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REPRESENTATIONS OF CHURCH AMONG YOUNG THEOLOGIANS

SUMMARY

Since 1995, so-called ‘wishes of churchgoers’ have been implemented in a number of European countries. In these adjustments a fundamental church reform is demanded, especially in the fields of women’s ordination, celibacy, having a say in bishop appointments, sexual ethics and the association with divorced — and remarried people. The list with critical remarks is long, which explains the tension between the church as it is desired and the church as it is experienced. Well, reflections and discussions about the question what the church should (has to) be like, are part of the essence of the church itself. Reconsidering its roots against the background of a prophesied future is a hermeneutic performance that cannot come to an end. Whatever views can be extracted from this process, they are embedded in the context of the present and aimed at making a modern presence of the church possible. Modernity can be interpreted as continuity in horizontal and vertical respect. So, the question which path the church should take in the future is obviously a permanent problem — actually nothing out of the ordinary.

There is one group, though, for which the development of the church could be of particular importance: those who study theology. They will mark the face of the church as potential future assistants in catechism, in pastoral service, in the numerous fields of territorial and categorial spiritual care. How the church will develop and what it will be like, is ultimately also decided by their practice. That is why this group should be looked at more closely here. One question should be with what representations of the church as it is desired, first-year students start their studies in theology — even when it is obvious that this representation can experience changes in the course of the studies and due to future professional experiences.

1. Representations of church — findings from recent investigations

In the past few years, a number of empirical studies with students of theology have been carried out, with the question about the representation of church also included in the plans of research. It inevitably involves various sample surveys and varying research designs. All the same it allows at least looking for some trends, which will throw some light on the question about the representations of church.

In 1993 Christian Friesl carried out a replication test (first official test 1989) with students of theology at several colleges of higher education in Austria (Friesl 1993). In this study, 937 students in all were registered. Friedl has found
out that 51 per cent of the people questioned are very strongly in favour of a modern church, 40 per cent are "strongly" in favour. This means that all together 91 per cent of the people questioned strongly or very strongly give an affirmative answer to the question whether modernity of the church is desirable. This group of 91 per cent represent 96 per cent of all 'lay theologians' and 80 per cent of all seminarists. The remaining 20 per cent of the seminarists and 4 per cent of the 'lay theologians' can be spread over those 9 per cent of the people questioned that do not agree with the demand for a modern church. Exactly two third of all the people questioned (62 per cent) emphasize that the church should open to modern society, art and science, even if it were at the expense of common traditions. According to Friesl there are three areas of criticism in the eyes of the students regarding the present and the desirable church: first, they criticise the statements of the church on doctrines that are alienated from life and on the inadequate orientation towards the wishes of people; secondly, there is criticism on the hierarchical structure of the church, which, on the basis of this structure, lacks the preconditions to enter into a real dialogue with society that has been structured democratically, and thirdly there is criticism on the mechanism of the inner church solutions to conflicts, which demonstrate little "fraternity" but all the more strongly a calculating power.

Friesl connects these results to the question about the relationship of the students with the church. On a ten-point scale (1 = no relationship; 10 = very strong relationship) at least 59 per cent indicate a value between 8 and 10, which means that they say they are "very strongly" connected with the church. 48 per cent fall into the category of still a "strong" church connection. With regard to the ten-point scale, the average value for all the people questioned lies at 7.37. The distinction between seminarists (8.76) and 'lay theologians' (6.91) is barely 2 points. In comparison with the 'lay theologians', the church connection of the seminarists is some 18 per cent stronger.

First of all, these results show that there is a mutual relation between church connection and church criticism. With an increasing connection with the church, a critical attitude is levelled out. This particularly holds good for seminarists. However, this conclusion is put into perspective by the middle values for the entire group of the people questioned. The sample survey does not show a polarization regarding the questions "church connection" and "church criticism", but rather a broad trend in the direction that on the one hand people are "attached" to this church, yet on the other hand consider its empirical form strongly in need of reform (cf. also the results with other research groups in Ziebertz 1993).

Likewise from Austria is the study by Theodor Köhler and Bernhard Schwaiger (1996). In a period of time of nine years (1980 until 1989) students of theology at the Catholic-theological Faculty Salzburg were repeatedly questioned at the start of their studies and during their fourth semester. It inevitably involves