

**I.**

The political system in my region changed a lot in the 1990s but these changes did not automatically eliminate the models of undemocratic political culture inherited over the centuries. Systematic efforts to build a democratic political culture are therefore essential preconditions for further democratic development in the region. Since it represents the key precondition for peaceful coexistence, building a democratic culture must be an integral part of working for peace.

I propose that we now reflect on the dominant models of political socialization in local religious communities (LRC). I would like to show that the content and values shaping the awareness of the members of faith communities are linked to the content and values shaping their awareness as citizens. If all faith communities, individual believers and the whole of society are to become aware of their responsibility for building peace, this will depend on the dominant values and beliefs represented by believers and society.

I would now like to answer the double question that occurred to me when reflecting on the - interesting and instructive - connection between the Apostle Paul and the Occupy Movement.

In my region faced with violent conflicts, why is Christianity repeatedly so unresponsive to the message of peace and nonviolence? Or again, why has Christianity in my region always been so weak when it comes to communicating the message of forgiveness and reconciliation in post-war times?

Despite the different historical legacies there, my region has always been not just unfavourable to democracy but resolutely against it; politically it has always been authoritarian, culturally always traditionalist and socially always underdeveloped; its values have always been collectivist and conservative.

In connection with the complex socialization processes of anti-democratic political cultures, the faith communities use a unique social structure that is available to them everywhere: the local religious networks of parishes, congregations and mosques.

The state authorities and political leaders have realized the political power of these networks and thus regularly tend to win these religious institutions over for their cause, in return for secular privileges, because they consider them a model of social policy integration. In other words: an obedient, conformist believer will always be an obedient, conformist subject or an obedient, conformist supporter of the nation or the party - and vice-versa.

Of course, the local religious community (LRC) is the preferred place for “educating” believers, and education to shape an obedient, conformist spirit from the start excludes any involvement in making peace, nonviolence and reconciliation essential elements of faith identity. The fear is that this could impact negatively on the cohesion of the nation.

Although the disintegration of communism offered a unique historical opportunity, the regional religious communities did not dare to change into one of the key factors of

political socialization, aiming at a democratic political culture. Instead, they uncritically submitted to the autocratic–authoritarian leaders of national liberation, in the belief that national renewal would guarantee the renewal of faith.

Certainly, this transformation would not have meant merely adapting religious communities to the needs of society, but rather a true religious catharsis, mainly visible in their turning to processes of peace, mainly of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In this case, the authentically religious and the socially desirable go hand in hand. Believers aware of themselves and their own faith would also be aware, responsible citizens, a support to democratic society; citizens aware of themselves and their responsibility, open for action in responsibility and solidarity, would be aware and responsible members of their religious communities. Only an aware believer who is at the same time an aware citizen is willing and able to become an effective peace-builder.

The fact that the LRCs in our region still tend to be bulwarks of undemocratic political culture is all the more tragic, as – via their unique societal infrastructure and networks - they would have an incomparable potential for systematically building a democratic political culture and at the same time educating the faithful for peace and nonviolence. If they opened up to God’s workings it could become a unique opportunity for their salvation from all their historical failure.

“Where there is danger, signs of rescue also grow” (Friedrich Hölderlin).

For this to happen, however, two things are necessary.

Externally – a healthy separation of religious communities from the state and party political power structures and the development of an effective cooperation with civil society structures.

Internally – a democratization of institutional life in religious communities, particularly at the local level.

In order to clarify the changes needed within LRCs in order to achieve democratic socialization, we need to focus on their antidemocratic structures.

## **II.**

In order to illustrate my criticism of the different mechanisms of the anti-democratic system existing in LRCs, I will start from the basic values of democracy.

### **1. Mechanisms of undemocratic, political socialization**

In the awareness that there are very different practices, I will start from the characteristics predominant in the region when speaking of political socialization within local religious communities.

#### **a) Political awareness**

The autocratic style of LRCs, which has become the norm despite the formal existence of pastoral, social and economic councils, reduces the believers to passive objects. Believers whose faith awareness is numbed turn out to be citizens without political competence, i.e. without any awareness of their ability to personally exercise influence in the political sphere. What is more, they cannot themselves elect the

leaders of their religious communities. That arouses distrust among the church members vis-à-vis the civil duty to participate in the political sphere.

Yet when they enter the “political arena” it becomes obvious to what extent they depend on the election of autocratic, centralist actors and parties, precisely because of the centralistic leadership of local religious communities.

