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**The Church and her Social Engagement –
Where we Stand Today**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year's German Symposium is ending with a lecture from a German bishop. Last of all religion: Should I cast a conciliatory glance into the hereafter, and place all the hard work of the future that has been talked about in the lectures and discussions in a milder and more transfigured light? Does our programme have any need for a sensitive, pleasant ending? I'd be delighted to give you just that, but without running away from reality. I'd rather like to show you how the Church in her own way, and through a spiritual mission, supports a culture of freedom that we in Germany need to preserve and further develop. The Church can, I hope, have a healing effect in our society, which in this day and age often lacks orientation, and have a positive effect on private and public decision-making.

It is one of the great Germans at this venerable university, Ralf Dahrendorf, who in his book "In search of a new order"¹ (reprinted for third time in 2007) has long been in search of the "ligatures" that a politics of freedom urgently needs if it is to avoid the risk of self-destruction. In this context he also mentions the religions, to the extent that these create deep bonds "whose presence gives meaning and direction to the opportunities for choice" that he considers the quintessence of freedom (p. 45 f.). Religions should not, in his opinion, raise any claim to absoluteness that would restrict the options for choice. But what is certainly correct is this: Christianity and the Church consider freedom the outcome of God's will, and see this as the norm and the driving force behind the life of the individual and society. They seek to increase freedom in the world – which for them means more than creating "the

¹ Translator's note: The title of Dahrendorf's work, and subsequent translations from it, are rendered into English here by the present translator.

greatest life opportunities for the greatest number" (Dahrendorf), which is to say the widest possible diversity of options. I would like to illustrate this with reference to the Catholic Church, and in so doing also refute the modern suspicion that our faith inevitably promotes discord, is incompatible with today's need for cultural integration, or even poses a threat to freedom. Experiences in Germany prove the opposite.

My lecture will be in three parts: 1. The religious vocation of the Church, 2. Freedom of religion and the legal relationship between Church and state, 3. Arenas of the Church's social engagement.

1. The religious vocation of the Church

Without a doubt, one can view the Catholic Church in purely sociological terms. From this perspective, we note that it is no doubt the world's oldest global player, operating independently of territorial boundaries, with over one billion believers, more than 400,000 priests and countless voluntary workers spread right across the world. In Germany today there are over 26 million Catholics living in 12,000 parishes. In the German Caritas Association alone, Germany's largest charitable organisation, almost 500,000 professional and a further 500,000 voluntary staff are employed. So it is entirely appropriate to compare the Catholic Church to a global corporation with a worldwide infrastructure. This, however, is only one perspective on the Catholic Church, the social science perspective, which in itself does not give us the full picture.

It is important to understand that we do not see ourselves either as a corporation or as one of the numerous non-governmental organisations. To understand better how we see ourselves, it is essential to take a look at the theological arguments. Only this kind of reflection can bring to light the foundations on which a correct understanding of the Church's social engagement is based. We need to keep reminding society of these roots, because this is the only way to help people gain a correct and complete understanding of the Church's message.

Exactly fifty years ago, on 25 January 1959, the then Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council, which took place from 1962 to 1965. The Council Fathers who had gathered in Rome engaged very deeply with, among other things, the issue of the Church's self-understanding. In a resolution on the Church – *Lumen gentium* – they emphasise very clearly

that the Church sees itself in the first instance not as an institution, but as the people of God, as a community of faith, love and hope. She is rooted in the life and tradition of Jesus of Nazareth, and is called by his mission to live by the Gospel, to proclaim the message of the Gospel and to serve humankind. The self-understanding of the Church states that she is not there for herself but for others, that she is a Church for people, for the world and for their unity, reconciliation and peace. The critical calls heard in some quarters that the Church should stick to so-called "Church matters", and kindly confine its engagement to within its own sphere, are diametrically opposed to this self-understanding and the Church's holistic message. Put like this these calls are misplaced, suggesting as they do that the Church might wish to reduce her engagement to the performance of purely social services, and keep her message of the Gospel to herself. Because the key concern of the Church, and indeed any Christian, is the leading of life in faith. And just as our life is comprised of *all* the aspects of the way we lead it, a Christian sees and understands all these aspects in the light of faith.

