

## BENEDICTIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY – RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH FROM WORSHIP EXPERIENCES?\*

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### ABSTRACT

The article was written as a conversation between Dogmatics and Liturgical Studies. It asks what kind of self-understanding of the church becomes visible in the blessing ceremonies that have been newly adopted in recent years. In the background, there are considerations that such liturgical celebrations shape the image of the Church in time and society. At the same time, it is discussed how such new liturgical celebrations develop traditional concepts of ecclesiology. The blessing ceremonies discussed below, such as the blessing of couples on Valentine's Day or the blessing of same-sex couples, are not regulated by the official Church. They are part of a changing liturgical practice from the ecclesial base. This development of the Church on a practical and theoretical level deserves theological reflection. Here God's message of salvation is proclaimed in new liturgical formats. In these liturgies, Christians approach a changing society with the liturgy. The theological discussion about such celebrations is gaining importance in German theology. It is also reflected in the dioceses which are opening up to the inner-church reform process. In particular, it plays a role in the Synodaler Weg, which has recently begun in Germany, a process of reform within the Church.

### Key words

Ecclesiology; Blessing; Blessing ceremony; New liturgical formats; Liturgical theology

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## 1. Liturgy as an Expression of Church's Self-understanding

In the liturgy of the Church, what and how the Church believes, and how she understands herself is expressed, practised, and staged. Faith and celebration shape each other mutually; they form the ecclesial self-understanding of an era. The concrete form of the service presents a certain image of the church and at the same time has an effect back on theological theory formation and church concept development. What the church believes and how it expresses this faith in the service is thereby not once and for all (given), but the subject of active shaping and historically in flux.<sup>2</sup> Non-simultaneity between the local and the universal church, but also between the positions of the different actors and between different theological disciplines is not the exception but the rule, and not a drama. The local church can react more precisely to social and church developments.<sup>3</sup> Needs for development in teaching, theory, and liturgy can be grasped more sharply and better when reflected on the spot than is possible and appears urgent to a distant central office that is pressing for unity in the universal church. Scientific theology and church leadership take on different roles and work with different competencies; pastoral practice, in turn, needs and shapes Christian contemporaneity with its respective culture and society.

Theoretically and institutionally perceived so far rather reservedly, blessing ceremonies, i.e., 'benedictions', have for some time played

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<sup>2</sup> On the connection between *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* thus invoked, cf. Julia Knop, *Ecclesia orans: Liturgie als Herausforderung für die Dogmatik* (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 2012); Julia Knop, 'Liturgie als Thema und Herausforderung der Dogmatik: zur systematisch-theologischen Relevanz des Gottesdienstes,' in *Sakramentale Feier und theologia prima: der Vollzug der Liturgie als Anfang und Mitte der Theologie*, Klosterneuburger Symposium 2018 (Pius-Parsch-Studien 16), eds. Andreas Redtenbacher and Markus Schulze (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 2019), 53–73.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the examples from different epochs of liturgical history in Jürgen Bärsch and Benedikt Kranemann in coop. with Winfried Haunerland and Martin Klöckener, eds., *Geschichte der Liturgie in den Kirchen des Westens: Ritueller Entwicklungen, theologische Konzepte und kulturelle Kontexte. 2 Bände* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2018); on the manifold development processes cf. Albert Gerhards and Benedikt Kranemann, eds., *Dynamik und Diversität des Gottesdienstes: Liturgiegeschichte in neuem Licht* (Quaestiones Disputatae 289) (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 2018).

an increasingly important role in the pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church in Germany in a very diverse way. In them, the Church presents itself in a partly unusual, yet creative and affectionate way. There are still traditional blessings in the course of the Church and calendar year or related to unique occasions such as the house blessing for moving in.<sup>4</sup> However, new forms of celebration are also being developed and tested.<sup>5</sup> In this way, not only pastoral workers but also communities as a whole react to social developments in the shaping and perception of human life in partnership and family. They also take into account changing sociological conditions in religion and describe the task of the church and its ritual practice more openly: Blessings are celebrated on a denominational or ecumenical basis. There are also group- and gender-related blessings. Even people who do not belong to any religious community sometimes ask in a special life situation, for example, after the birth of a child, during adolescence, at the beginning or end of a partnership, to be granted the closeness of God in a blessing ceremony.<sup>6</sup> Finally, there are blessing ceremonies for same-sex couples with a long history. The theological debate in science and church is somewhat lagging behind this latter practice<sup>7</sup> but is slowly gaining

