



Frankfurt Study Day

of the Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation (CAPP) - German Section

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COUNTERACTING THE DIVISION OF SOCIETY WITH CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ETHICS

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A. Preamble

Poverty and inequalities are tragic phenomena that have accompanied humanity since time immemorial, but are unacceptable. Following the admonitions of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* to develop a new holistic ecological model for the world ¹, and with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations of 2015 we have an agenda to develop the world sustainably and to eliminate poverty in the world by 2030 (Agenda 2030). ² Through worldwide division of labor, global cooperation, international development aid and promotion of education and expansion of national social systems and many other measures inequalities should be mitigated and poverty should be further combated in the following years.

The multiple crises of recent years, such as the worsening climate crisis, Corona pandemic, energy crisis, global inflation and the war in Ukraine, to name just a few, have again exacerbated the situation. Hundreds of millions of people are facing dramatic increases in the cost of basic everyday necessities and are at risk of poverty and hunger. At the same time, the crises are also producing a few winners by bringing enormous new wealth to a tiny fraction of humanity. ³

¹ Papst Franziskus, Enzyklika ,Laudato Si' 137

² <https://unric.org/en/17goals/>

³ <https://www.oxfam.de/ueber-uns/aktuelles/soziale-ungleichheit>



The worsening inequality is measured by the fact that between 2020 and 2021 the richest one percent of the world's population gained \$ 26 billion (63 percent) of total new wealth, while \$ 16 billion (37 percent) went to the remaining 99 percent of the world's population.⁴ Calls are then quickly made for greater taxation of the richest segments of the population to give governments the financial leeway to create accessible health, education, and social security systems for all people and to invest in gender equity and anti-racist haggling.⁵

Without entering into a discussion about fair taxation and its practical feasibility, without shedding light on the current distribution of tax revenues, without analyzing in more detail the dangers that the demanded taxations pose in terms of the erosion of the middle class, it must be said that solving these problems solely in terms of the material, financial dimension falls short. What is urgently needed in addressing the immense challenges is the human dimension, as Pope Francis has urged us to do with his encyclical on fraternity and social friendship.

Corporate activity is indeed a noble vocation⁶, aimed at generating wealth and improving the world for all.⁷ God promotes us, He expects us to develop the abilities He has given us, and He has given the world a great many opportunities. His plan for us is for each person to develop.⁸ With this calling and responsibility, we should examine how we can counteract the division of society in Germany.

B. Poverty and social division in Germany

Inequality is becoming more and more of a problem - worldwide, but also in Germany. Studies over the last millennia come to a clear conclusion: there has never been a peaceful reduction of inequality in history! Only wars and catastrophes led to a social equalization.⁹ If, of course, one does not want war or catastrophes to be the new means of income policy, serious efforts are needed to ensure that an unequal distribution of wealth, which does not have to be unjust per se, is still perceived as fair to a certain extent and finds general acceptance in society.

⁴ Ebd.

⁵ <https://www.oxfam.de/ueber-uns/aktuelles/soziale-ungleichheit>

⁶ Papst Franziskus, Enzyklika ‚Fratelli Tutti‘ 123

⁷ Papst Franziskus, Enzyklika ‚Laudato Si‘ 129

⁸ Vgl. Papst Paul VI., Enzyklika ‚Populorum Progressio‘ 15; Papst Benedikt XVI., Enzyklika ‚Caritas in veritate‘ 16

⁹ Scheidel, Walter, Nach dem Krieg sind alle gleich - Eine Geschichte der Ungleichheit, 2018



According to recent studies, the top decile, i.e. the wealthiest 10%, of the German population has 67.3% of the total wealth of € 8.9 trillion, and the richest 1% even has 35.3%. By contrast, the other 90% have 32.7%, with the bottom half of the population owning only 1.3% of total assets.¹⁰ Simulation models indicate a further concentration of the top decile in the coming years to 80% by 2045, which will be at the expense of the middle class, will not be accepted by the community and will lead to social division.

While many children are born per family in the upper and lower classes, the birth rate in the middle class has been falling since the 1980s. Fewer children and more investment in the individual child is the priority here. In order to maintain the standard of living, the income of both parents is necessary, especially because of the enormously expensive care for children in daycare centers and kindergartens and the high costs for home help compared to other countries. It is now scandalous that even well-educated, high-earning young married couples in major German cities are unable to create their own home from their own work. It is no longer work that is the source of wealth, but inheritance!