Exposed to the dominance of LRCs not only in questions of faith but also in cultural and political questions, the believers are, in turn, trained to become citizens who tolerate the sacralization of politics, and the open approval by religious communities of individual political actors or parties.

All that together – the monopoly of exercise of authority in local religious communities, the impossibility of the believers sharing in the elections of LRF leadership and the patronizing of the believers in political questions by the LRFs – all that teaches the believers to become immature members of these communities, which is linked to diminishing community and the loss of personal responsibility. That is preparation for their being uncritical citizens and without distance in all the communities they belong to, above all in terms of their national and party political adherence.

*In short: If the awareness of faith withers, this leads to decreasing political awareness, and vice versa!*

Only when the autonomy of faith and politics is overcome will the believers be equipped to work for peace, as this commitment is the expression of political responsibility both as believers and citizens.

## **b) Freedom**

The alienation of believers from LRCs as the community for which they bear responsibility corresponds to the boastful identification of their leaders with the community itself, and very often also with the church or God. Armed with a label of untouchability from “below” they declare all criticism “from inside” to be destructive of unity and all criticism from “outside” to be a phobia. LRCs are thus incapable of communication that is non-oppressive (*herrschaftsfrei* – see J. Habermas). The unconditional obedience towards the leaders of religious communities is declared a virtue of faith.

A believer who is denied freedom of opinion and, particularly, of speech in LRCs is thereby prepared to be deceived as a citizen as well: when politicians are called into question they hide behind “national vital interest” (“whoever criticizes me criticizes the nation”). And the same applies to religious communities: when the leaders are called into question they hide behind the “interests of the institution” and even behind God (“whoever criticizes me criticizes the church or even God”).

Naturally the media also play an important role, mostly promoting monologues and instructions but not freedom of expression. That is the preparation of believers for a “partitocratic manipulation of the media” (D. Bojic) in the field of social policy – media that opportunistically try to raise their own profile in the service of political, economic and religious centres of power.

*In short: The elimination of religious freedom opens the way to the elimination of civil freedoms and vice versa!*

It is the atmosphere of freedom both in the area of faith and in society that forms the decisive starting point and the precondition for peace-making to become the essential part of political identity of believers and citizens.

### **c) Pluralism**

The LRCs systematically deplore pluralism, although stressing that faith is a question of personal decision. Everything that differs from their own [convictions] is labelled hostile. As though anything other than the unfaithfulness of believers could be a threat to faith (Ž. Mardešić).

This dualist view of a world full of enemies divides the world into the absolutely good ("us") and those who are absolutely bad ("the others"). The LRC is distorted through fear of the other and turned into a closed fortress constantly under siege. The life of the faithful is characterized by freedom, openness and hope, by vulnerability, exclusivity and pessimism. In this atmosphere of threat, even those daring to think differently – theologically or politically – are all those excluded from the LRC. There is no room for tensions in the pluralism that is the source of life. Mistrust towards pluralism favours a strong need for security among the believers, a need that turns up in the social policy space in the form of a yearning for a totalitarian, synchronized order, possibly with a religious rationale. Through demonizing the "Left" and glorifying the "Right", the LRCs expose their believers to the right wing of conservative parties in social policy.

Faith in LRCs is a static biological inheritance to be defended and not creatively developed. It is not a personal decision that renews itself with every challenge in life. The faithful are not encouraged to constantly base their political decisions in the area of social policy on a personal rational questioning of political programmes and achievements. Instead, decisions are taken once and for all on the basis of "political idolization" (S L Frank), a kind of political fanaticism based on the belief that a social policy order is to incarnate the absolute good. When the faithful in the LRCs learn to perceive unity as the one, uniform thought-form they will then understand unity in the field of social policy in the same way. That forms the precondition for the nationalist claim to monopoly through a single party. The dualistic view and ghetto mentality prevailing in the field of religion – the belief that an atheist or member of another faith is not a positive challenge to faith and humanity but rather a threat to one's own identity – can be transferred to the field of social policy: a member of another political orientation or another worldview is not a partner, rather an enemy, even absolute evil itself.

*In short: The extinction of religious pluralism paves the way for eliminating pluralism in the field of social policy and vice versa!*

Not accepting pluralism as God's will means directly opposing commitment to peace of whose have the basic ability to perceive the "divine spark" in the enemy in the midst of conflict, and to discern the possible partner for building a better future. Indeed, in an atmosphere of dualism and ghettoization, peace-making constitutes not only an undesired option but is an absolute evil, equated with the betrayal of one's

own religious and political body. That is why the defenders of peace-making reap more hate and contempt “at home” than the religious or political enemy.