<sup>4</sup> For a description of the history of blessings see: Adolph Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter* (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 1909; reprint Bonn: Nova und vetera, 2006); on the history of the corresponding liturgical books and the celebrations described in them, as on a theology of blessing cf. Florian Kluger, *Benediktionen: Studien zu kirchlichen Segensfeiern* (Studien zur Pastoralliturgie 51) (Regensburg: Pustet, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Biblical theological foundations, models of practice and further theological perspectives are put together in Julia Knop and Benedikt Kranemann, eds., *Segensfeiern in der offenen Kirche: Neue Gottesdienstformen in theologischer Reflexion* (Quaestiones Disputatae 305) (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. among others Michael Domsen and Emilia Handke, eds., *Lebensübergänge begleiten: was sich von Religiösen Jugendfeiern lernen lässt* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016); Hans Gerald Hödl, Johann Pock and Teresa Schweighofer, eds., *Christliche Rituale im Wandel: Schlaglichter aus theologischer und religionswissenschaftlicher Sicht* (Wiener Forum für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft 14) (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2017); Ulrike Wagner-Rau and Emilia Handke, eds., *Provozierte Kasualpraxis: Rituale in Bewegung* (Praktische Theologie heute 166) (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019); also the contributions in the booklet *Diakonische Kirche in säkularer Gesellschaft*, *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 47, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the basic text of the ad hoc working group 'Segensfeiern' Sachbereich 5 'Familie' of the Zentralkomitees der deutschen Katholiken, last modified November 27, 2019, <https://bit.ly/32wprku>; cf. the annex to this text 'Segen schenken – Segensfeiern für gleichgeschlechtliche Paare,' accessed December 30, 2019, <https://bit.ly/399XvnZ>; also the essays in Stephan Loos, Michael Reitemeyer and Georg Trettnig, eds., *Mit dem Segen der Kirche?: Gleichgeschlechtliche Partnerschaft im Fokus der Pastoral* (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 2019); Ewald Volgger and Florian Wegscheider, eds., *Benediktion*

momentum. The form, significance and theological legitimacy of such celebrations are now also being discussed at the diocesan level.

In all these celebrations, the church acts. This is also the case when no approved liturgical form is taken as a basis, or when we can observe the differences and non-simultaneity between the different levels or actors – between pastoral practice and academic reflection, between the moral teaching of the Church and liturgy, between ordination-bound services and those presided over by an unordained person.<sup>8</sup> As the prayer of the Church is the prayer of the baptised, the worship of the Church is the worship of the baptised. All the baptised bear the liturgy without prejudice to the specific duties of ministers or the respective roles in the liturgy.<sup>9</sup> The close relationship and mutual opening up of the Church and liturgy, which has been repeatedly emphasised by liturgical science since the Council, cannot be reduced to sacramental worship services; it applies to every liturgy and is therefore also applicable to blessings.

What self-understanding of the church becomes visible in the mentioned blessing celebrations of a new and different kind? How do they shape the image of the church in our time and society? To what extent do these blessings – in all their diversity – further develop traditional church self-understanding and traditional ecclesiological concepts? In order to sharpen the question as to what image of the church is shown in the various liturgical celebrations, we will pick out blessings for which rituals have only recently been developed and practised in Germany that have not yet been regulated by Church authorities. Here church development takes place on a practical and theoretical level:

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*von gleichgeschlechtlichen Partnerschaften* (Schriften der Katholischen Privat-Universität Linz 8) (Regensburg: Pustet, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> The term 'rite deaconia' (Ritendiakonie), which goes back to Paul Michael Zulehner, is used here; cf. Paul M. Zulehner, 'Ritendiakonie,' in *Die diakonale Dimension der Liturgie* (Quaestiones Disputatae 218), eds. Benedikt Kranemann, Thomas Sternberg and Walter Zahner (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 2006), 271–285; Johannes Pock, 'Gottesdienste „im Vorhof der Heiden“: pastoraltheologische Überlegungen zur Liturgie zwischen gefeiertem Mysterium und Ritendiakonie,' *Heiliger Dienst* 67 (2015), 246–258.

