

“And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne... Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” (Revelation 12:4b,5,17; ESV)

Berlin-Steglitz, 21<sup>st</sup> December 2019

Dear friends, relatives and acquaintances,

With these words of the Christmas story according to the Revelation to John I send you a warm greeting for the holy Christ-mass<sup>1</sup>. I hope that I can stay in touch with you at least in this way after having been in "emergency mode" almost continuously this year, and having therefore been unable to respond to the many messages and greetings that reached me directly.

The Christmas story from Revelation speaks to me much more directly this year than the more familiar Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke. The birth of the child causes anger in the adversary of God, and results in the persecution of those who declare themselves for the newborn ruler and do not allow themselves to be dissuaded from their confession. It is an experience that so many members of our congregation have had in their home country and caused them to flee from their home country. And it is an experience that so many members of our congregation have had to make again in our country this year: the dragon allies with the actors of the state and attempts to fight those who hold onto their faith in Jesus Christ.

Again this year I have had hundreds of parishioners in our congregation whom the German state has defamed as enemies of the Federal Republic of Germany. The state has tried with all its might to deport these parishioners from our country to their Muslim homeland, where death awaits them. The behaviour of the branches of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF<sup>2</sup>), especially in Berlin and Brandenburg, towards our parishioners reminds me more of a killing spree than of a legal<sup>3</sup> process. Persons within the state are simply trying to force as many Christians as possible to be deported. Just now, in the last few days before Christmas, a large number of faithful, committed parishioners have received their deportation notice. Nowadays we don't expect anything else from the BAMF. The only difference from last year is that the BAMF now often takes up to two years before sending the documentation to justify the deportation notice. Anyone who receives the deportation notice exceptionally quickly has been lucky... Supporting information provided by the pastor is often not even mentioned in the records. I only write it knowing that it will at least be available later to the administrative court. The decisions about the fate of our parishioners are almost only made at the level of the administrative

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<sup>1</sup> *Christfest* – literally “Christ festival”.

<sup>2</sup> *Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge*.

<sup>3</sup> The German used here has a broader significance than can be captured by a single English word. *Rechtsstaat* is a “state founded on the rule of law”. Dr Martens explains in his 2016 circular letter: “after the Second World War it was important to the Federal Republic of Germany that it be a *Rechtsstaat*, a State operating according to Law founded on Right, a State putting justice into practice.”

courts. And there one is subject to the “luck of the draw”. None of the judges follow the same basic approach. The differences that I have seen in the various administrative courts this year are so crass that it is hard to believe! At the beginning of September, I went with a very committed Afghan parishioner to a hearing at the Greifswald Administrative Court. As we found out, the judge had scheduled exactly one hour for the hearing, which was to determine whether our parishioner had seriously converted to Christianity, including time for interpretation and dictation of the hearing’s minutes. That basically said it all: one only takes an hour to make a decision about a person's life and death. The hearing went accordingly: the judge asked our Afghan parishioner to please summarise his case. Unfortunately, our parishioner had a very moving but very detailed story to explain why he had become a Christian. But he didn't get the chance [to tell it] – in no time the hearing was over, and the summary of minutes that the judge dictated showed clearly that the judge really wasn't the least bit interested in our parishioner. At the end of the hearing, when the solicitor asked the judge to also listen to me as a *Seelsorger*<sup>4</sup>, who had closely supported this parishioner for several years, the judge brusquely rejected the request: on principle he did not listen to what pastors had to say. The judge concluded: “At least I still consider my judgment; for most of my colleagues here, the verdict is already decided before the trial.” Of course, our Afghan brother's [asylum] application was rejected; now he is in danger of being deported back to his home country. This is what our alleged “rule of law<sup>5</sup>” really looks like: judges openly admit that their judgments have already been decided before the trial. Here in Berlin the process is a little more subtle: Here, too, there are judges at the administrative court with whom one has a 0.0% chance of being recognised as Christian converts. Our parishioners are only social parasites to them, nothing more. But here the hearings drag on for hours, even though the result is actually clear from the start. In Frankfurt [on the Oder River] I had to deal with a judge who is openly campaigning on well-known websites against the “asylum industry”. Unfortunately, he took over the entire cases of our Pakistani parishioners, so we already know that they can save themselves the trouble of going to the court hearing ... Here in Berlin there is at least one chamber at the administrative court where our parishioners still have a 30% chance of their application being upheld. But it remains a pure lottery which chamber will be drawn for the individual members of our congregation – i.e. whether they have a chance at all, or whether they know three years in advance how their court hearing will turn out. Again and again I experience how the court and BAMF work “hand in hand” in the court hearings, as if their actions were pre-agreed. There I also experience that a BAMF employee alleges, without any substantiation, that I would perjure myself in court - according to the motto: “Pastors always lie anyway.” And the judge promptly follows the arguments of the BAMF employee. One can observe with many BAMF representatives how they enjoy trying to hurt the religious feelings of our parishioners. A communion assistant in our congregation had described in a very moving way what it means for him to be able to distribute the blood of Christ to the congregation during the service, and I had once again confirmed that communion assistants can only serve when the whole community is convinced that the assistant is a serious Christian. But the BAMF representative only commented with a cynical grin: “To be a communion assistant you don't have to be a Christian; a desire for self-promotion is enough.” Of course, the judge again followed the BAMF ... Much in the court hearings reminds me of the situation of the fathers and mothers of our Old-Lutheran Church 200 years ago. State officials determine what the “right” Christian belief is, against which is then measured whether someone is a serious Christian or not. Recently, a young person from our community had explained very movingly that he could not live without