#### **d) Culture of remembrance**

The LRCs resist pluralism and their resistance to dialogue makes them defenders of the past. Everywhere people are now claiming a monopoly on historical truth that until recently was the prerogative of the communist regime. But without an open and honest dialogue about the past, the healing of transition societies through forgiveness and reconciliation will be unthinkable. Local religious communities only send messages about their own national and religious suffering and their own victims. Not only are prayer ceremonies held for them but monuments are built as public "places of remembrance". They have often even been erected in honour of the hangmen of the victims of other religious and ethnic groups. Yet people forget the high price of their own religious, ethnic and even territorial purity.

"Sensitivity for the suffering of others" (J.B. Metz) as the basis of the monotheistic ethic, but also the condition for true and faithful remembering, has long been banned from the rostrums of local religious communities, if it was ever present.

"The condition of all truth is expressing the suffering of others" (Th. W. Adorno).

The LRCs tirelessly proclaim the myth of their own innocence. That prepares the believers for accepting the nationalist-archaic myths of the winners, who suffer from amnesia towards victims of their own national-religious narcissism. The believers are thus made incapable of recognizing guilt and sensing the need for forgiveness that is the start of any process of "healing of memories" (John Paul II). That is why the believers are receptive to political programmes that in our region are mostly nationalist in origin, that take positions of accepting victimization (“we have always been the victims”) or sounding childish (“others are always to blame”). Instead of being “experts for forgiveness and reconciliation” on the socio-political stage, they become “experts for hatred and revenge”. Imperceptibly, the abuse of religious symbols from the local religious communities is transferred to the LRCs in the socio-political sphere. That is a popular way of rallying people - inciting their fear of those who are different. Instead of promoting the “symbolic, universal community” they use religious symbols to implement the “diabolical power of the particular” (I. Sarcevic): isolationism, intimidation or expressions of superiority towards those who differ in terms of their faith or nationality. All this, of course, because the flames of hate were lit and shone particularly brightly because of the religious element!

But the believers are prepared for all that by not hearing about religious peace-makers or religiously inspired social reformers as role models. They only hear of “war-like” saints, who, in turn, are an effective tool for closing their own ranks and inciting hate against everything that is different in religious and national terms. That is the reason why the faithful are not leading in the area of social policy in the processes of reconciliation and forgiveness.

*In short: The extinction of a new culture of remembrance in the religious field will pave the way for eradicating a new culture of remembrance in the socio-political field, and vice versa!*

And precisely a new culture of remembrance would be the important precondition and the first step towards building peace. It would display religious and political boldness if people could be shattered by the suffering of others and open their eyes for the suffering that is done to others under the banner of our religious and political bodies.

### **e) Social solidarity**

We can also sense the loss of social solidarity in the LRCs, in the context of transition societies characterized by a savage social injustice. Their leaders have become immune to social ethics and responsibility for society. They stress moral theology that is almost pathologically reduced to sexual ethics and also accentuates spiritualism and liturgy. They are receptive for questions of nationality and faith but they are not very interested in burning social issues.

The faith that has renounced its duty to realize itself in the wholeness of life, including in the social sphere, has degenerated into a rhetorical, one-sided and decadent surrogate. If they were to stand up publicly for social justice the communities would be accused of drifting towards the left and betraying the nation or the state. The leaders of LRCs are almost obsessively concerned with their own financial and material security. They even take gifts from those responsible for the social injustice.

Consequently they identify with them. That way they lose the freedom of proclamation: they do not have the boldness to protest prophetically against the social injustices. Such proclamation would differ from an ethical protest because they would simply call the culprits to account in public.

It is true that in some places people attempt to preserve their credibility by supporting charitable projects under the umbrella of LRCs. But combating the consequences of social injustice cannot replace the grappling with its root causes. If religious education downplays all the social aspects of the church calling or only reduces them to charity then the believer is prepared to approve political programmes that are closed to social problems – to their causes and sometimes even their consequences. These programmes do not reflect a concern for the ideology invoked, but quite simply a profitable form of white-collar crime.

Raising awareness of socio-political issues among believers is disturbed by the business practice of LRCs. It is non-transparent, not only towards the believers but also towards church and state donors.