<sup>9</sup> Depending on the liturgy, different ministers and role bearers take on the leadership of a service, which must, however, be at the service of the celebrating community. This does not change the fact that there are always precedents for the liturgy which contradict this. For liturgical-theological reasons, a form of liturgy should be maintained which shows the Church as a *community* of faith and which involves all the baptised. Where liturgical orders contradict this, they themselves should be called into question, instead of making theological-legal misunderstandings and problems the norm.

in view of new or newly identified needs, new liturgical formats are also emerging in which God's message of salvation is proclaimed and Christians place themselves at the service of a securely changing society. An example of this is a blessing ceremony that was held in Erfurt in 2000 and is now widespread in German-speaking countries: the blessing ceremony on Valentine's Day. Finally, blessing ceremonies for same-sex couples, as they are currently being discussed in the Catholic Church in Germany,<sup>10</sup> will be questioned about the church's self-image that is intended, and practised and traditional church images will be corrected and developed further. In the theological discussion, these and similar celebrations have so far been considered more from their meaning for the respective addressees than from their ecclesiological relevance – wrongly, as it will turn out. The discussion will conclude with reflections from a liturgical as well as a systematic theological perspective, which will lead to theses that will stimulate further discussion.

## 2. Blessing of Couples on Valentine's Day

What ecclesiology is expressed in a blessing ceremony to which couples from very different life situations are publicly invited, people who are 'on their way in partnership'? The blessing ceremony on Valentine's Day was first celebrated in Erfurt in 2000.<sup>11</sup> Today it is offered in many places in the German-speaking area, but its rite is neither

<sup>10</sup> Finally, in December 2019 the chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, Cardinal Reinhard Marx, expressed himself positively about a blessing 'in the sense of a pastoral accompaniment' (im Sinne einer seelsorglichen Begleitung); see 'Marx: Homosexuelle Paare können einen Segen bekommen,' accessed December 12, 2019, <https://bit.ly/30kuCRQ>.

<sup>11</sup> The celebration was published by the present Auxiliary Bishop of Erfurt, Reinhard Hauke, who designed this celebration. Cf. Reinhard Hauke, *Herzlich eingeladen zum Fest des Glaubens ...: Projekte für Christen und Nicht-Christen* (Leipzig: Benno, 2009), 65–67. Also: Bianka Piontek, 'Valentinstag in Erfurt: ein Heiliger kehrt zurück in die Kirche,' in *Liturgie mit offenen Türen: Gottesdienst auf der Schwelle zwischen Kirche und Gesellschaft* (Beiträge zu Liturgie und Spiritualität 13), eds. Irene Mildenerger and Wolfgang Ratzmann (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2005), 165–170; Thomas Klie, ed., *Valentin, Halloween & Co.: zivilreligiöse Feste in der Gemeindepraxis* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006); Stephan Schatzler, *Riten und Rituale der Postmoderne: am Beispiel des Bistums Erfurt* (München: GRIN, 2012); Birgit Jeggle-Merz, 'Segnungsfeiern am Valentinstag: Eine Initiative aus dem Bistum Erfurt mit weitreichender Ausstrahlung,' in *Segensfeiern in der offenen Kirche: Neue Gottesdienstformen in theologischer Reflexion*, 149–176.

officially regulated nor necessarily uniform.<sup>12</sup> In order to elaborate on the ecclesiology inherent in this celebration of the blessing, a worship service template from 2005 is used. Ecclesiological markers can be found on different levels. The question is: What is the significance of verbal and non-verbal rites? Who is involved, what roles are there? From where can we see ourselves commissioned to give God's blessing to other people? Which forms, which texts, which perspectives are chosen and why? How do you deal with role models from approved forms? How does ecumenical experience come into play? Is a church space used? Is there an invitation by the church and an ecclesiastically legitimised leadership?

