's current problems are closely linked with the European history of violence of the 20th century. From the shots of Sarajevo in 1914 when Yugoslavia was still a kingdom, to the Second World War with its manifold conflicts leading to the establishment of Communist rule, to the transformation to nationalist regimes which came to an end in the bloody wars of the 1990ies, a trail of numerous injuries and crimes has been running through the societies affected which are significantly marked by these experiences. Unresolved history and a lack of reconciliation seriously call into question the present and future of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the significance of these challenges reaches beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region of former Yugoslavia. Even if the future of the different societies is the responsibility of the people living there, the neighbouring countries, nearby and further away, are included in this responsibility in many different ways. Although the different religious communities have already made important steps towards reconciliation, coming to terms with the history burdened by violence, healing of the wounds and reconciliation will demand attention and commitment in the long term. First and foremost it is necessary to develop an understanding for the different perspectives and the experiences underlying them. Truth and justice are

indispensable elements of every reconciliation process. The respect of all victims and their sufferings is the starting point of the project. For this reason the central experiences made by the Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian population are discussed in a proper manner. At the same time the participants are given the opportunity to question and, if necessary, to correct their perception of the conflicts in the region in view of being influenced by their own history. Related to this is the hope to deepen one's own understanding of the current burdens and to make a modest contribution to healing the wounds.

These conceptual deliberations are reflected in the composition of the thirty participants twenty of whom are coming from the different national major groups of the country. Another ten persons come from the other European countries such as Poland, Germany, Ukraine, Italy, Ireland or Albania. One of the central lessons learned by the process of German-Polish reconciliation is that the creation of confidence-building encounters with the others is indispensable for the necessary mental transformations.⁶ In this context the confrontation with the victims' experiences of suffering and with the concrete places where violent acts happened is of essential significance. So during the Workshop places of remembrance, communities and persons are visited who can provide information on the sufferings of the different groups. In view of the marked political purposes of the victims' narratives in Bosnia the participants often are exposed to considerable hostilities within their communities of origin.

The common paths including a reflection of the European neighbours on their responsibilities contribute to strengthen the participants in their (self-)critical analysis of their precarious heritage. The clear localisation of the Foundation in the German-Polish reconciliation context and the subsequent practice moreover generates a credibility which significantly promotes real European talks.

This was not least shown when the Bosnian partners visited the exhibition *Pojednanie/Reconciliation in progress. The Catholic Church and the German-Polish relations after 1945*. Following the request of both episcopates the exhibition was developed by the Foundation on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the correspondence that was exchanged between the Polish and German bishops together with the Centre for Remembrance and Future (Ośrodek Pamięć i Przyszłość) from Wrocław.⁷ The exhibition shown there and in Berlin at the same time was designed as a German-Polish project and it showed the history of German-Polish reconciliation, which was often full of tension, by illustrating the astonishing achievements of this process and by marking the still open questions. So it was possible to prevent the informative process of German-Polish reconciliation from becoming played down as a far too smooth doctrinal narrative. It is not surprising that some German-Polish controversies evolved during the development process. The underlying historical tensions, however, could be made visible in the exhibition in the sense of a multi-perspectives approach. So the exhibition received a special workshop character. Reports were not given about a process but from within a process. This openness, in particular, inspired the Bosnian partners. The case of Germany and Poland could thus become like a foil for describing their own experiences. At the same time the Bosnian

⁶ Conf. Jörg Lüer, *Uczyć się pojednania od Polaków i Niemców? [Versöhnung lernen von Polen und Deutschen?]*. In: „Więź”, 653 (2013), p. 128-136.

⁷ Conf. Exhibition catalogue *Pojednanie/Versöhnung in Progress. Die katholische Kirche und die deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen nach 1945*. Berlin-Wrocław 2015

experiences could provide a new approach to German and Polish material thus counteracting a possible rigidity concerning memories that tend to become dangerous.

These encounters represent *pars pro toto* the special opportunities and requirements of the European dialogue. If this dialogue is to exceed national contexts without levelling them out and thus replacing them, then it is necessary to develop a culture of dialogue that primarily starts with the willingness to listen. This requires multi-perspectivity and respectful conflict management as well as active patience knowing that healing needs time and at the same resisting the temptation to resign and get accustomed to injuries and tensions. To underestimate the encouragement emanating from the German-Polish case would mean to give away an important resource helping to constructively deal with innumerable tensions resulting from the European history burdened by violence.

All these experiences are also reflected in the joint declaration published by the presidents of the German and Polish Bishops' Conferences on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Letter of Reconciliation of the Polish Bishops to the German Bishops:

The gift of reconciliation makes us sensitive for situations where people are unreconciled and living in discord in today's world. Despite all progress, for which we are grateful, in many places Europe still suffers from the injuries of the past which have a lasting effect. The identity of peoples and groups is still marked by historical burdens which were never removed. So lack of understanding and mistrust are passed on from generation to generation. For this reason the Polish and the German Bishops' Conferences celebrate the anniversary of the exchange of letters in order to include the experience of reconciliation into the dialogue with the Church and with society held in other countries thus providing impulses for reconciliation processes in Europe. With the establishment of the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation initiated by both Bishops' Conferences we have made a first step towards this objective.⁸

⁸ Quoted from: „Zukunft gestalten aus dem Geist der Versöhnung“. *Gemeinsame Erklärung der Vorsitzenden der Polnischen und der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz aus Anlass des 50. Jahrestags des Briefwechsels von 1965.* In: Damian Bednarski (Editor), *Erinnerung und Versöhnung. Die Botschaft der polnischen Bischöfe an die deutschen Bischöfe und ihre Folgen.* Katowice 2015, P. 136-138.