



## 50 years Vatican Council II – Remembrance and obligation

### Relevance of the Franciscan idea

50 years of II Vatican Council and the Franciscan Idea. That was the main topic in January News. It should occupy us the whole year because we can say with good reason that the essential decisions and documents of the Council correspond to the basics of the Franciscan spirituality.

We live today at cross-roads of an era; its dimensions are surmised, however not recognized and taken seriously in their consequences yet. We know the gigantic cleft between the poor and the rich; we lament the dissimilar distribution of goods and the power over our mother earth, and then are surprised at terror and wars. We are astonished at the Arabian spring, but then are forced to look on powerlessly that the community of nations - the UNO - cannot stop the war of a member state against its own people. We experience apocalyptic signs of the environmental destruction; however we do not consider changing our lifestyle. Political visions which signal a turn to the better are missing. A "turn" has to do something with conversion and reorientation. So what we need are prophetic leading figures who show us the ways out.

Francis and Clare are such figures at whom we can orientate ourselves. They lived in a similar time of change. The behavior of state and church was marked by interests that had nothing to do with the spirit of the Gospel. They were entangled in power struggles, crusades and wars. The poor did not appear in the scene. The humble God who comes down into the lowliness of our earthly life in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and reveals a clear preference for the poor was brought again to memory by Francis and Clare. Everything authoritarian was foreign to them. They lived a fraternal form of the Church in their communities which stood in clear contradiction to the hierarchical structure of the time then.

Inspired by the love of Jesus a new world opens to the two: the world of love for the neighbor. Their world was marked by structures of above and below, high-ranking and degraded, sirs and farm hands caves in. They got out of this world in which posses-

sion of assets determine the social standing. They recognize that this cannot be the world how God created it. They discover the Gospel as an alternative; a reconciled world in which the value of man does not depend on performance and income. There we are allowed simply to make use of the wealth of God in creation and in the world. There would be sufficient for everyone if only we would share and make the open hand to be the model for our social and personal life instead of the closed fist. This is the way to peace; this is the world in which the biotopes of wars and terror dry out. It is an enormously difficult and long way. But there is no other way if we really want a better world of peace and justice. What is necessary is a new culture of sharing.

As Francis, in his Song of Brother Sun, sang and reminded us all about the brotherly unity of all creatures, we are not the masters of the creation but fellow creatures. We have to learn again to end the destructive dealing with the creation. The rediscovery of the unity of God, man and nature as a paradigm of a Franciscan creation spirituality is a necessity.

This "being besides each other" of the different cultures, religions and moral concepts in this world becomes one of the great problems of our time. A peaceful living together in a multicultural society can be successful only when we enter again into a sincere dialogue of cultures and religions and get into the track of the principle of the peacemaking character of religions.

These are some of the important problem-areas and challenges which we will mention and deepen in the course of the year. For everyone who takes Francis and Clare as his models, this should be a top ranking concern this year. It is because the two founder figures of the Franciscan movement are also the hidden, leading figures of the Council.

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*The council has asked the Religious Orders to return to their sources. The CCFMC is a fruit of this obligation. Thousands of sisters and brothers of the Franciscan family in the whole world are gathered together in an intercultural dialog regarding what the Franciscan spirituality has to say for our time. Fifty years after the beginning of the council we want to show with lived examples how highly relevant and explosive this is today.*

### Atheism and Francis of Assisi

#### On the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (Church in the Modern World) of the II Vatican council, number 19

Anton Rotzetter, capuchin

As the II Vatican council says, atheism must be accounted among the most serious facts of this age, it can even be counted among "the signs of the times," and as such it is deserving a closer examination." In other words: What appears as atheism has to be examined exactly. We must ask ourselves whether God does not even approach us also in this way, In any case, the Council challenges us "to examine atheism most carefully". The text then continues:



*"Atheism is very often the result of a violent protest against the evil in this world, or of the way how certain human values are unduly given an absolute character, which makes them take the place of God ... Atheism, as seen from all sides, is not originally a spontaneous appearance, but stems from a variety of causes, including a critical reaction against religious beliefs, and in some places against the Christian religion in particular. Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion."*