The celebration of the blessing corresponds to the basic structure that is constitutive for liturgies of Christian churches: the dialogical moment of God's address and the people's response or, in other words, the moment of the encounter between God and people is clearly expressed. Blessing is or rather shapes a relationship between God and man, as is already clear in the Bible. The celebration of the blessing opens a symbolic space into which people are invited who wish to come before God with their lives. The inviting people – Christians – know that they are motivated and empowered to promise God's blessing to others through biblical tradition and through centuries of blessing practice, but also through everyday religiousness (wishing for the blessing). Behind this is the conviction that all blessings begin with God, that the blessing belongs to the community of God and man, and that the blessing densely expresses the hope of God's nearness in the lives of people.<sup>15</sup>

The liturgy takes place in a church room. It is led by a Lutheran pastor and a Roman-Catholic priest. Married couples give witness to their partnership. According to the schedule, musicians are also involved. The role of the two clergymen is to lead the ecumenical blessing service. This includes opening and closing, a prayer at the beginning, the viewing and interpretation of images, an invitation to the Our Father,

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<sup>12</sup> According to the experience of these celebrations, 'ambiguity and diversity' and thus tolerance of ambiguity obviously do not contradict being a church. Cf. Thomas Bauer, *Die Vereindeutigung der Welt: über den Verlust an Mehrdeutigkeit und Vielfalt* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> For the biblical assurance of a theology of blessing see Stephan Winter, 'Theologie und Praxis des Segens,' in *Segensfeiern in der offenen Kirche: Neue Gottesdienstformen in theologischer Reflexion*, 37–55.

and the Aaron Blessing as the final blessing. The married couples tell about their relationship, say the intercessions together with the clergy, and at the end of the service – after the Aaron blessing – bless the couples who wish to receive this. Occasion, space, actors, language, and sign actions, and even the occasion signal that the church is acting here.

The distribution of roles in the celebration is differentiated and not fixed on the ordained. The two ordained persons open and close the service. The reports on the partnership that are important for the celebration, however, are contributed by the couples. Their competence based on life experience is decisive for the performance of this task in the service. Baptised persons perform central liturgical tasks such as the intercessory prayer and the prayer of blessing over the couples independently of a ministry or ordination. The ‘invitation to blessing’ states that it is about ‘a request to God for the success of the partnership’. The fact that clergymen and married couples bless equally shows that both have the ability to do so and that this does not depend on an ordination. The prerequisite for being able to give the blessing is baptism. It forms the theological foundation on which liturgical action is based. Baptised persons are not only able to speak of God – for example, by giving a public testimony of their faith – they are also empowered to give God’s love and attention to others.<sup>14</sup>

Linguistically, the blessing service constitutes a community from the beginning. The introductory prayer already in the first sentence speaks of an assembly and emphasises the community aspect. Twice the praying ‘we’ is mentioned. In the doxology, the gathered congregation (‘we’) praises God ‘who meets us as a good and lasting community’. The blessing is not an individual event but is connected with a community that relates to God and is defined from God.