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<sup>4</sup> A pastor, literally a “person who cares for souls”.

<sup>5</sup> See Note 3.

receiving the body and blood of Christ. In her judgment, the judge stated that it was "not understandable" why the reception of the Sacrament should be so important. After all, Christian faith is only about "values and rules". And to underline this, she also explained in her judgment: to recognise this, you would not need "expert knowledge". That is why she is not dependent on the instruction of a pastor as to what constitutes a serious Christian. The yardstick for the recognition of a Christian is an optional Protestant moral religion, which of course hardly differs from Islam. For this reason, it is not possible to understand why a person should convert from Islam to the Christian faith. A state that gives itself authority over the faith of Christians - which the Seer John described 1900 years ago, is always very topical for our congregation. Of course there are also courts that, thank God, do exactly the opposite and make their decision largely dependent on the pastor's deposition. The decisive factor why an asylum seeker is recognised or not recognised as a converted Christian in Germany is simply his place of residence. And the second key factor is his eloquence. Whoever has good acting qualities and can express him/herself well, that person has a chance. But a simple, faithful, Afghan Christian, who is hardly able to give his name in a court hearing, naturally has no chance if the judge asks which elements of the Christian faith he would consider critically... Up until then, the Christian had thought that the Christian faith was about Jesus dying on the cross for his sins, not that there were "critical elements" in it ... But whoever is not able to criticise the Christian faith in court, his/her application is expressly rejected by the court on this basis. It's downright diabolical!

I could now fill pages with an account of the experiences that we as a congregation have had with the state institutions. These impressions should be enough. I can only say again and again to the members of our congregation that I am deeply ashamed to belong to a people<sup>6</sup> in whose name injustice is repeatedly spoken in such an incomprehensible way. I really don't want to have anything to do with this people, in whose name "deportations into death" are ordered - but it's not that easy to avoid responsibility for what is happening in this state. And the judgment of God, which this state brings about with its actions against our Christian brothers and sisters over Germany, will probably impact all of us.

I have had to spend a good part of my time again this year campaigning for the right to life of our threatened brothers and sisters. Almost every week I sat somewhere in the hall of an administrative court and tried to use my testimony to stand up for the members of our congregation - unfortunately in very many cases without success. In July of this year, at the invitation of the US Department of State, I attended a "Ministerial To Advance Religious Freedom" in Washington. It was a very impressive event, at which I also had the opportunity to report on the violation of religious freedom here in Germany by German authorities and courts, and to speak with high-ranking political representatives. These included the Federal Government Commissioner for Religious Freedom, Markus Grübel, who had previously invited me to a conversation and who shares our view that it cannot be the responsibility of the state to question the authenticity of a conversion in direct contradiction to the testimony of the relevant *See/sorger*. But unfortunately he also hits a brick wall at the relevant departments in the Interior Ministry. I am grateful that the International Society for Human Rights has taken up this issue and accepted my request for a ban on deportation to Islamic countries for converted Christian refugees for whom the responsible church has testified to the authenticity of the conversion; 1-on-1 as they have demanded. In the summer of this year there was also a nationwide survey of Christian