The Second Vatican Council examined in very great detail the politico-social mission of the Church that obliges her to serve people. In this connection the church sees herself as bound together with the whole of humankind, charged with responsibility for helping make "the family of man and its history more human" (GS 40). She endeavours to uphold the dignity of every human person, and to uphold freedom and justice. She must voice concern when the well-being of people and their basic rights, such as peace, freedom and justice, are threatened. It is therefore her duty to observe political events within a state, within Europe and worldwide, to name injustices, and to join forces with others in helping build structural social justice. The actions of the Church are guided by "the *care and responsibility* for *man*, who has been *entrusted* to her by Christ" (CA 53) – in all his social, economic and political concerns, according to Pope John Paul II in his social encyclical *Centesimus annus* of 1991.

How that should be applied to current trends in our societies is a question I shall address more closely in a few moments. But we can say one thing straight away: This care and responsibility for man does not imply a politicisation of the Church. The Church is not a political party, nor does it claim the authority to be able to put forward economic or political systems. As Pope Benedict XVI put it, in her concrete actions "The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle [...] She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice" (DCE

28). Or to put this another way, in a nutshell: The Church does not intend to go into politics herself, she aims to help make politics possible in the first place.

Two aspects come into focus here: On the one hand, an obligation to pursue dialogue – dialogue with civil society, the business community and policymakers on the underpinnings of a just social and economic order that upholds human dignity. Logically, this means that Christians do not form an alternative society, living in a kind of hermetically sealed Catholic world where they remain impervious to social developments, nor are they among society's onlookers. They are rather in a position of responsibility, as Christians and as members of society, for helping shape that *one* social context, and for focusing special attention on those who are excluded by society or whose voice is not being heard.

On the other hand the understanding articulated by Pope Benedict XVI reflects a recognition of the intrinsic value of earthly realities properly understood (GS 36), as already clearly expressed in the words of Jesus: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22.15-22). The Second Vatican Council once again clearly reaffirmed this when it said: "The Church and the political community *in their own fields* are autonomous and independent from each other" (GS 76).

What to our ears sounds self-evident is the outcome of a lengthy process of differentiation between state and Church. It is crucial that this recognition of the autonomy of these two spheres, the sphere of politics or the state on the one hand, and the Church on the other, be qualified by pointing out that both relate to one and the same human person, though each from a different perspective. This is the key aspect that makes the dialogue between state and Church necessary. Politics and the state, and the Church, may be autonomous, but they are at the same time dependent on each other due to their joint responsibility for both individuals and the collectivity. This brings me to the second part of my lecture:

2. The religious community and the legal relationship between Church and state

Once again: Church and state are two different things. In Germany they maintain a relationship of mutual freedom that permits numerous forms of cooperation, provided that neither impinges on the freedom of the other. The separation of religion and the state is one of modernity's major achievements. It is a key prerequisite for life and co-existence to succeed in

a free society. The sense of foreignness that we experience in the face of the Islamic world is due not least to the fact that it ascribes a direct political role to religion. Not infrequently, Christians suffer as a result of this.

It is well known that the specific relationships between Church and state in the countries of the European Union differ very widely. It goes without saying that we respect the alternatives to the path we have followed in Germany: I have in mind for instance the system of an established church, one example of which we find in the country where I am a guest today, where Europe's oldest established church exists – the Church of England. At the same time we are also familiar with the system of a profound separation of state and Church, of which France has been considered the motherland since 1905. I believe we are witnessing a growing rapprochement between the various traditions. The current French President, Mr. Sarkozy, now advocates the notion of a "positive laicity". And at the same time a slow process of the disestablishment of state churches is evident: Here in the UK there is an ongoing debate on the established church system, and a stronger dissolution of the existing links between state and Church seems not unlikely.

Back to Germany, though. There, Church and state are radically separate. The state adopts a neutral world view or philosophy. The Basic Law guarantees the freedom of faith and conscience, as well as the freedom to profess a religious or philosophical creed. It guarantees not only the freedom of personal conviction, but also the undisturbed practice of religion (Article 4 of the Basic Law). In Germany not only the religious freedom of the individual is under the special protection of the state, but also the joint practice of religion as a corporate freedom. Religious communities can acquire the legal status of corporations under public law, and as such also have the right to levy membership fees in the form of a tax. These provisions of the Basic Law apply not only to the Christian churches. The Jewish or other faith communities also have this right to become a corporation under public law.