We encounter various basic liturgical elements which also occur regularly in church blessing services from the Book of Blessings:<sup>15</sup> read-

<sup>14</sup> The invitation to the blessing does not speak of baptism, but formulates that the love of God biblically seen becomes visible in his blessing. On the other hand, it establishes a connection between the experience of love and its transmission. From here, references to baptism can be established, especially if one understands baptism as God’s care and love for humankind.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Liturgische Institute Salzburg, ed., *Benediktionale: Studienausgabe für die katholischen Bischöfe des deutschen Sprachgebietes*, erarbeitet von der Internationalen Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Liturgischen Kommissionen im deutschen Sprachgebiet (Trier, Zürich, Einsiedeln [u.a.]: Benziger, 1979) (Pastoralliturgische Reihe in

ing of Scripture (here, 1 Cor 13:1–11) – (intercessory) prayer – blessing. Incidentally, the testimonies of the couples precede the proclamation and supplication. They illustrate how the act of blessing is carried out against the background of these experiences. Life and faith, experience and tradition meet and interpret each other. The partnership and common life of (married) couples<sup>16</sup> are placed under the blessing of God. The request for a blessing is addressed to God. It is presented without restriction or condition and, according to the presentation, is not subject to any institutional restrictions or moral tutelage. It is spoken into the individual life situation, which in turn is not rigidly but dynamically perceived. The human desire and need for blessings is taken seriously.

### 3. Blessing Ceremonies for Same-sex Couples

A dynamic, learning, and open church that is on the way with people also meets same-sex couples in its blessing ceremonies. They are now offered in many places but are officially still under church edict.<sup>17</sup> For, as per the frequently encountered reason, the church may not and cannot bless what it morally condemns. On the other hand, those who celebrate such celebrations refer to more recent assessments of homosexuality as they are presented by the human sciences and theology, especially exegesis and moral theology.

Blessing ceremonies for same-sex couples are also justifiable, practicable, and meaningful today from a liturgical-theological point of view because these couples ask for God's blessing for their love relationship, which they want to live out of their faith. The biblical pericopes in which violent sexual acts between men are condemned do not meet what is understood in the present day as a love relationship

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Verbindung mit der Zeitschrift „Gottesdienst“). Cf. Kluger, *Benediktionen*. The following explanations always refer to the German edition of the *Benediktionale*.

<sup>16</sup> The text is not clear here. Sometimes it talks about couples, sometimes about married couples.

<sup>17</sup> However, there are inner-church initiatives which should lead to a recognition of such blessing ceremonies by the church leadership, for example, by the Central Committee of German Catholics; see the texts mentioned in footnote 5. An instructive presentation, phenomenological, and theological analysis of concrete worship forms according to which partnership blessings are made in Germany are offered by Dominik Bodenstern and Andreas Krebs, 'Riten zur Segnung gleichgeschlechtlicher Partnerschaften', in *Segensfeiern in der offenen Kirche: Neue Gottesdienstformen in theologischer Reflexion*, 195–210.



between two people of the same sex.<sup>18</sup> Homosexuality is seen today, from a human scientific point of view, as a standard variant of human sexuality. The civil law equality of homosexual and heterosexual partnerships was fully implemented in Germany in 2017. The Institute of Registered Civil Partnerships has already existed since 2001; since 2017, civil marriage is now also possible. Officially, however, homosexuality is still described in church morals<sup>19</sup> as ‘pathological’<sup>20</sup> and ‘objectively disordered.’<sup>21</sup> Homosexual relationships and actions, as it says in the catechism, ‘are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved’. (CCC 2357). Whoever is homosexually inclined is called to chastity according to Roman moral teachings (cf. CCC 2349). In his post-synodal apostolic letter *Amoris laetitia*, which Francis writes in 2016, there are no analogies between heterosexual marriage and homosexual partnership, ‘absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family.’<sup>22</sup> The social, medical, ethical, and legal re-evaluation of homosexuality does not still find its reflection on the Church’s side as concerns a substantial development