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<sup>6</sup> I.e. the German people (*Volk*).

congregations working with converted Christian refugees. I largely designed the questionnaire for this myself. The results which the organization "Open Doors" presented at a press conference at the end of October, based on more than 6500 individual cases, are staggering: The acceptance rate for Christian refugees is being further and further reduced for political reasons. Throughout Germany, the administrative courts have declared the BAMF's decisions to be unlawful in more than 60% of the cases - impressive evidence of the total failure of the BAMF's work. We were also able to document how much the granting of refugee status for Christian converts here in Germany is a pure lottery that has little to do with the rule of law. Thankfully, the former faction leader of the CDU/CSU faction in the *Bundestag*<sup>7</sup>, Volker Kauder, in contrast to his earlier position, has now clearly and unequivocally backed our demands for a ban on deportation for converted Christians, and has visibly promoted this demand at a press conference in the Federal Press Conference<sup>8</sup>. He has also spoken out very clearly that the current practice of the BAMF and many administrative courts in Germany seriously violates the human right to freedom of religion. However, at the moment it cannot be seen that the responsible departments in the Ministry of the Interior have even started to think seriously about this issue. This is certainly because the current President of the BAMF makes no secret of his aversion to Christian converts from Iran and openly campaigns against them, yes, even explains that the BAMF has no knowledge at all that Christians are being persecuted in Iran. In doing so, he quite openly takes the side of the Iranian mullahs - as we often experience from those who are politically in charge of our country. For example, our Federal President warmly congratulated, on behalf of all Germans, the Holocaust deniers in Tehran this year on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, which cost countless lives. As our parishioners nicely put it: "The smell of oil is stronger in the nostrils of European politicians than the smell of the spilled blood of the Iranian people." And we experience it again and again, that politicians of a party which loves to talk about a "Christian image of humanity"<sup>9</sup>, is more willing to show solidarity with red and brown<sup>10</sup> agitation against Christian refugees than to seriously advocate for their right to life - with a very few positive exceptions. In November I was invited by the Ambassador of the USA to his residence at the Brandenburg Gate and was able to talk about violations of religious freedom here in Germany. But I also noticed that just mentioning the word "refugee" was enough to provoke obvious scepticism. Human rights obviously do not apply to all people in the same way ...

Our parishioners continue to experience how they are beset from two sides: On the one side there are still problems, although less often than three years ago, with radical Islamic residents threatening parishioners and, in some cases, even beating them up to the point of hospitalisation. In Brandenburg in particular, the authorities are not prepared to take this problem seriously. This year we had the case of an Afghan parishioner, whose interpreter at the hearing in the BAMF was openly outraged that our parishioner had fallen away from Islam. Apart from the fact that one can only guess how this interpreter translated at the BAMF, the interpreter openly threatened that this apostasy from Islam would have consequences for our parishioner. No sooner said than done - the interpreter informed some of the residents in the home of this parishioner who, only a few days later, beat up the parishioner so badly that he/she had to go to the hospital. However, the authorities

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<sup>7</sup> The lower house of the German federal parliament.

<sup>8</sup> The *Bundespressekonferenz*. Perhaps akin to the Australian National Press Club? See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bundespressekonferenz> for more details.

<sup>9</sup> "*christlichen Menschenbild*".

<sup>10</sup> Traditional colours of the socialist/left-wing (red) and fascist/right-wing (brown) parties.

refused to provide any protection to our parishioner. We thus had to let the parishioner live in our parish rooms until, after a battle of several months, we could finally get him/her moved to another home. Another parishioner has been living with us for almost half a year now because the authorities refuse to approve his/her relocation application, even though he/she was openly threatened with death, even within earshot of the police. On the other side our parishioners experience the ever-increasing hostile mood towards refugees from the local population. Just this week I heard a child in the first year-level of school (!) report how another child in school said: "My dad works in the town hall and he said that all foreigners should get out of Germany!" This is yet another example from Brandenburg, showing the hostility our parishioners encounter there. They are often treated accordingly in government offices. Thus we are always very grateful when church members tell us of opposite experiences.