At the same time the poverty increases felt. Approx. 20% of the pensioners are today in a poverty situation, in need of the basic safety device, while this concerned approx. 30 years ago only 10% of the pensioners. In fact, the poverty rate in Germany has been stable for years at 16%, thus in the middle of the OECD countries, which have between 10-20%.¹¹ It should be noted that poverty in Germany is defined in relative terms - i.e. when income is lower than 60% of the average income - and that poverty has a longitudinal dynamic in that 70% of the poverty population remains in this poverty situation only temporarily and for no longer than two years. The remaining 30% of the poverty population are those with multiple poverty risks, of whom again just under half, or 2.4% of the total population, are classified as 'very poor' for at least five years.¹² This group remains stably poor, with multiple risk factors such as unemployment, low educational level, single parenthood, migration background, high age, etc. perpetuating the poverty situation, and must therefore be cushioned by the welfare state.

As a result, this reinforces the formation of an urban underclass with complex problem situations, its own poverty economy (entitlement reduction, acceptance of donations, self-help in the network), its own residential areas (segregation) and its own norms (honor). In this excluded, deprived poverty milieu, the norms of the middle class are only valid and

¹⁰ Bach, Stefan, DIW Wochenbericht Nr. 50/2021, S. 809

¹¹ Schönig, Werner, Die anderen zweieinhalb bis sechzehn Prozent, in Rahmfeld, C. (Hrsg): Theologie und Soziale Arbeit im Gespräch, Wiesbaden 2019

¹² Ebd.



effective to a limited extent. Extreme poverty in the form of homelessness is on the rise. Promoting and demanding, planning, aspiration level and saving for purpose have no relevance here.¹³

Singularity as a motto of today's society 'I am special' cannot serve poor people, so they are further marginalized. To this end, lack of resources to participate in community experiences (sports equipment, scout clothing) and improper nutrition perpetuate the poverty population. Obesity among preschool children - a reliable indicator of poverty-stricken areas - leads to diabetes, broken joints in old age, and impairs the ability to work.

Poverty is already felt not only in the typical segregated areas, but is present in the midst of our society: whether on the way to the suburban train through Frankfurt's Bahnhofsviertel, one of the toughest social hotspots in Europe, or at the Tafel with 600 guests in Starnberg, Germany's richest municipality. There is no sign of a trend reversal. Rather, demographic developments, increasing migration and inflation, but also the limited financial viability of overstretched social systems with additional budgetary demands for external and internal security, tight public, especially municipal coffers and increasing national debt will continue to drive polarization.

C. "Poverty is not part of the Church in Germany".

When this quotation fell into the discussion of the assembled members and friends of the German CAPP Section, there was a palpable great consternation. After all, in the Beatitudes, the poor are the first target group of the Good News of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ With the principle of the universal destination of goods, the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church (CST) also calls for special attention to the poor and to those who are on the margins of society - the hungry, the beggars, the homeless, people without medical assistance, refugees, to name a few groups.¹⁵ As Pope Francis wished shortly after his election: "I want a poor Church and a Church for the poor."¹⁶

A church for the poor: that is undoubtedly what the Catholic Church in Germany is. We have so many aid organizations as hardly any church in other countries. Caritas international, Adveniat, the Kindermissionswerk, Kirche in Not, Malteser international, Misereor,

¹³ Schönig, Werner, Armut und gesellschaftliche Spaltung, 11.2.23

¹⁴ Vgl. Mt 5,3

¹⁵ Kompendium der Soziallehre der Kirche, 182.

¹⁶ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130316_rappresentanti-media.html



Renovabis and Missio: thanks to church taxes and successful fundraising campaigns, the relief organizations of the German church provide important aid for poor people in Germany and throughout the world. They came into being after the World War II and from the experience that without the help of other countries Germany would not have been able to rebuild on its own. All these aid organizations are an expression of lived charity with the poor in the global south.¹⁷

With Caritas, there is also a church welfare organization that cares for the elderly, poor and marginalized people in Germany. Its flaming cross logo makes it clear that even if it is becoming more and more difficult to recruit faithful, pious employees in view of the shortage of skilled workers and the increasing secularization of the world: Caritas' institutional roots and spiritual foundation lie in practicing Christian charity. With almost 700,000 full-time employees and several hundred thousand volunteers, 13 million people on the fringes of society are cared for, accompanied, supported and advised, in food banks, in homeless shelters, in children's and family centers or in nursing homes.¹⁸

This help for the poor should not and must not be minimized. In fact, the assistance provided is perceived very positively in society. Caritas, in particular, is seen by the population as having a high degree of credibility, in contrast to the Catholic Church. "Caritas is good, church is bad": What is overlooked here, of course, is that Caritas is part of the church. It is all the more important that Caritas does not become an NGO, a welfare association among many, but remains true to its evangelical mission statement. Depending on the context, this can be understood more narrowly or more broadly in concrete terms: From table service in nursing homes to the act of serving food in the food bank or respectful cooperation between children and young people or an appreciative organizational culture. Where friendships are formed, boundaries are overcome.