This is plain text! The atheism is not least also a reaction to the inadequate God testimony of the religions, primarily also the Christianity. Therefore one speaks also about "practical atheism": One can talk constantly about God - what the biblical religion particularly forbids. If one, however, lives and acts as if there were no God, then this is practical atheism. God is action, change, unconditional caring. And he has no other hands than those of the people who believe in Him. One also speaks of "ecclesial atheism": a Church which places itself in the centre proclaims itself as the object and not anything above it, that asserts itself instead of always pointing beyond itself, proclaiming God, such a church is "an atheistic Church". It acts atheistically if it does not diagnose its own failures and contradictions but always accuses only its individual believers of it. For example, the church must not say that it had already always proclaimed that the other religions are also "paths to salvation", because this is a blatant and conscious lie. One cannot reverse dogmas by interpretation and then claim that what is said today was already thought of in the earlier wording. Also the way in which even in the highest places until quite recently Vatican Council II has been interpreted, this also reveals an understanding of history which derides the truth.

Likewise does the absolute conviction with which highest officeholders trace the present form of the Church directly back to Jesus, presenting this as an irrefutable contradiction. Added to this are the crusades, the wars between different denominations, the Inquisition, the enforced missionizing, the enforcement of papal power, the intrigues, the suppression of different opinions, the ignoring of human rights within the Church, the destruction of movements and initiatives of liberation theology, the missing or inadequate sexual morality, the cases of sexual abuse, and so on.-The Church has a credibility problem brought on by its own fault: It darkens the countenance of God not only in its members, the individual believers, but as an institution and in the official behavior.

If this means "God"- then Atheism is right. Thus many people are telling themselves. And most of them turn to a confused or esoteric image of God. Between 1990 and 2000, far more than 2 ½ million people have left the Catholic Church, in Germany alone.

The Council begins the number 19 of the constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope) with an excellent statement: A special characteristic of the dignity of the human person is his/her call to communion with God. From his/her very beginning is the human person called to a dialogue with God. For we exist only, because we have been created by God out of love and we have our being only in this love and we would not live fully in the truth, if we did not freely acknowledge this truth and entrusted ourselves to our creator.

This dignity of the human person is reflected in St Francis and is shining on us. In him we can see what faith in God can look like in reality.

*"The root reason for human dignity lies in the human person's call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of our origin we are already invited to dialogue with God. For human beings would not exist were they not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it; and we cannot live fully according to the truth unless we freely acknowledge that love and devote ourselves to our Creator".*

This dignity of the human person shines for us from Francis of Assisi. In him can be seen how the belief in God can really look like. The painter Giotto has expressed this in a unique way in the upper church of Assisi. There the church is about to collapse (at that time also!); Francis presses his right shoulder under the "building", dancing and cheerful, with astonishing ease, yes with utmost calmness he prevents the collapse. His eyes are fixed beyond the display frame, therefore beyond the concrete, describable reality. If one follows his look, one stumbles upon another picture - of Abraham who did not have any single evidence in the earthly reality which proved him the care of God. Not one's own strength, not the self-divinization, but the unconditional faith alone is what saves the church. Francis placed everything on God who presented Himself in Jesus of Nazareth as love and goodness. Clare followed him because he talked about "the good Jesus." Under the qualities of God he raises the goodness of God on every occasion that offered itself, like a litany, poetically and ecstatically. God "alone is Goodness".

Among other things Francis shows his God- experience in a phrase which should serve him and others as a motivation for a corresponding behavior: "*per amorem caritatis* - out of love of the love with which we are loved" (BrOrd 31) we shall do this or that. Innumerable are the anecdotes in the life of Francis where this phrase occurs to justify the behavior. He recommends the people to accept God's love, to carry it oneself and to "give birth in a sacred work which shall become an example to others" (BrGl 53). Faith in God is verified by deed alone; God is "born" into the world only when faith is accompanied by deed.

His faith in God appears even more radical in the "celebration of the celebrations", as Francis calls Christmas. Here he celebrates the lasting solidarity of God with all nature which "is in need"; the complete overspending of love into the earthly conditions here. God and man, God and the poor, God and the animals may not be played off against each other anymore. After the "celebration of the celebrations" he wants immediately to turn to the emperor to obtain laws which help the poor and the animals to get their divine right. God and world belong together.

The CCFMC wants to go along and to stand with its programs in the service of a God, which takes the wind out of the atheism's sails.