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Stephan Goertz, ed., „*Wer bin ich, ihn zu verurteilen?*“: *Homosexualität und katholische Kirche* (Katholizismus im Umbruch 5) (Freiburg/Br.: Herder, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Peter Schallenberg, ‘Homosexualität aus Sicht des katholischen Lehramtes,’ in *Mit dem Segen der Kirche?: Gleichgeschlechtliche Partnerschaft im Fokus der Pastoral*, 71–85; Stephan Goertz, ‘Gleichgeschlechtliche Sexualität und Partnerschaft: moraltheologische Gründe für eine Revision der kirchlichen Lehre,’ in „*Wer bin ich, ihn zu verurteilen?*“, 86–98; Julia Knop, *Beziehungsweise: Theologie der Ehe, Partnerschaft und Familie* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2019), 86–101; Jochen Sautermeister, ‘Segnung gleichgeschlechtlicher Paare: strukturanalytische Beobachtungen zentraler Argumentationstypen aus theologisch-ethischer Sicht,’ in *Mit dem Segen der Kirche: Die Segnung gleichgeschlechtlicher Partnerschaften in der Diskussion*, ed. Andreas Krebs and Matthias Ring (Bonn: Alt-Katholischer Bistumsverlag, 2018), 111–122.

<sup>20</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana*. Declaration on certain questions concerning sexual ethics, accessed December 12, 2019, sec. 8, <https://bit.ly/2CH0iZP>.

<sup>21</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders*, accessed December 12, 2019, sec. 2, <https://bit.ly/5jeyRYD>.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* of The Holy Father Francis to Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Consecrated Persons, Christian Married Couples and all the Lay Faithful on Love in the Family, accessed December 12, 2019, sec. 251, <https://bit.ly/2WHZ5IX>.

of its teachings and practice, which would correct previous devaluation and discrimination.

Now, ‘blessing’ means literally ‘benedictio’, but not a moral evaluation by a human institution. Blessing is the praise of God for creation and salvation and the request to God to turn to mankind in salvation.<sup>23</sup> This cannot be denied to the couples at issue here, especially in view of the new human scientific and theological insights mentioned above. To understand homosexuality as a standard variant of human sexuality means theologically to see it as part of the good, God-willed creation. The theology of blessing, as it is formulated in the Book of Blessings, starts out from a fundamental need of the blessing of man and interprets it as a desire for ‘salvation, protection, happiness and fulfilment’ (Benediktionale, PE 1) for one’s own life.<sup>24</sup> Where people long for a blessing in order to be granted God’s fundamental promise of creation (cf. Gen 1:31) or to be assured of it, this cannot be denied. For the Church is not a source of blessing, nor an authority able to decide on the good or bad of a person, but she is a sign and instrument (cf. LG 1) of the salvation that God himself is and gives. With regard to an ecclesiology from the liturgy, it should be noted here that the Church allows herself to be called to the service of God and man for the blessing, when it is a matter of thanksgiving and praise, interpretation of life by faith and a plea for new life chances, the connection of the life of a couple to the salvific history of God, etc. It does not create the blessing but brings into the world that blessing which is promised.<sup>25</sup>

Because of the Church’s self-understanding, as the current inner-church discussion shows and as already existing models for such celebrations show, such blessing celebrations must be celebrated as the liturgy of the Church with the corresponding theological and aesthetic celebration form.<sup>26</sup> The church’s appreciation of the respective

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. in detail: Thomas Hieke, ‘Segen: Kraftvermittlung und Eintritt in den Heilsraum Gottes: Zehn Thesen zu Segen/Segnen in der christlichen Bibel,’ in *Segensfeiern in der offenen Kirche: Neue Gottesdienstformen in theologischer Reflexion*, 15–36, and Stephan Winter, ‘Theologie und Praxis des Segens.’

<sup>24</sup> It can be left open here whether such generalising notions of ‘man’ are acceptable.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Hans-Joachim Sander, ‘Das Möbiusband von Segen und Fluch – eine Fundstelle Gottes: Kirche in prekärer Wechselwirkung mit gleichgeschlechtlichen Partnerschaften,’ in *Mit dem Segen der Kirche?: Gleichgeschlechtliche Partnerschaft im Fokus der Pastoral*, 101–116.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the anthology resulting from a conference organised by various German dioceses: *Mit dem Segen der Kirche?: Gleichgeschlechtliche Partnerschaft im Fokus der Pastoral*.

relationship is expressed in the form of the celebration. These celebrations are then the performance of a changed ecclesial approach to different partnership constellations. Through the congregation or community gathered for this celebration and the conduct of the service, the church explicitly expresses its commitment to this couple. In the liturgy for the blessing of same-sex couples of Old Catholics in Germany, the congregation is asked about its willingness to support the couple on their journey.<sup>27</sup> Thus, such a liturgy becomes an act of conversion of the church, which renounces its previous assessment of a certain form of sexuality and in conversion promises its solidarity to those who have been ostracised up to now, and thus it gives witness to God's promise. Here, a liturgically renewed ecclesiology becomes apparent.