Ladies and gentlemen, the new religious and philosophical pluralism in our country has indeed led to a decline in membership figures for our major churches. Yet having said that, this pluralisation has found a home in numerous free, as it were made-to-measure forms of religious orientation. The growth in the number of Muslims is also part of this development, as is the structural recovery of the so-called "new atheism", for example in the form of freethinkers' associations. Muslims and other religious and philosophical communities are

also able to participate in our constitutionally guaranteed rights of freedom. Certain standards do have to be met, for instance where religious instruction in public schools as provided for by Article 7 Paragraph 3 of the Basic Law is concerned. Our churches look very favourably on Islamic religious instruction provided in German by university trained teachers who are recognised accordingly by their religious communities – which is to say on the same conditions that apply to religious instruction provided by the Christian denominations. Muslims are also in principle entitled to corporate status, provided that they are able to offer clear information on their rules of membership and the content of their faith, as well as a guarantee of the permanence of their corporation. We welcome the statements made by the leading Muslim associations that affirm our Basic Law and its guiding values. This is an important first step toward acquiring corporate status. We also welcome the fact that the German Islam Conference at its plenary meeting one year ago committed to the goal of offering Islamic religious instruction in public schools in German, as provided for by Article 7 Paragraph 3 of the Basic Law, within the next few years.

At our plenary assembly in the autumn of last year we German bishops issued a declaration that attracted a lot of attention, in which we adopted a basically positive position on current plans to build mosques in a number of German cities. We are dealing with a right of freedom here, so we cannot reconcile this with making permission to build mosques dependent on the condition that permission be granted to build churches, and that religious freedom be guaranteed, in Muslim countries. Yet it goes without saying that we do demand this freedom when we engage in dialogue with Muslims – particularly with those from Arab countries and Turkey. Within Germany we expect Muslims to plan and realise their mosque building activities in such a way as to foster progress toward integration, as opposed to creating obstacles to it.

In Germany we do not need a new, modern law for the freedom of religion as is sometimes claimed. A tried and tested liberal legislative framework is already in place that is also quite capable of doing the job in the situation of the new religious pluralism. We are concerned, however, by tendencies in court rulings and legislation to emphasise the so-called negative side of the freedom of religion, which is to say the right of freedom from religion. Current examples include the issues of crucifixes in official public spaces, or religious clothing worn by officials, such as the headscarf worn by female Muslims when working as teachers. Here the Catholic Church advocates the strongest possible interpretation of the freedom of religion

in positive terms as the freedom to profess a religious creed. It is by no means the case that religious belief, and monotheism in particular, create discord that is detrimental to peaceful coexistence, and that religion should therefore be banished to the private sphere. One particularly trenchant example of this misunderstanding is the policy of the Berlin Senate, which occasionally seems almost hostile to religion. Perhaps the waves made by the referendum in Berlin on the introduction of "religion" as a standard subject in schools have also swept across the Channel to you. Christianity at any rate is – quite on the contrary – a faith that seeks and promotes a life of peace and freedom.

A word on Europe: As a church, we welcome the provisions of the Treaty of Lisbon, under which the European Union will respect the provisions under national law governing the relationship between religion and the state, and under which it will maintain a structured dialogue with religious and philosophical associations and organisations. Quite how this will look, remains to be seen. We urge that substantial talks be held that are more than just cosmetic.

3. Arenas of the Church's social engagement

From what I have said so far it should have become clear that the Church is committed to the modern idea of freedom in a fundamental way. Indeed the Church has made significant contributions to its fundamental underpinnings – sometimes helping ground them, sometimes making them more precise, and sometimes contradicting them. Christian faith in God thus enables us to embrace an understanding and a praxis of human freedom that protects us against becoming bound absolutely by worldly realities – and in so doing enables us to shoulder real responsibility for the world. Exercised responsibly before God, this freedom is at the same time immune to being overpowered by its own minor lapses, or to ending up as unfettered selfishness. I would now like to show what this specifically Christian understanding of freedom means for the Church's activities, with reference to a number of social issues and arenas.