Naturally this is almost exclusively left to the leaders of LRCs. Moreover it is not infrequent that the leaders abuse the social rights of employees in the religious communities. All of that only prepares the believers to tolerate different abuses in the socio-political field: lack of transparency, corruption and social injustice.

*In short: Annihilating the social awareness of in the religious field paves the way to eradicating social awareness in the field of social policy, and vice versa!*

And it is precisely that social awareness that triggers the struggle for social justice and is an essential component of peace-building. I am convinced that not only injustice leads to extremism at the social and political levels and opens the door to

violence. The physical presence of God facing this vicious circle of injustice means, in my opinion: “God is not dead. He is the bread” (Jürgen Moltmann).

#### **f) Partnership between women and men**

The inability of transition societies to respond positively to the challenges of transition depends on their insisting on ideological control and the exclusion of women from the field of the social policy. Local religious communities behave similarly in transition societies by going without women’s potential for faith. The leaders of LRCs do not allow women to run the different areas of life in religious communities on an equal footing with men. They are still slave to the theological constructs and traditional piety that are motivated by mistrust or even hatred of women.

Women are rarely found in high positions in the pastoral, economic or social councils of LRCs even though they are often better trained theologically than the men, and not only in the field of business.

Not even the absence of vibrancy and creativity in the communities motivates the men to abandon the exclusion of women. This is favoured by the fact that the LRCs in the region are only familiar with male leaders. That way the believers are prepared for the fact that they do not get to know the potential of women in LRCs and that means for the field of social policy: because they do not know of the hidden potential of women for democracy they do not question the exclusion of women from political, economic and educational structures.

*In short: Eradicating the potential of women in the religious field paves the way for deleting the potential of women for democracy in the socio-political field, and vice versa!*

And yet women show more creativity and courage than men in the area of peace-building, one vivid example being not only the life stories of 15 Nobel Prize winners but also the first results of research on peace commitment in my region.

#### **g) Cooperating for the common good**

Corrupt/corrupting “obsession with the state” (Ž. Mardešić) is the source of being lost in pluralist society. It prevents LRCs in transition societies from recognizing the civil sector as the privileged place of testifying to faith. The desire for privileges dampens the will to serve. That is the reason why the leaders of LRCs close themselves off in distrust from the civil sector.

In communities the believers expect everything from the state and the political parties, which are regarded as the only guarantors for preserving faith. That is why civil society is not regarded as the appropriate place for practically living out your faith and showing responsibility for yourself and the world. Yet many hidden aspects of the identity of the faithful could be retrieved from oblivion if they got involved in this sector: people could, for example, discover that a lived environmental awareness can be an authentic and holistic expression of faith.

Then the LRCs would have the opportunity to change their attitude of servile dependence towards the state and the parties for a true autonomy in civil society. It would not just be a matter of integrating into society but also of bearing authentic

witness to faith. This would doubtless lead to vibrancy and creativity in the communities and also to their developing an ability to offer political and democratic socialization. One of these consequences would be peace-building, which is nurtured precisely in civil society.

*In short: We have noted above that uncontrolled power in the LRCs paves the way for uncontrolled power in the socio-political field. That means that without true democratization of religious communities there will be no true democratization of society. And vice versa!*

In other words: a democratic atmosphere is needed, both in the religious and the socio-political field, so that peace commitment can unfold as an essential feature of religious and socio-political identity.

## **2. Hope?**

In my region, there is neither a guarantee nor any prospect of a peace-making reshaping of society and the religious communities. Are there any signs of hope? Despite the many threatening clouds still on the horizon my answer is positive.

Instead of passively waiting for society and religious communities to become peace-builders, many believers are setting out by themselves on the path of peace-building. The credibility not only of their faith but also of their whole human existence depends on it. These people are joining in with building a politically democratic culture. As there the LRCs have offered them inadequate space, if any, they have found room in the NGO sector. Their own peace-making awareness is lived out in the area of non-governmental organizations that they have generally founded themselves. They are not noticed by the media. They have to fight for all the numerous peace-making experiences and have rebuilt some destroyed bridges.

It would be valuable if the religious communities could completely open up to these people and groups and recognize their prophetic voice and the practical assistance they have given. That way the communities would give a genuine answer to the peace message. After all, the peace message forms the core of the message they proclaim and the reason why the communities exist at all. The clergy who are open to this could play a mediating role. Their number is growing, often thanks to the peace-building work done by peace-minded believers.