And so I will celebrate Christmas again this year with frightened and often desperate members of the community, and I hope that the message of the angels in the fields of Bethlehem will reach their hearts despite all that they are currently going through.

Yet, we have experienced this miracle again and again this year: that in the midst of the calamity of this world we can still cheerfully celebrate Communion-services in our church every week - usually three in total. We have experienced what a power the gift of the holy body and blood of Christ exhibits; how it can comfort, raise-up and encourage the members of our congregation. Again this year we will record well over 20,000 communions at our altar. After not having had a single death in the congregation this year, in this week before Christmas I had two funerals for Iranian parishioners, each of which we held entirely in Farsi. The funeral service, which we had held in our church on Thursday, was particularly impressive: Almost 150 worshipers from all over Berlin came to our church at 8:45 a.m. and sang joyful songs in the face of death. At the conclusion we moved in a long procession to the nearby cemetery, where the Creed and the Hallelujah echoed throughout the cemetery in Farsi. Yes, our community's singing has become noticeably stronger this year. Contributing significantly to this has been the installation of a data-projector in our church, which enables the congregation to sing along in Farsi; the songs are projected simultaneously in the Arabic and Latin (for our German members) scripts, as well as with a German translation. The German liturgy is also projected in this way so that the members of the congregation can speak and sing along. The Nicene Creed on Sunday in the worship service also sounds much stronger now ...

This year, for the first time, I have dared to write and preach a sermon in Farsi myself. Unfortunately, I did not take a language course in Farsi, but only learned the language a little by listening. But I am gradually growing into the language - which is particularly useful for me in pastoral care. And I notice that I am already dreaming more and more in Farsi ...

This year I travelled for a week each with three groups: In February I drove with the new pre-confirmation group to Weigersdorf in Lausitz. A very nice group of almost 20 children has come together. It is very lively, but also gives me much pleasure. In April I drove with our confirmation group to Homberg / Efze, where we prepared for the holy confirmation in Easter week. And in October, I again spent a week in the Lutheran Youth Village in Molzen with almost 50 young people - it was one of the nicest and, for me, most relaxing retreats I have ever experienced. I have already mentioned my trip to the USA. Actually, I flew from Germany to the United States twice in July: First I flew to the "Ministerial", after which I had half a day to explore Washington in the scorching heat. Then I flew back for the weekend, and immediately on the Monday made my way back to Tampa, Florida, where I was able

to give one of the main lectures at the big convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and at the same time report about our work. It was a great pleasure for me to see again many dear friends there in Tampa at the convention, especially my former vicar and now professor Jacob Corzine, with whom I could spend some time on the sidelines of the convention. The visit there was like a spiritual "homecoming" for me - yet at the same time I was looking forward to being here with my dear congregation members again. I would never want to miss out on our life together! This also applies to our church-asylum<sup>11</sup> seekers who, after an illegal decision by the Interior Ministers' Conference, must now endure a further 18 months in church-asylum, because the BAMF, under the instruction of the interior ministries, now considers the stay in church-asylum to be flight [from the law]. Various administrative courts have already declared these instructions to be illegal - but of course the BAMF is not moved by these rulings. But our church-asylum seekers know that should they leave church-asylum, they would be deported to their deaths as part of a mass-deportation to Afghanistan or Iran. They simply cannot return to Islam as the Scandinavian countries expect them to do – and as the BAMF increasingly expects of them. We recently admitted an Iranian Christian to the church-asylum. He was baptised in Norway more than eight years ago and has already undergone missionary training there. His mission organisation wanted to employ him and send him to Niger as a missionary to the Muslims. But of course the Norwegian authorities determined that he was not really a serious Christian and wanted to deport him to Iran. So he has to wait 18 months with us before the BAMF must take over his case - and will then probably reject his asylum application. But for us it is, at the same time, a great gift. I am thankful that we have almost a little monastery in our church - with a community of Christians who pray and work together. Our community centre is a house filled with life 24 hours a day, where one is always greeted warmly when one walks in through an open door. Yes, our church asylum seekers are a great spiritual gift for all of us. "Life together" is not just a nice word for us, it is a reality lived every day.