3.1 Responsibility for education

In keeping with the *genius loci* I shall begin with education. One thing is clear: A society's sustainability depends to a large extent on how well it succeeds in creating opportunities for

lifelong learning. Wherever they come from, children need free access to educational opportunities. Under today's conditions, individuals with no education or training will have no opportunities, and a society that does not offer everyone (or at least the majority of the younger generation) a chance to participate in educational opportunities will be unable to compete internationally in the medium term. Education is also an imperative of economic and social reason.

This is only one side of the coin, however. Education is not only about the upward social mobility of the individual and the economic performance of society. Education is also – and perhaps first and foremost – about liberating people from the constraints of ignorance, prejudice and false ties to tradition. It opens up horizons. It helps enable individuals to form their own responsible judgements, and lead lives in keeping with their dignity.

In Church schools we aim to provide education in this spirit as a path to freedom. This also includes raising the issue of God. We should not underestimate the risk of misunderstanding the real end of education as being the marketability and augmentation of so-called human capital, the risk of reducing education to training. Hiding behind these wrongly understood goals, if we allow them to become absolute, is a programmatic instrumentalisation and domestication of the human person (although this would be a highly modern programme indeed). The Church – in her own schools, in her religious instruction and in public discourse – sides with those who see education as an end in itself for the free human person endowed with the gift of reason.

3.2 Responsibility for life

The social commitment of the Church includes her commitment to protect human life in all its phases – from conception to natural death. In recent decades the biosciences have increased considerably our knowledge on the life of the human being during the initial stages of his or her existence. Some of these insights harbour extraordinary potential for the diagnosis and therapy of diseases. At the same time, though, we are confronted with situations of serious bioethical conflict in which the protection of human life is at stake. I would mention here for instance research on embryonal stem cells, which presupposes the killing of embryos. I would mention extracorporeal fertilisation, which in more and more cases is involving genetic selection.

In Europe and the United States, the end of life is being debated as controversially as its inception. Many people are experiencing growing concern that active euthanasia, initially made possible in the name of self-determination, might now become a routine process behind closed doors that the individual can avoid only with great difficulty. It is certainly no coincidence that many elderly Dutch people now carry the so-called "credo card" in order to prevent active euthanasia being applied to them in the event of an emergency.

The Catholic Church – as you are aware – is described by many as inexperienced in the ways of the world, as well as anti-emancipatory, due to what those individuals perceive to be the Church's strict positions on the protection of life. Is it not, so it is then argued, an expression of freedom to be able to decide whether to terminate a pregnancy? Do we not gain freedom and humanity when certain genetic predispositions toward disease can be eliminated through prenatal selection? And finally: Is a self-determined death not an absolutely fundamental right of freedom? The pathos of these questions is highly suggestive. In my view, though, it is imperative that we add some critical remarks and raise some further questions. This cannot be an issue of restrictions on freedom; it is rather about an appropriate understanding of it.

First of all: All positions that consider abortion or the destruction of human embryos legitimate must define the concrete, individual prenatal life as being outside the human family. However, it is anything but evident which criteria might be used to draw this distinction. Is it really more plausible to consider the embryo a form of existence prior to human life rather than an early form of existence of the human being him- or herself? Many of the arguments tell us more about the vested interests of the living in defining the terms of the debate than about the status of the unborn.

A second thought: There is a risk that the human being is increasingly becoming the product of strategies of invention and optimisation. This, however, changes the relationship of human beings both to themselves and to their fellow human beings. How can the claim that the human being is an end in him- or herself, which is so fundamental to the idea of freedom, retain its normativity when we are forced to see ourselves as the result of the human power of disposal, wielded on the basis of the latest technological innovation? And furthermore: In a society of that kind, what recognition would be accorded to life that is disabled, weak, or incapable? What scope would we allow these people, what dignity would we ascribe to them

if they were no longer capable of living up to the image of the human being made familiar to us through technological modernity? This is where the Church stands up for those who are not being heard, or who are unable to speak for themselves – for the unborn, those living on the margins of society, and not least the sick and the dying. We stand up for the dignity of every human being, for the right to life, because this is the foundation for all other human rights.