But are the poor a mere object of the church, passive recipients of assistance and the target of practiced charity? A self-critical look at the everyday life of many church congregations shows: In Germany, we live in large parts of a very middle-class church, a wealthy church. The church accounts, which are well filled thanks to church taxes and state church payments, are only one aspect of this. In the medium and long term, the financial strength of

¹⁷ Überblick siehe: <https://www.dbk.de/katholische-kirche/aufgaben/caritas-und-hilfswerk>

¹⁸ <https://www.caritas.de/diecaritas/wir-ueber-uns/die-caritas-in-zahlen/statistik>



the church will also decrease significantly in Germany due to the number of people leaving the church and the decreasing number of believers.

Another aspect is the community of believers itself, which gathers every Sunday for Holy Mass. There are many statistics on religious affiliation, but hardly any on the sociology of practicing Catholics in Germany. There are probably differences between parishes in large cities like Berlin with a high percentage of migrants and those in rural areas. It would be interesting to know how high the percentage of poor people is in the active parts of the parishes.

Where are the poor? Do we see the poor as our brothers and sisters, as part of the church? Do we have the needs and worries, the fears and sensitivities of the poor in mind, when there is hardly any personal, interpersonal contact between poor and wealthy Christians? With its relief organizations and its strong Caritas, the Catholic Church in Germany has professionalized the fight against poverty. Indirectly, however, there is also here a danger of "outsourcing", of poverty and the fight against poverty. This requires critical self-reflection. A credible spirituality in the sense of CST can and must never "delegate away" poverty. It must build bridges between the everyday life of the parishes and the professional charitable work on and with the poor.

In the "Synodal Way" ¹⁹, which has received much attention worldwide, the Catholic Church in Germany has set out to respond to the unspeakable abuse scandal and to counter the decline in faith with new impulses. Unfortunately, the core issues of CST - such as the family as the life cell of society, the challenges of human work in the age of digitalization and globalization, a fair shaping of the economy and more unity and peace in international relations - are not on the agenda of the synodal journey. Here, too, the perspective of the poor and the mandate of the Gospel to stand by the side of those blessed by Jesus Christ are missing. What is needed is a renewed, strong spiritual foundation, a conversion in the spirit of CST, so that we as the church in Germany can turn to the poor not only on an institutional but also on a personal level.

If the church finds it difficult to place poor people at the center of its community life, at the center of its thoughts about the future, then it will have a hard time approaching non-believers of good will and political decision-makers in this sense. As the image of God, every human being possesses an unshakeable dignity. Therefore, the church needs new spaces of encounter in which people do not perceive themselves as poor or rich, but as

¹⁹ <https://www.synodalerweg.de>



brothers and sisters loved and wanted by God, who have a common mission: to give a face to the Good News in the world of today.

D. Measures to combat social division and to overcome social segregation and areas of poverty

Division, segregation and poverty are social realities, but we as Christians must never accept them as God-given. Politicians and the media like to look for "solutions" to deal with social problems. However, this falsely suggests that there are simple, workable and implementable solutions to the complex challenges of modern, democratic society. In democracies in particular, however, there is wrangling, arguing and voting among the basic political currents to find the right solutions. To suggest that politics can "solve" social problems once and for all by taking the right measures to create heaven on earth would be a fallacious approach. Poverty research therefore prefers the more pragmatic and realistic notion of "overcoming" challenges.²⁰ This concept does not see poor people as passive victims of the system, but also recognizes their achievement in coping with an often difficult and arduous everyday life, in which a place to sleep, a warm meal and the receipt of social assistance do not fall from the sky, but often have to be fought for.

As the dominant economic system, market economy has lifted millions of people out of extreme poverty. A recognition of the positive roles of entrepreneurs, an appreciation of creativity and innovation, protection of private property and the freedom of the market are aspects that CST appreciates, not only since the social encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. But CST also maintains that markets need both legal and ethical guidelines so that the focus is on people and not on profit and so that there is no overexploitation of God's creation. In the political history of the Federal Republic of Germany, CST has thus had an important influence on the shaping of the social market economy - a synthesis of a free market economy with a caring welfare state as a corrective to capitalist excesses. To meet the challenges of poverty and rising inequality, sharpening measures are needed on both sides of the coin: more market and more social balance.

The state's economic prosperity is based on the success of entrepreneurs. These already groan about hurdles and excessive bureaucratization when starting a business. CST should support a "start-up culture" in which young people are given the skills and financial resources to create good ideas, jobs and the prosperity of tomorrow.

²⁰ Schönig, Werner, Armut und gesellschaftliche Spaltung, 11.2.23



Education, even early childhood education in kindergartens and schools, is the key to a successful life. If children from socially disadvantaged families or families with a migrant background start school without a good command of German, they are already at a massive disadvantage when it comes to their further schooling and careers. Research and development are further decisive factors for jobs and prosperity and for creating a more climate-friendly world. The state can create helpful approaches here through subsidies and tax policy.