I cannot report any large "successes" in numbers this year - and that is not what our work is about anyway. We notice, of course, how the walls around Europe are becoming more and more impenetrable and Christians under threat are hardly able to climb over these walls. So the baptism courses have become very manageable for us. At the same time, I have in many cases needed to conduct further teaching when, for example, parishioners have joined other congregations. The Confessional immersion that they have received here has not always been sufficient for them to search out a Lutheran church again. But I am very grateful for how many members of our congregation clearly recognise why they are in our Lutheran church and not in another church.

There is not much to report from what you would call my "private life". There were two special highlights: On May 30 (one day after the fact), we were able to celebrate my father's 90th birthday; all four children arrived for the occasion with their - almost complete - families, and we had a lovely afternoon together. I am very grateful that my parents are still in good shape for their age, and continue to be involved intensively in the refugee work in our community. The next day I went to Weigersdorf to celebrate the wedding of my godson, Sebastian Wenz, to Donata Voigt. I was very touched and moved by the spiritual

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<sup>11</sup> In German: *Kirchenasyl*. See e.g. <https://www.kirchenasyl.de/herzlich-willkommen/welcome/>. Churches offering asylum "place themselves between refugees and the authorities in order to bring about a re-examination of cases and to prevent deportation".

depth of both the service and the celebration that followed. It made me very proud of my godson ...

Also from a personal perspective was the fact that our Trinity congregation has now become an independent parish with its own right to call [a pastor]. So in May of this year I was officially appointed by a meeting of the congregation to become their pastor - henceforth for an unlimited period. This call by the congregation means a lot to me. At the parish festival on Pentecost Monday, our superintendent Peter Brückmann confirmed the appointment, previously announced by the church leadership, in a worship service. This marks the end of a process that began six and a half years ago when I moved from Zehlendorf to Steglitz to start our mission project here. I am very grateful that this year we were again so strongly and openly supported in our work by our church leadership, especially our bishop. It was very encouraging to experience again how our church leadership supports our work and recognises its importance. If only the big churches would position themselves as openly and unambiguously in the support of converted Christian refugees as our bishop does again and again! Then we would be a good deal closer towards a ban on deportation!

I am grateful for the full-time employees in our community: for our sister Tarja Ikäheimonen, for the married couple Turunen, and also for our social worker Tatiana Lossin. The work is so extensive that her help is irreplaceable - although we unfortunately have to replace our sister Tarja from January 2020, because after almost five years she is returning to Finland for family reasons. We will miss her very much. I am grateful for the many volunteers in our congregation, for the good teamwork in the church council, and indeed for the many "new" congregation members who actively contribute to our congregation in so many different ways with their gifts. Yes, it is going really well for me in Steglitz. And of course I am also a little spoiled here when I realise that I find a Sunday service "empty" because it - which happens very rarely - has fewer than 200 communicants receiving the Sacrament ...

At the beginning of 2020, the last ten years of my service before I reach the retirement limit will start - although I have no illusions that this retirement limit will probably not exist in ten years, given the lack of pastors in our church (as in all churches). When I consider that I have been serving our Church for more than 30 years, including more than 28 years as a pastor, ten years seems like a short time. But when I consider how much has changed here in Steglitz and therefore also in my life in the past six and a half years, ten years seems to be a very long time. And actually I don't look that far ahead, but simply ask, in keeping with the Bible: "Let me have another year!" I am grateful that God has given me the strength again this year to bear my workload, which mostly exceeds 100 hours a week, with reasonably satisfactory health. I was even able to recover sufficiently from internal surgery in hospital that I was able to get on the plane to the United States two weeks later - albeit with a bandage around my stomach ... How long I will be able to continue with my current workload is only known by the Lord of the Church. Therefore: "Let me have another year!"

Yes, I would like to stand for another year with our brothers and sisters who are engaged in the fight with the dragon. I would like to continue to celebrate many wonderful worship services with them, and to accompany people on their way to Christ and on their way with Christ - yes, especially on the last stretch of the road to eternity. Only Christ alone knows what stretch I myself will be given. And that's a very good thing.

I wish you all a joyful and grace-filled Christmas and an equally joyful and blessed New Year of Our Lord 2020. May HE strengthen all of us, particularly at this Christmas time, in the confidence that the child in the crib is at the same time the victor over sin, death and devil - and that HE alone will speak the last word in the story of our life and in the history of this world!

*Your Gottfried*