#### 4. Church's Self-image and Blessing Ceremonies

The blessing ceremonies that are the subject of this discussion express the church in a new, sometimes unusual way. Rehearsed forms and traditional concepts of the church are broken up and questioned. It becomes apparent that the church can also be lived differently. This need not be explicitly addressed in the respective texts – but it can be experienced. How does the church present itself here?

It is an inviting church, interested in its fellow human beings regardless of their church affiliation. In these liturgies, Christians act out of the hope of God's attention to all people and put this prominently in the foreground. It is a church that invites people of very different faiths, church members, and non-denominational groups, to hear and experience God's benedictio. It does not close itself off in the service but shows itself to be open to the culture in which it lives and which shapes it. The invitation alone is an ecclesiological interesting fact. It is about a church that proclaims and celebrates its faith with people who do not need to bring any preconditions except a basic trust in the power of God's blessing. That is why the texts and rites of a blessing

<sup>27</sup> Liturgische Kommission des Katholischen Bistums der Alt-Katholiken in Deutschland, ed., *Die Feier der Partnerschaftssegnung im Katholischen Bistum der Alt-Katholiken in Deutschland* (Bonn, 2014), 45; cf. also Andreas Krebs, "In vielfältigen Formen wird seine Liebe in uns sichtbar": zum Stand der Diskussion um die Pluralisierung von Lebensformen im Katholischen Bistum der Altkatholiken in Deutschland,' in *Mit dem Segen der Kirche: Die Segnung gleichgeschlechtlicher Partnerschaften in der Diskussion*, 11–27.

ceremony on Valentine's Day, for example, are kept relatively simple, but at the same time quite dense: a biblical reading, the Lord's Prayer, the Aaronite blessing, not least the testimonies of the couples.

In the presented liturgies, the church also shows a diaconal self-understanding. The respective celebration of the blessing is not primarily directed towards the self-preservation of the church; the gaze is not primarily directed *ad intra*. It is not about stabilisation and consolidation of the denominational community. Rather, the service becomes the place and moment of encounter of church, society, and culture. Believers who act in this way show interest in people and their successful lives. Precisely for this reason, it will have to be said that the Church of Jesus Christ becomes visible here, namely as a church that is constantly changing with the people who live in and with it in different ways.

Moreover, it is the church that renounces definitions and judgments. In contrast to a church's self-image as a teaching and judging authority superior to both the individual and society, the church here shows a new self-image: the celebrations are open to people who want to be blessed and who feel this is good in their present life situation. This church grants God's blessing to all those people who ask for it. Judging by the texts of, for example, the Valentine's Day celebrations, but also by the forms circulating for the blessing of homosexual partnerships, official church doctrine plays no role in dealing with a partnership, ways of life, marriage, etc. (although one might ask how the couples who give testimony are chosen). The blessing is put forward as a blessing for the people. The texts and drawing acts are then selected. It is about friendship, love, partnership, and the request that God may bless them. The church abstains from moral judgment about these people and their lives and does not set up any corresponding preconditions for the blessing. In this way, it maintains a certain openness in its position by addressing questions but refrains from giving final answers or giving its answer in the form of a promise, a blessing instead of by formulating a moral doctrine.

The church, as it appears in the described blessing celebrations, remains dynamic. The communion which once gathers in a place for Valentine's Day services is not designed to be permanent and stable, as much as it is naturally possible for appropriate connections to be formed. Even a funeral celebration is probably a frequent, one-time event for the community, from which no constant worship practice or

community ties need to follow. In the blessing ceremonies for same-sex couples, church dynamics are shown in the readiness to follow social developments and scientific findings also on the ritual level, even if this makes visible inner-church non-simultaneity of liturgy and moral teaching.