3.3 The current crisis on the global financial markets

We in the Church also feel called to respond to another highly topical issue: the crisis on the financial markets. Pope John Paul II articulated a truth of timeless normativity when he said that the human person – by which he meant every single human person, and not just a few – that the human person "is the source, centre and purpose of all economic activity". Allow me, ladies and gentlemen, to discuss a few basic issues with respect to the economic and financial crisis in light of this maxim.

Already, barely anyone now disputes the fact that we need a long-term reform and reorientation of economic policy. As you are aware, in Germany after the disaster of the Second World War we opted for the model of a social market economy, which seeks to combine economic success with a reconciliation of social interests, and puts enabling economic frameworks in place. The problems we face today, however, can no longer be solved at the national level. What we need is rather a global economic policy that also takes due account of the interests of the poor countries, and does not seek a solution to the problem at their expense. There is still hope – despite the majority of forecasts to the contrary – that the G20 countries at their summit here in London in April will take up these issues and adopt concrete resolutions.

In the current situation, however, it is virtually inevitable that the liberal economic order as such will come in for criticism. The standard-bearers of liberal economics carry an appropriate share of responsibility for this. Hardly anything has discredited the notion of economic freedom more than the incessant attempts to portray as incompatible with freedom any state measures to set frameworks, exercise control or regulate. Regulation and freedom were portrayed as opposites, which objectively speaking is not the case. Freedom does not always mean only "freedom from"; it also means "freedom for". Anyone calling for freedom must also insist on the regulation of that freedom. We need to learn this anew, so that the idea

of economic freedom can continue to enjoy the consensus of our societies, or become the object of a new consensus.

The same principle applies to the ethos of the businessman. For much too long it was claimed that ethics and economics were mutually exclusive. It goes without saying that profit is the key precondition for the continued existence of a bank or an enterprise. That is indisputable. But does that say all that is to be said about the responsibility of the businessman or the executive? Is it not important to ask how profits are made? Can and should we act really independently of cross-cutting responsibility, and independently of the issue of what consequences our individual and corporate action might have for the common good? It seems to me that the words of the apostle Paul "test everything; hold fast what is *good!*" (1 Thess 5.21) have been changed into "test everything; hold fast what is *useful!*" Can this be the basis for business activity?

Given the dynamism and complexity of the globalised economy, not everything that is legally permissible will also be ethically sound. If we are to build trust in the global financial and economic system and introduce order into it, we will not be able to avoid raising the issue of the professional ethos, the individual ethical criteria applied by those who bear responsibility. Anyone wishing to preserve and strengthen a liberal economic order should be careful not to eliminate the freedom of economic action, and not to view the businessman merely as a cog in the machinery of an economic system. Here we need to strengthen those who demonstrate that the market and morality go together, those who care about and look after the welfare of their staff, instead of seeing them only as a source of labour.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will now come to a close. Without a doubt, the Catholic Church in Germany is currently undergoing a massive change process. Studies show that people's openness to the world of religion remains undiminished. Yet we have difficulty in putting across our faith and its liberating force. This is painful – and must stimulate us to do everything in our power to become the "missionary Church" envisioned by the German Bishops' Conference in many of its more recent publications.

And what about the state? At the beginning of my lecture I mentioned Ralf Dahrendorf, who all his life was a passionate advocate of a political liberalism. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas has shown that the modern state legitimates itself "self-sufficiently", by which he

means without recourse to religion. But even Jürgen Habermas recognises that the process of political opinion and will formation within the state draws on ethical life constructs and cultural ways of life that he terms pre-political sources. In Germany and Europe, these include not least Christian norms and values, and the actions that they set free. The Church wants to keep these sources alive. She is following a mission that is divine, and that at the same time leads her to the heart of the challenges we face today. She is aware of the responsibility bestowed on her by God in and for society, and is seeking dialogue with the various groups and responsible agencies and individuals. So I would be all the more delighted now to strike up a conversation with you and seek a process of joint exchange.