Due to the minimum wage law that came into force in 2014 - this currently amounts to €12 per hour - the question of fair wages, which was still at the heart of *Rerum Novarum* (1891), is not currently the major social policy issue in Germany. All the more discussions there are about affordable housing. The right to housing is a human right. For families, the nucleus of our society, housing is the center of life. And yet it is becoming increasingly difficult to find affordable rental housing. For young families today, buying a small house is a distant dream and not a concrete possibility. Purchase prices are too high, interest rates have risen and - apart from the country's peripheries - there are far too few offers in areas close to the city. What is needed here is a coordinated offensive by the government and a tax reform to ease the burden on the middle class.

Strengthening community social work - through church-based or independent charities - is an important way to help vulnerable people contribute their talents to society and the economy in the long term through educational and relational work, thus counteracting social division, especially in urban neighborhoods with high levels of inequality. A key to this is securing long-term funding for this social work. Short-term "projects" and "activism" may be good PR, but they are unlikely to build long-term trust between social workers and their clients, such as the homeless. This trust must be earned over many years - it cannot be assumed.

In addition to political and economic measures, a new ethic of encounter is needed, a new way of living together in the spirit of the Holy Father and his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. An important prerequisite here is to take off the middle-class glasses, to ask oneself again and again in daily life, but also in politics, civil society and the Church: where do the poor feel a threshold, a social discrepancy that I myself may not even perceive? Example: If new shirts are purchased in a scout group and nine children are bought new shirts by their parents and one child receives an old shirt of the previous year as a gift from the pastor, this could be seen by the child and his parents as a structurally discriminatory barrier, even if this was meant positively.



Participation and inclusion - the practical togetherness in everyday life is more important here than a discourse about the poor. In general, where discussions and language skills are concerned, many poor people already have a hard time, especially if there are language barriers. What is needed here is a keen sense of fellow human beings, an empathetic encounter at eye level. A meal together, for example after the Sunday service, can bring about a new togetherness. All people in our society are called upon to step out of their comfort zones in order to place the afflicted at the center of their attention. Examples are given by the encouraging practical experience of "lighthouse" people who help people on the margins through children's activities, home visits or visits to the sick.

The "noble calling" of entrepreneurs, who want to create jobs and increase prosperity, plays a special role here. Here, Christian entrepreneurs should take on a pioneering role. The distorted image of the oppressive capitalist of the 19th century, who exploits his workers to maximize his profit, contradicts our reality in Germany. It is true that we need entrepreneurs who will increase our economic and technological capabilities, create fairly paid employment opportunities, protect God's creation, and always have the poor and the overcoming of poverty in their professional and personal lives at heart. We need noble entrepreneurs of the 21st century.

E. "Make wide the room of your tent" (Is 54:2)

In times of worldwide refugee movements, the temptation is great for Western states like Germany to pull up the drawbridges at the castle walls, to close borders, to seal themselves off like a fortress. CST warns all Christians and people of good will against this path. After all, it was Jesus Christ himself who fled to Egypt with Maria and Joseph as baby, fearing persecution by Herodes.

"Make wide the room of your tent": in Isaiah 54, God speaks to his exiled Israeli people. He wants to convey joy and hope. The working document for the continental stage of the synodal journey describes this tent as a "space of communion, a place of sharing and a base for mission."²¹ The tent provides shelter, but it can also sway wildly in the event of inclement weather. The worldwide synodal process calls the church to go further, to become wider, and to remain open rather than closed. From the point of view of CST, it should be

²¹ https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2022/2022-172a_Mach-den-Raum-deines-Zeltes-weit-Synode_2021-2024_Arbeitsdokument-kontinentale-Etappe.pdf.



added that in a missionary Church the tent must also be wide enough open and friendly to welcome the poor and the elderly, the marginalized and migrants, all those blessed by Jesus. As the Holy Father explains in *Fratelli Tutti*, this also requires increased cooperation, a new fraternal togetherness at the international level. Poor countries must not be excluded from the international market. The scourges of globalization, as well as wars of aggression and modern slavery, must be eliminated through prosperity and a living democratization based on human rights and the full dignity of the human person.²²

The document reflects the contributions to the discussion of the participants of the Frankfurt Study Day of the Foundation Centesimus Annus pro Pontifice - German Section on February 11th, 2023, which resulted from the keynote speeches of Prof. Dr. rer. pol. habil. Werner Schönig "Poverty and social division" and by Father Philipp Meyer OSB "Poverty and inequality from the perspective of *Fratelli Tutti*".

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²² Papst Franziskus, Enzyklika ‚Fratelli Tutti‘ 128ff.