Above all the blessing ceremonies on Valentine's Day present a church which cannot be defined by the boundaries of a denomination, but is ecumenically open. Here the liturgy does not become a place of denominational separation or profile sharpening. The Valentine's blessing, for example, is (at least in Erfurt, but may look different elsewhere) explicitly ecumenically answered for and shaped. Baptised believers and believers commissioned by their churches are conceptually responsible; church members and non-denominational churches are equally invited. 'Church' is determined interdenominationally; it is a church that is not denominationally appropriated and for which denominational homogeneity is not a precondition for common prayer. Confessional ecclesiologies can be set aside here for one simple reason: there is no need for it here. Even more: such blessing ceremonies offer, at least in Western ecumenism, a good reason to ask which dimensions and elements of faith and worship have long since been shaped and accounted for together.

Both examples of couples blessings show a church in which institutional conditions and the importance attached to them are shifting. The Church is experienced as the Church of the baptised; the inner-church difference marked by ordination is not levelled out but is not decisive in these celebrations. Church understanding and worship are not defined here by the ordained ministry. What is decisive is the promise and authorisation rooted in Baptism to proclaim and promise God's promises to others and to open up spaces of relationship for interpersonal relationships and for the encounter with God.

In the liturgies that have been questioned here about their implicit ecclesiology, (1.) the 'assembly' is in the foreground, while the 'institution' recedes. The pneumatological foundation of the church, which arises from the variety of charisms, is here particularly formative; Christological conceptions of church and official Christ representation are rather in the background. What is decisive is (2.) the request that people can place their lives under the blessing of God, who is promised to them as the source of all blessings. What the church is, is here (3.) not determined and staged by denominational boundaries and

differences, but by the mandate of all the baptised to pass on God's blessing.

## Conclusion

The previous remarks referred to the liturgical and pastoral experiences which, at least in part, are more advanced than church teaching. This concerns moral theological, liturgical theological, and ecclesiological questions, which are partly intensively discussed in theology and the church. How to deal with such non-simultaneousness? Can the liturgical experiences presented also develop argumentative or normative power for the further development of church doctrine?

In systematic theology, particularly in the tradition of Melchior Cano, one distinguishes different places of knowledge of faith, the so-called *loci theologici*.<sup>28</sup> It refers to the places or, more precisely, instances to which authority and relevance are attributed in the church when it is about to identify faith convictions and formulate them in a contemporary way. Cano's system has been adopted and updated many times. In addition to biblical and ecclesiastical tradition, today's concepts list persons (groups) and ecclesiastical authorities such as the *sensus fidei* or the ecclesiastical teaching office, various sciences such as theology, philosophy, history, cultural, and human sciences, as well as the experiences and convictions of other Christian denominations and other religions.<sup>29</sup> According to this system, theological knowledge arises and develops in dialogue and from the convergence of a plurality of respectively unjustifiable church perspectives, none of which can be renounced. These instances include also the service of worship resp. the liturgical experience and prayer practice of the faithful. The church is a complex, dynamic entity with very different actors who, in their role and by virtue of their competence, shape and form the local church. Wherever people gather for worship in response to God's word, the church becomes visible. This is where the faith consciousness of the church is articulated. Although the local worship practice cannot develop normative power on its own, it is indispensable as concerns

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Bernhard Körner, *Orte des Glaubens – loci theologici: Studien zur theologischen Erkenntnislehre* (Würzburg: Echter, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Peter Hünemann, *Dogmatische Prinzipienlehre: Glaube – Überlieferung – Theologie als Sprach- und Wahrheitsgeschehen* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2003), 207–251.

the understanding of the place of the Church, its task, and responsibility in the present time and as regards the questions of identifying the direction of the future development of the Church's teaching and the need of its reformation. It is vital that such discussion is supported.

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